



Paper

What's the point? The importance of meaningful work

IES Perspectives on HR 2016

Luke Fletcher, University of Brighton, and Dilys Robinson, Principal Research Fellow

March 2016

Member Paper 118

We spend a lot of our time at work. Around eight hours a day, for at least 40 weeks every year, for 40 years or so... It's an unsurprising hypothesis that being bored, feeling disconnected, and seeing no point in our work is likely to have a damaging effect. While the impact may not be quite as severe as the often-quoted Dostoevsky prognosis below, people who find no real meaning in their work are likely to suffer (emotionally and perhaps also mentally and physically), especially if they do not have absorbing interests outside work to bolster their self-esteem and sense of self-worth.

'Deprived of meaningful work, men and women lose their reason for existence; they go stark, raving mad.'

Fyodor Dostoevsky

What is meant by 'meaningfulness'?

People actively seek meaning and purpose in their lives, including at work, in order to enrich and fulfil their sense of self (Frankl, 1962). Thus, meaningfulness has been positioned as a fundamental psychological need that strengthens an individual's self-worth and life experience (Yeoman, 2014).

Lips-Wiersma and Morris (2009) argue that meaningfulness is 'the subjective experience of the existential significance or purpose of life'. In their research, Truss and Madden (2013) draw on this definition, together with the work of Koltko-Rivera (2006), who shows that Maslow intended self-transcendence, rather than self-actualisation, to constitute the highest form of human development. Truss and Madden propose that meaningfulness arises when individuals perceive an authentic connection between their work and a broader transcendent life purpose beyond the self.

Meaningfulness and work

Pratt and Ashforth (2003) argue that there are three core dimensions of meaningfulness: meaningfulness *in* work, meaningfulness *at* work, and transcendence:

Meaningfulness *in* work constitutes 'feeling that one is receiving a return on investments of oneself in a currency of physical, cognitive, or emotional energy' (Kahn, 1990), and occurs when the individual feels 'worthwhile, useful and valuable'. A lack of meaningfulness is associated with feeling that an insignificant amount is asked or expected (Kahn and Heaphy, 2014).

'I am useful and valued'

Meaningfulness at work reflects the subjective assessment of ‘where do I belong?’, and so is the extent to which people view their work as enhancing their membership and connection with the organisation (Pratt and Ashforth, 2003). People have a fundamental desire to belong to a social group, and therefore meaningfulness at work acts to fulfil this need by strengthening, and providing value from, one’s identity as a member of the organisation (Cohen-Meitar et al, 2009).

‘I am part of my organisation’

Transcendence signifies the perception that one is contributing to something 'greater' than oneself (Lips-Wiersma, 2002), and as such reflects an interconnection between one's identity, aspirations and work attachments (Rosso et al, 2010). It indicates a feeling of contributing to the common good, and making a positive impact to the broader community and society.

‘I make a difference’

Why bother?

Why should organisations make an effort to understand their employees and help them to experience meaningfulness at work – isn’t it enough just to reward them fairly for what they do? Although this is an understandable view, conceptualising work in purely economic terms can lead to problems for individuals and for the organisation. Employees are likely to adopt a transactional attitude to their employer, which means they might do the bare minimum, withhold discretionary effort, and leave simply because they get a better pay offer. In addition, a failure to understand the deep-seated need for meaning may lead to a dissatisfied workforce, full of employees who focus on their own package of pay and conditions and lose their sense of altruism and team spirit.

Although research into meaningfulness at work is relatively new (Bailey and Madden, 2015), there is a growing body of evidence that – quite apart from being ethically the ‘right’ thing to do – employers will benefit from having employees that find a strong sense of meaning at work. Studies have highlighted how the experience of meaningfulness is linked with:

- Higher levels of engagement (Chen et al, 2011; Hirschi, 2012; May et al, 2004).
- Reduced absence (Soane et al, 2013).
- Better quality performance (Rodell, 2013).

What can organisations do to increase meaning?

It is, of course, much easier for individuals to experience meaning in certain types of organisation. People are often attracted to work for a charity, for example, due to a deep-seated belief in, and identification with, the aims and activities of the organisation. People in caring professions are motivated by 'doing good' and by improving the lives of those they care for. In central and local government, people often have a strong public service ethos which keeps them buoyant even through difficult times. It's much harder to experience meaning when working in companies offering products and services that do not make an obvious positive impact on society, especially if the employee feels little identification with the product. Difficulty also arises, even in 'worthy' organisations, if the employee's role is distanced from the customer or end user. What can be done to maximise meaningfulness?

According to Kahn (1990), the experience of **meaningfulness in work** arises primarily through job design that offers:

- autonomy, variety and challenge;
- a good person-job fit; and
- rewarding social interactions with colleagues, managers, and clients/customers.

The experience of **meaningfulness at work** is facilitated by building strong organisational cultures and identities, and through transformational and visionary leadership (Pratt and Ashforth, 2003). This ensures cohesion and shared understanding, which in turn encourages a sense of belonging.

Finally, **transcendence** can be fostered by embedding a psychologically safe and high-integrity cultural environment that connects employees with core beliefs that help the individual to align themselves with 'what matters' (Pratt and Ashforth, 2003). This connection with the organisation's values and purpose will bolster employees' sense that they are doing something good and worthwhile.

Bailey and Madden (2015) demonstrate that meaning can be experienced by employees in different areas of work, even those areas that are perceived as relatively low-skilled. They carried out in-depth interviews with participants drawn from three occupational groups – refuse collectors, stonemasons and academics – all from within south-east England. The three occupational groups were purposively selected: refuse collectors because their area of work is often stigmatised because it is perceived as a 'dirty job'; stonemasons who, by contrast, are seen as doing 'good' work (Terkel, 1974) that is highly skilled; and academics, who represent a professional group with deep subject-matter expertise. Individuals in all three groups experienced meaning in their work: the refuse collectors felt they were contributing to society and the environment via their recycling work; the stonemasons (working on conservation in a cathedral) felt a sense of pride in conserving

historical stonework for future generations; while the academics found meaning in their research and their teaching. This sense of meaning was preserved despite different degrees of frustration experienced with aspects of their jobs.

A common feature across Bailey and Madden's three groups was that a sense of meaningfulness and pride arose during shared rituals or ceremonies. These could be held to mark the completion of a piece of work or could be social events at specific points of the year. This suggests that it is important for organisations to facilitate such shared events, because they help employees to experience these important feelings of meaningfulness in work.

Another important finding in Bailey and Madden's work was that experiencing a sense of meaning was associated with having autonomy at work. The stonemasons and academics had considerable control over the way in which they ordered their time and tasks, but even the refuse collectors had some autonomy at certain points in the day to organise their time in whatever way they wished, and appreciated 'being left alone to get on and do your job'.

Organisations should also consider how they can minimise the aspects of work that people describe as 'meaningless', or alternatively explain better to employees why certain activities are important and therefore have meaning, if this is not immediately obvious. Typically, such tasks are repetitive, administrative, bureaucratic and not clearly connected with the core purpose of the role – tasks that lead to frustration because employees are asked to do them by the organisation but do not understand why they have to be done.

In conclusion, the positive benefits of offering meaningful work (higher engagement, reduced absence and better performance) suggest that it is worthwhile for organisations to make the effort. As with every area of people management, it is important to understand what gives meaning to different people, rather than make assumptions. However, there are some aspects that seem to apply across the board, suggesting that it would be wise to focus on these: job autonomy, shared values, opportunities for social interaction with colleagues, celebrations of success, and an explanation of why apparently 'meaningless' tasks are important to the wider organisation.

References

- Bailey C, Madden A (2015), 'Time reclaimed: temporality and the experience of meaningful work', *Work, Employment and Society*, Vol. 1, No. 16
- Chen Z, Zhang X, Vogel D (2011), 'Exploring the underlying process between conflict and knowledge sharing: a work-engagement perspective', *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, Vol. 41, pp. 1005–1033

- Cohen-Meitar R, Carmeli A, Waldman D A (2009), 'Linking meaningfulness in the workplace to employee creativity: the intervening role of organisational identification and positive psychological experiences', *Creativity Research Journal*, Vol. 21, pp. 361–375
- Frankl V E (1962), *Man's Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy*, Beacon Press
- Hirschi A (2012), 'Callings and work engagement: moderated mediation model of work meaningfulness, occupational identity, and occupational self-efficacy', *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, Vol. 59, pp. 479–485
- Kahn W A (1990), 'Psychological conditions of personal engagement and disengagement at work', *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 33, pp. 692–724
- Kahn W A, Heaphy E D (2014), 'Relational contexts of personal engagement at work', in Truss C, Alfes K, Delbridge R, Shantz A, Soane E C (eds), *Employee Engagement in Theory and Practice*, Routledge
- Koltko-Rivera M (2006), 'Rediscovering the later version of Maslow's hierarchy of needs: self-transcendence and opportunities for theory, research and unification', *Review of General Psychology*, Vol. 10, No. 4
- Lips-Wiersma M (2002), 'The influence of spiritual "meaning-making" on career behaviour', *The Journal of Management Development*, Vol. 21, pp. 497–519
- Lips-Wiersma M, Morris L (2009), 'Discriminating between "meaningful work" and the "management of meaning"', *Journal of Business Ethics*, Vol. 88, pp. 491–511
- May D R, Gilson R L, Harter L M (2004), 'The psychological conditions of meaningfulness, safety and availability and the engagement of the human spirit at work', *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, Vol. 77, pp. 11–37
- Pratt M G, Ashforth B E (2003), 'Fostering meaningfulness in working and at work', in Cameron K S, Dutton J E, Quinn R E (eds), *Positive Organizational Scholarship: Foundations of a New Discipline*, Berrett-Koehler Publishers
- Rodell J (2013), 'Finding meaning through volunteering: why do employees volunteer and what does it mean for their jobs?', *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 56, pp. 1274–1294
- Rosso B D, Dekas K H, Wrzesniewski A (2010), 'On the meaning of work: a theoretical integration and review', *Research in Organizational Behavior*, Vol. 30, pp. 91–127
- Soane E, Shantz A, Alfes K, Truss C, Rees C, Gatenby M (2013), 'The association of meaningfulness, well-being, and engagement with absenteeism: a moderated mediation model', *Human Resource Management*, Vol. 52, pp. 441–456

Terkel S (1974) *Working*, New Press

Truss C, Madden A (2013), 'Transcending the self: understanding the role of "the other" in meaningful work'. Paper presented to Work, Employment and Society conference, University of Warwick, 3–5 September

Yeoman R (2014), 'Conceptualising meaningful work as a fundamental human need', *Journal of Business Ethics*, Vol. 125, pp. 235–251

More on this topic

Workshop

Meaningfulness at work Tuesday, 13 December 2016, London

IES is collaborating with Brighton Business School (BBS) to deliver a research study led by Dr Luke Fletcher of BBS, funded by the Richard Benjamin Trust, entitled 'Enhancing everyday working life through meaningfulness initiatives in the workplace'. The study explores the impact of receiving a small intervention (a training session, followed by reflective activities), focused on meaningfulness at work, on employees' engagement, well-being and performance. The results of this study will feature as part of an IES workshop for HR Network members on 13 December 2016.

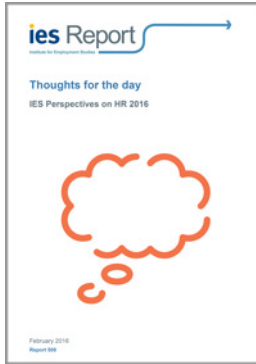
To find out more and book a place, visit www.employment-studies.co.uk/events

To find out more about the ideas in this article or how IES can help you, please contact:

Dilys Robinson, Principal Research Fellow
dilys.robinson@employment-studies.co.uk

Acknowledgements

Thanks are expressed to Professor Catherine Bailey (formerly Truss), Professor of Management in the Department of Business and Management at the University of Sussex, and Dr Adrian Madden, Senior Lecturer in Employment Relations in the Department of Human Resources and Organisational Behaviour at the University of Greenwich, for allowing us to draw extensively on their recently published (2015) research into meaningfulness at work.



This article is from the IES report: *Thoughts for the day: IES Perspectives on HR 2016*. (IES Report 508, 2016).

The full report is available online at:
www.employment-studies.co.uk/hr2016

About IES

IES is widely respected for its knowledge, insight and practical support in HR, OD, L&D and people management issues. The Institute combines expertise in research with its practical application through our consultancy work. Our approach is based on:

- building, exploiting and sharing the evidence base
- independence, objectivity and rigour

- considering the whole people system, not just the individual parts
- delivering practical, sustainable business benefits
- building our clients' capabilities rather than their dependence.

Whatever your professional and HR needs, get in touch:

T: 01273 763400

E: emma.knight@employment-studies.co.uk