



This article originally appeared at Workforce Management's site, www.workforce.com.
The original link is below.

10 Ways to Make Work More Meaningful

February 9, 2010

Meaningful work drives high levels of employee engagement, but such work is increasingly perceived as being scarce. If your organization doesn't offer work with purpose, employees may leave to seek it elsewhere. Here's what you can do to infuse every position with a great sense of meaning and purpose.

By Paul Fairlie

We may be entering the age of less meaningful work. Consider the following: Job satisfaction levels have been slipping since the 1970s. Social thinkers say the same thing has been happening with the work ethic. Work attitudes have also worsened over the years, with fewer people agreeing to the statement "Work is a person's most important activity."

Behind these attitudes are tumultuous years in the workplace. The last few decades have seen organizations go through more frequent, rapid and radical changes. Jobs are more intense and insecure. Three-quarters of Americans cite money and work as the leading causes of their stress. Yet, real income remains flat.

This alone is enough to make people cynical. Now throw in a few corporate scandals and such global threats as terrorism and climate change and people start asking serious, existential questions of themselves. *Who am I? Why am I here? What should I be doing with my life?* The meaning of life is a hot topic. Eckhart Tolle's *A New Earth* is a best-seller. Business blogs and magazines are buzzing about meaningful work. Author Malcolm Gladwell called for more of it in his book *Outliers*. Even McKinsey & Co. is extolling the virtues of touchy-feely rewards in place of pay and bonuses. It makes sense that people are demanding more meaning in the workplace since they spend most of their waking hours there.

I first stumbled upon the importance of meaningful work in my Ph.D. data. I called it the "Sisyphus Effect," after the mythical figure who was cursed to roll a large boulder up a hill, only to have it roll back down again, repeatedly, for all eternity. His curse is the embodiment of meaningless work—no variety, control, feedback, recognition or significant impact on anything greater than himself. These are the five "must haves" of meaningful work, and they played a part in every outcome I measured, including depression, burnout, satisfaction, commitment and the desire to leave a job.

All of this got me wondering. How important is meaningful work? And is it getting harder to find?

I surveyed 1,400 Americans on nearly 300 job characteristics over five surveys. The following characteristics were among the top 25 strongest drivers of commitment and intentions to stay that were *also* reported at lower levels in organizations. What was scarce among the strongest drivers of commitment and intentions to stay was having a job that:

- ◆ Helps you to fulfill a life purpose;
- ◆ Helps you to become what you were “meant to be” in life;
- ◆ Is a major source of life happiness (e.g., makes you feel “alive”);
- ◆ Involves tasks that you would do for pleasure on your own time;
- ◆ Enables you to do good things in the world.

The message here is that there is room to improve these aspects of every job, in every organization. These changes could pay off in higher commitment and retention. It’s not younger or older workers who feel this way. There were few generational differences, which suggests that these things are equally important to all generations.

You may also think that these things are unimportant in a bad economy when people’s jobs are at stake. Yet, these surveys were conducted during a period of the last recession which saw some of the deepest dives in employment, GDP and the S&P 500.

I’m not predicting a mass exodus of people cashing out to volunteer for Doctors Without Borders. But if recent work trends continue, we could reach a tipping point. More people are having an existential crisis of confidence about their jobs, and perhaps, the nature of work in their lives. They call this transcendence in existential circles. Zen Buddhists call it a “satori.” And it’s irreversible.

Once you lose employees’ hearts on the basis of what’s deeply meaningful to them (as human beings, not as employees), you can lose them for good. And if they stay, they could still withdraw psychologically and reapply their extra energy elsewhere. In other words, they’ll do the minimum that’s expected of them and go home to what really matters.

All is not lost, however. Organizations can bring more meaning to every job. There are easy ways and hard ways of doing this. Here are 10 easy ones:

1. **Measure meaningful work on your next employee survey.** Make sure your survey taps the workplace features mentioned above: a job that helps fulfill a life purpose, a job that helps people be what they are meant to be, etc.
2. **Find out what really matters to employees.** Try asking this on your next employee survey: “If you woke up tomorrow morning with \$20 million in the bank and five years to live, what things would you do for the rest of your life?” Now, find “low-cal” ways of making work in your organization seem more like these things.

3. **Communicate meaningful work that's already there.** Meaning is partly a state of mind. Employees may already have opportunities for meaningful work that are not well communicated. Make the connection between individual jobs and the purpose of the organization.
4. **Connect employees with people who have been changed by your organization.** Invite people to give testimonials at annual meetings and town halls. Start a “twinning” program among employees and clients. Collect and share client stories or videos
5. **Ask your employees how they can have a bigger impact.** Conduct surveys and focus groups. Get ideas and empower employees to implement them.
6. **Enable employees to do philanthropic work outside of work.** Donate the time and money, set up a program and offer a suite of opportunities.
7. **Offer career counseling “plus.”** Not all development is career-related. People are human beings before they come to work. Consider what they're trying to accomplish in their nonwork lives and who they're trying to become. Support those efforts.
8. **Coach managers to provide better feedback and recognition.** These are two “must haves” of meaningful work that I've identified in my other research, and they're relatively free. This could be done tomorrow. Recognition is important for employees to see their impact.
9. **Use meaningful work to attract and recruit people.** If you've got meaningful work in your organization, flaunt it. Review your current strategies for acquiring talent and make sure the message is there.
10. **Make a pledge about job and organizational redesign.** This is a longer-term goal, but get it on the radar. Revisit job descriptions and reporting lines. Get employees to brainstorm how they could do their jobs differently. This is at the heart of “job crafting,” a technique from Amy Wrzesniewski at the Yale School of Management. Don't assume that meaning is inherent only in certain jobs. Most of them can be imbued with more meaningful features.

Paul Fairlie is president and CEO of [Paul Fairlie Consulting](#), a research and consulting firm that helps employers assess and create meaningful and healthy workplaces. To comment, e-mail editors@workforce.com.

The link to the original article is below. Free site registration is required for access.

<http://www.workforce.com/archive/feature/26/97/97/index.php>

Copyright © 2010 Paul Fairlie and Paul Fairlie Consulting.