

Published by Thomson Reuters Canada Ltd.

5 must-haves of meaningful work

HR managers are being pushed to do more with less while still showing the value of their efforts. They need to identify a handful of things that have the greatest impact on employee engagement and productivity. No short list would be complete without “meaningful work.”

My research on more than 800 Canadians found five workplace factors that were drivers of every employee outcome measured, including depression, burnout, overall satisfaction, commitment and turnover thoughts. What were these five things? They weren't pay, benefits, promotion or even a good supervisor — although these had some impact.

It's what I call the “Sisyphus effect.” In Greek mythology, Sisyphus was cursed by the gods to push a large rock up a hill and then let it roll down, repeatedly, for all eternity. His curse is the embodiment of meaningless work — no variety, no control, no feedback, no recognition and no significant impact on anything greater than himself.

These are the five “must-haves” of meaningful work I've found:

Variety: Using a wide range of skills to do a variety of things.

Control: Having a say in how you do your work.

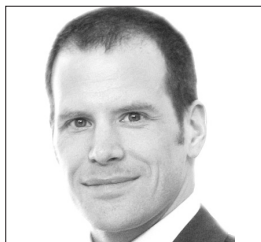
Clear feedback: Knowing how well you're performing.

Recognition: The praise you get for doing your best work.

Significant impact: Doing work that is important in the greater scheme of things.

There was a sixth item — co-worker relationships — that almost made the cut. And there was another meaning-based driver: Believing that work is preventing you from realizing your potential and becoming who you are “meant to be” in life. You can roll your eyes at this, but for every one point increase in this, there was nearly a half-point decrease in overall satisfaction, commitment and thoughts of staying. Realizing your potential had more impact than feedback, recognition or co-workers.

One of the strongest drivers was satisfaction with work itself. Is your job creative? Fascinating? Enjoyable? When satisfaction was high, employees saw their jobs as being high in vari-



■ GUEST COMMENTARY

PAUL FAIRLIE

ety, control and significant impact. Thus, when people tell you they like what they do, they're really saying their work is meaningful.

Each of the five must-haves of meaningful work is linked to employee outcomes. But how do they combine for even stronger impact? This is where data mining can be used to identify driver combinations. Some highlights:

- Only 15 per cent of employees had jobs with both high feedback and significant impact. They saw themselves as being 56 per cent more able to perform.
- Nearly one-quarter (24 per cent) of employees reported both low recognition and satisfaction with work itself. They were also 26 per cent less committed to their employers.
- Employees with low satisfaction with both co-workers and work itself reported levels of depression that met cut-offs for major depressive disorder.
- Pay satisfaction was the strongest driver of turnover thoughts. However, when pay satisfaction is average, as it is for most employees, satisfaction with work itself still emerged as the strongest driver. When pay wasn't an issue and work satisfaction was high, thoughts of leaving were 14 per cent lower.

So what didn't drive employee outcomes in this study? Demographics. Rarely did these come into play. Regardless of age, gender, level in the organization, sector or job tenure, the same meaningful work factors were linked to depression, burnout, satisfaction, commitment and turnover thoughts. We're all looking for the same kind of meaning at work.

How does employee engagement fit into all of this? It's simple — meaningful work is engag-

ing. Unfortunately, engagement is often confused with other things and is poorly measured as a result. It's difficult to detect even when it's properly measured. Unlike engagement, meaningful work has a solid foundation in many areas of thought. Engagement, commitment and performance are important, but these are outputs. They don't happen unless employees view their work as meaningful.

Meaningful work also makes business sense. I computed a return on investment for meaningful work based on data and other metrics. This included predictive weights from the study, published correlations between turnover thoughts and actual turnover, published cost estimates for depression and turnover and average turnover rates in Canada. Providing meaningful work results in a cost savings of at least \$1 million to employers with 500 employees. That's based on depression and turnover alone and doesn't include absenteeism, presenteeism and productivity.

Employer tips

So what should employers do? First, measure the must-haves of meaningful work on employee surveys. Be sure to link the data to outputs such as commitment, absenteeism and turnover to prioritize issues for immediate attention. Break out the results by department to leverage learnings from more meaningful departments. Specific, actionable ideas for job redesign can be derived from employees themselves in post-survey focus groups.

Meaningful work may no longer be a nice-to-have. Increased business competition has led to higher work intensification, job stress and workplace depression. Add corporate scandals and global events to the mix — environment, terrorism — and people begin to rethink the role of work in their lives. This is suggested by decades of polls showing slow declines in job satisfaction and commitment. If we don't re-tool jobs and organizations to provide more meaningful work, North Americans may begin to shift more effort towards family, community and leisure interests as a way of filling the void left by an increasingly toxic work world.

Paul Fairlie is president and CEO of Paul Fairlie Consulting, a Toronto-based research and consulting firm that helps employers create meaningful and healthy workplaces. He can be reached at pfairlie@paulfairlieconsulting.com.