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# Meaningful Work, Employee Engagement, and Other Key Employee Outcomes: Implications for Human Resource Development

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## Abstract

### The Problem.

Meaningful work is underrepresented in current models and measures of work characteristics. Ironically, past research suggests that meaningful work may have substantive impacts on employee outcomes. The current study addresses this problem by demonstrating the value of meaningful work in human resource development (HRD) practices involving employee engagement.

### The Solution.

A web-based survey of employed North Americans ( $n = 574$ ) was conducted. Meaningful work characteristics were compared to other work characteristics as correlates and predictors of employee engagement, burnout, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and turnover cognitions. Meaningful work characteristics had the strongest relative correlations with multiple employee outcomes. They also predicted substantive variance in employee engagement while controlling for other work characteristics in regression analyses.

### The Stakeholders.

Since meaningful work contains themes of human development (e.g., self-actualization, social impact), this variable represents an opportunity for human resource development (HRD) practitioners to increase levels of employee engagement as a strategic leverage point within organizations.

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## Keywords

meaningful work, job characteristics, employee engagement, burnout, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, turnover, human resource development

Employee engagement has spawned a great deal of interest and activity since its inception in the organizational behavior literature (Kahn, 1990). Its nature (Macey & Schneider, 2008), measurement (Schaufeli, Bakker, & Salanova, 2006), antecedents and consequences (Saks, 2006), and best practices (Macey, Schneider, Barbera, & Young, 2009) have all been discussed. Research on engagement has culminated in several edited volumes (e.g., Bakker & Leiter, 2010). While there are multiple conceptualizations of engagement, three dimensions have gained the most research attention. *Vigor* refers to high levels of energy and mental resilience at work. *Dedication* involves a strong involvement in one's work and a sense of significance and pride. *Absorption* entails being fully concentrated and happily engrossed in one's work (Schaufeli et al., 2006).

Engagement has more recently been considered within the context of human resource development (HRD; Shuck & Wollard, 2010). For example, managerial training courses are being tailored to increase levels of engagement among direct reports (Gebauer & Lowman, 2008). Opportunities for employee learning have also been considered as antecedents of engagement (Czarnowsky, 2008). Thus HRD professionals are becoming more aware that levels of engagement can be both actively and passively increased by developing talent. One way that HRD professionals could address engagement is to promote human development in addition to "human resource" development. Specifically, work could be designed not only to enable the acquisition of job-specific knowledge, skills, and abilities but also to satisfy the fundamental development needs of employees. Kuchinke (2010) has argued that HRD professionals have an ethical and moral imperative to develop employees as human beings, as well as human resources for organizational ends. If HRD professionals are interested in increasing levels of engagement by promoting human development, models of human meaning could inform these efforts and add to current theory building.

*Meaning* entail issues of "life meaning, purpose, and coherence" (Ryff, 2000, p. 132). Common dimensions of meaning include having a purpose or goals, living according to one's values and goals, autonomy, control, challenge, achievement, competence, mastery, commitment, engagement, generativity or service to others, self-realization, growth, and fulfillment (e.g., Antonovsky, 1990; Baumeister, 1991; Ebersole, 1998; Emmons, 1999; Frankl, 1992; Kobasa, 1979; Maslow, 1970; Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2003; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Wong, 1998). One theme that emerges from the dimensions of meaning, above, is the concept of self-transcendence. In other words, human beings appear to have a need to transform themselves (e.g., growth) and the world around them (e.g., generativity) while making progress toward important end states (e.g., purpose, achievement). Thus development would seem to be central to the concept of meaning. Following from this, it seems possible that HRD professionals could increase engagement by ensuring that meaningful

work characteristics are present in workplaces. Meaningful work is defined as *job and other workplace characteristics that facilitate the attainment or maintenance of one or more dimensions of meaning* (Fairlie, 2010).

Meaningful work is by no means a nascent concept. Both Maslow (1965) and Alderfer (1972) described types of work that promote self-actualization. McGregor (1960) described work that allows the expression of imagination, ingenuity, and creativity. Moreover, Locke (1976) argued that job satisfaction is a function of doing what is personally valued. Finally, meaningfulness of work is a component of the Job Characteristics Model (Hackman & Oldman, 1975).

Why should meaningful work be related to engagement? First, research suggests that attaining meaning is very important to individuals (King & Napa, 1998; Kotter-Grühn, Wiest, Zurek, & Scheibe, 2009; Sheldon, Elliot, Kim, & Kasser, 2001). Employees should be more engaged in work that they view as personally meaningful. Second, meaning has been linked to well-being (Brunstein, Schultheiss, & Grässmann, 1998; Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999; Keyes, 2007; McKnight & Kashdan, 2009). This link is critical, given that engagement presumably has affective components (Schaufeli et al., 2006). Third, a growing number of North Americans desire interesting work and social usefulness through their work (Davis, Smith, & Marsden, 2009). However, the nature of work seems to be changing in ways that are less meaningful (NORA, 2002). Perhaps as a result, levels of work ethic (Highhouse, Zickar, & Yankelevich, 2010; Weaver, 1997) and work centrality (England, 1991; Twenge, Campbell, Hoffman, & Lance, 2010) have declined over time in North America and Europe. These changes have implications for related levels of engagement.

Meaningful work has direct implications for HRD. For example, developmental themes are explicit in a meaningful work factor recovered from recent research (Fairlie, 2010). This includes self-actualizing work (i.e., realizing one's full potential through work), realizing one's life purpose, values, and goals through work, and social impact (i.e., having impacts on people and things through work). Historical changes in the nature of work, which may be affecting levels of meaningful work, have also been considered as a source of new perspectives on HRD (Garavan, O'Donnell, McGuire, & Watson, 2007). Specifically, there have been calls to recognize the role of employee world views in adult learning (Johansen & McLean, 2006). Employee world views, as they pertain to work, may be transforming in response to the changing nature of work and, subsequently, the prevalence of meaningful work.

Meaningful work also has direct linkages to engagement. Kahn (1990) argued that employees are engaged when their "preferred self" is manifested in the workplace. What is identified as meaningful in many individuals' lives is often closely tied to self and identity (Debats, Drost, & Hansen, 1995). May, Gilson, and Harter (2004) reported a correlation of .63 between Kahn's dimension of meaningfulness and engagement. In general, a growing number of researchers have situated the concept of meaningful work within the context of engagement (e.g., Chalofsky & Krishna, 2009; Stringer, 2008). Yet, little research has explored an explicit connection between these two research variables.

## *Purpose of the Study*

The purpose of the study is to investigate the role of meaningful work in engagement and other employee outcomes such as burnout, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and turnover cognitions. A number of hypotheses will be tested. First, work characteristics that facilitate meaning should be engaging and satisfying. This is hypothesized from research suggesting that dimensions of meaning address things that are exceptionally important to people (King & Napa, 1998; Sheldon et al., 2001). This is also suggested by need satisfaction theories (Porter, 1962). The presence of meaningful work characteristics should also strengthen commitment to organizations that provide them.

*Hypothesis 1:* Meaningful work characteristics would positively correlate with engagement, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment.

An absence of meaningful work characteristics should be associated with more cynical views of one's job (i.e., disengagement) and more frequent thoughts of changing employers. In addition, individuals who report less meaningful work may experience higher levels of exhaustion. In some jobs, life purpose, goals, and values, as personal resources, may not be leveraged to make sense of, and/or buffer the stressful effects of challenging work. This may be suggested by the conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989).

*Hypothesis 2:* Meaningful work characteristics would negatively correlate with disengagement, exhaustion, and turnover cognitions.

The presence of meaningful work characteristics should also be more important than the presence of other work characteristics as factors in employee outcomes, given that dimensions of meaning are closely tied to the self or identity (Debats et al., 1995). In addition, dimensions of meaning are linked to individuals' most satisfying life events (Sheldon et al., 2001), conceptions of the good life (King & Napa, 1998), and greatest life longings (Kotter-Grünn et al., 2009). The self-relevance and exceptional desirability of meaning suggests exceptional, relative importance for meaningful work characteristics.

*Hypothesis 3:* Meaningful work would have the strongest correlations with all employee outcomes, relative to other work characteristics.

Finally, since meaningful work characteristics are considered distinct from other work characteristics, the former should not overlap with the latter in their prediction of employee outcomes (e.g., engagement). First, meaningful work characteristics have not been recovered in other multivariate models of work characteristics (Campion & Thayer, 1985; Hackman & Oldham, 1975; Parker & Wall, 1998). Second, items measuring meaningful work tend to address work in relation to, or in service of self-relevant variables (e.g., goals, values). Items measuring other work characteristics are primarily concerned with properties of jobs, in and of themselves.

*Hypothesis 4:* Meaningful work would predict unique variance in levels of engagement while controlling for the effects of other work characteristics.

## Method

### *Participants and Procedure*

The convenience sample consisted of 574 respondents who were 18 years of age or older and at least part-time employed. The modal profile was female (71%), full-time employed or self-employed (93%), in a supervisory or management position (63%), and residents of the United States (54%) or Canada (28%). The mean age was 46.42 ( $SD = 10.42$ ). The participants passively accessed the web site of a Canadian leadership training and development company between December, 2010 and January, 2011. They were invited to complete a brief, web-based measure of emotional intelligence, followed by the web-based survey battery for the current study in exchange for feedback scores on some measures.

### *Measures*

*Meaningful Work Inventory (MWI).* The MWI is a 64-item measure of work characteristics that are correlated with important employee outcomes (Fairlie, 2010). It also measures work characteristics that are aligned with models of human meaning. Eight subscales are formed from 53 items: meaningful work, intrinsic rewards, extrinsic rewards, leadership and organizational features, supervisory relationships, coworker relationships, organizational support, and work demands and balance (see Table 1). While all subscales contain items that are aligned with models of meaning, the meaningful work subscale is perhaps most closely aligned with models of meaning in its entirety. The MWI also includes single items measuring connection to a “bigger picture,” authentic self-expression at work, and callings. These items are not part of any subscale. The subscales are reliable ( $\alpha$ 's = .76 to .96), relatively free of social desirability bias (median  $r = .13$  and  $r = .19$  with impression management and self-deceptive enhancement, respectively), and demonstrate concurrent validity as correlates of exhaustion, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, turnover cognitions, and health symptoms (median  $r = |.40|$ ; Fairlie, 2010). This study focused only on the eight subscales. The MWI was selected for its comprehension in representing the work characteristic “space,” including meaningful work.

*Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9).* The nine-item UWES-9 measures vigor, absorption, and dedication as dimensions of engagement (Schaufeli et al., 2006). The UWES-9 was chosen to represent employee engagement for its extensive validation across several countries (Schaufeli et al., 2006; Shimazu et al., 2008).

*Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (OLBI).* The 16-item OLBI was used to measure energy (i.e., exhaustion-vigor) and identification (i.e., disengagement-dedication; Demerouti, Bakker, Vardakou, & Kantas, 2003). Use of the OLBI enabled the simultaneous measurement of dimensions that are germane to both burnout and engagement. Previous

**Table 1.** Meaningful Work Inventory Subscales

Subscale	No. of items	Facets
Meaningful Work	10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-actualizing work (e.g., job enables one to fulfill one’s potential and become a fully functioning person)</li> <li>• Social impact (i.e., legacy, generativity, “mattering”)</li> <li>• Job enables one to fulfill one’s life purpose, goals, and values</li> <li>• Feelings of personal accomplishment</li> <li>• Belief in achieving one’s highest career goals in one’s organization</li> </ul>
Intrinsic Rewards	8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Autonomy</li> <li>• Skill utilization</li> <li>• Task variety</li> <li>• Task identity</li> <li>• Creative freedom</li> <li>• Involvement and participation</li> <li>• Job-induced self-efficacy (e.g., job enables one to discover one’s strengths)</li> <li>• General opportunities for growth and development</li> </ul>
Extrinsic Rewards	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fair pay</li> <li>• Perks</li> <li>• Other rewards for one’s efforts</li> </ul>
Leadership & Organizational Features	10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Integrity (i.e., fair, honest, trustworthy, respectful, democratic)</li> <li>• Authenticity (i.e., consistent words and actions)</li> <li>• Clear communication of goals and direction</li> <li>• Corporate social responsibility (i.e., protects and maintains human rights and the environment)</li> </ul>
Supervisory Relationships	9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Integrity (i.e., fair, honest, trustworthy, respectful, accountable, democratic)</li> <li>• Social support (i.e., emotional, appraisal)</li> <li>• Feedback</li> <li>• Recognition</li> <li>• Communicates the importance of one’s job</li> </ul>
Coworker Relationships	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Integrity (i.e., trustworthy, respectful)</li> <li>• Social support (i.e., emotional, instrumental)</li> </ul>
Organizational Support	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Efficient operations (i.e., policies, procedures)</li> <li>• Resources (i.e., people, things, training)</li> <li>• Communications</li> <li>• Role clarity</li> </ul>
Work Demands & Balance	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reasonable work demands (i.e., role overload)</li> <li>• Work-life balance</li> </ul>

research has reported adequate reliability and validity for the OLBI (Demerouti & Bakker, 2008).

In addition, several items were developed to measure job satisfaction (1 item), organizational commitment (6 items), and turnover cognitions (5 items; thoughts of quitting, perceptions of job alternatives, search and turnover intentions; see Bozeman & Perrewe, 2001). Brief measures of these variables were needed to minimize survey battery length while maintaining a focus on engagement. The items have adequate psychometric properties (Fairlie, 2011a).

## Results

### Factor Analyses

Factor analyses were conducted to reduce some measures to a smaller number of composites. The UWES-9 items were subjected to a principal axis factor analysis with varimax rotation. One factor was extracted with an Eigenvalue greater than 1, accounting for 69.99% of the total variance in the rotated solution. A scree plot also suggested the presence of one factor. These items were summed to form a total engagement composite scale.

The 12 items measuring job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and turnover cognitions were also subjected to a principal axis factor analysis with varimax rotation. A single item failed to load greater than  $|.40|$  on a primary factor, and was removed. A second analysis was conducted on the 11 remaining items. Two factors were extracted with Eigenvalues greater than 1, accounting for 74.19% of total variance in the rotated solution. A scree plot suggested that a one-factor solution was more parsimonious (60.68% of the variance). The 11 items were summed to form a work adjustment composite of high job satisfaction, high organizational commitment, and low turnover cognitions.

### Psychometric Properties and Correlations

Table 2 contains means, standard deviations, Cronbach alphas coefficients, and correlations. Most measures demonstrated high internal consistency ( $\alpha$ 's  $\geq .83$ ). The alpha for work demands and balance ( $\alpha = .62$ ) was lower than usual for that subscale.

All work characteristics correlated significantly with all employee outcomes ( $r$ 's =  $.27$  to  $.77$ , all  $p < .001$ ). In support of Hypothesis 1, meaningful work characteristics were positively correlated with total engagement, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment. Hypothesis 2 was also supported, in that meaningful work characteristics negatively correlated with disengagement, exhaustion, and turnover cognitions. Hypothesis 3 was partially supported. Compared to other work characteristics, meaningful work characteristics had the strongest correlations with total engagement, disengagement, and work adjustment. Only work demands and balance was more strongly correlated with exhaustion (by a magnitude of only  $-.02$ ). Specifically, meaningful

**Table 2.** Means, Standard Deviations, Reliability Coefficients and Correlations

	Mean	SD	Alpha	Correlations			
				9.	10.	11.	12.
1. Meaningful work	46.90	14.00	.94	.77	-.77	-.52	.73
2. Intrinsic rewards	39.87	11.00	.92	.66	-.71	-.49	.69
3. Extrinsic rewards	14.23	4.61	.83	.39	-.46	-.34	.60
4. Leadership & organizational features	46.65	13.69	.95	.42	-.52	-.40	.69
5. Supervisory relationships	43.60	13.20	.94	.39	-.49	-.39	.55
6. Coworker relationships	27.44	6.08	.94	.30	-.35	-.28	.37
7. Organizational support	28.52	7.45	.85	.50	-.54	-.46	.57
8. Work demands & balance	9.76	2.77	.62	.27	-.34	-.54	.33
9. UWES-9 total engagement	44.92	12.29	.95		-.76	-.59	.63
10. OLBI disengagement	18.86	4.63	.85			.67	-.74
11. OLBI exhaustion	18.48	4.15	.84				-.51
12. Work adjustment	49.74	15.86	.93				

Note: UWES-9 = Utrecht Work Engagement Scale; OLBI = Oldenburg Burnout Inventory. Variables 1 through 8 are measured by the Meaningful Work Inventory (MWI). UWES-9 Total Engagement is a composite of UWES-9 Vigor, Absorption, and Dedication. Work adjustment is a composite of overall job satisfaction, commitment, and low turnover cognitions.  $N = 574$ . All  $r$ s  $p < .001$ .

work characteristics was the strongest correlate of total engagement ( $r = .77, p < .001$ ) and disengagement ( $r = -.77, p < .001$ ). Although not tabled, meaningful work characteristics had the highest mean absolute value correlation with total engagement, disengagement, exhaustion, and work adjustment (mean  $r = |.70|$ ). Intrinsic rewards was ranked second (mean  $r = |.64|$ ).

## Regressions

Table 3 contains the results of a hierarchical regression analysis conducted to examine the incremental validity of meaningful work characteristics as a predictor of total engagement. Meaningful work characteristics were entered as a second block following the other seven work characteristics. In support of Hypothesis 4, meaningful work characteristics accounted for a substantive portion of variance in total engagement,  $\Delta R^2 = .16, F(1, 398) = 159.64, p < .001$ . Both meaningful work,  $\beta = .64, t(398) = 12.64, p < .001$ , and intrinsic rewards,  $\beta = .18, t(398) = 2.95, p < .01$ , remained significant in the second block.

The reduced beta weight for intrinsic rewards in the second block likely reflects a high correlation observed between meaningful work and intrinsic rewards ( $r = .78$ ) rather than measurement overlap. The former dimension pertains to work that enables one to transform one's self and the world while making progress toward important, personal end states. The latter dimension pertains to work that is intrinsically

**Table 3.** Regression Analysis for UWES-9 Total Engagement

Variable	B	SE B	$\beta$	$r^2$	$\Delta r^2$
Step 1				.43***	
Intrinsic rewards	.73	.07	.63***		
Extrinsic rewards	.03	.14	.01		
Leadership & organizational features	.03	.05	.03		
Supervisory relationships	-.06	.05	-.07		
Coworker relationships	.01	.09	.00		
Organizational support	.10	.11	.06		
Work demands & balance	-.06	.21	-.01		
Step 2				.58	.16***
Intrinsic rewards	.21	.07	.18**		
Extrinsic rewards	-.04	.12	-.02		
Leadership & organizational features	-.08	.04	-.08		
Supervisory relationships	.02	.04	.02		
Coworker relationships	-.04	.08	-.02		
Organizational support	.08	.09	.05		
Work demands & balance	-.03	.17	-.01		
Meaningful work	.58	.05	.64***		

Note: UWES-9 = Utrecht Work Engagement Scale. Predictor variables are measured by the Meaningful Work Inventory (MWI). UWES-9 Total Engagement is a composite of UWES-9 Vigor, Absorption, and Dedication.  $N = 406$ .

\*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

rewarding, in and of itself, and serves basic needs to be fully present and embedded in one's work. Past research supports the orthogonality of these dimensions (Fairlie, 2010; 2011b). Nonetheless, intrinsic rewards contains some content that is aligned with models of meaning. As an aside, tolerance statistics for the regression analysis were nonsignificant, suggesting little multicollinearity in the final equation. Linear relationships among predictors must be very strong (i.e.,  $R > .90$ ) before multicollinearity begins to degrade solutions (Fox, 1991).

## Discussion

Meaningful work characteristics had the strongest relationships with engagement and most other employee outcomes, relative to other work characteristics. In addition, and echoing past research (Stringer, 2008), meaningful work characteristics was the strongest unique predictor of engagement. This dimension accounted for 16% of the total variance in engagement scores while controlling for a wide range of other work characteristics. Given the developmental theme that is inherent in meaningful work

(i.e., self-transcendence), the results would suggest a prominent role for HRD professionals in addressing these issues within organizations.

The observed relationships between meaningful work characteristics and the outcome variables were unusually large by research standards (Cohen, 1992). They were also larger than those found among other work characteristics and similar outcomes (e.g., Eby, Freeman, Rush, & Lance, 1999; Fried & Ferris, 1987; Loher, Noe, Moeller, & Fitzgerald, 1985). It could be argued that some of the study measures are redundant. However, the MWI measures perceptions of one's job and workplace characteristics. Outcome measures evaluate self-reported perceptions of one's cognitive or affective states (e.g., engagement, exhaustion) and summary attitudes and behaviors with respect to one's organization (e.g., commitment, turnover cognitions). The measures also differ in terms of generality-specificity. It could also be argued that the observed relationships were a function of common method variance (i.e., self-report, web administration). However, this problem is less prevalent than once believed (Crompton & Wagner, 1994). In addition, other work characteristics measured by the MWI, and administered under the same conditions in this study, had weaker relationships with outcome variables (e.g., coworker relationships).

The role of meaningful work in engagement and other employee outcomes was substantive in this study, indicating its practical relevance for HRD practice. Yet, meaningful work is underrepresented in many models and measures of work characteristics, which typically focus on intrinsically rewarding work characteristics (Campion & Thayer, 1985; Hackman & Oldham, 1975; Parker & Wall, 1998; Warr, 1994). While intrinsic rewards had strong relationships with engagement and other outcomes in the current study, they were smaller than those associated with meaningful work characteristics. The current results suggest that self-actualizing work, realizing one's life purpose, values, and goals through work, having a social impact through work, feelings of personal accomplishment, and believing in one's highest career advancement within one's organization are overlooked sources of engagement and work adjustment.

### *Limitations and Future Directions*

The current study is not without theoretical, methodological, and statistical limitations. First, the study was based on a convenience sample that was overweighted by females and individuals in supervisory positions. Future research on meaningful work could take advantage of probability sampling methods (Kidder & Judd, 1986). In addition, the study relied solely on self-report data, which could be associated with response sets (Crocker & Algina, 1986) and method variance effects (Spector & Brannick, 1995). Future studies may be conducted using other methods of data collection (e.g., behavioral observation, ratings by others). The research was also cross-sectional in nature. Thus there are restrictions on the causal interpretations that can be made. Longitudinal and experimental methods could be employed to more accurately assess changes in the levels of employee outcome variables as a function of meaningful work.

### *Implications for HRD Practice*

The study has several practical implications for HRD professionals. These implications inform several actions that could be taken to maintain and increase levels of meaningful work in organizations and reap its associated benefits. These are discussed in order from more simple, short term, and internal to the organization, to more complex, long term, and external to the organization.

First, meaningful work characteristics should be audited on employee surveys. Items should measure levels of self-actualizing work, realization of purpose, goals, and values, social impact, feelings of personal accomplishment, and perceived ability to meet one's highest career goals within one's organization. Similar questions yielded the strongest correlations with nearly every employee outcome measured in this study. HRD professionals should also examine relationships among meaningful work characteristics and employee outcomes in their survey data to confirm these links within their own organization. Correlation analyses, regression analyses, and separate analyses by department could help to prioritize actions.

Second, HRD professionals could ensure that opportunities for meaningful work are clearly communicated and understood within organizations. Employees may perceive low levels of meaningful work on employee surveys. Yet, such perceptions may be inaccurate (see Spector, 1992). Strategies may be crafted to rectify this problem. For example, job descriptions could be revisited with employees. Their attention could be drawn to tasks and activities that, for example, support the realization of their full potential as individuals. Thus there may be "unused" opportunities for meaningful work within each employee's purview. Employees may also not be aware of the objective social impacts of their work. Managers could assist direct reports in analyzing their jobs to understand the cause (i.e., proximal) and effect (i.e., distal) relationships that exist between their jobs and the overall vision and strategy.

Programs could also be created to develop deeper social connections among employees and clients. This could lead to a number of outcomes, including a more thorough understanding of individual employee impacts. For example, client satisfaction surveys could include questions on client impact. The results could be shared with employees. Client testimonial stories and videos could be shared with employees at annual meetings and town halls. Both employees and clients could participate in focus groups on client service improvements. Finally, employees and clients could be "twinned" on the basis of personality, values, and/or interests, and have regular contact to discuss product and service improvements. In all of the examples, above, employees would experience greater exposure to the human recipients of their work.

HRD professionals may also support employees in changing their mindsets about their jobs. Personality traits and cognitive styles may predispose employees to perceiving higher or lower levels of meaningful work. For example, perceptions of job autonomy have long been linked to employee attitudes and behavior (Terry & Jimmieson, 1999; Theorell, 2003). These perceptions may stem, in part, from personality traits such as locus of control (Wang, Bowling, & Eschleman, 2010). Mindfulness,

in general, entails a greater attention and awareness around one's characteristic cognitive and affective styles (Brown & Ryan, 2003). HRD professionals could assist employees in breaking down their jobs, considering alternative ways of perceiving them, and ultimately shifting their perspectives on them (e.g., from "work" to "play"; Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000). Team assessments of personality traits and cognitive styles could inform these activities, if amenable to employees.

Third, HRD professionals could develop training programs to assist managers in understanding models of human meaning that underlie meaningful work (e.g., Wong, 1998). Managers could use models of meaning as a "lens" to understand how their decisions and behavior will impact employee engagement and performance. Specifically, typical managerial work activities (Borman & Brush, 1993) could be reviewed and executed differently to promote higher levels of meaningful work among direct reports. For example, developing and mentoring people is a common dimension of managerial work (Yukl, Wall, & Lepsinger, 1990). Managers could use theories of self-actualization to inform their employee development activities and ensure that development is equally employee- and organization-centered.

Fourth, HRD professionals could revise career development programs to better assist employees in achieving their long-term career goals within their current organization. This appears to be a feature of meaningful work. These long-term career goals may be closely aligned with employees' sense of self or identity and, as such, exist independent of any one employer. While long-term career-tracking is evident in many organizations, some programs are likely more organization-centered than employee-centered. HRD professionals with a deep understanding of human meaning could ensure that career tracking programs are also aligned with the life purposes, goals, and values of individual employees. These ideas are central to both protean (Hall, 1996) and boundaryless (Arthur, 1994) career concepts. These concepts entail a more subjective perspective on career progression and are focused on self-fulfillment in line with one's own personal goals rather than externally defined goals.

Fifth, HRD professionals could assist managers and direct reports in their collaborative efforts to redesign jobs. For example, job crafting (Berg, Wrzesniewski, & Dutton, 2010) and brainstorming techniques could be employed to append job descriptions with tasks and responsibilities that provide meaningful work as well as serve organizational strategy. Employees, for example, could be asked for ideas on how they could have a larger impact on people. In terms of self-actualization, employees could be asked to imagine what they would do for the rest of their lives if they didn't have to work for money. Themes could be distilled from these exercises, and jobs could be redesigned to address these themes in ways that are faithful to the needs of both employees and organizations.

Finally, HRD professionals could promote meaningfulness in employees' nonwork lives. Studies show that less than 8% of individuals' life longings are work-related (Kotter-Grühn et al., 2009). Surveys, focus groups, and interviews could be used to identify the nature of these other longings and inform ways to support them. While this is not an employer's responsibility, research shows that contributing directly to

employees' nonwork lives can lead to higher organizational commitment (Cohen, 1997). While some supports may be monetary (e.g., increased benefits), organizations may benefit more by sponsoring activities that directly address, for example, employee needs for social impact. For example, employees could engage in several paid days of community work per year. Nonwork time during compressed work weeks and sabbaticals could be used for continuing education. A suite of opportunities could be predeveloped in alignment with various aspects of meaning for the sake of cost and efficiency.

The above recommendations, if implemented, would have humanistic benefits for employees. However, they may also be profitable for organizations. Meaningful work characteristics was a substantive predictor of all employee outcomes measured in the current study. These outcomes are further associated with other, more distal, and more costly outcomes. Burnout has been linked to poor employee health (Shirom, Melamed, Toker, Berliner, & Shapira, 2005), absentee (Lee & Ashforth, 1996), lower work performance (Wright & Bonett, 1997), and turnover (Wright & Cropanzano, 1998). Job dissatisfaction has also been linked to these distal outcomes (Eby et al., 1999; Hackett, 1989; Judge, Thoresen, Bono, & Patton, 2001). Turnover cognitions have been shown to predict actual turnover (Tett & Meyer, 1993). Finally, engagement has been linked to several business outcomes across thousands of business units (Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002). In short, HRD policies and programs based on meaningful work may provide a "win-win" situation for both employers and employees.

## **Conclusion**

Meaningful work characteristics were shown to be strong correlates and unique predictors of engagement and other important employee outcomes. These characteristics were also more strongly related to these outcomes, relative to other work characteristics. Yet, meaningful work is underrepresented in many models and measures of work characteristics. This observation, together with the current findings, suggest that meaningful work characteristics are an overlooked source of employee motivation and engagement within organizations. HRD professionals may play a critical role in promoting meaningful work within organizations.

## **Author's Note**

Paul Fairlie is now at Paul Fairlie Consulting, Toronto, ON

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## Bio

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