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Meaningful Work: The What, Why and How Guide

By Paul Fairlie

“How do I engage my people?” Leaders have been asking this question ever since engagement became ‘the’ HR buzz word. [But it’s the wrong question, or at least too narrow a question.](#)

What about “How do I get my people engaged, satisfied, committed, and healthy?”, “How do I keep them from being absent, depressed, or burnt out?”, and “How do I retain them and get them to expend more effort?”

Engagement is one of many employee outcomes, all with their own drivers, costs and benefits. However, a handful of work factors are emerging as some of the strongest drivers of all of these outcomes. It’s called [meaningful work](#). I’ll tell you what that is, why it’s important, and how something so seemingly elusive can be provided to employees in tangible ways. Helpful references are at the end.



What is Meaningful Work?

Which work characteristics would be considered meaningful? When you analyze over 200 of them, a number of ‘buckets’ emerge. Most of them are fairly typical (e.g., intrinsic and extrinsic rewards, leadership, supervision).

However, one dimension stands apart. It’s having a job that:

- ◆ Helps you to fulfill purpose, life goals, and values;
- ◆ Helps you to realize your full potential as a person;
- ◆ Has a positive impact on people, things, and the world in general;
- ◆ Makes you feel like you’re accomplishing something worthwhile;
- ◆ Involves tasks that are enjoyable, in and of themselves;
- ◆ Is a major source of overall, life happiness.



It's also about seeing your job as a calling, being authentic, and having a connection to something bigger than yourself at work. These are classic existential themes. And while it's true that people differ in what they find meaningful, these tend to matter to most people, even if we don't all speak the same language. Social scientists have formed taxonomies of our deepest strivings, concerns, personal projects, and life longings. Each of these link to work characteristics that enable them.

Meaningful work is not new. It's echoed in Maslow's self-actualization, McGregor's Theory Y Management, and Herzberg's Motivator-Hygiene Theory. You'll recognize it in Dan Pink's *Drive*, Dave Ulrich's *Why of Work*, and Simon Sinek's *Start With Why*. Malcolm Gladwell talked about it in *Outliers*, and Eckhart Tolle has extolled the virtues of meaning, in general, in *A New Earth*.

Why Provide Meaningful Work?

The Importance of Meaning to People



Meaning is what people say they most want in life. It's what *really matters* to them. When researchers ask thousands of people to identify their life longings, most satisfying life events or conceptions of the 'good life', the things that come up again and again are found in models of human meaning. *Ironically, these things are absent from many models of employee motivation.* If you want employees to be fully present in their jobs, you must provide work

characteristics that build and maintain meaning.

Meaningful Work is Healthy Work

Do you have rising drug and disability costs? Meaningfulness has repeatedly been linked to physical and mental health. In fact, the actual concept of mental health is being re-defined by mental health professionals as *flourishing*, which combines both happiness and meaning. Meaningful work is healthy work.

The Growing Crisis of Meaningful Work

Job satisfaction and work ethic levels have been slipping for decades in North America and Europe. People appear to be psychologically withdrawing from work as an important life pursuit.

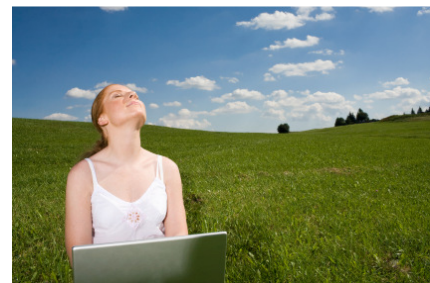
What is happening? The last few decades have seen organizations go through more frequent, rapid, and radical changes. Jobs are more intense and insecure. Three-quarters of Americans cite money and work as the leading causes of their stress. Yet, real income remains flat. Corporate scandals have also eroded confidence in organizations, and global events such as terrorism and climate change have people thinking about their impacts on the world through their work.

More people are asking *Who am I? What do I really want? Why am I here? What should I be doing with my life...and my work?* As a result, a growing number of people on national surveys are saying that they want more **interesting work** and **social usefulness through work**.

Meaningful Work Drives Critical Outcomes

I surveyed 1,000 people in 50 states on nearly 40 work dimensions as part of an academic study.

Out of 80 questions, the meaningful work questions were among the strongest correlates of satisfaction, commitment, stay intentions, discretionary effort, engagement, and low burnout, as well as low depression, low anxiety, physical health, and mental health as indexed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).



For example, employees with jobs that helped them to:

- ◆ Fulfill a life purpose were 41% more likely to get interested and absorbed in their work;
- ◆ Achieve life goals were 34% more likely to work beyond what was expected of them;
- ◆ Realize their personal values were 52% more likely to feel committed to their employers;
- ◆ Become who they were 'meant to be' in life were 41% more likely to dislike stopping work;

- ◆ Do what they do best had 33% weaker intentions to quit
- ◆ Do ‘good things in the world’ had 24% weaker intentions to quit;
- ◆ See their connection to a vision and mission were 58% more likely to feel committed to their employers.

Overall, in three national samples, meaningful work characteristics had the highest average correlation with engagement, satisfaction, commitment, effort, stay intentions, healthy days, as well as low stress, burnout, and depression. This is ironic, given that meaningful work questions are *missing from most employee surveys*.

Work Dimension	Average Correlation
Meaningful Work	.55
Intrinsic Rewards (e.g., autonomy, recognition, involvement)	.51
Organizational Support	.42
Leadership & Organizational Features	.39
Supervisory Relationships	.37
Extrinsic Rewards (e.g., pay, promotion, benefits, vacation)	.36
Work Demands & Balance	.32
Co-Worker Relationships ¹	.28

Some employers may think that meaningful work factors will be less important to employees when the economy is bad. 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.



¹ These lower-ranked work factors are not unimportant, only less important. The surveys measured *only* important work factors. Additionally, while Leadership & Organizational Features and Supervisor Relationships were lower-ranked, it can be argued that *all* of these work factors come under the purview of leaders and supervisors.

A 'How-To' Guide for Meaningful Work

How do you provide meaningful work to employees? This can be challenging for some organizations. Luckily, there are multiple routes to meaningful work, and one or more of these may be possible for your own organization.

Assessment

First, find out 1) who your employees are, and 2) how they perceive their work. The first one involves personality, values and interests inventories. The second one involves employee surveys. With both, you'll learn what motivates employees, and how much or how little of what motivates them is present in their jobs.



Many people find similar things meaningful, but there will be differences. And simple heart-to-heart talks won't cut it. Use validated tools to assess the gaps and inform dialogues.

There are several good employee surveys, but make sure they tap themes such as growth and development, realizing strengths and potential, realizing values, life goals, and social impact. Intrinsically-rewarding work factors are also important (e.g., employee involvement, recognition, freedom to be creative, project ownership, clear processes and communication).

Communicate Meaningful Work

Meaningful work is often already present, but unnoticed. Once you know how employees see their jobs and workplaces, consider the *validity* of those perceptions. For example, employees may disagree on a survey that they have job autonomy, even though it exists 'unused' in their job descriptions. They may also feel that they have no significant impact on people. More care could be taken to show employees what effects they have on clients and customers. Focus groups, client testimonials, and 'twinning' programs among employees and clients may help to cement these connections. Meaningful work is partly a mind set. Some employees are naturally better at finding meaning than others.

Re-Tool Jobs to Be More Meaningful

If possible, modify people's jobs so to shore up the kinds of meaningful work that are found lacking on surveys. Don't assume that meaningfulness is inherent only in certain jobs. Most jobs can be changed in small ways to address what most matters

to people. For example, supervisors and direct reports could engage in ‘job crafting’ to create more intrapreneurial roles (e.g., realizing potential, growth opportunities). As well, ask employees how *they* think they can have a bigger impact on clients and society at large.

If you’re really brave, try asking this on your next 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?” Together with your employees, identify key themes in these dreams and then modify their work to address some of them.

Make the Work Environment More ‘Un-Work’ Like

Sometimes you can’t increase the meaningfulness of your organization’s products and services, nor the nature of people’s jobs. But perhaps the work environment can be transformed to be more like the places where people would rather be. You’ll find basketball courts and games rooms in some larger companies, but you could score more points with smaller scale environment changes that link more deeply to what most matters to employees. It’s like coming clean and saying “If you *had* to work somewhere, wouldn’t you rather work *here*?”

Make Non-Work Lives Meaningful

If you can’t provide meaningful work or meaningful work environments, help employees to create more meaning in their non-work lives. This isn’t your responsibility, but it helps. Research shows that contributing *directly* to employees’ non-work lives can lead to higher commitment. By this, I don’t mean paying people more or topping up benefits. And although on-site concierge and day care can help employees to breathe easier, these accouterments are not necessarily aligned with many employees’ sense of a meaningful life.

Studies show that less than 8% of people’s life longings are work-related. Finding out what the other 92% are for your employees could provide a palette of easy wins. Perhaps it’s paid time off for volunteer work. Also, not all employee 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, and find easy ways to support those efforts.



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