



## Meaningless Work is Depressing and Costly to Employers

**Study of 1,400 employees finds drivers of workplace depression, including lack of meaningful work.**

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October is Healthy Workplace Month in Canada. While one of the goals may be fewer employees coughing and sneezing, it's also about improving the quality of work and its effects on mental health.

Take depression, for example. Although we sometimes 'bring' our blue moods to work, work itself is a significant factor in depression. It's also costly. Depressed employees lose up to 3.2 more days per month than other workers, leading to productivity losses up to \$395 per employee per month.

### ***So what job factors are linked to depression? How prevalent are they in organizations?***

It's critical to answer *both* of these questions. Some job factors may be strong drivers of depression, but are already at low levels in organizations. No problem. What employers need to know is what job factors are 1) scarce, but guard against depression, and 2) prevalent and depressing.

I polled nearly 1,400 Americans in almost every state on 300 questions spread across different versions of the Meaningful Work Inventory®. I then identified job factors reported at *lower* levels and related to *lower* depression. I also identified job factors reported at *higher* levels and related to *higher* depression (depression was measured in the study).

When you convert the positives and negatives and plot them in the same space, a handful of things emerge. Some of them are not surprising:

- ◆ Pay
- ◆ Fairness & respect
- ◆ Work-life balance
- ◆ Career advancement
- ◆ Effort-reward balance
- ◆ Role conflict

What was perhaps most interesting were themes of **meaningful work**. When employees were doing the following through their jobs, they were *less depressed*:

- ◆ Fulfilling a life purpose;
- ◆ Becoming who they were 'meant to be' in life;
- ◆ Making the best use of their skills and talents.

*More...*



Yet, *these meaningful job factors are relatively scarce*. Having a life purpose and realizing one's skills and potential are hardcore existential issues.

Some forms of healthy work never change, but demographers and sociologists claim that we're also entering an age of meaningful work. Corporate scandals and environmental concerns may be hastening this trend. A growing number of North Americans may be looking for work that is more aligned with who they are and what they're trying to do in their lives.

### ***What can employers do?***

1. If depression is a leading source of disability in your organization, consider the drivers identified in this paper as possible causes.
2. Use employee surveys to identify drivers of employee well-being and their levels in your own organization.
3. Re-tool jobs and workplaces to better align with employee goals, values and purpose. Don't assume that meaningfulness is inherent only in certain jobs, or that employee values cannot be aligned with business strategy. Sometimes all it takes is a communication strategy.
4. Train managers to recognize and constructively address symptoms of employee depression.
5. Encourage employees to use employee assistance programs (EAPs), if available. EAPs can help employees to cope with mood problems that affect performance.

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