

## The Meaning of Work

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*Meaningful work can transform employee commitment.*

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By Paul Fairlie

This article is not about engagement. It's about bigger questions: How do I get my employees engaged, satisfied, committed and healthy? While many factors drive these outcomes, a handful have the most impact. One is called meaningful work.

Each job and workplace has hundreds of characteristics, but individuals find some characteristics more meaningful than others. In my own research and that of others, factors like fulfilling one's purpose, realizing personal values and achieving life goals through work stand out, as do realizing one's full potential and having a social impact. Each of these factors links to job and work characteristics that enable them.

### Return on Investment

Surveying more than 1,000 U.S. employees on 80 job- and workplace-related questions in 2010, I found that meaningful work was the strongest driver of commitment, stay intentions and discretionary effort. It beat out leadership, supervisors, co-workers, pay and other factors that contribute to engagement.

Employees with jobs that helped them:

Fulfill a life purpose were 41 percent more likely to get interested and absorbed in their work.

Achieve life goals were 34 percent more likely to work beyond what was expected of them.

Realize their personal values were 52 percent more likely to feel committed to their employers.

Become who they were meant to be in life were 41 percent more likely to dislike stopping work.

Do what they do best had 33 percent weaker intentions to quit.

Do good things in the world had 24 percent weaker intentions to quit.

See their connection to a vision and mission were 58 percent more likely to feel committed to their employers.

Overall, meaningful job and work factors had the second highest correlation with a composite of high satisfaction, commitment and stay intentions and low burnout. Intrinsic job rewards such as autonomy, recognition and involvement had the highest correlation.

### Put Meaning into Work

Simply talking about meaning can help uncover what employees



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currently do in their jobs that is tied to personal value, purpose and life goals. Encourage more focus on aspects of work that relate to these meaningful characteristics. If there is a large gap between work and meaning, the following tools can help deepen the connection:

**Make assessments.** First, find out who your employees are with personality, values and interests inventories. Then use employee surveys to find out how they perceive their work. You'll learn what motivates each employee and how much or how little of what motivates them is present in their jobs. Many people find similar factors meaningful, but small differences exist.

**Tweak the jobs.** Based on these assessments, make small tweaks that make a huge difference for employees. For example, ask employees how they think they can have a bigger impact on clients and society. Then engage with direct reports in "job crafting" to create more "intrapreneurial" roles.

Ask employees "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?" With your employees, identify themes in their answers and then modify their work to include some of the themes.

**Get personal.** Studies show that less than 8 percent of people's life longings are work-related. Find out what makes up the other 92 percent for your employees. Remember that not all employee development is career-related. Consider what employees are trying to accomplish in their personal lives and find ways to support those efforts at work.

### Driving Meaning

According to Paul Fairlie Consulting's 2010 survey of 1,000 U.S. employees, the following dimensions were the strongest drivers of employees' commitment, stay intentions, discretionary effort and absorption:

| Dimension   | Correlation |
|---|-------------|
| Intrinsic job rewards such as autonomy, recognition and involvement | 0.72        |
| Meaningful job and work factors                                     | 0.67        |
| Extrinsic job rewards such as pay, promotion, benefits and vacation | 0.65        |
| Work demands and balance  | 0.59        |
| Leadership and organizational factors                               | 0.59        |
| Supervisor factors  | 0.40        |

|                   |      |
|-------------------|------|
| Co-worker factors | 0.37 |
|-------------------|------|

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