

Economic Studies in Inequality, Social Exclusion
and Well-Being

Series Editor: Jacques Silber

Milena Nikolova *Editor*

Work Meaning and Motivation

Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Work
Well-being

OPEN ACCESS



Springer

Economic Studies in Inequality, Social Exclusion and Well-Being

Series Editor

Jacques Silber, Ramat Gan, Israel

Traditionally, economists have identified well-being with market command over goods rather than with the “state” of a person. The books in this series go precisely beyond the traditional concepts of consumption, income or wealth and offer a broad, inclusive view of inequality and well-being. Topics include, but are not limited to: Capabilities and Inequalities, Discrimination and Segregation in the Labour Market, Equality of Opportunities, Globalization and Inequality, Human Development and the Quality of Life, Income and Social Mobility, Inequality and Development, Inequality and Happiness, Inequality and Malnutrition, Income and Social Mobility, Inequality in Consumption and Time Use, Inequalities in Health and Education, Multidimensional Inequality and Poverty Measurement, Polarization, Poverty among Children and Elderly People, Social Policy and the Welfare State, and Wealth Distribution.

Milena Nikolova

Editor

Work Meaning and Motivation

Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Work
Well-being

 Springer

Editor

Milena Nikolova 

The University of Groningen

Faculty of Economics and Business

Groningen, The Netherlands



ISSN 2364-107X

ISSN 2364-1088 (electronic)

Economic Studies in Inequality, Social Exclusion and Well-Being

ISBN 978-3-032-23825-2

ISBN 978-3-032-23826-9 (eBook)

<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-23826-9>

© The Editor(s) (if applicable) and The Author(s) 2026. This book is an open access publication.

Open Access This book is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if you modified the licensed material. You do not have permission under this license to share adapted material derived from this book or parts of it.

The images or other third party material in this book are included in the book's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the book's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

This work is subject to copyright. All commercial rights are reserved by the author(s), whether the whole or part of the material is concerned, specifically the rights of translation, reprinting, reuse of illustrations, recitation, broadcasting, reproduction on microfilms or in any other physical way, and transmission or information storage and retrieval, electronic adaptation, computer software, or by similar or dissimilar methodology now known or hereafter developed. Regarding these commercial rights a non-exclusive license has been granted to the publisher.

The use of general descriptive names, registered names, trademarks, service marks, etc. in this publication does not imply, even in the absence of a specific statement, that such names are exempt from the relevant protective laws and regulations and therefore free for general use.

The publisher, the authors and the editors are safe to assume that the advice and information in this book are believed to be true and accurate at the date of publication. Neither the publisher nor the authors or the editors give a warranty, expressed or implied, with respect to the material contained herein or for any errors or omissions that may have been made. The publisher remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

This Springer imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

If disposing of this product, please recycle the paper.

Foreword

Work Meaning and Motivation: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Work Well-being is a timely and original contribution. The study of meaningful work has long been central in psychology, sociology, and philosophy, yet much of this research has remained siloed within individual disciplines. In economics, the topic is only beginning to gain traction. This volume breaks new ground by bringing together leading scholars across economics, organizational and applied psychology, sociology, history, and entrepreneurship to offer a comprehensive account of what makes work meaningful and why it matters. In doing so, it not only synthesizes the state of the art but also lays the foundation for a more integrated research agenda on work and well-being.

The significance of this book extends well beyond academic debates. Meaningful work is closely linked to issues high on today's policy agenda: labor market participation, workforce motivation, resilience in the face of technological disruption, and mental health. At a time when societies are grappling with automation, precarious employment, and shifting expectations about the role of work in life, this volume demonstrates that meaningful work is not a peripheral concern but a central element of human flourishing and social stability.

This volume thus stands as both an academic milestone and a valuable resource for policymakers and practitioners. By bringing together diverse disciplinary perspectives and making them openly accessible, it ensures that the study of meaningful work will inform debates not only within universities but also across workplaces, governments, and international organizations.

Erasmus University Rotterdam
Rotterdam, The Netherlands
Open University
Heerlen, The Netherlands

Martijn J. Burger

Preface

Work Meaning and Motivation: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Work Well-being brings together leading research on work well-being, with a particular focus on work meaningfulness. The volume reflects recent efforts to bridge interdisciplinary perspectives on how people engage with and understand their work and whether they find it significant, purposeful, and aligned with their values.

While questions about meaning in work have deep roots in sociology, psychology, philosophy, and organizational studies, economists have only recently begun to examine them systematically. This book responds to the growing recognition that understanding work meaningfulness requires dialogue across disciplines. The volume originated as an idea that took shape during a hybrid workshop held in March 2025 in Groningen, supported by the Dutch Research Council's Open Science Meetings Fund, where scholars from diverse fields exchanged insights on how meaning in work can be studied, supported, and sustained.

The chapters reflect this diversity of perspective. Evgenia I. Lysova and Luke Fletcher outline the conceptual debates and provide a review of organizational psychology and behavior research on meaningful work. Duncan Gallie and Ying Zhou trace the evolution of sociological traditions from essentialist and liberal frameworks to contemporary empirically-grounded approaches. Martin Tušl, Miika Kujanpää, Merly Kosenkranius, and Jessica de Bloom explore how individuals actively craft meaningful experiences through their work and life roles. Boris Nikolaev and Sean Dwyer extend the discussion to entrepreneurship, introducing the concept of “entrepreneurial meaningfulness.” Benjamin Schneider provides a historical view, showing how autonomy, competence, and relatedness have long shaped workers' experiences. Martijn Hendriks and Femke Cnossen review the emerging economic literature on the causes and consequences of meaningful work. The final chapter extends the dialogue between psychology and economics by introducing the *work orientations* framework—people's long-term views of work as a job, career, or calling—as a lens for understanding motivation, effort, and meaning in economic life.

What unites these contributions is the view that meaningful work is not a luxury but a central determinant of human well-being. By integrating perspectives that are

often studied in isolation, this volume seeks to deepen understanding of how meaning in work is created, maintained, or lost, and how these processes shape individuals, organizations, and societies. The aim is to provide a foundation for future interdisciplinary research and to encourage scholars, policymakers, and practitioners to recognize the importance of meaningful work in shaping both lives and labor markets.

Groningen, The Netherlands

Milena Nikolova

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I would like to thank all of the contributors to the individual chapters of this volume for their expertise, commitment, and collegiality. I am also grateful to the University of Groningen's FEBRI Institute for providing accelerator grant funding. I am very thankful to the Dutch Research Council (NWO) for supporting my original research on work orientations (*SSH Open Competition XS Pilot 2022–2023 round 1–2*, file number 406.XS.01.062), for funding the 2025 workshop through the Open Science Meetings Fund (file number 500.010.2439), and for supporting the Open Access publication of this book (file number 36.201.150) through the grant *Open Science Open Access Books 2025-I*.

I also wish to thank the editorial team at Springer for their guidance and support throughout the publication process.

Finally, I extend my thanks to all attendees and discussants of the 2025 Groningen work and well-being workshop, as well as to colleagues who provided comments on the individual chapters, whose thoughtful insights and questions enriched the development of this volume.

Contents

Meaningful Work: An Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior Perspective.	1
Evgenia I. Lysova and Luke Fletcher	
The Meaning and Meaningfulness of Work: The View from Sociology. . .	37
Duncan Gallie and Ying Zhou	
Workers’ Proactive Pursuit of Meaning: The Role of Needs-Based Crafting	59
Martin Tušl, Miika Kujanpää, Merly Kosenkranius, and Jessica De Bloom	
What Makes Entrepreneurship Worth Doing? A Review and Research Agenda on Entrepreneurial Meaningfulness	81
Sean M. Dwyer and Boris Nikolaev	
Meaningful Work in Historical Perspective	115
Benjamin Schneider	
The Economics of Meaningful Work: A Scoping Review	151
Martijn Hendriks and Femke Cnossen	
Work Orientations and Economics	185
Milena Nikolova	

Contributors

Jessica de Bloom Faculty of Business and Economics, HRM&OB, Nettelbosje, University of Groningen, Groningen, Netherlands

Femke Cnossen University of Groningen and Global Labor Organization (GLO), Groningen, The Netherlands

Sean M. Dwyer Price College of Business, The University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK, USA

Luke Fletcher The Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, UK

Duncan Gallie Nuffield College, Oxford University, Oxford, UK

Martijn Hendriks Erasmus Happiness Economics Research Organisation (EHERO), Erasmus University Rotterdam, Rotterdam, The Netherlands
University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa

Merly Kosenkranius HAMK Edu Research Unit, Häme University of Applied Sciences, Hämeenlinna, Finland

Miika Kujanpää University of South-Eastern Norway, School of Business, Hønefoss, Norway

Evgenia I. Lysova Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Amsterdam, Netherlands

Boris Nikolaev College of Business, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO, USA

Milena Nikolova The University of Groningen, Faculty of Economics and Business, Groningen, The Netherlands

Benjamin Schneider Oslo Metropolitan University, Oslo, Norway

Martin Tušl Public and Organizational Health, Center of Salutogenesis, Epidemiology, Biostatistics and Prevention Institute, University of Zurich, Zurich, Switzerland

Ying Zhou University of Surrey, Guildford, Surrey, UK

Meaningful Work: An Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior Perspective



Evgenia I. Lysova and Luke Fletcher

Abstract As interest in meaningful work is growing both from scholars and practitioners, it is of great importance to provide an overview of the meaningful work literature to date. In this chapter, we zoom in on the developments so far in the field of organizational psychology and organizational behavior. We first reflect on the conceptualization of meaningful work, the theoretical framework underlying research in the field, and methodological considerations. Then, we provide an overview of antecedents and outcomes of meaningful work in the form of an input-process-output model. Among antecedents, we discuss person-focused, relations-focused, work and occupational context-focused, organization-focused, and society-focused factors. In relation to the outcomes of meaningful work, we highlight the range researched to date, focusing on work-related attitudes, behavioral work outcomes, work-family-nonwork interplay, and health and well-being. In reviewing the literature to date, we also critically reflect on key problematic gaps, challenges, and assumptions. In doing so, we provide ideas for important future research directions that aim to promote interdisciplinary and forward-looking development of the meaningful work field.

Keywords Meaningful work · Work meaningfulness · Meaning in work · Organizational behavior · Organizational psychology

If one wanted to crush and destroy a man entirely, to mete out to him the most terrible punishment, all one would have to do would be to make him do work that was completely and utterly devoid of usefulness and meaning.

(A quote from the novel *"The House of the Dead"* by Fyodor Dostoevsky, 1862)

E. I. Lysova (✉)
Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Amsterdam, Netherlands
e-mail: e.lysova@vu.nl

L. Fletcher
The Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, UK
e-mail: l.fletcher@mmu.ac.uk

This quote by a famous Russian writer emphasizes the importance for an individual to engage in work that is useful and has meaning and purpose. Experiencing meaningful work is, therefore, regarded as “a fundamental human need” that individuals actively seek to satisfy (Yeoman, 2014). Defined as work that is perceived by individuals as personally significant, valuable, and worthwhile (Lysova et al., 2023), meaningful work has received growing attention from both practitioners and scholars. For instance, meaningful work has been viewed by practitioners as one of the paths toward creating “simply irresistible organizations” (Bersin, 2015) and one of the key reasons why people remain in organizations (De Smet et al., 2022). Meaningful work has also become the topic of different practitioner-focused books (e.g., Michaelson & Tosti-Kharas, 2024) and podcasts (e.g., Soren, 2023–present). In turn, scholarly interest in the topic is seen in the burgeoning amount of literature and meta-analytical reviews (e.g., Allan et al., 2018; Bailey et al., 2019; Blustein et al., 2023; Lysova et al., 2019; Rosso et al., 2010), special issues (e.g., Bailey et al., 2019; Lysova et al., 2023), and books (e.g., Yeoman, 2014). Such an interest is unsurprising, especially as meaningful work has been found to have a range of positive implications for individuals and organizations, including greater job satisfaction, work engagement, engagement in extra-role behaviors, performance, work-related creativity, and reduced turnover (e.g., Allan et al., 2018; Cai et al., 2018; Amabile & Pratt, 2016).

To date, several valuable efforts¹ have been made to review the existing research on meaningful work. We selected only those that focused on reviewing meaningful work within organizational behavior/psychology and those that have drawn upon this disciplinary field, such as relevant insights from human resource management, management, sociology, philosophy, and ethics. Table 1 provides an overview of the key published reviews. Rosso et al.’s (2010) foundational review laid down the understanding of sources of meaningful work, together with the mechanisms underlying its emergence. Further advancing the understanding of sources of meaningful work, Lysova et al. (2019) reviewed the literature from the perspective of how meaningful work can be fostered in organizations, proposing an integrative framework of the multilevel sources of meaningful work that emphasizes the importance of understanding the interplay of person-, job-, organizational-, and societal-level sources of meaningful work. At the same time, Bailey et al. (2019) conducted another literature review of meaningful work, focusing on both sources and outcomes of meaningful work within the domain of human resource development (HRD). In turn, a meta-analytical review by Allan et al. (2019) specifically examined the outcomes of meaningful work. Recently, Blustein et al. (2023) reviewed sources and outcomes of meaningful work in relation to how it connects to decent work, which is defined as work that consists of “(a) physically and interpersonally safe working conditions (e.g., absent of physical, mental, or emotional abuse), (b) hours that allow for free time and adequate rest,

¹ Here, we highlight only several of the existing literature reviews with a focus on signaling different perspectives undertaken by these reviews. Also, these are the reviews we would focus on in providing the synthesis of meaningful work in this paper. There are many other reviews on the topic that exist, focusing more specifically on certain disciplines (e.g., business ethics, Michaelson et al. (2014); sociology, Laaser and Bolton (2022), etc).

Table 1 Overview of the key published reviews

Source	Journal	Type of review	Focus of the review
Rosso, Dekas, and Wrzesniewski (2010)	<i>Research in Organizational Behavior</i>	Literature review	Understanding sources of meaningful work and psychological mechanisms underlying them
Both-Nwabuwe et al., 2017	<i>Frontiers in Psychology</i>	Systematic literature review	Understanding what is meaningful work and how it can be best measured
Lepisto & Pratt, 2017	<i>Organizational Psychology Review</i>	Conceptual review	Understanding what is meaningful work, explaining it through self-realization and justification perspectives
Martela & Pessi, 2018	<i>Frontiers in Psychology</i>	Literature review	Understanding what is meaningful work, defining the key dimensions of meaningful work
Lysova, Allan, Dik, Duffy, & Steger (2019)	<i>Journal of Vocational Behavior</i>	Literature review	Understanding how organizations can foster meaningful work by exploring sources of meaningful work and the interactions between them, and developing an integrative multilevel framework of factors fostering meaningful work
Bailey et al. (2019)	<i>Human Resource Development Review</i>	Systematic literature review	Understanding what meaningful work is, its antecedents, and outcomes to inform theory and practice in human resource development
Allan, Batz-Barbarich, et al. (2019)	<i>Journal of Management Studies</i>	Meta-analytical review	Examining the outcomes of meaningful work
Blustein et al. (2023)	<i>Annual Review of Work and Organizational Psychology</i>	Literature review	Examining the connection between decent work and meaningful work

(c) organizational values that complement family and social values, (d) adequate compensation, and (e) access to adequate health care” (Duffy et al., 2016, p. 130). The above mentioned reviewers primarily focus on addressing the sources and/or outcomes of meaningful work, while several of the existing reviews specifically cover the conceptual and operationalization debates surrounding meaningful work (Both-Nwabuwe et al., 2017; Lepisto & Pratt, 2017; Martela & Pessi, 2018).

In this chapter, we will draw on these prior review efforts, together with synthesizing additional recent work, to provide an understanding of meaningful work in the context of organizational behavior and organizational psychology, and discuss future research directions and implications of this work. We will proceed to provide the synthesis of meaningful work research in the following order: (1) conceptualization, (2) theoretical frameworks, (3) methodological approaches and measurements, (4) an integrative model of antecedents and outcomes, and (5) future research directions and recommendations.

Conceptualization

What constitutes meaningful work remains a significant topic of debate. There are different ways to make sense of this debate. Some scholars take a subjective view of meaningful work, seeing it in “the eye of the beholder” (Michaelson et al., 2014, p. 86)—so it is up to the individual to perceive their work as meaningful. Others pursue a more objective view of meaningful work, arguing that for work to be meaningful, it needs to be objectively worth pursuing. Michaelson (2021) introduces the normative understanding of meaningful work, suggesting that it is a “purposeful activity that one has good reasons to experience as meaningful, that others have good reasons to perceive as socially worthwhile, and that it is independently (inter-subjectively or objectively) meaningful” (p. 422). This ongoing debate of *subjective* versus *objective* understanding is further fueled by each of the perspectives being preferred by different disciplines. For instance, philosophers tend to draw on objective or normative understandings of meaningful work (e.g., Michaelson, 2021), while organizational psychology and behavioral scholars (e.g., Lysova et al., 2019) draw primarily on subjective understandings of meaningful work, further challenging the path to resolving the debate.

The conceptual debate is also fueled by the vast array of definitions of meaningful work that have emerged, also due to the concept being used in different and siloed disciplines. Lepisto and Pratt (2017) reviewed various definitions of meaningful work, concluding that the core of this phenomenon is “positivity associated with an individual’s work” (p. 5). They suggested the distinction between meaningful work as a *realization* (i.e., meaningful work is centered on the fulfillment of needs, motivations, and desires associated with self-realization) and *justification* (i.e., meaningful work is centered on the individual’s accounts that justify the worthiness of one’s work). Martela and Pessi (2018) counted 36 existing definitions of meaningful work, which in one way or another included the following three elements: *significance* (i.e., how much intrinsic value people assign to or can find from their work), *broader purpose* (i.e., how work contributes to something beyond individuals’ own benefits), and *self-realization* (i.e., how much individuals are able to realize and express themselves through their work). They extend the work by Lepisto and Pratt (2017), arguing that self-realization and justification (significance, in their case) are not separate perspectives but both key dimensions of meaningful work and that there is a third dimension of a broader purpose (Martela & Pessi, 2018).

The last aspect of the conceptual debate concerns whether meaningful work represents a unidimensional or a multidimensional construct. Traditionally, meaningful work has been regarded as a unidimensional phenomenon, which reflects scholars’ seeing it as a static positive job attitude, similar to other attitudes (e.g., work engagement) (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). This perspective contrasts with the work by Lips-Wiersma and Morris (2009) who argue for the multidimensional view of meaningful work, treating it as a work experience arising from four core dimensions: (a) *developing and becoming self* (i.e., feeling true to oneself and developing

personally and morally as one engages in work), (b) *expressing full potential* (i.e., feeling able to express one's talents and gaining a sense of achievement), (c) *unity with others* (i.e., feeling of having shared values and belonging), and (d) *serving others* (i.e., feeling able to contribute to the well-being of others). These dimensions reflect the experience of meaningful work, acknowledging the tension that exists in meeting the needs of self (a and b) and the needs of others (c and d) as well as the need for being and the need for doing (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009). Another multidimensional view on meaningful work has been proposed by Steger et al. (2012), who conceptualize meaningful work as including three facets: (a) *positive meaning* (i.e., people judging that their work has personal significance), (b) *meaning-making through work* (i.e., people viewing their work as contributing to their meaning in life), and (c) *greater good motivations* (i.e., people viewing work as having a broader impact on others). Pratt and Ashforth (2003) draw on the identity perspective to distinguish between meaningfulness *in* work, arising from what one does (i.e., one's work role) and, *at* work, arising from a sense of belonging to something bigger (i.e., membership in a group or community).

As we can see, the debate about what meaningful work entails can be attributed to the different (disciplinary) perspectives taken by scholars and the underlying understanding of what makes work meaningful, and meaningful for whom. The fact that scholars use concepts of meaning, meaningful work, and meaningfulness interchangeably, when they may refer to slightly different things, further exacerbates this matter. For matters of clarity, in this paper, we proceed with taking a subjective view of meaningful work and define it as an "individual's experience of their work as being personally significant, worthwhile, and valued"² (Lysova et al., 2023, p. 1227).

Theoretical Frameworks

Here, we proceed with discussing the different underlying theoretical perspectives addressing meaningful work. We distinguish between (1) job design-related theories, (2) need-based theories, (3) relational theories, and (4) other theoretical frameworks.

²Here, we align with prior conceptualizations (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Rosso et al., 2010) that distinguish meaningfulness as the amount of significance work holds for an individual rather than it is the output of having made sense of work, or interpreting what work means. An example of interpreting what work means would be seeing work as just a means to an end or as a calling. Also similar to prior research reviews (Bailey et al., 2019; Lepisto & Pratt, 2017; Lysova et al., 2019; Rosso et al., 2010), meaningful work should be distinguished from related constructs. For instance, it differs from a sense of calling, which requires prosocial purpose pursuit that is externally or internally summoned and ought to be undertaken (e.g., Duffy et al., 2014). Meaningful work also differs from intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000) or work engagement (Schaufeli et al., 2006)—both reflecting temporal episodes of feeling motivated to engage in tasks for their own sense, not needing them to be prosocial or purposeful in nature.

Job Design-Related Theories Much of the existing research studying meaningful work draws on the Job Characteristics Model (JCM), which views experienced meaningful work as one of the critical states necessary for the development of internal work motivation (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). The theory proposes that a job designed to allow higher levels of autonomy, skill variety, task identity, and task significance enables greater experienced meaningfulness of work, resulting in greater motivation and performance (Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Rosso et al., 2010). Other job design-related theories utilized for studying meaningful work entail relational job design theory (Grant, 2007) and the theory of purposeful behavior (Barrick et al., 2013). The relational job design theory (Grant, 2007) proposes that the more employees perceive that their job has an impact on beneficiaries (i.e., anyone positively impacted by the job) and they have contact with beneficiaries, the more it motivates them to make a prosocial difference, experiencing meaningful work. In turn, Barrick et al.'s (2013) theory proposes that personality traits motivate purpose goal striving, which could be best addressed by certain job characteristics that reflect these strivings; when these job characteristics act in concert with these purposeful motivational strivings, individuals experience the psychological state of experienced meaningfulness, which, in turn, triggers task-specific motivation processes that influence the attainment of work outcomes. Some research specifically draws on Kahn's (1990) personal role engagement framework, positioning meaningful work as one of the psychological conditions, next to availability and safety. This theoretical perspective goes beyond job design to look at wider work context and the situational ebbs and flows impacting meaningful work, for example how access and the ability to utilize organizational-level resources/systems can vary for different tasks and situations across the day and as such impact the extent to which meaningfulness can be experienced across the working day (see, for example, Fletcher, 2017; Fletcher et al., 2018).

Needs-Based Theories Next to job design- and context-related understanding of meaningful work, some research utilizes theories emphasizing the satisfaction of needs. For instance, research has drawn on the self-determination theory (SDT) (Ryan & Deci, 2017) that argues that the satisfaction of the needs of *autonomy* (i.e., a sense of volition and internal perceived locus of control in one's undertakings), *competence* (i.e., a sense of mastery and efficacy in what one does), and *relatedness* (i.e., a sense of connection to others and belonging to a community) plays an important role for the motivation, well-being, and vitality (Ryan & Deci, 2017). In particular, these three psychological needs, together with the recently added fourth need of beneficence (i.e., a sense of benefiting other people) (Martela & Ryan, 2016), have been related to meaningful work (Martela et al., 2021; Martela & Riekkari, 2018).³ Furthermore, Psychology of Working Theory (PWT) (Duffy et al., 2016) similarly uses the needs-satisfaction mechanism to explain how decent work

³While job design theories are concerned with how to design enriching jobs, need-based theories are focused on how to satisfy psychological needs, which could but does not have to be achieved through job design.

connects to meaningful work (Blustein et al., 2023). Decent work consists of “(a) physical and interpersonally safe working conditions (e.g., absent of physical, mental, or emotional abuse), (b) hours that allow for free time and adequate rest, (c) organizational values that complement family and social values, (d) adequate compensation, and (e) access to adequate health care” (Duffy et al., 2016, p. 130). Thus, decent work reflects basic workplace conditions to which employees are entitled, and through the satisfaction of basic psychological needs, individuals can also experience meaningful work, which is then a more aspirational work condition of experienced significance (Blustein et al., 2023).

Relational Theories In addition to the purely job design and need-focused theoretical perspectives, meaningful work has also been theorized through relational perspectives. For instance, drawing on social information processing theory (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978), Wrzesniewski et al. (2003) have proposed the interpersonal sensemaking theory which argues that employees rely on interpersonal cues—“meaningful chunks of other’s behaviors they receive from colleagues, supervisors, and beneficiaries of their work—as sources of information about the value or significance of their job, role, and self in the organization” (pp. 103–104). Individuals scan their environment for cues, interpret those cues (i.e., regard them as affirming or disaffirming), and make attributions about why someone acted the way they did. This process of making meaning of relational cues allows individuals to see whether their work is meaningful or whether they need to alter the content of their job and role, or how they view themselves, to experience their work as meaningful (Wrzesniewski et al., 2003). Prior research finds that people attend to cues to facilitate meaningfulness during emotionally ambivalent situations/events (Lysova et al., 2023). A relational explanation of the emergence of meaningful work has also been grounded in the theory connecting social networks to the experience of meaningfulness of work (Robertson et al., 2020). This theory proposes that social network features (e.g., tie strengths, context, structural features) produce various social resources that facilitate the engagement in purposeful actions that create conditions for the meaningfulness of work.

Other Frameworks Lastly, there are several frameworks that have been developed that specifically focus on understanding the sources of meaningful work, yet they remain insufficiently empirically tested. In particular, Rosso et al. (2010) developed a framework addressing four major pathways to meaningful work, emphasizing the following seven mechanisms through which meaningful work is proposed to be created: authenticity, self-efficacy, self-esteem, purpose, belongingness, transcendence, and cultural and interpersonal sensemaking. In turn, Lysova et al.’s (2019) integrative multi-level framework posits that meaningful work is fostered in organizations when there is alignment between individual-level factors (i.e., individuals’ motivations, values, beliefs, and goals), contextual factors such as job-level (i.e., job design, type of work, and many more), organizational-level (e.g., organizational policies and practices, leadership, and many more), and societal-level factors (e.g., access to decent work, cultural norms). This framework draws on the notion of

personal-environment fit (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005), which argues that the greater congruence between person-centered factors and the features of one's job and organizational environment, the higher the likelihood that this person will thrive at their work and the path toward meaningfulness will be smoother (Hansen, 2013).⁴

Methodological Approaches and Measurements

Despite the lack of conceptual clarity of meaningful work, the topic is extensively studied both qualitatively and quantitatively. Qualitative research on meaningful work has focused on a single organization (e.g., Carton, 2018; Lepisto, 2022), different professions (Bailey & Madden, 2017, 2019; Fontana et al., 2023), disabled workers (Zeyen & Branzi, 2023), and crises (Jiang, 2021). Quantitative research primarily examines the antecedents of meaningful work, with several research efforts focusing on the outcomes of meaningful work (e.g., Allan et al., 2018; Steger et al., 2012). Table 2 provides an overview of the key measures utilized in meaningful work studies.

Often grounded in the JCM (Hackman & Oldham, 1976), quantitative research mostly treats meaningful work as a static positive job attitude and as such is reflected in the utilization of cross-sectional research designs (e.g., Schnell et al., 2016) or longitudinal research designs that measure meaningful work over a period of several months or years (Allan, 2017). Lately, the developments of qualitative research work (Bailey & Madden, 2017; Jiang, 2021; Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017; Wehrle et al., 2024) show that meaningful work represents a fluctuating subjective experience rather than a static positive job attitude. And as such, quantitative studies have recently turned to examining meaningful work through diary studies to capture within- and between-level differences, yet such studies remain relatively scarce. In particular, this stream of research finds that meaningful work fluctuates weekly (e.g., Geldenhuys et al., 2021; Lysova et al., 2023), daily (Romney et al., 2024; Vogel et al., 2020), and situationally (Fletcher et al., 2018).

Meaningful work so far is primarily studied at the individual level. However, several studies have attempted to study the concept at the team and organizational-level. For example, several studies have examined the antecedents and outcomes of team-level meaningfulness (Aubé & Rousseau, 2016; Lisak et al., 2022) as well as meaningfulness climate in teams (Vahle-Hinz et al., 2024; Yang et al., 2019). Also, Lepisto (2022) has qualitatively studied the emergence of a shared sense of meaningfulness in an organization.

⁴Taken together, several theories and frameworks are specifically used to study meaningful work in organizational psychology and organizational behavior disciplines. However, it is important to note that meaningful work research also utilizes a diversity of other theories, such as sensemaking theory (Weick, 1995), mindfulness-to-meaning theory (Garland et al., 2015), and job demands-resources theory (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017).

Table 2 Overview of the existing measures of meaningful work

Source	Measure	Unidimensional vs. multidimensional	Number of items; an example item
Spreitzer (1995)	The meaning subscale of psychological empowerment	Unidimensional	3 items, e.g., <i>“the work I do is meaningful to me.”</i>
May, Gibson, & Harter (2004)	Psychological meaningfulness scale	Unidimensional	6 items, e.g., <i>“the work I do on this job is very important to me.”</i>
Steger, Dik, & Duffy (2012)	Work and meaning inventory (WAMI)	Multidimensional: (1) positive meaning (2) meaning-making through work (MM) (3) greater good motivation (GG).	10 items, e.g., <i>“I understand how my work contributes to my life’s meaning.”</i> (1); <i>“I view my work as contributing to my personal growth.”</i> (2); <i>“I know my work makes a positive difference in the world.”</i> (3)
Lips-Wiersma and Wright (2012)	Comprehensive meaningful work Sale (CMWS)	Multidimensional: (1) developing and becoming self (2) expressing full potential (3) Unity with others (4) service to others (5) inspiration (6) reality (7) balance	28 items, e.g., <i>“my work helps me grow personally.”</i> (1); <i>“at work, I can use all of my skills and abilities.”</i> (2); <i>“my work allows me to feel connected with others.”</i> (3); <i>“my work is of service to a broader community or cause.”</i> (4); <i>“my work inspires me toward a higher purpose.”</i> (5); <i>“I am aware of the real-world demands and constraints in my job.”</i> (6); <i>“I find balance in dealing with conflicting demands at work.”</i> (7)

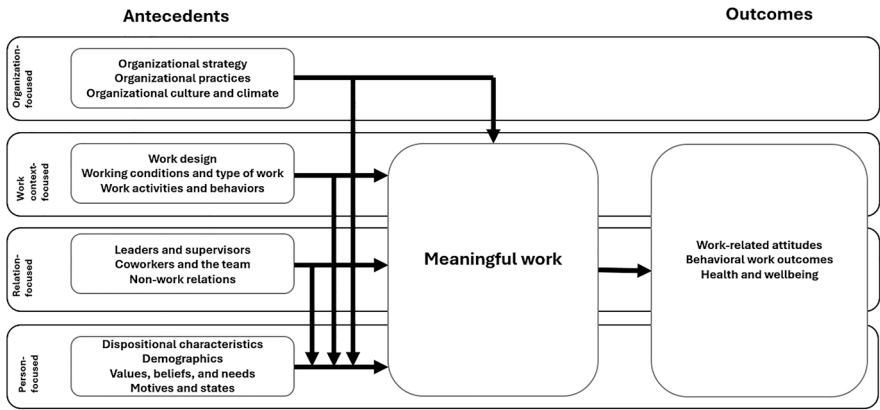


Fig. 1 Integrative model of antecedents and outcomes of meaningful work

An Integrative Model of Antecedents and Outcomes of Meaningful Work

Figure 1 presents an integrative model of antecedents and outcomes of meaningful work. The model is organized as an input-process-outcomes model, or, in other words, it presents the model of antecedents-meaningful work outcomes.

We start by discussing the antecedents of meaningful work, distinguishing between person-focused, relations-focused, work, occupational context-focused, organizations-focused, and society-focused factors.

After discussing the antecedents of meaningful work, we will proceed with reviewing existing research on the outcomes of meaningful work concerned with a) work-related attitudes, b) behavioral work outcomes, c) work-family/nonwork interplay, and d) health and well-being.

Person-Focused Antecedents

Prior reviews on meaningful work have used different categorizations when it comes to distinguishing person-focused antecedents of meaningful work. Here, we proceed with distinguishing research focusing on (a) dispositional characteristics, (b) demographics, (c) values, beliefs, and needs, and (d) motives and states.

Dispositional characteristics. In this category, we review traits that remain relatively stable over time as factors relating to meaningful work. Several studies examine the relationship of the “Big Five” personality traits with meaningful work, finding that conscientiousness, openness, extraversion, and agreeableness have positive correlations and neuroticism has a negative correlation with meaningful work (e.g., Frieder et al., 2018; Woods & Sofat, 2013; Zhang et al., 2023). In their

study, Simonet and Castille (2020) show that only enthusiasm and industriousness have a positive association, and volatility has a negative correlation with meaningful work. Meaningful work is also found to be related positively to positive affective disposition (Steger et al., 2013) and benevolence (e.g., Gandal et al., 2005). Britt et al. (2001) show that the personality trait of hardiness is related to the tendency to find work during military deployment meaningful. Next to personality-related variables, prior research also demonstrates that personal strengths and the utilization of these are positively associated with meaningful work (Littman-Ovadia & Steger, 2010; Harzer & Ruch, 2012).

Although these insights are valuable, they do not really provide information about the unique value personality has to understanding meaningful work. This is because personality is known to relate to many other positive work attitudes and behaviors (e.g., Wille et al., 2014), which, in turn, relate to meaningful work as well. Therefore, we need to better understand whether personality adds anything unique and significant to the understanding of meaningful work beyond these general insights that may have been attributed to connection to other relevant positive work attitudes and behaviors.

Demographics. Relatively little research explores demographic differences in meaningful work. Of those examples, Weeks and Schaffert (2019) examine the potential of generations to influence how meaningful work is experienced, yet they reveal that generations share broad similarities in the experience of meaningful work. A recent study by Goštautaitė et al. (2025) shows that age is positively related to career meaning, indicating that older people may find their work and career more meaningful than younger people. Two studies find that constraints associated with social class (i.e., subjective social status) may hinder people from choosing work that they find personally meaningful, showing that social class is positively related to meaningful work (Allan et al., 2014, 2016).

We can see that research is yet to further examine how meaningful work is shaped by demographic factors. Finding that meaningful work is important across generations is important as it goes against public media often portraying only the younger generations needing and seeking meaningful work in organizations. In so doing, it confirms that meaningful work is a universal human need (Yeoman, 2014). Also, the finding that social class matters for meaningful work is particularly important as it opens up avenues to explore societal inequalities more deeply.

Values and beliefs. Prior work reveals that values are an important source of meaningful work, yet the conceptual unclarities and differences in the value categorizations make it challenging to disentangle between the “meaning” and “values” constructs in some research (Rosso et al., 2010). To illustrate, one study finds that across eleven national cultures, a self-realization value (i.e., fulfillment of personal potential) is a significant source of meaning (Šverko & Vizek-Vidovic, 1995).

Different beliefs are associated with meaningful work. In particular, research looks at the beliefs people have about the role work plays in their lives. People who have high job involvement (i.e., the extent to which employees believe their jobs are central to their lives) and work centrality (i.e., the relative importance of work to

other domains in life) tend to report greater meaningful work (Brown, 1996; Kanungo, 1982; MOW International Research Team, 1987; as cited in Rosso et al., 2010). Different kinds of beliefs are captured by the concept of work orientation (i.e., beliefs about how work influences the meanings individuals make of their work; Bellah et al., 1985; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). Among these work orientations, having a calling orientation to work (i.e., working not for financial rewards or advancement, but for the fulfillment and contributions that the work brings) (Bellah et al., 1985; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997) tends to relate to greater meaningful work. In particular, a sense of calling (i.e., “an approach to work that reflects seeking a sense of overall purpose and meaning and is used to help others or contribute to the common good, motivated by an external or internal summons”, p. 426) is likely to predict work meaningfulness (e.g., Duffy et al., 2018). Other beliefs that are positively associated with meaningful work are beliefs in one’s ability to make career choices, captured by the concept of work volition (Allan et al., 2016). Also, the belief of one having a clear and coherent sense of one’s self, self-concept clarity, may also be positively associated with meaningful work (Oh & Roh, 2019). In their study among entrepreneurs, Brieger et al. (2021) show that entrepreneurs who believe their business can create more social value experience higher levels of meaningful work.

Despite the potential importance of values for meaningful work, the research has not developed much since the work summarized in Rosso et al. (2010). Related to this, we could not really see many insights that would particularly relate meaningful work to cross-cultural values, which could be an important research topic to undertake in the attempt to understand meaningful work across the globe. Moreover, research connecting work orientations and meaningful work tends to prioritize the value of having a calling orientation over a job orientation and a career orientation when it comes to the expectations of viewing one’s work as meaningful. However, this raises the question whether job and career orientations could also be seen as important and influential in promoting meaningful work, potentially in more specific contexts or circumstances.

Motives, needs, and states. Motives are generally discussed as a source of meaningful work in research when they are connected to intrinsic motivation (e.g., Allan et al., 2016; Shamir, 1991; Steger et al., 2012), identified regulation motivation (e.g., Autin et al., 2022), and prosocial motivation or helping others (Allan et al., 2018; Farmer & Van Dyne, 2017; Grant, 2007). Also, having a learning goal orientation positively relates to meaningful work (Matsuo et al., 2019).

Another important person-centered antecedent of meaningful work is the satisfaction of the psychological needs of autonomy, competence, relatedness, and beneficence (e.g., Autin et al., 2022; Kim & Allan, 2020; Martela et al., 2021; Martela & Riekkari, 2018). Satisfaction of social needs through, for instance, feeling community belonging is positively associated with meaningful work (Allan et al., 2020).

What’s more, a recent study shows that being in a state of awareness (i.e., noticing or attending to internal and external experiences that occur in the present moment with a quality of curiosity) and cognitive flexibility (i.e., a state in which individuals feel able to adapt their thinking, emotions, and behaviors to a new

situation) enables greater meaningful work (Lysova et al., 2023). Several studies find mindfulness to be a factor contributing to meaningfulness (e.g., Garland et al., 2015; Singh & Bamel, 2020). Also, Lepisto (2022) shows that being in a state of emotional energy plays an important role in the creation of a shared sense of meaningfulness.

Reflecting on the knowledge accumulated so far, we can see that much of the attention centers on psychological needs as key antecedents of meaningful work, which can be explained by the critical importance of such needs in motivational experiences (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Still, some emergent work shows that states can be helpful in unpacking fluctuations in meaningful work. Surprisingly, while experiences of meaningful work are fueled by emotions (Lepisto, 2022; Lysova et al., 2023), there has been almost no research that examines emotions and emotional states (e.g., hope, compassion) and how they enable greater insight into meaningful work.

Relation-Focused Antecedents

Social relations are critical for the experience of meaningful work: not only do they enable individuals to experience a greater sense of belonging needed for meaningful work (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003), but through relations, individuals receive cues about the value of their work (Wrzesniewski et al., 2003). Different kinds of relation-focused antecedents have been studied to date concerning meaningful work, namely those concerning (a) leaders and supervisors, (b) coworkers and the team, and (c) nonwork relations.

Leaders and supervisors Leaders and supervisors are seen to play an important role in influencing meaningful work. For example, Carton (2018) argues that leaders act as “architects” who create meaning in their organizations through the process of sensegiving. Analyzing the leadership of John F. Kennedy for employees working in NASA, Carton (2018) highlights how leaders are needed to help employees connect their daily work to the overarching greater purpose of their organization. However, to contribute to employees’ sense of work meaningfulness, leaders need to cultivate their own sense of meaningfulness (Kipfelsberger et al., 2022; Sosik, 2000; Steger & Dik, 2010).

Research has also studied different leadership styles and behaviors that can impact the followers’ sense of meaningful work. For example, meaningful work is likely to be fostered by transformational leadership (Arnold et al., 2007; Purvanova et al., 2006; Tummers & Knies, 2013), servant leadership (e.g., Cai et al., 2018; Tan et al., 2024), meaningful leadership (Frémeaux & Pavageau, 2022), empowering leadership (e.g., Lee et al., 2017; Matsuo et al., 2019), responsible leadership (Lips-Wiersma et al., 2020), inclusive leadership (Shafaei & Nejati, 2024), and ethical leadership (Demirtas et al., 2017; Wang & Xu, 2019).

Next to specific leadership styles, the following six leadership practices have been found to be associated with meaningful work: communicating the work’s

bigger impact, recognizing and nurturing potential, fostering personal connections, discussing values and organizational purpose during hiring, enacting integrity through modeling values-based behaviors, and giving employees freedom (Mercurio et al., 2024). Showing respect to the managers (e.g., Peng et al., 2024) and providing employees with positive feedback (Liu et al., 2023) are also positively related to meaningful work. Additionally, Kipfelsberger et al. (2022) show that leader meaningfulness is transferred to the followers through visionary leadership. Lepisto (2022) finds that leaders contribute to the creation of a shared sense of work meaningfulness by engaging in ritual work—“actions by leaders to create, maintain, and expand opportunities for, and members’ entry into, situations where members physically co-assemble and develop a shared attention and a shared mood” (p. 1334).

Bailey and Madden (2016) shared interesting insights regarding the role of leaders and supervisors in employees’ meaningful work. The authors’ qualitative data reveal that employees refer most to leaders when they discuss how they have decreased their sense of work meaningfulness. For instance, leaders who disconnect employees from supporting connections, give them pointless work to do, or disregard their professional judgment risk harming the sense of meaningful work for their employees. Other research demonstrates that working with leaders and supervisors who mistreat and/or abuse their employees (Rafferty & Restubog, 2011) and who fail to acknowledge the important contributions of their employees (Montani et al., 2020) negatively impacts employees’ sense of meaningful work.

This body of research clearly shows that leaders (and managers) play an important role in meaningful work, yet there is more to know about the behaviors and actions that are able to promote meaningful work in organizations, not just the ones that can destroy meaningful work. This is because there are several studies showing that different, often quite similar, leadership styles are connected to meaningful work. This leaves us wondering what specifically leaders (and managers) can do, apart from adopting a generally positive “motivational” or “empowering” leadership style, to enable greater meaningful work. For example, are there any particular leadership behaviors that are more promoting versus undermining employees’ sense of meaningful work?

Coworkers and the team: Having positive interpersonal relationships with coworkers (Bailey & Madden, 2017; Kahn, 2007; Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009; May et al., 2004) and rewarding coworker connections (e.g., Fouché et al., 2017) are found to be important sources of meaningful work. Positive work relationships that provide individuals with positive cues conveying that they are worthy, cared for, and safe to speak up (Lysova et al., 2023), provide access to resources that support their pursuit of meaningful goals (Robertson et al., 2020), and allow individuals to feel they can “give to others” (Colbert et al., 2016) contribute to the experience of work as meaningful. Identifying highly with colleagues and perceiving there is high intra-group respect (Cardador & Hill, 2018), as well as receiving social support and feedback from coworkers (e.g., Simonet & Castille, 2020), positively relate to meaningful work. In contrast, workplace interpersonal mistreatment (i.e., peer ostracism) undermines the meaningfulness of work (Zhang et al., 2023). Research so far points to the importance of social relationships and interactions for meaningful work.

However, given coworker interactions and team dynamics have changed with increasing digitalization and since the Covid-19 pandemic, it is important to better understand how the widening diversity of interactions, most of which are now occurring via IT-mediated mechanisms, changes people's ability to send/receive and interpret social cues accurately (Lysova et al., 2023). We proffer that it is potentially harder to receive and interpret one's work as meaningful as work interactions become increasingly IT-mediated, yet there may also be alternative ways in which social cues can be transferred through the use of IT—which may be helpful for specific groups, such as neurodiverse workers.

Nonwork relations. Next to interpersonal relationships developed at work, relationships that people have outside work also influence the meaning of their work (Brief & Nord, 1990; as cited by Rosso et al., 2010). Specifically, the family can put a strain on one's work through demands for time and economic resources or enhance positive meanings of work by offering a supportive environment enabling recovery and confirming the role of the work or the job in a person's life by "expressing admiration, respect, and love [for the person]; by affirming what [one] said and did was right; and by giving assistance such as money, time, labor, or information" (Brief & Nord, 1990, p. 223). A recent study by Hwang et al. (2025) shows that family recognition—the extent to which individuals perceive that their family appreciates and recognizes their work—positively relates to meaningful work both directly and indirectly through boosting workers' self-esteem.

These scarce insights on nonwork relational sources of meaningful work signal that more interdisciplinary work bringing together work-nonwork interface scholars with meaningful work can suggest fruitful lines of inquiry (e.g., Magrizos et al., 2023).

Work Context-Focused Antecedents

The work context is one of the most often studied factors in relation to meaningful work. To provide a comprehensive understanding of the different context-focused antecedents of meaningful work, we will proceed to discuss the following four categories of factors: (a) work design, (b) working conditions and type of work, (c) digitalization of work, and (d) work activities and behaviors.

Work design. Research shows that having high levels of autonomy, skill variety, task identity, task significance, and task feedback is important for the individual to experience work meaningfulness (Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Rosso et al., 2010; Simonet & Castille, 2020). Working in jobs that enable individuals to connect with and impact beneficiaries of their work and, therefore, to experience greater meaningfulness in their work (Grant, 2007, p. 396; Grant et al., 2007) and working in jobs high on task significance (Allan, 2017; Grant, 2008) are likely important factors contributing to meaningful work. Interestingly, Robertson et al. (2024) show that meaningful work can also emerge as a result of doing harm, leading workers they studied in the veterinary industry to forecast the worthiness of the conducted

harm with their work. Specifically, the study highlights how workers' interpretations of the worthiness of the harm, as well as the types of actions they take to remediate it, shape whether their involvement in harm-doing episodes undermines or heightens their sense of work meaningfulness. In contrast, working in jobs that create a sense of alienation, powerlessness, disconnection, or devaluation (Bailey & Madden, 2019; Lepisto & Pratt, 2017) challenges the possibility for workers to experience meaningful work. A recent study also underscores the importance of task interdependence (i.e., the extent to which employees depend on other members to complete their tasks effectively) for meaningful work (Zhang et al., 2023).

When examining how specific tasks impact experiences of meaningful work, several studies point to the harmful influence of doing repetitive tasks or unnecessary tasks (e.g., Isaksen, 2000; Mäkikangas et al., 2023). In turn, working on tasks that are perceived by individuals as challenging work demands (e.g., Kim & Beehr, 2020), rather than hindrance work demands, may be positively related to work meaningfulness.

Prior research shows that having an enriched job design is important in promoting meaningful work. However, the question arises about the access to this kind of design for many employees. Focusing too much on creating enriched job design may create greater segregation between those who have “good,” high-quality jobs that are empowering and impactful, versus those that have “poor,” low-quality jobs that are alienating and maintain powerlessness. What's more, while research portrays unnecessary and repetitive tasks as tasks limiting meaningful work, some of these tasks might actually be very important for the organization, e.g., when monitoring potential risks. Therefore, the focus should be on ensuring that tasks that are actually unnecessary are reduced, whereas those tasks that may seem unnecessary but do have a longer-term or more indirect importance are better communicated. Repetitive tasks may be important for the work process, but there may be ways to reduce repetition through utilizing AI and automation. This opens up other questions about how to redesign jobs to be more meaningful within a more automated, low-skill-oriented context.

Working conditions and type of work. Much of the research concerning working conditions in relation to meaningful work focuses on examining decent work. Proposing Psychology of Work Theory (PWT), Duffy et al. (2016) position decent work, which concerns the basic work conditions all employees are entitled to, to provide a foundation for creating opportunities to experience meaningfulness in one's work (Blustein et al., 2023). Prior research shows that decent work positively predicts meaningful work across different cultural contexts (e.g., Di Fabio & Kenny, 2019), with the two components of decent work—values complementary to the organization, followed by safety and access to health care—being the most significant predictors of meaningful work (Blustein et al., 2023). Allan et al.'s (2020) study highlights how these constructs also relate longitudinally: decent work positively predicted meaningful work, and positive changes in decent work predicted positive changes in meaningful work. Other aspects of working conditions studied, include for instance job insecurity and lack of personal or career development support, limit the experience of meaningful work (Arnoux-Nicolas et al., 2016; Lips-Wiersma

et al., 2020). Also, meaningful work is negatively associated with perceived underemployment across several domains, including perceptions of insufficient pay or status or a mismatch between the job requirements and a worker's field of expertise or qualifications (Allan, 2017; Kim & Allan, 2020). When working conditions are characterized by a high level of distributive justice (Zhang et al., 2023), fair compensation, and workload distribution (Lips-Wiersma et al., 2020), employees also tend to experience greater meaningful work.

Several studies specifically study experiences of meaningful work in particular jobs and occupations. For instance, Lips-Wiersma et al. (2016) show that those employed in jobs that are considered to be "white collar" (professional or semi-professional) report higher levels of meaningful work than those employed in traditional "blue collar" jobs (manual) or those employed in so-called "pink collar" (retail/hospitality/administration) jobs. Other studies point out how specificities of occupational context or one's position in an organization impact experiences of meaningful work, e.g., Mitra and Buzzanell (2017), who studied practitioners in the area of corporate social sustainability, or Szóts-Kováts and Primecz (2025), who studied human resource professionals. In the context of entrepreneurship (see also chapter "Meaningful Work in Historical Perspective" of this book), for example, some research reveals that this type of employment creates conditions of underpayment, unhealthy work pursuits, and demands for self-sacrifices (Dempsey & Sanders, 2010; Gregori et al., 2021) as well as various tensions and challenges for the experiences of meaningful work (Frémeaux & Henry, 2023; Symon & Whiting, 2019). Several studies have paid attention to low-status work (for a review, see Laaser & Bolton, 2022), "dirty" work (i.e., work that is physically, socially, or morally tainted (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999)), such as refuse collectors, stonemasons (Bailey & Madden, 2017), animal shelter workers (Schabram & Maitlis, 2017), or zookeepers (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009). A study by Huang et al. (2022) finds that there is a negative relationship between perceived occupational stigma and experienced meaningfulness.

While a growing body of research focusing on decent work, conceptualized from a psychological perspective, is important for understanding the importance of having good working conditions in organizations before one can aspire to seek meaningful work, it is also worth acknowledging that there are objective conditions of employment (e.g., safe working practices, pay, working hours, access to benefits, and contractual obligations) that influence work experiences. This would provide a solid and realistic ground for the experiences of decent work, rather than being overpowered, for instance, by one's deep love for the work one does.

Digitalization of work. Technological advancements and the COVID-19 pandemic promoted scholarly attention to the impact of digitalization on meaningful work. A couple of studies have examined meaningful work in remote work settings, such as the study by Afota et al. (2024), showing that high-intensity telecommuting leads to a decline in meaningful work because of the decline in a sense of belongingness. Other research focuses on work conducted via digital platforms or on gig workers, showing that in these contexts, employees face power inequality in freelancer-client relationships and the strict review and rating systems embedded in

platforms, diminishing the opportunity to experience meaningful work (Fieseler et al., 2019; Nemkova et al., 2019). Nevertheless, microtask or crowd workers try to craft their work to experience meaningful work, perceiving a greater sense of meaningfulness through seeing their work contributing to their self-improvement (e.g., learning, fun, etc.) and rewards (i.e., flexibility in life, money, autonomy) as well as contributing to their beneficiaries by doing greater good and helping the requesters. A study by Aleksić et al. (2024) shows how perceiving techno-invasion in one's work may negatively impact meaningful work. Utilization of AI and robotization at work, however, is likely to have many different effects on the experience of meaningful work. Both conceptual and empirical work show that AI (e.g., Bankins & Formosa, 2023) and robotization (e.g., Berkers et al., 2020) can be a threat and an opportunity for meaningful work. However, Nikolova et al. (2024) find, drawing on data from 14 industries in 20 European countries spanning over 15 years, that robotization, in overall terms, leads to a decrease in meaningful work.

Furthermore, organizational contexts characterized by the utilization of datafication systems (i.e., digital means of tracking worker activities) may hinder experiences of meaningful work, but could also foster meaningful work by providing employees the means for self-reflection and development if they are designed to minimize conflict between the aims of the systems and individuals' values (Stein et al., 2019).

The increasing digitalization of work will likely change our understanding of meaningful work (Mollick, 2024). Therefore, building on this research, it seems valuable to not only focus on accumulating an ambiguous (both positive and negative) understanding of technology on meaningful work, but also to try to explain which conditions can make it have more positive versus more negative effects.

Work activities, tasks, and behaviors. Much research has studied the role of job crafting—proactive redefining and reimagining one's jobs to align with one's preferences, needs, and passions—as a way to enable meaningful work (Berg et al., 2013; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). By engaging in crafting job demands and job resources, employees experience greater work meaningfulness both directly (e.g., Petrou et al., 2017) and indirectly through the optimization of their person-job fit (Tims et al., 2016). Engaging in job crafting was also helpful for individuals to protect them from the negative effects of illegitimate (unnecessary or unreasonable) tasks on their meaningful work (Mäkikangas et al., 2023). Prior research also shows that engaging in daily proactive behavior relates positively to meaningful work, even beyond daily helping behavior (Fay et al., 2023). Also, daily engagement in prosocial and personal growth activities is likely to be positively related to everyday experiences of meaningful work (Romney et al., 2024). Moreover, Deeg and May (2022) show that demonstrating moral courage positively relates to meaningful work. While prior research shows that proactive behavior is an antecedent of meaningful work, we could also expect that it will be an outcome of meaningful work. Therefore, we should expect future research to deepen our understanding of the reciprocal relationships between the two.

Job crafting is often seen as the path to creating more meaningfulness in one's work. However, this draws on the assumption that all jobs/people have the ability

and control to be able to craft. The manager and employer will likely be motivated to control the extent to which this happens as it may push people away from the core aspects of their job that they were contracted to do, and that may have serious repercussions for the organization and for customers/patients, etc. It is also much more likely/able to happen in larger organizations with a broader range of more flexible options to move across different areas of the business. In smaller organizations, this may be more difficult, yet job descriptions are likely to be more flexible to adaptation and job crafting could provide opportunities to develop new initiatives/role openings, etc., that expand and grow the business.

Organization-Focused Antecedents

In comparison to other types of antecedents, the examination of organization-focused antecedents of meaningful work remains limited. We proceed with reviewing research so far by focusing on: (a) organizational strategy, (b) organizational culture and climate, and (c) organizational practices.

Organizational strategy. Limited research has examined organizational strategy, including organizational purpose and objectives as a source of meaningful work, showing that a strategic approach can enable people to account for the impact of their work (Pratt & Hedden, 2023). Jasinenko and Steuber (2023) find that perceived organizational purpose positively relates to meaningful work. Also, Carton (2018) shows that the ultimate objective of an organization could become a source of meaningful work if leaders are able to “architect” the connecting path between this objective and employees’ daily work.

While we see that organizational purpose can serve as a factor promoting meaningful work, we cannot expect that every organizationally derived/oriented purpose will be perceived by employees as a worthwhile cause to pursue. Therefore, it is important to unpack the relationship between organizational purpose and meaningful work to draw out the mechanisms through which an organization’s purpose and strategic priorities facilitate meaningful work and how these may be susceptible to ideological or political bending.

Organizational practices: Meaningful work research studying organizational practices has primarily focused on the role of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and Human Resource Management (HRM). CSR practices, entailing organizational efforts aimed at considering the triple bottom line of economic, social, and environmental performance, are regarded as an important source of meaningful work (e.g., Aguinis & Glavas, 2019; Glavas & Kelley, 2014; Glavas & Lysova, 2025; Janssen et al., 2022). A subset of CSR practices includes corporate volunteering activities and engagement, which are also positively related to experiences of meaningful work (Caligiuri et al., 2013; Rodell, 2013).

With regard to HRM practices, prior research emphasizes that practices of recruitment, selection, socialization, performance management, and learning and development, when strategically focused on stimulating engagement, could foster

meaningful work (Albrecht et al., 2015; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). In particular, studies show that perceived opportunities for development and training are positively associated with meaningful work (e.g., Fletcher, 2016). Recent studies highlight how performance management can create greater experiences of meaningful work (Beer et al., 2022; Kubiak, 2022). Singh et al. (2021) also find that selection and recruitment, training, performance evaluation and rewards, and participatory decision-making are positively associated with meaningful work.

This body of research shows that organizational practices can contribute to meaningful work. However, so far, our understanding of how they do so remains limited. For example, there is an established expectation that CSR can serve as a source of meaningful work, but it is important to unpack the mechanisms and conditions under which it would indeed contribute to greater meaningful work in organizations. For instance, a recent study showed that CSR impacts meaningful work strongest when CSR is also embedded in one's job (Glavas & Lysova, 2025). Similarly, HRM practices tend to be considered as an intentional system or "bundle" of related practices that collectively aim to motivate employees and promote high-performance working, and as such, meaningful work here may just reflect one desirable outcome (out of many) of a high-performance HRM system, rather than in itself a theoretically meaningful one. There may also be contradictory or undesirable aspects of some HRM practices for meaningful work, particularly performance management and reward, which may distort or exploit workers' desire to experience their work as meaningful. Future research is needed to more fully understand these aspects.

Organizational culture and climate. Meaningful work is fostered in organizations characterized by a social-moral climate (Schnell et al., 2016), organizational fairness (Si et al., 2023), and organizational democracy (Svendsen & Jönsson, 2022). In turn, in organizations that are perceived to be high on organizational politics (Landells & Albrecht, 2019) and on workplace incivility (Peng et al., 2020), the ability to experience meaningful work is challenged.

Having some insight into which cultures can promote meaningful work in organizations, it is important to understand how they can be created and sustained by leaders. Alternatively, it is important to unpack how cultures that undermine meaningful work can also be challenged by leaders (Nishii & Leroy, 2022).

Interplay of Different Antecedents

In our discussion and visualizations, we focus mainly on how these different types of antecedents directly influence meaningful work. However, we also draw on Lysova et al.'s (2019) integrative framework that emphasizes the importance of examining the interplay between the different antecedents in how they impact meaningful work. Specifically, we argue that person-focused antecedents interact with the three other categories of antecedents to enable meaningful work. This argument is grounded and supported by the person-environment fit theory, which

suggests that the most optimal work experiences and other work outcomes are achieved when there is greater congruence between personal attributes (e.g., needs, abilities, values) and the features of one's environment (e.g., supplies, demands, values) (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). While Lysova et al.'s (2019) framework primarily highlighted person-job fit (fit between individual abilities and needs and the demands and supplies of the job) and person-organizational fit (fit between individual and organizational values), we anticipate that other types of fit—person-vocation fit (i.e., the congruence between individual vocational interests and vocational characteristics), person-team fit (fit between individual attributes and those of the work group), and person-supervisor fit (fit between individual attributes and those of the supervisor) (Van Vianen, 2018)—are of relevance to meaningful work, making the path toward meaningfulness smoother (Hansen, 2013). Therefore, Fig. 1 also indicates the expected interplay between person-centered factors and relational-, work and occupation context-focused, and organization-focused factors in influencing meaningful work.

Outcomes of Meaningful Work

Below, we proceed with discussing outcomes of meaningful work at the individual level within the following categories: (a) work-related attitudes, (b) behavioral work outcomes, and (c) health and well-being.

Work-related attitudes. Research consistently shows that meaningful work is positively related to job satisfaction (e.g., Allan et al., 2018; Steger et al., 2012), work and personal engagement (e.g., Johnson & Jiang, 2017; Vogel et al., 2020), career commitment (e.g., Duffy et al., 2014), organizational commitment (e.g., Geldenhuys et al., 2014; Jiang & Johnson, 2018), and person-job fit (e.g., Tims et al., 2016). Meaningful work is also negatively related to turnover or withdrawal intentions (e.g., Allan et al., 2018; Arnoux-Nicolas et al., 2016) and absenteeism (Soane et al., 2013).

The research so far points to meaningful work relating to these different positive attitudinal work outcomes, which raises a question of how much meaningful work uniquely explains these outcomes beyond well-established work attitudes such as work engagement or job satisfaction.

Behavioral work outcomes. Unlike with attitudinal outcomes of meaningful work that have been studied extensively, the knowledge acquired on the behavioral outcomes is less developed. Meaningful work is likely positively related to self-rated job performance (e.g., Allan et al., 2018; Fürstenberg et al., 2021), personal initiative (e.g., Ma et al., 2023), organizational citizenship behavior (e.g., Allan et al., 2018), service quality (Zhou et al., 2023), creativity (e.g., Amabile & Pratt, 2016; Cohen-Meitar et al., 2009), and innovative work behavior (e.g., Cai et al., 2018). In turn, meaningful work may also increase the likelihood of withholding of work-related ideas for the benefit of the organization (Rafferty & Restubog, 2011). It may also reduce cyberloafing (i.e., a type of deviant behavior that includes the use

of the internet for personal reasons during work hours) (Riester & Keller, 2024; Tan et al., 2024) and unethical behavior [e.g., counterproductive work behavior, ranging from minor rule violations (e.g., coming late to work) to more serious acts of sabotage, and time theft (Rai et al., 2023; Riester & Keller, 2024)].

While expanding the range of potential behavioral outcomes is a valuable development, many of these behavioral outcomes are primarily self-reported within existing studies. This raises the question of whether the full range of these behavioral outcomes would also be observed by colleagues or supervisors of employees who view their work as meaningful.

Health and well-being. When it comes to well-being as an outcome of meaningful work, research often refers to the double-edged sword of meaningful work. This is especially seen in the relationship of meaningful work to the work-family or work-nonwork interface. On one side, meaningful work is likely to facilitate the reconciliation of work and private activities, showing it to relate to greater work-to-family enrichment (e.g., Johnson & Jiang, 2017; Tummers & Knies, 2013) and work-life balance (e.g., Magrizos et al., 2023). On the other side, research also reveals meaningful work to be associated with overworking, overdevotion, and overidentification with work, explaining higher work-family conflict (e.g., Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Dempsey & Sanders, 2010; Florian et al., 2019; Oelberger, 2019).

In turn, research studying the association of meaningful work with other health-related and well-being outcomes shows a more consistent picture of the positive effect of meaningful work. In particular, meaningful work is positively related to psychological well-being (e.g., Arnold et al., 2007; Lips-Wiersma et al., 2020), life satisfaction, life meaning (e.g., Romney et al., 2024; Steger et al., 2012), and general health (e.g., Allan et al., 2018; Cai et al., 2018). Meaningful work is negatively related to emotional exhaustion (e.g., Vahle-Hinz et al., 2024) and stress (e.g., Landells & Albrecht, 2019). However, a recent study by Annison and Davidson (2023) finds that meaningfulness can both alleviate and exacerbate stress. Also, Magrizos et al. (2023) show no direct relationship between meaningful work and stress, such that it was negative only for those with low workaholism, turning positive for higher levels of workaholism.

The insight that meaningful work can have both positive and negative outcomes on health and well-being is interesting, as it draws attention to unpacking in which contexts and circumstances (and with a particular mix of personality and individual characteristics) meaningful work tends to lead to more positive or more negative health and well-being outcomes.

Much of the research examining outcomes of meaningful work to date has focused on individual-level outcomes. However, there are a few team-level studies showing that meaningful work relates positively to team performance (Aubé & Rousseau, 2016; Lisak et al., 2022; Yang et al., 2019), team process improvement (Aubé & Rousseau, 2016), and team organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) (Yang et al., 2019). A study by Duchon and Plowman (2005) also finds an association of meaningful work with patient satisfaction. More is needed to build the evidence around the team and organizational-level outcomes of meaningful work.

Recommendations for Future Research

Reflecting on the state of research on meaningful work so far conducted by the organizational psychology and organizational behavior disciplines, we identify several research gaps and suggest directions for future research.

First, as the debates surrounding what constitutes meaningful work remain unresolved and the diversity of conceptualizations continues to further extend, scholars studying meaningful work must take a clear standpoint when it comes to the definition of meaningful work. It is important that the chosen way to conceptualize meaningful work aligns with the chosen way of its operationalization. In this way, different conceptualizations can provide important input for the interdisciplinary conversations. For instance, future research could examine both unidimensional and multidimensional operationalizations of meaningful work to examine similarities and differences in outcomes. Also, we are yet to better understand the implications of taking one or another perspective for the understanding of antecedents and outcomes of calling (see also Lysova et al., 2023). Also, although not discussed extensively in this review, several papers pointed to the importance of exploring meaningful work from the perspective of others rather than primarily relying on it being in the eye of the beholder (Michaelson & Tosti-Kharas, 2020; Tosti-Kharas & Michaelson, 2021). This raises the question of who then has more value/authority to determine what work is deemed meaningful or not—also an important future research direction.

Second, related to the conceptualization and empirical examination of meaningful work, the time has come to move away from seeing meaningful work as a static positive job attitude, but rather as a dynamic, fluctuating work experience. This requires not only conducting daily and weekly diary studies (Lysova et al., 2023; Vogel et al., 2020) but also investing in conceptualizing meaningful work as a dynamic phenomenon in the way it is theorized in studies. This includes differentiation between fluctuations in meaningful work as a whole experience, as well as changes in the tasks (i.e., doing more or less meaningful tasks). As our review shows, there are some very promising developments and examples showing the value of studying meaningful work as a dynamic phenomenon. For example, Vogel et al. (2020) show that focusing on the daily experience of meaningfulness (mis)fit has different outcomes of work engagement than the average of meaningful work. Moving toward understanding meaningful work as a dynamic work experience also means that we need to better understand state-level antecedents and outcomes of meaningful work. This requires stepping away from traditional reliance on JCM (Hackman & Oldham, 1976) in search of more theories that can support and ground a dynamic understanding of meaningful work. For an illustration, Lysova et al. (2023) draw on the mindfulness-to-meaning theory (Garland et al., 2015) to explain how states of awareness and cognitive flexibility explain weekly boosts of meaningful work. As meaningful work is seen to be a fluctuating state, scholarly attention should also be drawn to understanding not only how to create the experiences of meaningful work but also how to maintain or sustain them at optimal levels. For

instance, Jiang (2021) explored how meaningful work can be sustained in a crisis time by utilizing a situational purpose. More insights into the way to boost or regain a sense of work meaningfulness are needed.

Another aspect related to how we understand and study meaningful work concerns the consideration of meaningfulness being more than just an individual phenomenon. As scarce research shows (e.g., Lepisto, 2022), meaningfulness is experienced at the team and organizational levels. This raises questions of what it means to experience meaningful work at these different levels, how it can be fostered in organizations (i.e., between coworkers and by employers), and how scholars can best capture or measure these multilevel experiences of work meaningfulness. Third, Fig. 1, which we introduce in this paper, illustrates that different sources are impacting meaningful work at different levels (similar to Lysova et al., 2019). As we explain, there are good arguments to expect that these sources of meaningful work do not act in isolation but rather interact. Therefore, we call for future research to especially consider the interactions between, for example, person-focused factors and relational-, work-context-, and organization-focused factors in influencing meaningful work. This aligns with research increasingly showing the value of examining person-situation interactions (Chen & Kanfer, 2006; Tett & Burnett, 2003), yet this interactional research in the meaningful work field remains rather scarce.

Next, to address the interactions between factors in relation to meaningful work, it is also important for research to investigate more organization-focused factors. In particular, without understanding how organizational culture and practices can facilitate or limit meaningful work, we may end up in a situation where designing enriched jobs does not facilitate it or does so only to a limited extent, as the organizational infrastructure does not support them. Also, understanding how organizations need to change to accommodate fostering meaningful work is likely to have a bigger impact on the individuals' meaningful work pursuit. Another observation concerns the need to examine more antecedents that happen to be unique to digitalized workplaces or pay more scholarly attention to how the integration of technology in organizations and further developments of new ways of working could impact meaningful work. Clearly, there is much more we can learn about meaningful work in relation to AI and robots, yet we call for expanding this focus to understanding meaningful work among those engaged in remote work, gig work, or any other nonstandard work arrangements.

Fourth, although there are different valuable efforts conducted to understand the outcomes of meaningful work, much of what we know appears to concern individual-level outcomes and particularly attitudinal outcomes. If meaningful work is to be seen as an important phenomenon for organizations, it needs to be examined in relation to outcomes at the level of teams and organizations. For instance, it would be interesting to explore how meaningful work contributes to organizational innovation (Amabile & Pratt, 2016). What's more, as the review shows, some of the health and well-being outcomes hint at the double-edged sword nature of meaningful work. Clearly, much more research is needed to investigate different aspects of this double-edged sword nature of meaningful work, but also to examine factors such as

boundary conditions that could account for the effects of meaningful work being more positive or more negative for health and well-being outcomes.

Fifth, DEI is a “broad umbrella” “typically utilized by practitioners to refer to organizational (or institutional) policies and practices that aim to make the workplace a fair, diverse, and inclusive environment” (Fletcher, 2024, p. 170). While each term (diversity, equality, inclusion) has a slightly different emphasis and focus of action, they are often ‘bundled’ together such that “inclusion augment and extends upon the other two...[by] go[ing] beyond ‘leveling the playing field’ (as per equality) and ‘increasing proportions and representation’ (as per diversity) to enhance the involvement, participation, voice, and authentic expression of all groups in the organization” (Fletcher, 2024, p. 170). The value of examining meaningful work from a DEI perspective is important given macro-level future of work changes related to “population and demographic shifts, the continued rise of populism and nationalistic agendas as well as war and political frictions between countries, and the economic inequalities and uncertainties arising in the post-pandemic world” (Lysova et al., 2023, p. 720). Given that meaningful work has been argued to be a “fundamental human need” (Yeoman, 2014), it is crucial to understand how to enable all humans to meet this need for meaningfulness when at work, particularly as the world is becoming increasingly polarized, unequal, and uncertain. Of critical importance is the need to examine the experiences of minoritized groups, who often feel the sharp end of the wedge when it comes to the impact of increasing inequalities and global crises (Kantamneni, 2020). Minoritized groups, such as people of color, disabled people, and LGBTQ+ people, may not have as many opportunities to experience their work as meaningful, and their encounters of prejudice and discrimination may shape the ways in which they interpret and make sense of their work (and life) as meaningful (e.g., Allan, Tebbe, et al., 2019; Ryff et al., 2003). Additionally, their identities may hold particular significance and take on different meanings when pursuing meaningful work—for example, Zeyen and Branzeti’s (2023) longitudinal study shows how disabled workers’ identity with their disabled body shaped their meaning-making at work. Given the pursuit and experience of authenticity at work is likely to offer unique benefits yet also challenges and threats to minoritized workers and their sense of identity, especially those advancing their careers and leadership potential (Fletcher et al., 2025), there are avenues to explore the interconnections between meaningful work, authenticity, and career experiences of minoritized people in more depth.

Lastly, we lack longitudinal and field experimental research that embeds a contextualized understanding of how potential policy and practitioner interventions may work or operate. This may take the form of helping practitioners design, test, and evaluate organization-specific learning and development programs around meaningful work, team-level and individual-level micro interventions, and participatory initiatives that enable employees to design their own meaningful work interventions. Field experimental research can entail formalized traditional randomized-control trials, but can also involve a wider range of social science methodologies and participatory strategies such as action learning sets and systems thinking approaches (see reviews by Eden, 2017; Hauser et al., 2017; Ram et al.,

2014). Lab-based or (hypothetical) scenario-based experimental designs only go so far in ascertaining how a deeply situated experience, such as meaningful work, can be facilitated through specific interventions. So far, only a very small number of studies have tried to develop and test specific forms of meaningfulness interventions in the workplace. For example, Fletcher and Schofield (2021) examined the effects of a short personal development intervention where participants across three different organizations were asked to attend a training session followed by weekly “meaningfulness” tasks and activities. They found that compared against a wait-list control group, those in the meaningfulness intervention group had raised levels of meaningfulness in/at work, job and organizational engagement, and personal initiative a few weeks afterward. However, through conducting focus groups with the participants, they also revealed a number of barriers, issues, and considerations when designing and implementing such interventions in practice. As many meaningful work scholars have noted, when organizations seek to intervene and manage the meaning-making processes and meaningful work experiences of their workers, then it is likely that these efforts will backfire and have deleterious consequences (e.g., Bailey et al., 2017). Therefore, there is a need to better understand how interventions can be designed in a co-produced way between managers and employees to optimize the potential benefits while minimizing the potential issues. Researchers have a useful role to play in helping organizations design and test rigorous evidence-based approaches that best align with their context and workforce population.

References

- Afota, M. C., Provost Savard, Y., Léon, E., & Ollier-Malaterre, A. (2024). Changes in belongingness, meaningful work, and emotional exhaustion among new high-intensity telecommuters: Insights from pandemic remote workers. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 97(3), 817–840.
- Aguinis, H., & Glavas, A. (2019). On corporate social responsibility, sensemaking, and the search for meaningfulness through work. *Journal of Management*, 45(3), 1057–1086.
- Albrecht, S. L., Bakker, A. B., Gruman, J. A., Macey, W. H., & Saks, A. M. (2015). Employee engagement, human resource management practices and competitive advantage: An integrated approach. *Journal of Organizational Effectiveness: People and Performance*, 2(1), 7–35.
- Aleksić, D., Černe, M., & Batistič, S. (2024). Understanding meaningful work in the context of technostress, COVID-19, frustration, and corporate social responsibility. *Human Relations*, 77(3), 426–451.
- Allan, B. A. (2017). Task significance and meaningful work: A longitudinal study. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 102, 174–182.
- Allan, B. A., Autin, K. L., & Duffy, R. D. (2014). Examining social class and work meaning within the psychology of working framework. *Journal of Career Assessment*, 22(4), 543–561.
- Allan, B. A., Autin, K. L., & Duffy, R. D. (2016). Self-determination and meaningful work: Exploring socioeconomic constraints. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 7(71), 1–9.
- Allan, B. A., Autin, K. L., Duffy, R. D., & Sterling, H. M. (2020). Decent and meaningful work: A longitudinal study. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 67(6), 669–679.
- Allan, B. A., Batz-Barbarich, C., Sterling, H. M., & Tay, L. (2019). Outcomes of meaningful work: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Management Studies*, 56(3), 500–528.

- Allan, B. A., Duffy, R. D., & Collisson, B. (2018). Helping others increases meaningful work: Evidence from three experiments. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 65(2), 155–165.
- Allan, B. A., Tebbe, E. A., Bouchard, L. M., & Duffy, R. D. (2019). Access to decent and meaningful work in a sexual minority population. *Journal of Career Assessment*, 27(3), 408–421.
- Amabile, T. M., & Pratt, M. G. (2016). The dynamic componential model of creativity and innovation in organizations: Making progress, making meaning. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 36, 157–183.
- Annisson, J., & Davidson, A. (2023). “Few things in life are easy and worth doing”: How the bi-directional relationships between meaningful work and work-related stress can both help and hinder wellbeing. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 14, 1244051.
- Arnold, K. A., Turner, N., Barling, J., Kelloway, E. K., & McKee, M. C. (2007). Transformational leadership and psychological Well-being: The mediating role of meaningful work. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 12(3), 193–203.
- Arnoux-Nicolas, C., Sovet, L., Lhotellier, L., Di Fabio, A., & Bernaud, J.-L. (2016). Perceived work conditions and turnover intentions: The mediating role of meaning of life and meaning of work. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 7, 704.
- Ashforth, B. E., & Kreiner, G. E. (1999). “How can you do it?”: Dirty work and the challenge of constructing a positive identity. *Academy of Management Review*, 24(3), 413–434.
- Aubé, C., & Rousseau, V. (2016). Yes, we complain... so what? *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 31(7), 1137–1151.
- Autin, K. L., Herdt, M. E., Garcia, R. G., & Ezema, G. N. (2022). Basic psychological need satisfaction, autonomous motivation, and meaningful work: A self-determination theory perspective. *Journal of Career Assessment*, 30(1), 78–93.
- Bailey, C., & Madden, A. (2016). What makes work meaningful—Or meaningless? *MIT Sloan Management Review*, 57(4), 53–61.
- Bailey, C., & Madden, A. (2017). Time reclaimed: Temporality and the experience of meaningful work. *Work, Employment and Society*, 31(1), 3–18.
- Bailey, C., & Madden, A. (2019). “We’re not scum, we’re human”: Agential responses in the face of meaningless work. *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, 35(4), 101064.
- Bailey, C., Madden, A., Alfes, K., Shantz, A., & Soane, E. (2017). The mismanaged soul: Existential labor and the erosion of meaningful work. *Human Resource Management Review*, 27(3), 416–430.
- Bailey, C., Yeoman, R., Madden, A., Thompson, M., & Kerridge, G. (2019). A review of the empirical literature on meaningful work: Progress and research agenda. *Human Resource Development Review*, 18(1), 83–113.
- Bakker, A. B., & Demerouti, E. (2017). Job demands–resources theory: Taking stock and looking forward. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 22(3), 273–285.
- Bankins, S., & Formosa, P. (2023). The ethical implications of artificial intelligence (AI) for meaningful work. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 185(4), 725–740.
- Barrick, M. R., Mount, M. K., & Li, N. (2013). The theory of purposeful work behavior: The role of personality, higher-order goals, and job characteristics. *Academy of Management Review*, 38, 132–153.
- Beer, H., Micheli, P., & Besharov, M. (2022). Meaning, mission, and measurement: How organizational performance measurement shapes perceptions of work as worthy. *Academy of Management Journal*, 65(6), 1923–1953.
- Bellah, R. N., Madsen, R., Sullivan, W. M., Swidler, A., & Tipton, S. M. (1985). *Habits of the heart*. University of California Press.
- Berg, J. M., Dutton, J. E., & Wrzesniewski, A. (2013). Job crafting and meaningful work. In B. J. Dik, Z. S. Byrne, & M. F. Steger (Eds.), *Purpose and meaning in the workplace* (pp. 81–104). American Psychological Association.
- Berkers, H. A., Smids, J., Nyholm, S. R., & Le Blanc, P. M. (2020). Robotisering en betekenisvol werk in distributiecentra: Bedreigingen en kansen. *Gedrag & Organisatie*, 33(4), 324–347.
- Bersin, J. (2015). Becoming irresistible. *Deloitte Review*, 16, 146–163.

- Blustein, D. L., Lysova, E. I., & Duffy, R. D. (2023). Understanding decent work and meaningful work. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, 10(1), 289–314.
- Both-Nwabuwe, J. M. C., Dijkstra, M. T. M., & Beersma, B. (2017). Sweeping the floor or putting a man on the moon: How to define and measure meaningful work. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 8, 1658.
- Brief, A. P., & Nord, W. R. (1990). Work and meaning: Definitions and interpretations. In A. P. Brief & W. R. Nord (Eds.), *Meanings of occupational work* (pp. 1–19). Lexington Books.
- Brieger, S. A., De Clercq, D., & Meynhardt, T. (2021). Doing good, feeling good? Entrepreneurs' social value creation beliefs and work-related Well-being. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 172, 707–725.
- Britt, T. W., Adler, A. B., & Bartone, P. T. (2001). Deriving benefits from stressful events: The role of engagement in meaningful work and hardiness. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 6(1), 53.
- Brown, S. P. (1996). A meta-analysis and review of organizational research on job involvement. *Psychological Bulletin*, 120(2), 235–255.
- Bunderson, J. S., & Thompson, J. A. (2009). The call of the wild: Zookeepers, callings, and the double-edged sword of deeply meaningful work. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 54(1), 32–57.
- Cai, W., Lysova, E. I., Khapova, S. N., & Bossink, B. A. (2018). Servant leadership and innovative work behavior in Chinese high-tech firms: A moderated mediation model of meaningful work and job autonomy. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9, 1767.
- Caligiuri, P., Mencia, A., & Jiang, K. (2013). Win-win-win: The influence of company-sponsored volunteerism programs on employees, NGOs, and business units. *Personnel Psychology*, 66(4), 825–860.
- Cardador, M. T., & Hill, P. (2018). Career paths in engineering firms: Gendered patterns and implications. *Journal of Career Assessment*, 26(1), 95–110.
- Carton, A. M. (2018). “I’m not mopping the floors, I’m putting a man on the moon”: How NASA leaders enhanced the meaningfulness of work by changing the meaning of work. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 63(2), 323–369.
- Chen, G., & Kanfer, R. (2006). Toward a systems theory of motivated behavior in work teams. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 27, 223–267.
- Cohen-Meitar, R., Carmeli, A., & Waldman, D. A. (2009). Linking meaningfulness in the workplace to employee creativity: The intervening role of organizational identification and positive psychological experiences. *Creativity Research Journal*, 21(4), 361–375.
- Colbert, A. E., Bono, J. E., & Purvanova, R. K. (2016). Flourishing via workplace relationships: Moving beyond instrumental support. *Academy of Management Journal*, 59(4), 1199–1223.
- De Smet, A., Dowling, B., Hancock, B., & Schaninger, B. (2022). The great attrition is making hiring harder. Are you searching the right talent pools? *McKinsey Quarterly*, 58(4), 1–13.
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2000). The “what” and “why” of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior. *Psychological Inquiry*, 11(4), 227–268.
- Deeg, M. D., & May, D. R. (2022). The benefits to the human spirit of acting ethically at work: The effects of professional moral courage on work meaningfulness and life Well-being. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 181(2), 397–411.
- Demirtas, O., Hannah, S. T., Gok, K., Arslan, A., & Capar, N. (2017). The moderated influence of ethical leadership, via meaningful work, on followers' engagement, organizational identification, and envy. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 145(1), 183–199.
- Dempsey, S. E., & Sanders, M. L. (2010). Meaningful work? Nonprofit marketization and work/life imbalance in popular autobiographies of social entrepreneurship. *Organization*, 17(4), 437–459.
- Di Fabio, A., & Kenny, M. E. (2019). Decent work in Italy: Context, conceptualization, and assessment. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 110, 131–143.
- Duchon, D., & Plowman, D. A. (2005). Nurturing the spirit at work: Impact on work unit performance. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 16(5), 807–833.

- Duffy, R. D., Allan, B. A., Autin, K. L., & Douglass, R. P. (2014). Living a calling and work Well-being: A longitudinal study. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 61(4), 605–615.
- Duffy, R. D., Blustein, D. L., Diemer, M. A., & Autin, K. L. (2016). The psychology of working theory. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 63(2), 127–148.
- Duffy, R.D., Dik, B.J., Douglass, R.P., England, J.W., & Velez, B.L. (2018). Work as a calling: A theoretical model. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 65(4), 423–439.
- Eden, D. (2017). Field experiments in organizations. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, 4(1), 91–122.
- Farmer, S. M., & Van Dyne, L. (2017). Organization-specific prosocial helping identity: Doing and belonging as the basis of “being fully there”. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 38(6), 769–791.
- Fay, D., Strauss, K., Schwake, C., & Urbach, T. (2023). Creating meaning by taking initiative: Proactive work behavior fosters work meaningfulness. *Applied Psychology*, 72(2), 506–534.
- Fieseler, C., Bucher, E., & Hoffmann, C. P. (2019). Unfairness by design? The perceived fairness of digital labor on crowdworking platforms. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 156, 987–1005.
- Fletcher, L. (2016). Training perceptions, engagement, and performance: Comparing work engagement and personal role engagement. *Human Resource Development International*, 19(1), 4–26.
- Fletcher, L. (2017). The everyday experiences of personal role engagement: What matters most? *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, 28(4), 451–479.
- Fletcher, L. (2024). Diversity, equality, and inclusion. In M. Bal (Ed.), *Elgar Encyclopedia of organizational psychology* (pp. 170–175). Edward Elgar Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781803921761.00035>
- Fletcher, L., Bailey, C., & Gilman, M. W. (2018). Fluctuating levels of personal role engagement within the working day: A multilevel study. *Human Resource Management Journal*, 28(1), 128–147.
- Fletcher, L., Pichler, S., & Chandrasekaran, L. (2025). Being LGBT and being an authentic leader: Contextualizing the experience of authentic leadership. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 98(1), e70018.
- Fletcher, L., & Schofield, K. (2021). Facilitating meaningfulness in the workplace: A field intervention study. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 32(14), 2975–3003.
- Florian, M., Costas, J., & Kärreman, D. (2019). Struggling with meaningfulness when context shifts: Volunteer work in a German refugee shelter. *Journal of Management Studies*, 56(3), 589–616.
- Fontana, E., Frandsen, S., & Morsing, M. (2023). Saving the world? How CSR practitioners live their calling by constructing different types of purpose in three occupational stages. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 185(4), 741–766.
- Fouché, E., Rothmann, S. S., & Van der Vyver, C. (2017). Antecedents and outcomes of meaningful work among school teachers. *SA Journal of Industrial Psychology*, 43(1), 1–10.
- Frémeaux, S., & Henry, F. (2023). Temporality and meaningful entrepreneurship. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 188(4), 725–739.
- Frémeaux, S., & Pavageau, B. (2022). Meaningful leadership: How can leaders contribute to meaningful work? *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 31(1), 54–66.
- Frieder, R. E., Wang, G., & Oh, I. S. (2018). Linking job-relevant personality traits, transformational leadership, and job performance via perceived meaningfulness at work: A moderated mediation model. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 103(3), 324–333.
- Fürstenberg, N., Alfes, K., & Shantz, A. (2021). Meaningfulness of work and supervisory-rated job performance: A moderated-mediation model. *Human Resource Management*, 60(6), 903–919.
- Gandal, N., Roccas, S., Sagiv, L., & Wrzesniewski, A. (2005). Personal value priorities of economists. *Human Relations*, 58(10), 1227–1252.
- Garland, E. L., Farb, N. A., Goldin, R., & Fredrickson, B. L. (2015). Mindfulness broadens awareness and builds eudaimonic meaning: A process model of mindful positive emotion regulation. *Psychological Inquiry*, 26(4), 293–314.

- Geldenhuys, M., Bakker, A. B., & Demerouti, E. (2021). How task, relational and cognitive crafting relate to job performance: A weekly diary study on the role of meaningfulness. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 30(1), 83–94.
- Geldenhuys, M., Taba, K., & Venter, C. M. (2014). Meaningful work, work engagement and organisational commitment. *SA Journal of Industrial Psychology*, 40(1), 1–10.
- Glavas, A., & Kelley, K. (2014). The effects of perceived corporate social responsibility on employee attitudes. *Business Ethics Quarterly*, 24(2), 165–202.
- Glavas, A., & Lysova, E. (2025). Meaningful work and corporate social responsibility: Examining the interactions of a sense of calling with organizational- and job-level factors. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 98(3), e70045.
- Goštautaitė, B., Kim, N., Steindórsdóttir, B. D., Parry, E., Dello Russo, S., Andresen, M., & Zikic, J. (2025). Age and career resilience through the lens of life course theory: Examining individual mechanisms and macro-level context across 28 countries. *Human Resource Management Journal*, 35(4), 879–893.
- Grant, A. M. (2007). Relational job design and the motivation to make a prosocial difference. *Academy of Management Review*, 32(2), 393–417.
- Grant, A. M. (2008). The significance of task significance: Job performance effects, relational mechanisms, and boundary conditions. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 93(1), 108–124.
- Grant, A. M., Campbell, E. M., Chen, G., Cottone, K., Lapedis, D., & Lee, K. (2007). Impact and the art of motivation maintenance: The effects of contact with beneficiaries on persistence behavior. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 103, 53–67.
- Gregori, P., Holzmann, P., & Wdowiak, M. A. (2021). For the sake of nature: Identity work and meaningful experiences in environmental entrepreneurship. *Journal of Business Research*, 122, 488–501.
- Hackman, J. R., & Oldham, G. R. (1976). Motivation through the design of work: Test of a theory. *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance*, 16(2), 250–279.
- Hansen, J. C. (2013). A person-environment fit approach to cultivating meaning. In B. Dik, Z. Byrne, & M. Steger (Eds.), *Purpose and meaning in the workplace* (pp. 37–56). American Psychological Association.
- Hauser, O. P., Linos, E., & Rogers, T. (2017). Innovation with field experiments: Studying organizational behaviors in actual organizations. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 37, 185–198.
- Huang, B., Ma, L., & Huang, L. (2022). My work is meaningless: The consequences of perceived occupational stigma for employees in high-prestige occupations. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 715188.
- Hwang, S., Zeng, Y., & Lysova, E. I. (2025). Family recognition of work as a source of meaningful work: Examining the roles of self-esteem and parental status. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 156, 104068.
- Isaksen, J. (2000). Constructing meaning despite the drudgery of repetitive work. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 40(3), 84–107.
- Janssen, J. L., Lysova, E. I., Wickert, C., & Khapova, S. N. (2022). Employee reactions to CSR in the pursuit of meaningful work: A case study of the healthcare industry. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 969839.
- Jasinenko, A., & Steuber, J. (2023). Perceived organizational purpose: Systematic literature review, construct definition, measurement and potential employee outcomes. *Journal of Management Studies*, 60(6), 1415–1447.
- Jiang, L., & Johnson, M. J. (2018). Meaningful work and affective commitment: A moderated mediation model of positive work reflection and work centrality. *Journal of Business and Psychology*, 33, 545–558.
- Jiang, W. Y. (2021). Sustaining meaningful work in a crisis: Adopting and conveying a situational purpose. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 66(3), 806–853.
- Johnson, M. J., & Jiang, L. (2017). Reaping the benefits of meaningful work: The mediating versus moderating role of work engagement. *Stress and Health*, 33(3), 288–297.
- Kahn, W. A. (1990). Psychological conditions of personal engagement and disengagement at work. *Academy of Management Journal*, 33(4), 692–724.

- Kahn, W. A. (2007). Meaningful connections: Positive relationships and attachments at work. In J. E. Dutton & B. R. Ragins (Eds.), *Exploring positive relationships at work: Building a theoretical and research foundation* (pp. 189–206). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Kantamneni, N. (2020). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on marginalized populations in the United States: A research agenda. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 119, 103439.
- Kanungo, R. N. (1982). Measurement of job and work involvement. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 67(3), 341–349.
- Kim, M., & Beehr, T. A. (2020). Thriving on demand: Challenging work results in employee flourishing through appraisals and resources. *International Journal of Stress Management*, 27(2), 111.
- Kim, T., & Allan, B. A. (2020). Underemployment and meaningful work: The role of psychological needs. *Journal of Career Assessment*, 28(1), 76–90.
- Kipfelsberger, P., Raes, A., Herhausen, D., Kark, R., & Bruch, H. (2022). Start with why: The transfer of work meaningfulness from leaders to followers and the role of dyadic tenure. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 43(8), 1287–1309.
- Kristof-Brown, A. L., Zimmerman, R. D., & Johnson, E. C. (2005). Consequences of individuals' fit at work: A meta-analysis of person–job, person–organization, person–group, and person–supervisor fit. *Personnel Psychology*, 58(2), 281–342.
- Kubiak, E. (2022). Increasing perceived work meaningfulness by implementing psychological need-satisfying performance management practices. *Human Resource Management Review*, 32(3), 100792.
- Laaser, K., & Bolton, S. (2022). Absolute autonomy, respectful recognition and derived dignity: Towards a typology of meaningful work. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 24(3), 373–393.
- Landells, E. M., & Albrecht, S. L. (2019). Perceived organizational politics, engagement, and stress: The mediating influence of meaningful work. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10, 1612.
- Lee, M. C. C., Idris, M. A., & Delfabbro, P. H. (2017). The linkages between hierarchical culture and empowering leadership and their effects on employees' work engagement: Work meaningfulness as a mediator. *International Journal of Stress Management*, 24(4), 392–415.
- Lepisto, D. A. (2022). Ritual work and the formation of a shared sense of meaningfulness. *Academy of Management Journal*, 65(4), 1327–1352.
- Lepisto, D. A., & Pratt, M. G. (2017). Meaningful work as realization and justification: Toward a dual conceptualization. *Organizational Psychology Review*, 7(2), 99–121.
- Lips-Wiersma, M., Haar, J., & Wright, S. (2020). The effect of fairness, responsible leadership and worthy work on multiple dimensions of meaningful work. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 161, 35–52.
- Lips-Wiersma, M., & Morris, L. (2009). Discriminating the 'meaningful work' literature: A study of lay representations of meaningful work. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 88, 499–513.
- Lips-Wiersma, M., & Wright, S. (2012). Measuring the meaning of meaningful work: Development and validation of the comprehensive meaningful work scale (CMWS). *Group & Organization Management*, 37(5), 655–685.
- Lips-Wiersma, M., Wright, S., & Dik, B. (2016). Meaningful work: Differences among blue-, pink-, and white-collar occupations. *Career Development International*, 21(5), 534–551.
- Lisak, A., Harush, R., Ickson, T., & Harel, S. (2022). Team interdependence as a substitute for empowering leadership contribution to team meaningfulness and performance. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 637822.
- Littman-Ovadia, H., & Steger, M. F. (2010). Character strengths and Well-being among volunteers and employees: Toward an integrative model. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 5, 419–430.
- Liu, S., Wang, J., & Wang, R. (2023). Transforming passive employee engagement into active engagement: Supervisor development feedback valences on feedback-seeking behavior. *Psychological Reports*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00332941231213842>
- Lysova, E. I., Allan, B. A., Dik, B. J., Duffy, R. D., & Steger, M. F. (2019). Fostering meaningful work in organizations: A multi-level review and integration. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 110, 374–389.

- Lysova, E. I., Fletcher, L., & El Baroudi, S. (2023). What enables us to better experience our work as meaningful? The importance of awareness and the social context. *Human Relations*, 76(8), 1226–1255.
- Ma, B., Zhu, S., & Jain, K. (2023). The “sense” behind proactive behaviors: Feedback seeking, meaningfulness, and personal initiative. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 144, 103896.
- Magrizos, S., Roumpi, D., Georgiadou, A., Kostopoulos, I., & Vrontis, D. (2023). The dark side of meaningful work-from-home: A nonlinear approach. *European Management Review*, 20(2), 227–244.
- Mäkikangas, A., Minkinen, J., Muotka, J., & Mauno, S. (2023). Illegitimate tasks, job crafting and their longitudinal relationships with meaning of work. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 34(7), 1330–1358.
- Martela, F., Gómez, M., Unanue, W., Araya, S., Bravo, D., & Espejo, A. (2021). What makes work meaningful? Longitudinal evidence for the importance of autonomy and beneficence for meaningful work. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 131, 103631.
- Martela, F., & Pessi, A. B. (2018). Significant work is about self-realization and broader purpose: Defining the key dimensions of meaningful work. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9, 363.
- Martela, F., & Riekk, T. J. (2018). Autonomy, competence, relatedness, and beneficence: A multicultural comparison of the four pathways to meaningful work. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9, 327587.
- Martela, F., & Ryan, R. M. (2016). Prosocial behavior increases Well-being and vitality even without contact with the beneficiary: Causal and behavioral evidence. *Motivation and Emotion*, 40, 351–357.
- Matsuo, M., Arai, K., & Matsuo, T. (2019). Empowering leadership and meaningful work: The mediating role of learning goal orientation. *International Journal of Training and Development*, 23(4), 328–338.
- May, D. R., Gilson, R. L., & Harter, L. M. (2004). The psychological conditions of meaningfulness, safety and availability and the engagement of the human spirit at work. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 77(1), 11–37.
- Mercurio, Z. A., Myles, T., Adams, W., & Clifton, J. D. (2024). Mapping and measuring leadership practices intended to foster meaningful work. *Occupational Health Science*, 8(2), 435–469.
- Michaelson, C. (2021). A normative meaning of meaningful work. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 170(3), 413–428.
- Michaelson, C., Pratt, M. G., Grant, A. M., & Dunn, C. P. (2014). Meaningful work: Connecting business ethics and organization studies. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 121(1), 77–90.
- Michaelson, C., & Tosti-Kharas, J. (2020). A world changed: What post-9/11 stories tell us about the position of America, purpose of business, and meaning of work. *Academy of Management Review*, 45(4), 877–895.
- Michaelson, C. W., & Tosti-Kharas, J. (2024). *Is your work worth it?: How to think about meaningful work*. PublicAffairs.
- Mitra, R., & Buzzanell, P. M. (2017). Communicative tensions of meaningful work: The case of sustainability practitioners. *Human Relations*, 70(5), 594–616.
- Mollick, E. (2024). *Co-intelligence: Living and working with AI*. Portfolio, Penguin Random House.
- Montani, F., Boudrias, J. S., & Pigeon, M. (2020). Employee recognition, meaningfulness and behavioural involvement: Test of a moderated mediation model. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 31(3), 356–384.
- MOW International Research Team. (1987). *The meaning of working*. Academic Press.
- Nemkova, E., Demirel, P., & Baines, L. (2019). In search of meaningful work on digital freelancing platforms: The case of design professionals. *New Technology, Work and Employment*, 34(3), 226–243.
- Nikolova, M., Nossen, F., & Nikolaev, B. (2024). Robots, meaning, and self-determination. *Research Policy*, 53(5), 104987.
- Nishii, L. H., & Leroy, H. (2022). A multi-level framework of inclusive leadership in organizations. *Group & Organization Management*, 47(4), 683–722.

- Oelberger, C. R. (2019). The dark side of deeply meaningful work: Work-relationship turmoil and the moderating role of occupational value homophily. *Journal of Management Studies*, 56(3), 558–588.
- Oh, S., & Roh, S. C. (2019). A moderated mediation model of self-concept clarity, transformational leadership, perceived work meaningfulness, and work motivation. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10, 1756.
- Peng, J., Chen, L., Yang, X., & Xie, L. (2024). Meaningfulness at work: Role of distributive justice, managerial respect and work self-efficacy. *Management Decision*, 62(3), 885–912.
- Peng, Y., Xu, X., Jex, S. M., & Chen, Y. (2020). The roles of job-related psychosocial factors and work meaningfulness in promoting nurses' bridge employment intentions. *Journal of Career Development*, 47(6), 701–716.
- Petrou, P., Bakker, A. B., & Van Den Heuvel, M. (2017). Weekly job crafting and leisure crafting: Implications for meaning-making and work engagement. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 90(2), 129–152.
- Pratt, M. G., & Ashforth, B. E. (2003). Fostering meaningfulness in working and at work. In K. Cameron, J. Dutton, & R. Quinn (Eds.), *Positive organizational scholarship: Foundations of a new discipline* (pp. 309–327). Berrett-Koehler.
- Pratt, M. G., & Hedden, L. N. (2023). Accounts and accountability: On organizational purpose, organizational identity, and meaningful work. *Strategy Science*, 8(2), 182–192.
- Purvanova, R. K., Bono, J. E., & Dziewieczynski, J. (2006). Transformational leadership, job characteristics, and organizational citizenship performance. *Human Performance*, 19(1), 1–22.
- Rafferty, A. E., & Restubog, S. L. D. (2011). The influence of abusive supervisors on followers' organizational citizenship behaviours: The hidden costs of abusive supervision. *British Journal of Management*, 22(2), 270–285.
- Rai, A., Kim, M., & Singh, S. K. (2023). Meaningful work from ethics perspective: Examination of ethical antecedents and outcomes of meaningful work. *Journal of Business Research*, 169, 114287.
- Ram, M., Edwards, P., Jones, T., Kiselinchev, A., & Muchenje, L. (2014). Pulling the levers of agency: Implementing critical realist action research. In P. K. Edwards et al. (Eds.), *Studying organizations using critical realism: A practical guide* (pp. 205–222). Oxford University Press.
- Riester, J., & Keller, J. (2024). Considering the dark side of work: Bullshit job perceptions, deviant work behavior, and the moderating role of work ethic. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 198, 675–693.
- Robertson, K., Hannah, D., & Lautsch, B. (2024). Harm, then good? How work meaningfulness emerges from doing harm. *Journal of Management Studies*, 61(6), 2437–2466.
- Robertson, K. M., O'Reilly, J., & Hannah, D. R. (2020). Finding meaning in relationships: The impact of network ties and structure on the meaningfulness of work. *Academy of Management Review*, 45(3), 596–619.
- Rodell, J. B. (2013). Finding meaning through volunteering: Why do employees volunteer and what does it mean for their jobs? *Academy of Management Journal*, 56(5), 1274–1294.
- Romney, A. C., Netchaeva, E., Smith, I. H., & Brief, A. P. (2024). Meaningfulness is a luxury? How daily meaningful work activities and financial resources influence daily meaning and purpose in life. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 35(13), 2283–2308.
- Rosso, B. D., Dekas, K. H., & Wrzesniewski, A. (2010). The meaning of work: A theoretical integration and review. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 30, 91–127.
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2017). *Self-determination theory: Basic psychological needs in motivation, development, and wellness*. Guilford Publishing.
- Ryff, C. D., Keyes, C. L., & Hughes, D. L. (2003). Status inequalities, perceived discrimination, and eudaimonic well-being: Do the challenges of minority life hone purpose and growth? *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 44, 275–291.
- Salancik, G. R., & Pfeffer, J. (1978). A social information processing approach to job attitudes and task design. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 23(2), 224–253.

- Schaufeli, W. B., Bakker, A. B., & Salanova, M. (2006). The measurement of work engagement with a short questionnaire. *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, 66(4), 701–716.
- Schnell, T., Höge, T., & Pollet, E. (2016). Predicting meaning in work: Theory, data, implications. In *Positive psychology in search for meaning* (pp. 87–98). Routledge.
- Shafaei, A., & Nejati, M. (2024). Creating meaningful work for employees: The role of inclusive leadership. *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, 35(2), 189–211.
- Shamir, B. (1991). Meaning, self and motivation in organizations. *Organization Studies*, 12(3), 405–424.
- Si, W., Xiao, J., & Chen, L. (2023). Fairly meaningful: Mechanisms linking organizational fairness to perceived meaningfulness. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 187(1), 53–72.
- Simonet, D. V., & Castille, C. M. (2020). The search for meaningful work: A network analysis of personality and the job characteristics model. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 152, 109569.
- Singh, N. & Bamel, U. (2020). Can transcendence be attained through mindfulness? The mediating role of meaningful work. *Journal of Organizational Effectiveness: People and Performance*, 7(3), 257–273.
- Singh, N., Bamel, U., & Vohra, V. (2021). The mediating effect of meaningful work between human resource practices and innovative work behavior: a study of emerging market. *Employee Relations: The International Journal*, 43(2), 459–478.
- Soane, E., Shantz, A., Alfes, K., Truss, C., Rees, C., & Gatenby, M. (2013). The association of meaningfulness, Well-being, and engagement with absenteeism: A moderated mediation model. *Human Resource Management*, 52(3), 441–456.
- Soren, A. (2023). *Meaningful work matters* [audio podcast]. Spotify. <https://www.spotify.com>
- Sosik, J. J. (2000). The role of personal meaning in charismatic leadership. *Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies*, 7(2), 60–74.
- Steger, M. F., & Dik, B. J. (2010). Work as meaning: Individual and organizational benefits of engaging in meaningful work. In N. Garcea, S. Harrington, & P. Alex Linley (Eds.), *Oxford handbook of positive psychology and work* (pp. 131–142). Oxford University Press.
- Steger, M. F., Dik, B. J., & Duffy, R. D. (2012). Measuring meaningful work: The work and meaning inventory (WAMI). *Journal of Career Assessment*, 20(3), 322–337.
- Steger, M. F., Littman-Ovadia, H., Miller, M., Menger, L., & Rothmann, S. (2013). Engaging in work even when it is meaningless: Positive affective disposition and meaningful work interact in relation to work engagement. *Journal of Career Assessment*, 21(2), 348–361.
- Stein, M. K., Wagner, E. L., Tierney, P., Newell, S., & Galliers, R. D. (2019). Datification and the pursuit of meaningfulness in work. *Journal of Management Studies*, 56(3), 685–717.
- Svensden, M., & Jönsson, T. F. (2022). Organizational democracy and meaningful work: The mediating role of employees corporate social responsibility perceptions. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 946656.
- Šverko, B., & Vizek-Vidovic, V. (1995). Studies on the meaning of work: Approaches, models, and some of the findings. In D. E. Super & B. Šverko (Eds.), *Life roles, values, and careers*. Jossey-Bass, Inc.
- Symon, G., & Whiting, R. (2019). The sociomaterial negotiation of social entrepreneurs' meaningful work. *Journal of Management Studies*, 56(3), 655–684.
- Szöts-Kováts, K., & Primecz, H. (2025). How do human resource managers make sense of their work? A study of changing work meaningfulness using the critical incident technique. *Human Resource Development International*, 28(1), 132–151.
- Tan, Z., Yan, S., Xia, Q., & Zhang, Y. (2024). The relationship between servant leadership and cyberloafing: An investigation of meaningful work versus citizenship pressure. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 33(4), 535–550.
- Tett, R. P., & Burnett, D. D. (2003). A personality trait-based interactionist model of job performance. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 88(3), 500–517.
- Tims, M., Derks, D., & Bakker, A. B. (2016). Job crafting and its relationships with person–job fit and meaningfulness: A three-wave study. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 92, 44–53.

- Tosti-Kharas, J., & Michaelson, C. (2021). To mean is to be perceived: Studying the meaning of work through the eyes of others. *Academy of Management Perspectives*, 35(3), 503–516.
- Tummers, L. G., & Knies, E. (2013). Leadership and meaningful work in the public sector. *Public Administration Review*, 73(6), 859–868.
- Vahle-Hinz, T., Otto, K., & Rigotti, T. (2024). Effects of demands and resources in the team context. *Small Group Research*, 55(6), 884–918.
- Van Vianen, A. E. (2018). Person–environment fit: A review of its basic tenets. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, 5(1), 75–101.
- Vogel, R. M., Rodell, J. B., & Sabey, T. B. (2020). Meaningfulness misfit: Consequences of daily meaningful work needs–supplies incongruence for daily engagement. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 105(7), 760–770.
- Wang, Z., & Xu, H. (2019). When and for whom ethical leadership is more effective in eliciting work meaningfulness and positive attitudes: The moderating roles of core self-evaluation and perceived organizational support. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 156, 919–940.
- Weeks, K. P., & Schaffert, C. (2019). Generational differences in definitions of meaningful work: A mixed methods study. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 156, 1045–1061.
- Wehrle, K., Kira, M., & Klehe, U. C. (2024). The role of temporality in refugees' work-related meaningfulness-making. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 34, 436–450.
- Weick, K. E. (1995). *Sensemaking in organizations*. Sage.
- Wille, B., Hofmans, J., Feys, M., & De Fruyt, F. (2014). Maturation of work attitudes: Correlated change with big five personality traits and reciprocal effects over 15 years. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 35(4), 507–529.
- Woods, S. A., & Sofat, J. A. (2013). Personality and engagement at work: The mediating role of psychological meaningfulness. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 43(11), 2203–2210.
- Wrzesniewski, A., & Dutton, J. E. (2001). Crafting a job: Revisioning employees as active crafters of their work. *Academy of Management Review*, 26(2), 179–201.
- Wrzesniewski, A., McCauley, C., Rozin, P., & Schwartz, B. (1997). Jobs, careers, and callings: People's relations to their work. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 31, 21–33.
- Wrzesniewski, A., McCauley, C., Rozin, P., & Schwartz, B. (2003). Jobs, careers, and callings: People's relations to their work. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 31(1), 21–33.
- Yang, F., Huang, X., & Wu, L. (2019). Experiencing meaningfulness climate in teams: How spiritual leadership enhances team effectiveness when facing uncertain tasks. *Human Resource Management*, 58(2), 155–168.
- Yeoman, R. (2014). Conceptualising meaningful work as a fundamental human need. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 125, 235–251.
- Zeyen, A., & Branzei, O. (2023). Disabled at work: Body-centric cycles of meaning-making. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 185(4), 767–810.
- Zhang, Y., Bolino, M. C., & Yin, K. (2023). The interactive effect of perceived overqualification and peer overqualification on peer ostracism and work meaningfulness. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 182(3), 699–716.
- Zhou, Q., Sacramento, C., & Martinaityte, I. (2023). Work meaningfulness and performance among healthcare professionals: The role of professional respect and participative management. *Journal of Business Research*, 163, 113908.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if you modified the licensed material. You do not have permission under this license to share adapted material derived from this chapter or parts of it.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.



The Meaning and Meaningfulness of Work: The View from Sociology



Duncan Gallie and Ying Zhou

Abstract Since the mid-twentieth Century, theory and research in sociology on workers' responses to their experience of work can be broadly divided into three overlapping phases. The immediate post-war decades from the late 1940s to the 1970s saw the pervasive influence of an 'essentialist' conception of the meaningfulness of work. From the 1960s, this was challenged by a 'liberal' view that rejected the idea that there was an inherent human nature in favour of an emphasis on the importance of individual value choice. It argued that a growth of instrumentalism in work orientations would make job quality decreasingly relevant to the meaning of work. Then in the first decades of the twenty-first century, there was a revival of theory and research on meaningfulness, premised on the notion of fundamental human needs, but emphasizing at the same time broader societal needs. These different perspectives have given a very different importance to the role of technology as a determinant of the meaning of work. Technological change was at the core of the essentialist arguments; it was marginalized by the liberal arguments and has become once more an important preoccupation of more recent work on meaningfulness.

Keywords Meaningfulness · Alienation · Job quality · Skills · Control · Technology

JEL Codes J24 · J28 · J81

D. Gallie (✉)
Nuffield College, Oxford University, Oxford, UK
e-mail: duncan.gallie@nuffield.ox.ac.uk

Y. Zhou
University of Surrey, Guildford, Surrey, UK
e-mail: ying.zhou@surrey.ac.uk

Industrial Technology and Meaninglessness in Work

In the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx argued that humans have a distinctive ‘essential’ or ‘species’ being, which requires expression through ‘free, conscious activity’. Through conscious life activity ‘Man makes his life activity the object of his will and of his consciousness.’ The realization of this essential nature is determined by the nature of a person’s productive life, most vitally by their ability to produce freely, which enables them to contemplate themselves in a world that they have created (Marx, 1973, pp. 113–115). If they do not have possession of their own productive activity, if it is externally controlled and coerced, work constitutes estranged, alienated labour.

The alienation of labour has crucial implications both for people’s capacity for self-development and for their subjective sense of the meaning of their work. It tears a person from their species life: instead of being a source of self-realization, work becomes only a means to their existence (113–114). Marx spells out the subjective consequences of this:

in his work, therefore, he does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind. The worker therefore only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself. ... It is not therefore the satisfaction of a need, it is merely a means to satisfy needs external to it. Its alien character emerges clearly in the fact that as soon as no physical or other compulsion exists, labor is shunned like a plague. External labor, labor in which man alienates himself, is a labor of self-sacrifice, of mortification (Marx, 1973, pp. 110–111).

In Marx’s vision, the ultimate driving force behind the progressive degradation of work, and the consequent loss of meaningfulness of work tasks, was the concern of owners within a capitalist system of production to gain competitive advantage and enhance their profits by reducing the costs of labour. This was secured through a transformation of the work process that reduced the skill level of the workforce, initially through an ever more detailed division of labour and, in the era of large-scale industry, by increasingly incorporating skilled work tasks into the machinery itself. The use of machinery in manufacturing made it possible to replace a skilled with an unskilled workforce, while increasing the intensity of work for those employed (Marx, 2004).

This emphasis on the critical role of technology for the meaningfulness of (or alienation from) work under the conditions of industrial capitalism came to inform a good deal of sociological theory and research on work in the decades after World War II. In particular, it was developed by two influential traditions of work—the Friedmann school of the French *sociologie du travail* and the Anglo-Saxon *labor process theory*. Both neo-Marxian traditions pursued a research agenda of providing very detailed case studies of the implications of technology for changes in work tasks and work practices.

They focused particularly on the growing implementation of ‘Scientific Management’ policies, developed by Frederick Winslow Taylor in the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. These were seen as confirming and even accentuating Marx’s predictions about the fragmentation of tasks and the

reduction of worker skills. The efficiency and profitability of production, it argued, is maximized when work tasks are highly subdivided and standardized. The simplification of the labour process into elementary skills, together with the introduction of close supervisory control, was seen not only as a way of eliminating 'time-wasting habits', but also of isolating workers from each other, undercutting their capacity to resist management plans. With the growth of scientific management, employees lose control over their own labour and become alienated from the work process.

While the most prevalent trend was for complex tasks to be increasingly subdivided into routine and repetitive subtasks, the development that came to epitomize conceptions of the way in which work was evolving was that of the Fordist assembly line which both facilitated the coordination of highly subdivided work tasks and gave management a means of controlling (and therefore intensifying) the speed of work. It deprived workers of the ability to decide the rhythm of their own work and made them subject to the rhythm and rapidity of the machine.

The classic text that informed this perspective in *sociologie du travail* was Georges Friedmann's *Industrial Sociology: the Emergence of the Human Problems of Automation* (published in French in 1946 and in English in 1955). Friedmann's argument is notably more nuanced than Marx's, emphasizing the benefits of mechanization in freeing workers from many of the most disagreeable, and physically hazardous tasks, as well as providing them with greater choice and comfort as consumers. He also points to a degree of psychological variation in people's vulnerability to apparently negative work conditions—for instance the repetitiveness of work tasks. He does, however, place a central importance on the destructive effects of current trends in technological and organizational change on the skill structure and hence on workers' ability to use initiative in their work.¹

For Friedmann, 'The steady trend of "scientific management" is to cause semi-skilled workers to perform all operations which can be performed, without calling on the worker's intelligence and personality' (Friedmann, 1956, 214). It is 'precisely against the system of individual initiative that technicist rationalization was constructed and developed...It is incontestable that Scientific Management and its variants actually destroy all individual initiative in many workers' (212). This has important consequences for their sense of involvement in work. Describing the characteristic reaction of workers to technicist rationalization of the work process, he notes that:

The rarity or disappearance of those problems which stimulate skill, and the loss of initiative, seem to have been felt especially by them. A system requiring little of the worker's personality but rapid and precise reactions, and which also lowers his prestige among his comrades, inevitably tends to eliminate valuable satisfactions (210).

He concludes that the predominant mechanized systems of production have strongly negative effects on work involvement: 'Personal involvement in work is counteracted by contemporary tendencies in industry. And this is not the least

¹Friedman (1956) later developed a less pessimistic view of the potential scenarios of change, influenced by the experiments of some U.S. companies with job rotation and job enlargement.

reason for the risks which industry involves for the psychic equilibrium of many individuals' (375).. 'the unskilled worker has nothing but indifference for the interchangeable tasks which arouse in him no interest, no real knowledge of material, and which touch no deep spring of his personality' (397). The dominant tendency, he concludes, is for a growing 'despiritualization' of work (389).

Friedmann was writing at a time when industrial manufacturing was still the dominant industry in most economically advanced countries. However, the growth of clerical work from the interwar period and the marked rise of the service sector from the 1960s raised the issue of how far theories of work based on research on manual workers in manufacturing were relevant to the conditions of work more widely, given the changing occupational structure. Predictions of a long-term trend to deskilling appeared to be contradicted by the rise of a new middle class.

Although broadly similar to Friedmann's analysis in its general account of the dynamics of capitalist industrialism, Braverman (1974) *Labor and Monopoly Capital* was in part an attempt to respond to the issues raised by the growing numerical importance of white-collar work. His version of the argument was influential in giving the broader perspective an important role in Anglo-Saxon sociological theory and research. Braverman, like Marx and Friedmann, identified the distinctive capacity of human labour as 'its intelligent and purposive character' (56). But, in selling his labour power to the capitalist, the worker surrenders his control over the labour process to the employer, and is confronted by 'the progressive alienation of the process of production' (58).

Building on the earlier research of Wright Mills (1951), Braverman argues that clerical and service occupations have been subject to this process in a broadly similar way to manual work. In the early stages, the development of new specializations among non-manual workers may have raised skill levels. But, as the numbers expanded, so too did the division of work tasks, the concentration of planning and control in a small managerial elite and the mechanization of the work process. The computer system has transformed clerical work in much the same way that machinery recast manual work. Overall, the skill level of clerical workers has declined sharply, with the bulk of clerical workers becoming effectively semi-skilled workers, a process reflected in both training times and pay levels. While the transformation of service occupations, such as retail workers, may have been slower, a similar process is becoming evident (Braverman, 1974, p. 371). 'Rather than the emergence of a new middle class, the once relatively intermediate clerical and service occupations have been increasingly downgraded into an integral part of the working class and now suffer from the same alienating conditions of modern work as manual wage-workers' (Braverman, 1974, pp. 352, 371).

The major challenge to the view that trends in work inherently led to alienating work conditions that deprived workers of the opportunities for personal initiative and self-development in work that made work meaningful came from a quite different theoretical perspective, rooted in theories of industrialism developed in the United States (Kerr et al., 1960). The most comprehensive development of this view was by Robert Blauner in *Alienation and Freedom* (Blauner, 1964). For Blauner,

meaninglessness was a central aspect of alienation at work. He elaborates his view of the factors that gave rise to it in some detail:

Meaning in work depends largely on three aspects of the worker's relationship to the product, process and organization of work. The first factor is the character of the product itself. Working on a unique and individuated product is almost inherently meaningful...The second point is the scope of the product worked on. It is more meaningful to work on the whole, or even a large part...than to perform one's tasks on only a small part of the final product. Third, purpose and function increase when the employee's job makes him responsible for a large span of the production process. (Blauner, 1964, p. 23)

Blauner largely accepts the picture of the past implications of the development of mechanized technologies, with their tendency to subdivide tasks and intensify work. 'Tendencies towards meaninglessness', he writes, 'stem from the nature of modern manufacturing, which is based on standardized production and a division of labour that reduces the size of the worker's contribution to the final product' (Blauner, 1964, p. 23). These problems are most sharply accentuated in the assembly-line technologies characteristic of the automobile industry. In these work settings,

The alienation of meaninglessness is further intensified by the worker's lack of a clear identification with a particular job...Fractionalised job assignments, cyclic rather than task-directed work rhythms, and the anonymous atmosphere of the large plants—all dilute the sense of meaning, purpose and function on the assembly line (p. 108).

However, while accepting that technological development has undercut the meaningfulness of work in the past, Blauner (1964) strongly rejects the neo-Marxian thesis that this will continue to be the case in the future. As technology continues to develop, he argues, work processes will become increasingly automated, producing the conditions for a restoration of the meaningfulness of work. In highly automated work settings such as the chemical industries, the tendency for the subdivision of work tasks is reversed, with task operations increasingly integrated into the machinery itself. Instead, such technologies increase the need for skilled workers who can take responsibility for monitoring the operation of large technical complexes and who have the craft skills necessary for the high-level maintenance work that is essential with a more intricate technical system (pp. 167–168). This has profound implications for the enhancement of meaningfulness in work:

The perspective of the worker is shifted from his own individual tasks to a broader series of operations...And responsibility as a job requirement demands thinking in terms of the collective whole rather than the individual part. For all these reasons, automation involves a widening of the worker's scope of operations and provides new avenues for meaning and purpose in work (p. 173).

The primary role given to technology as a determinant of meaningfulness is a shared characteristic of both these neo-Marxian and non-Marxian approaches. For the former, there was a deterministic effect of technology within a capitalist system of production, whereas for the latter technological determinism was seen as inherent in a process of industrialization. However, while the emphasis was still placed strongly on the exploitative nature of the capitalist employment relationship, as research developed within the neo-Marxian tradition, there was an increasing recognition of

the variability of work processes and the scope for managerial choice in how to maximize worker effort and productivity (Friedmann, 1956; Friedman, 1977; Wood & Kelly, 1982). Similarly to non-Marxist research, there was a growing emphasis on the non-deterministic nature of technology and the importance of cultural and institutional factors in influencing the specific nature of management practices (Gallie, 1978; Kelley, 1989; Piore & Sabel, 1984). These developments raised significant questions about the validity of predictions of a technologically driven growth of meaninglessness in work.

Meanwhile, in the late 1960s, a significant development had occurred in theoretical perspectives about the experience of work, with a focus on the meaning in work replacing that of meaningfulness.

From Meaningfulness and Alienation to the Meaning of Work: Values and Work Orientations

Despite their disagreement about the long-term implications of technological change, the theoretical perspectives considered in the previous section shared the view that workers' capacity to use their initiative and develop their skills was crucial for meaningfulness and personal well-being. However, in the 1960s, this assumption became subject to an influential critique. In the *Affluent Worker: Industrial Attitudes and Behaviour* (Goldthorpe et al., 1968), Goldthorpe and colleagues, drawing on an action frame of reference, contended that workers' experience of their jobs depended crucially upon their prior work values. They rejected the view that responses to work depended upon some innate or essential human nature and argued that the workforce is highly differentiated in terms of the wants and expectations that people bring to their employment, leading to quite varied interpretations and evaluations of the nature of any specific work environment. Under conditions of near full-employment, workers would be able to exercise a degree of choice in their selection of jobs based upon the types of rewards they seek (Goldthorpe et al., 1968, pp. 183–184).

Drawing upon interviews with British workers in car assembly, small and large batch machining and chemical production, Goldthorpe et al. (1968) note that, while technologically conditioned working conditions did affect the intrinsic satisfaction that people derived from their jobs, there was no evidence that poor working conditions led to the types of antagonistic attitudes and conflict-laden work relations that might be expected if work experience were crucial for well-being; rather, workers had largely positive dispositions to their employing organizations (pp. 181–183). They attribute this to the fact that 'the orientation which workers have to their employment and the manner, thus, in which they define their work situation can be regarded as mediating between features of the work situation objectively considered and the nature of workers' responses' (p. 182). Among the workers they studied, such orientations were primarily of an instrumental type, in which people were mainly concerned with the financial rewards that come with the job rather than with the intrinsic satisfaction obtained by carrying out the work.

In contrast to theories of intrinsic human nature, this ‘work orientations’ perspective views the development of people’s wants and expectations with respect to work as ‘culturally determined variables, not psychological constants’ (178). As such they are rooted in the structure and processes of the wider society, in particular the family and community contexts in which people live. With changes in the family leading to a stronger emphasis on the nuclear family, ‘relations both between husband and wife and between parents and children would seem likely to become closer and more inherently rewarding’ than had been the case in traditional working class communities. Hence people will be better able to satisfy their expressive and affective needs through family relationships, making satisfactions from the experience of work less crucial to their well-being. This in turn leads to workers giving priority to the financial returns from work to realize their family projects outside work (175–176). Further, the authors argue that given the broader changes taking place in society, for instance higher levels of geographical mobility, it is likely that such instrumental work values will become increasingly prevalent over time in both the blue-collar and white-collar workforce.

The *Affluent Worker* studies led to an extended debate about the variations in work attitudes in different categories of the workforce and their possible determinants (Beynon & Blackburn, 1972; Blackburn & Mann, 1979; Brown, 1973; Daniel, 1969). In particular, there was sharp contention as to whether work values should be understood as independent of work experience or as a result of particular experiences of work, how stable they are across time and whether the lack of transparency of the labour market really makes it possible for workers to select jobs in terms of their work orientations. However, many of these studies were based on specific occupational groups, organizations or localities, making it difficult to assess the wider validity of their conclusions.

The argument that there was a long-term trend for rising instrumentalism proved particularly problematic.² In an attempt to assess this, national surveys have tended to use a measure of employment commitment, which asks respondents whether they would wish to continue to work even without financial necessity. Evidence from the US suggests that there was some decline in employment commitment between the mid-1970s and the mid-1990s, although it then levelled off and remained relatively stable over the next decade (Scott et al., 2010). An analysis of trends in the EU between the early 1990s and the mid-2000s found only a marginal decline. Evidence from Britain showed relative stability in employment commitment from the early 1980s to the early 1990s (Gallie et al., 1998). Arguably, more specific questions about job preferences provide stronger evidence about the meaning people attach to their jobs. In a study of 19 OECD countries, Esser and Lindh (2018) concluded that the relative importance of extrinsic and intrinsic job preferences changed little between 1989 and 2015. Research in Britain found that there had been no shift towards instrumental values over the period 1992–2006. Rather, intrinsic job preferences rose over the period (Gallie et al., 2012).

²For a fuller discussion of the evidence on instrumentalism, see Gallie (2019).

Given the resilience of intrinsic work values, it is difficult to conclude that the experience of work has become less important for workers' life experiences. One factor that may help to account for this is the rise in levels of education in the workforce. Arguably one of the major effects of more extended education is that it encourages both the capacity and desire for self-determination, as well as expressive and self-development values. A more educated workforce could then be expected to have retained strong intrinsic work values. A number of studies, both national and cross-national, have found that empirically educational level is strongly associated with the prevalence of both employment commitment and intrinsic work values (Gallie et al., 2012; Hult & Svallfors, 2002; MOW, 1987).

Work orientations theory was initially developed to account for the responses of mainly male manual and white-collar workers in poor working conditions. But perhaps the most controversial extension of the argument came with respect to the nature of women's work orientations and the consequent meaning they attach to work. Hakim (1996) contends that 'women are heterogeneous, diverse and divided' (p. 207). Unlike men, they have genuine choices to make between different styles of life, in particular with respect to the importance they give to their careers and the family. As a result, there is a marked polarization of the female workforce not only in the UK, but in Europe and the USA (208). A minority choose to give priority to their careers, whereas a majority choose a modern homemaker career that combines a priority for family life with limited employment, often in part-time jobs. The two groups have quite different orientations to work. While the career woman seeks personal development and fulfilment in work, women who pursue the modern homemaker career 'are secondary earners, fail to utilize any qualifications they may have, choose jobs for their convenience factors and social interest rather than with a view to a long-term career, are concentrated in female occupations and have lower earnings' (Hakim, 1996, pp. 207–208).

Research in the 1980s strongly confirmed the difference between men's and women's orientations to work. A major British national study concluded that work was less central to women's lives than to men's and that most women were still primary domestic workers (Martin & Roberts, 1984, pp. 191–192). However, later studies show an overall convergence between men and women in employment commitment (Gallie et al., 2017; Steger et al., 2013). Increased centrality of, and commitment to, work among women has been accompanied by a stronger attachment to intrinsic work values and to the more detailed job preferences that relate to such values.³ In their analysis of data from 19 countries, Esser and Lindh (2018) find that 'on average, women express stronger intrinsic preferences' and that 'Women tend to be more concerned with job autonomy than men' (p. 157). Overall figures may mask

³ Authors can differ in their terminological preferences. We take the notion of work orientations as a syncretical concept that refers to the relative centrality of work compared with other significant life activities (usually assumed to have necessary implications for both the strength of work commitment and the nature of work values). Work values refer to the relative importance of intrinsic and extrinsic rewards in work, while job preferences relate to the specific intrinsic or extrinsic aspects of work that are most important in a worker's assessment of a job.

important differences within the female workforce. In particular, Hakim's argument points particularly to the distinctive work orientations of female part-timers. The evidence here is more ambivalent. British research has tended to confirm that female part-timers have lower intrinsic job values than full-timers (Zou, 2015), whereas wider international research has found that they have 'stronger preferences for intrinsic qualities and job autonomy than full-time employees' (Esser & Lindh, 2018).

Women's work orientations and their related work values are not static. They can change in response to changes in educational and occupational attainments. In the 1990s and 2000s, a widely reported puzzle in the job satisfaction literature was that women have higher levels of job satisfaction than men despite their low wages and inferior working conditions (Clark, 1997; Curtice, 1993; Sloane & Williams, 2000; Sousa-Poza & Sousa-Poza, 2003). This paradox has been attributed to the relatively low significance attached to work in women's work orientations, which influenced what they value in and seek from their work (Clark, 1997; Hakim, 1991; Zou, 2015). However, with the rising educational attainments of women over recent decades, this gender gap has largely disappeared in recent studies (Green et al., 2018). The evidence cautions against treating work values as an inherent characteristic of employees in general or of particular categories of employee, rather than as contextually influenced and potentially varying over time in their implications for the experience of meaningful work.

The progression of research on work values and work orientations presents, then, a paradox. Initially developed as a critique of earlier traditions of work that had emphasized the central importance of work for personal self-development and well-being, more systematic research has shown that, far from any clear trend to greater instrumentalism, the intrinsic quality of the work environment, as reflected in factors such as the use of skill, initiative and job autonomy, has remained a high priority in workers' preferences. The alleged gender gap in work values and orientations also closed significantly in response to changes in educational attainments, work experiences and social norms. Although the earlier traditions tended to see this as reflecting inherent human needs, it is notable that a subjectivist approach, relying on people's personal preferences, points very much in the same direction.

The Revival of Research on Meaningfulness in Work

The last two decades witnessed a resurgence of interest in the meaningfulness of work in the social sciences. The revival was driven by both theoretical developments and growing empirical evidence highlighting the benefits of meaningful work for desired organizational outcomes such as work engagement (Steger et al., 2013; Williamson & Geldenhuys, 2014), job satisfaction (Steger et al., 2012), and performance (Allan et al., 2016; Harris et al., 2007; Leiter et al., 1998).

Two primary approaches to the conceptualization of meaningful work can be identified. The first, known as 'the realization perspective' (Lepisto & Pratt, 2017), is closely aligned with Marx's conceptualization of alienation. It suggests that

meaningfulness arises from the fulfilment of fundamental human needs for control, competence, and personal growth. Enriched jobs that allow individuals to express their creative potentials and develop skills according to self-congruent goals are inherently more meaningful than tedious, repetitive and restrictive work imposed by others (Michaelson, 2005; Podolny et al., 2004; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003).

In contrast, the ‘justification perspective’ (Lepisto & Pratt, 2017) highlights the objective value of work. From this viewpoint, meaningful work is defined by its ability to generate outcomes that extend beyond personal gains, contributing to a greater collective good. There is necessarily a moral argument implied in the justification perspective, with its emphasis on the ‘goodness’ of work, judged from an external standard independent of the perception of the individual carrying out the work. Such work often involves delivering tangible benefits for others and enhancing societal welfare (Beer et al., 2022; Florian et al., 2019; Trittin-Ulbrich & Glozer, 2024). From the justification perspective, the barrier to meaningful work is not the separation of conception and execution of work that reduces the scope for control and skill development as proposed by Marxist theorists, but the lack of value, significance, or worth of the work itself (Lepisto & Pratt, 2017).

This notion was elaborated in Graeber’s (2018) book *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory*. Graeber argues that a large swath of the labour force is employed in pointless jobs that serve no useful purpose, such as ‘flunkies’ whose work is to make someone else feel important, ‘duct tapers’ who fix problems which should not exist in the first place, and ‘box tickers’ who deal with bureaucratic tasks which benefit no one despite the illusion of creating value.

The distinction between the two conceptualizations of meaningful work hinges on whether meaningfulness arises from fulfilling one’s own needs through self-actualization or from serving others’ needs, even if the work itself is not particularly enjoyable. Work can be meaningful in one sense but not the other. For example, developing addictive video games for adolescents may require sophisticated skills and substantial decision latitude. Although it may provide a sense of personal satisfaction, few would consider such work as meaningful due to its harmful consequences. Conversely, work can be meaningful even when it is carried out in relatively restrictive conditions. For example, care workers who look after patients with terminal illnesses often feel a strong sense of meaningfulness, despite the fact that such work is often repetitive, exhausting, and poorly compensated (Bailey & Madden, 2016). During the COVID-19 pandemic, a high proportion of frontline workers who provided essential services for the public found their work meaningful despite significant personal sacrifices (Norris-Green & Wheatley, 2022).

While the realization and justification perspectives can be regarded as sharply opposing views about what constitutes meaningful work, Wolf (2010) has advanced a third position—namely that meaningfulness requires a combination of both subjective and objective elements. In her widely discussed book *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters*, she rejects the view that meaning can be derived purely from either the pursuit of hedonistic self-interest or from the rigid adoption of the normative demands of morality. Instead, she argues that it requires both strong subjective engagement, providing a sense of personal fulfilment, and an object of activity

which has a value whose source comes from outside and is independent of oneself. As she puts it ‘meaning in life consists in and arises from actively engaging in projects of worth’ (p. 26).

The definition of objective or impartial value inevitably raises questions about who makes these judgements. While recognizing that this remains a contentious area, for Wolf an important (although not exclusive) source of external endorsement of the independent value of an activity would appear to derive from how far it relates to wider values in the society. Their importance reflects in part the fact that people have a need for self-esteem that can be provided by the judgements of others. They also have an inherently social nature that encourages them to do something whose value extends beyond themselves and to be part of a community that shares values (pp. 28–37).

There is, however, no consensus in the literature on whether beneficence is a necessary condition for meaningful work. Some argue that meaningfulness can arise from either personal fulfilment or social contribution, without the need for both elements to be present simultaneously (Bramble, 2015; Taylor, 1984). Empirical evidence on this issue remains limited, particularly with respect to the extent to which jobs that support self-realization also provide social justification. Many occupations, such as those in education, healthcare, and skilled trades, may fulfil both criteria by enabling individuals to develop their abilities in the process of serving others. The practical relevance of the theoretical distinction between self- and other-oriented sources of meaningful work warrants empirical investigation.

Evidence on the Antecedents of Meaningful Work

Despite the well-established conceptual distinction between the realization perspective and the justification perspective, most empirical evidence on the antecedents of meaningful work has focused on the former, likely due to its longer theoretical tradition and data availability. A rich body of research has explored the structural factors that influence the degree to which employees derive a sense of meaning from their work, such as the characteristics of job tasks, the way in which work is coordinated and organized, the quality of social relationships in the workplace, and wider institutional and cultural environments.

The most studied job-level antecedents of meaningful work reflect job quality, which encompasses a range of manifest and latent benefits that meet individuals’ fundamental needs from their work (Green et al., 2018; Green et al., 2024). While economists have traditionally focused on monetary compensation, sociologists and psychologists have paid greater attention to intrinsic aspects of job quality such as skills, autonomy, and work intensity. While returning to many of the themes of the post-war alienation literature, the revived research on meaningfulness not only focused on positive rather than negative outcomes, but provided much more detailed empirical evidence on the relationship between work conditions and worker experiences.

Two particularly influential theories informing this work have been the Job Characteristics Model (Hackman & Oldham, 1976) and Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), which have their roots in organizational psychology. Research guided by the Job Characteristics Model consistently shows that jobs which provide greater skill variety, job autonomy, task significance, identity, and feedback are associated with higher levels of meaningfulness and motivation (Fried & Ferris, 1987; Hackman & Lawler, 1971). Self-Determination Theory, highlighting the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, has also received substantial empirical support. For instance, Nikolova and Cnossen's (2020) research based on the European Working Conditions Surveys shows that these factors account for 60% of the variation in perceptions of meaningful work across Europe—4.6 times more than indicators of extrinsic job quality such as pay, benefits, job security, career advancement, and working hours. In the UK, the 2024 Skills and Employment Survey reveals that key determinants of perceived work meaningfulness include managerial support, skill utilization, and involvement in workplace decision-making. In contrast, extrinsic factors such as pay and job insecurity show only weak correlations with meaningfulness (Zhou et al., 2025). Additionally, intrinsic aspects of job quality, particularly task complexity and opportunities for skill development, account for a large portion of the variation in meaningful work experiences between employees in higher and lower occupational classes (Williams et al., 2022).

Besides the features of job tasks, the meaningfulness of work is also influenced by how work is organized and managed. This stream of research has explored the impact of human resource practices and social relationships in the workplace. For instance, research based on the French Working Conditions Survey suggests that organizational restructuring and downsizing undermine the sense of meaningfulness, most likely due to their implications for obscured career prospects, disrupted learning, and increased workload (Coutrot & Perez, 2022). The system of 'algorithmic management', where job performance is constantly monitored and evaluated by quantifiable metrics, is particularly demoralizing and frequently gives rise to health issues (ibid).

In contrast, high-involvement management practices which empower individuals to make independent decisions about their job tasks and participate in wider organizational decisions are associated with higher levels of work engagement, skill development and perception of meaningfulness (Gallie & Zhou, 2020). Employee participation (or voice) in decision-making has both direct and indirect implications for meaningfulness. Participation directly enhances opportunities for self-determination, enabling the realization of a work value that has been consistently shown to be of central importance to employees. At the same time, it has an important indirect influence by providing a means for improving other aspects of the work environment in a way that better meets employee needs.

Of central importance in this respect for the realization perspective is that participation has been shown to have an effect in improving opportunities for learning at work—both in terms of informal learning through everyday work activities and formal learning through the provision of training (Gallie, 2019; Gallie & Zhou, 2020). Learning is essential for developing skills and enhancing the individual's sense of competence, especially in the fast-evolving technological environment

where new tools and systems constantly challenge the workforce to adapt and upskill.

In addition to participation in organizational decision-making, the quality of social relationships in the workplace is another critical source of meaning. Teamwork can influence the degree to which individuals identify with their work groups, thereby affecting the meaningfulness they derive from their work (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Wrzesniewski et al., 2003). When employees perceive their groups as distinctive and valuable, they are more likely to experience a sense of belonging (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003).

Leadership style also affects the social atmosphere in the workplace. Managers who inspire and support their employees tend to foster a stronger sense of meaning than those who solely rely on financial incentives to drive performance (Arnold et al., 2007; Bono & Judge, 2003; Zhou et al., 2025). Besides directly motivating employees to go the extra mile (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006; Schaufeli, 2021), supportive supervisory styles enhance individuals' perception of their job characteristics (Piccolo & Colquitt, 2006). For instance, progressive performance management practices that emphasize timely feedback, recognition, and development increase work engagement by making employees feel valued and appreciated (Kahn, 1990; Saks, 2006). A limitation of this stream of research is that many studies of leadership and teams are based on occupation or industry-specific samples, which may restrict their generalisability to the broader labour force.

Beyond organization-level factors, the perception of meaningful work is influenced by the broader institutional environments in which individuals are embedded. Cross-national comparative research on meaningful work remains scarce, but a rich body of research has examined country variations in job quality and their structural sources (Gallie, 2007; Gallie & Zhou, 2013, 2020; Green & Mostafa, 2012; Holman, 2013; Olsen et al., 2010). While these studies have rarely explicitly linked such variations to work meaningfulness, given the well-established importance of job quality for meaningfulness, it is reasonable to expect that institutional arrangements that promote intrinsic job quality will also enhance work meaningfulness, particularly when defined from a self-realization perspective. Policies and regulations that encourage skill development, job autonomy, organizational participation, and social support will increase the prevalence of enriched jobs, which are inherently more meaningful than repetitive, routine work.

Although earlier Marxian analyses were concerned with the social utility of work, this has been more formally developed in contemporary discussions of the justification perspective. However, there is much less empirical evidence on the antecedents of meaningful work from a justification perspective, with its emphasis on the extent to which work makes a positive contribution to other people or society at large, than is the case for the realization perspective (Beer et al., 2022; Florian et al., 2019; Trittin-Ulbrich & Glozer, 2024). Considerable ambiguity exists about what constitutes a positive contribution, and who should make such value judgments. Some have attempted to provide an objective definition of meaningful work as 'jobs in which people help others, alleviate suffering, eliminate difficult, dangerous, or tedious toil, make someone healthier, happier, aesthetically or intellectually

enrich people, or improve the environment in which we live' (Ciulla, 2012, p. 127). Others have used their own judgement to assign beneficence values to different occupations (Burbano et al., 2024). However, given the challenge of creating an exhaustive and widely agreed-upon list, most studies have relied on individuals' own assessments of whether they consider their work to be making a valuable contribution to society or not.

Most empirical evidence on the social value of work has been based on anecdotal evidence or analysis of non-representative samples from specific occupations. An exception is the research by Dur and Lent on 'socially useless jobs,' which examined four waves of the International Social Survey Programme covering over 100,000 workers from 47 countries (Dur & Van Lent, 2019). Their study found that contrary to the 'bullshit job' discourse, only 8% of workers disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement 'My job is useful to society', and 17% were doubtful (neither agreed nor disagreed). The presence of socially useless jobs is higher in the private sector than in the public sector (by 6% points). Notably, almost no one in occupations such as firefighters, police officers, social benefit officials, health workers, and teachers considered their jobs to be socially useless.

Research based on the American Time Use Survey and the UK Annual Population Survey suggests that highly skilled workers perceive their work as more meaningful than those in medium- or low-skilled occupations (Bryce, 2018). In France, a comparison of perceptions of meaningful work across industrial and occupational contexts found the lowest levels of meaningful work in manufacturing, commerce and sales, banks, insurance, and security. By contrast, the highest levels were reported by maternity assistants and more generally those working in caring occupations (Coutrot & Perez, 2022).

According to the European Working Conditions Survey, workers in the craft and related trades, as well as the agricultural sector, reported particularly high levels of meaningful work (Nikolova & Cnossen, 2020). In the UK, the 2024 Skills and Employment Survey, which covers 5465 workers across the country, revealed highest levels of meaningful work in healthcare, education, and construction (Zhou et al., 2025). The CIPD UK Working Lives Surveys found that care workers reported higher levels of meaningfulness than engineers, IT professionals, and finance professionals despite their inferior wages and working conditions. While highly skilled employees reported higher levels of meaningfulness in terms of doing useful work for their *organization*, a handful of occupations related to health, social care, and protective services stood out for reporting a strong sense of doing useful work for *society* (Williams et al., 2022).

Taken as a whole, the evidence indicates that the meaningfulness of work, when viewed through the lens of social justification, is associated with the inherent nature of the work. Specifically, jobs that provide essential public services tend to foster a heightened sense of meaning and purpose. Meaning appears particularly high in the types of jobs that involve direct relationships with the public or clients, where individuals often experience immediate feedback and recognition of their contributions (Coutrot & Perez, 2022). These roles tend to go beyond personal or organizational goals by connecting individuals to the tangible impact of their work on others.

Technologies and the Future of Meaningful Work

The rapid spread of artificial intelligence, machine learning, and robotics technologies (often referred to as the fourth Industrial Revolution) has raised questions about the future of work. Similarly to industrial automation and continuous processing technologies in the 1960s and 1970s and computerized and information technologies in the 1980s and 1990s that prompted generations of neo-Marxian and non-Marxian scholars to investigate how technology reshapes work and its inherent meaningfulness, the advent of artificial intelligence technologies is expected to profoundly transform the landscape of work and employment relationships once again. While technologies are unlikely to directly affect the meaning of work, they can certainly support or undermine the conditions for experiencing meaningful work through the two mechanisms identified in the literature: self-realization and social justification. Given the extensive evidence on the importance of job quality for self-realization, there are grounds to expect that the ways in which new technologies shape the meaningfulness of work will largely depend on their impact on intrinsic job quality.

Research on the impact of emerging technologies on job quality is still in the early stages, but a burgeoning body of evidence suggests that different types of technologies can affect the quality of work life in distinct ways. An online survey of 4802 UK employees conducted by the Institute for the Future of Work found that employees' life quality was positively associated with the frequency of their interactions with traditional digital tools such as laptops, tablets, and smartphones. In contrast, the relationship was negative for new technologies such as wearables, robotics, artificial intelligence, and machine learning software (Soffia et al., 2024a). An examination of the underlying mechanisms revealed a significant association between emerging technologies and job insecurity. Additionally, the use of wearable devices to monitor, assess, and control workers in real time has been found to intensify work and heighten health risks (Soffia et al., 2024b).

Another study has explored the impact of robotic technologies on job quality based on data from the 1995–2005 European Working Conditions Surveys matched with information on robots provided by the World Robotics Survey (Antón et al., 2023). The study found that exposure to industrial robots led to increased work intensity, while having no significant impact on the physical work environment, skills, or discretion. Consistent findings are reported by Nikolova et al. (2024) based on employee survey data and robotization data for 14 industries across 20 European countries from 2005 to 2021. Focusing specifically on the meaningfulness of work, the study suggests a doubling of robotization is associated with a 0.9% decrease in meaningfulness.

As was shown in earlier studies of automation, the impact of new technologies on job quality is not predetermined, but significantly affected by how they are designed and implemented in the workplace (Gallie, 1978; Parker & Grote, 2022). In particular, the extent to which employees are involved in this process moderates the impact of technology adoption on organizational outcomes. A survey of over

1000 UK firms shows that high-involvement management practices which encourage training, information-sharing, and employee consultation significantly enhance the positive impact of new technologies, leading to job creation, skill augmentation, and job quality improvement (Hayton et al., 2023). These outcomes are more pronounced in regions that have invested substantially in human capital and connectivity infrastructure.

Participative management enhances the benefits of new technologies because frontline workers possess valuable tacit knowledge about production and service processes, which can be leveraged to improve the design and implementation of new technologies. Involving employees in decision-making also fosters a sense of procedural justice, increasing their openness to embracing new technologies that enhance work efficiency (Felstead et al., 2020). Conversely, implementing changes without seeking employee input risks removing complex and interesting job tasks, potentially diminishing individuals' sense of competence and agency. For instance, technologies that require employees to 'tend the machine' often reduce individuals to passive monitors of digitalized equipment, which can result in boredom and alienation. In contrast, technologies that create tasks that challenge and stretch human capabilities can make work more engaging and fulfilling. Roles that involve 'managing the machine' often instil a greater sense of meaning as they require employees to perform complex, autonomous, and integrated tasks that promote skill development (Bankins & Formosa, 2023).

Beyond concerns with job quality and its implications for self-realization, from a justification perspective, the future of meaningful work will also depend on whether technologies will be used to enhance or harm societal welfare. Artificial intelligence technologies are versatile tools that can be deployed for both beneficial and detrimental purposes. They can drive scientific breakthroughs, extend life expectancy, and deliver personalized education. They can also spread misinformation, enable mass surveillance, and create weapons of mass destruction (Suleyman, 2023). The implications of the upcoming wave of artificial general intelligence technologies for the social welfare and hence for the meaningfulness of work in terms of the justification approach are difficult to predict.

In summary, the more recent literature on meaningfulness has pointed to two main pathways through which meaningfulness can be achieved: self-realization and social justification. From a realization perspective, the focus is on the quality of work and its implications for personal fulfilment. Jobs should be designed in a way that avoids overly segmented tasks or constraining working conditions that give rise to feelings of alienation and estrangement. Human-resource practices that promote skill development, employee participation, and social support are crucial for fostering a sense of meaning. The justification perspective centres on the social value of work. Individuals need to have reasons (that would be persuasive to others) to believe that their work contributes to the welfare of others or the betterment of society. This is relatively straightforward for those who work in occupations that directly help others such as doctors, nurses, teachers, and firefighters, but the rationale can be more elusive for those in process-focused roles which offer limited opportunities to interact with beneficiaries.

Work is arguably most meaningful when it benefits both the individual and the broader society. The impact of the Fourth Industrial Revolution on the future of work will depend on its ability to create jobs that are not only fulfilling for workers, but also contribute positively to the common good. Striking this balance requires prioritizing human-centred design principles to ensure that technologies are used to automate tedious tasks and free up individuals for more interesting, engaging, and often people-centred roles where they can directly witness the beneficial impact of their work on others. Achieving this vision requires policies and practices that cultivate a workplace environment where employee voices are valued. Organizations that embrace high-involvement work practices are better positioned to harness the potential of new technologies, paving the way for a more meaningful future of work for all.

Conclusion

Although the issue of meaningfulness in work has gained considerable visibility in the literature over the last decades, our chapter has shown that it has been fundamental to the sociology of work throughout the post-Second World War period. The nature of the arguments deployed and, indeed, the centrality attributed to the issue have varied, however, over time.

In the immediate post-war decades, the focus was primarily upon the decline of meaningfulness in work. This was attributed to the increasing prevalence of Taylorist management policies and technological developments such as the growth of assembly-line production techniques. These arguments were underpinned by an essentialist conception of human nature in which initiative and creativity were viewed as fundamental human needs. Developments in the work process were seen as curbing the capacity for the realization of such needs, thereby creating the conditions for both objective and subjective worker alienation, with work increasingly viewed as meaningless.

From the 1960s to the 1990s, an influential critique of this thesis was provided by proponents of an action-theory perspective in sociology, which rejected the notion that there were fundamental human needs for self-development through work in favour of the view that work preferences were rooted in cultural values that could vary between individuals, communities and societies. The major direction of change, it was suggested, involved the decreasing importance of work in people's lives and the increased centrality of family and non-work aspirations. As such, meaningfulness in work itself was no longer regarded as a core issue in the sociology of work. Rather, workers selected particular jobs in the light of their personal value preferences. Those in jobs offering poor intrinsic work conditions—whether male manual workers or female part-timers—were not experiencing meaninglessness but rather satisfaction with employment conditions that met their instrumental orientations to work.

While the shift from an essentialist account of worker experiences to one based on the relationship between work conditions and work values was helpful in

allowing for a degree of variation in workers' preferences about types of jobs, subsequent research has shown that the intrinsic features of work are of high importance for the majority of workers. Rather than an exclusive emphasis on instrumental benefits, workers tend to value characteristics of work—such as the use of initiative, control over the work task and opportunities for self-development—that were at the heart of the early concerns with meaningfulness.

The last two decades have seen a major renewal of research on meaningfulness, although perhaps with less recognition of earlier contributions than might be expected. But it has led to the development of earlier work in two important respects. The first lies in a stronger conceptual distinction between two types of meaningfulness. It has emphasized the contrast between meaningfulness in the sense of the capacity for self-development through work (the realization perspective) and meaningfulness in terms of the value of a person's work to society (the justification perspective). While these two approaches are often thought to have very different implications, a third view has argued that the meaningfulness of a job requires that it meets a combination of both subjective and objective criteria. While there are conflicting views about the viability of an attempt to define adequately the notion of objective value, upon which both the justification and the combined approach depend, there is a degree of agreement that certain qualities, such as work that involves 'caring for others', do constitute acceptable criteria.

A second contribution of more recent research on meaningfulness in work has been an enrichment of the empirical evidence. It has provided a more detailed characterization of the features of the work task and the work environment that are conducive to meaningfulness in the self-realization perspective. It has also shown the association between the meaningfulness of work and key organizational outcomes. In both cases, researchers were able to draw upon developments in self-determination theory and on the growing body of empirical research by both organizational psychologists and sociologists into the implications of job characteristics for workers' experience of their jobs.

The potential role of technology in facilitating or undermining meaningfulness has been central to discussions of the longer-term future of work since the earliest studies in the post-war period. In particular, across the decades, debate has revolved around the potential impact of automation, in its diverse forms, for the experience of work. The cumulative results of empirical research into earlier phases of automation suggested that quite varied forms of organizational design were compatible with a given technological environment. Given the central importance of job quality for workers' attitudes, this points to the absence of technological determinism with respect to the future meaningfulness of work and to the crucial importance of the adoption of organizational policies that enrich workers' jobs and enhance their feeling of involvement in the decisions that affect their work.

Acknowledgements We are grateful to Benjamin Schneider and Milena Nikolova for their comments on earlier drafts of the chapter at the 2025 Groningen Work and Well-being Workshop.

References

- Allan, B. A., Autin, K. L., & Duffy, R. D. (2016). Self-determination and meaningful work: Exploring socioeconomic constraints. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 7, 1–9.
- Antón, J. I., Fernández-Macías, E., & Winter-Ebmer, R. (2023). Does robotization affect job quality? Evidence from European regional labor markets. *Industrial Relations: A Journal of Economy and Society*, 62(3), 233–256.
- Arnold, K. A., Turner, N., Barling, J., Kelloway, E. K., & McKee, M. C. (2007). Transformational leadership and psychological Well-being: The mediating role of meaningful work. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 12, 193–203.
- Bailey, C., & Madden, A. (2016). What makes work meaningful—Or meaningless. *MIT Sloan Management Review*, 57, 4.
- Bankins, S., & Formosa, P. (2023). The ethical implications of artificial intelligence (AI) for meaningful work. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 185(4), 725–740.
- Beer, H., Micheli, P., & Besharov, M. (2022). Meaning, mission and measurement: How organizational performance measurement shapes perception of work as worthy. *Academy of Management Journal*, 65(6), 1923–1953.
- Beynon, H., & Blackburn, R. M. (1972). *Perceptions of work*. Cambridge University Press.
- Blackburn, R., & Mann, M. (1979). *The working class in the labour market*. Macmillan.
- Blauner, R. (1964). *Alienation and freedom. The Factory Worker and his Industry*. University of Chicago Press.
- Bono, J. E., & Judge, T. A. (2003). Self-concordance at work: Toward understanding the motivational effects of transformational leaders. *Academy of Management Journal*, 46, 554–571.
- Bramble, B. (2015). Consequentialism about meaning in life. *Utilitas*, 27(4), 445–459.
- Braverman, H. (1974). Labor and monopoly capital. In *The degradation of work in the twentieth century*. Monthly Review Press.
- Brown, R. K. (1973). Sources of objectives in work and employment. In J. Child (Ed.), *Man and organization*. Allen and Unwin.
- Bryce, A. (2018). Finding meaning through work: Eudaimonic Well-being and job type in the US and UK, Working Papers 2018004, The University of Sheffield, Department of Economics.
- Burbano, V. C., Folke, O., Meier, S., & Rickne, J. (2024). The gender gap in meaningful work. *Management Science*, 70(10), 7004–7023.
- Ciulla, J. B. (2012). Worthy work and bowie's Kantian theory of meaningful work. In D. Arnold & J. Harris (Eds.), *Kantian Business Ethics* (pp. 115–131). Edward Elgar.
- Clark, A. E. (1997). Job satisfaction and gender: Why are women so happy at work? *Labour Economics*, 4(4), 341–372.
- Coutrot, T., & Perez, C. (2022). *Redonner du sens au travail*. Seuil.
- Curtice, J. (1993). Satisfying work, if you can get it. In R. Jowell, L. Brook, & L. Dowds (Eds.), *International social attitudes: The 10th BSA report*. Aldershot.
- Daniel, W. W. (1969). Industrial behaviour and orientation to work - a critique. *Journal of Management Studies*, 6(3), 366–375.
- Dur, R., & Van Lent, M. (2019). Socially useless jobs. *Industrial Relations: A Journal of Economy and Society*, 58(1), 3–16.
- Esser, I., & Lindh, A. (2018). Job preferences in comparative perspective 1989-2015: A multi-dimensional evaluation of individual and contextual influences. *International Journal of Sociology*, 48, 142–169.
- Felstead, A., Gallie, D., Green, F., & Henseke, G. (2020). Getting the measure of employee-driven innovation and its workplace correlates. *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 58(4), 904–935.
- Florian, M., Costas, J., & Kärreman, D. (2019). Struggling with meaningfulness when the context shifts: Volunteer work in a German refugee shelter. *Journal of Management Studies*, 56(3), 589–616.

- Fried, Y., & Ferris, G. R. (1987). The validity of the job characteristics model: A review and meta-analysis. *Personnel Psychology*, 40(2), 287–322.
- Friedmann, G. (1946). *Problèmes humains du machinisme industriel*. Gallimard.
- Friedmann, G. (1956). *Le travail en miettes : spécialisation et loisirs*. Gallimard.
- Friedman, A. 1977 Industry and Labour. Macmillan.
- Gallie, D. (1978). *In search of the new working class - automation and social integration within the capitalist Enterprise*. Cambridge University Press.
- Gallie, D. (Ed.). (2007). *Employment regimes and the quality of work*. Oxford University Press.
- Gallie, D. (2019). Research on work values in a changing economic and social context. *Annals, AAPS*, 682(March), 26–42.
- Gallie, D., Felstead, A., & Green, F. (2012). Job preferences and the intrinsic quality of work : The changing attitudes of British employees 1992-2006. *Work, Employment and Society*, 26(5), 806–821.
- Gallie, D., White, M., Cheng, Y., & Tomlinson, M. (1998). *Restructuring the employment relationship*. Clarendon Press.
- Gallie, D., & Zhou, Y. (2013). Job control, work intensity and work stress. In D. Gallie (Ed.), *Economic crisis and the quality of work*. Oxford University Press.
- Gallie, D., & Zhou, Y. (2020). *Employee Involvement, Work Engagement and Skill Development*. European Union.
- Gallie, D., Zhou, Y., Felstead, A., Green, F., & Henseke, G. (2017). The implications of direct participation for organisational commitment, job satisfaction and affective psychological Well-being: A longitudinal analysis. *Industrial Relations Journal*, 48(2), 174–191.
- Goldthorpe, J. H., Lockwood, D., Bechhofer, F., & Platt, J. (1968). *The affluent worker : Industrial attitudes and behaviour*. Cambridge University Press.
- Graeber, D. (2018). *Bullshit jobs: A theory*. Simon & Schuster.
- Green, C. P., Heywood, J. S., Kler, P., & Leves, G. (2018). Paradox lost: The disappearing female job satisfaction premium. *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 56(3), 484–502.
- Green, F., Lee, S., Zou, M., & Zhou, Y. (2024). Work and life: The relative importance of job quality for general Well-being, and implications for social surveys. *Socio-Economic Review*, 22(2), 835–857.
- Green, F., & Mostafa, T. (2012). *Trends in job quality in Europe*. European Union.
- Hackman, J. R., & Lawler, E. E. (1971). Employee reactions to job characteristics. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 55(3), 259.
- Hackman, J. R., & Oldham, G. R. (1976). Motivation through the design of work: Test of a theory. *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance*, 16(2), 250–279.
- Hakim, C. (1991). Grateful slaves and self-made women: Fact and fantasy in women's work orientations. *European Sociological Review*, 7(2), 101–121.
- Hakim, C. (1996). *Key issues in women's work*. The Athlone Press Ltd.
- Harris, K. J., Kacmar, K. M., & Zivnuska, S. (2007). An investigation of abusive supervision as a predictor of performance and the meaning of work as a moderator of the relationship. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 18(3), 252–263.
- Hayton, J., Rohenkohl, B., Pissarides, C., & Liu, H. (2023). What drives UK firms to adopt AI and robotics, and what are the consequences for jobs?, Institute for the Future of work, September 2023.
- Holman, D. (2013). Job types and job quality in Europe. *Human Relations*, 66(4), 475–502.
- Hult, C., & Svallfors, S. (2002). Production regimes and work orientations: A comparison of six Western countries. *European Sociological Review*, 18(3), 315–331.
- Kahn, W. A. (1990). Psychological conditions of personal engagement and disengagement at work. *Academy of Management Journal*, 33(4), 692–724.
- Kelley, M. R. (1989). Alternative forms of work organization under programmable automation. In S. Wood (Ed.), *The transformation of work?* Unwin Hyman Ltd.
- Kerr, C., Dunlop, J. T., Harbison, F., & Myers, C. A. (1960). *Industrialism and industrial man*. Harvard University Press.

- Leiter, M. P., Harvie, P., & Frizzel, C. (1998). The correspondence of patient satisfaction and nurse burnout. *Social Science and Medicine*, 47, 1611–1617.
- Lepisto, D. A., & Pratt, M. G. (2017). Meaningful work as realization and justification: Toward a dual conceptualization. *Organizational Psychology Review*, 7(2), 99–121.
- Martin, J., & Roberts, C. (1984). *Women and employment: A lifetime perspective*. HMSO.
- Marx, K. (1973). *Economic and philosophic manuscripts of 1844*. Lawrence and Wishart.
- Marx, K. (2004). *Capital a critique of political economy volume one (1867)*. Ebook, Penguin Classics.
- Michaelson, C. (2005). Meaningful motivation for work motivation theory. *Academy of Management Review*, 30(2), 235–238.
- MOW. (1987). *International research team. The meaning of working*. Academic Press.
- Nembhard, I. M., & Edmondson, A. C. (2006). Making it safe: The effects of leader inclusiveness and professional status on psychological safety and improvement efforts in health care teams. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 27(7), 941–966.
- Nikolova, M., & Cnossen, F. (2020). What makes work meaningful and why economists should care about it. *Labour Economics*, 65, 101847.
- Nikolova, M., Cnossen, F., & Nikolaev, B. (2024). Robots, meaning, and self-determination. *Research Policy*, 53(5), 104987.
- Norris-Green, M., & Wheatley, D. (2022). *CIPD good work index 2022*. Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.
- Olsen, K. M., Kalleberg, A. L., & Nesheim, T. (2010). Perceived job quality in the United States, Great Britain, Norway and West Germany, 1989-2005. *European Journal of Industrial Relations*, 16(3), 221–240.
- Parker, S. K., & Grote, G. (2022). Automation, algorithms, and beyond: Why work design matters more than ever in a digital world. *Applied Psychology*, 71(4), 1171–1204.
- Piccolo, R. F., & Colquitt, J. A. (2006). Transformational leadership and job behaviors: The mediating role of core job characteristics. *Academy of Management Journal*, 49, 327–340.
- Piore, M. J., & Sabel, C. F. (1984). *The second industrial divide—Possibilities for prosperity*. Basic Books.
- Podolny, J. M., Khurana, R., & Hill-Popper, M. (2004). Revisiting the meaning of leadership. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 26, 1–36.
- Pratt, M. G., & Ashforth, B. E. (2003). Fostering meaningfulness in working and at work. In K. Cameron & J. Dutton (Eds.), *Positive organizational scholarship: Foundations of a new discipline* (pp. 309–327). Berrett-Koehler.
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and Well-being. *American Psychologist*, 55(1), 68.
- Saks, A. M. (2006). Antecedents and consequences of employee engagement. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 21(7), 600–619.
- Schaufeli, W. (2021). Engaging leadership: How to promote work engagement? *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 754556.
- Scott, H., Zickar, M. J., & Maya, Y. (2010). Would you work if you won the lottery? Tracking changes in the American work ethic. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 95(2), 349–357.
- Sloane, P. J., & Williams, H. (2000). Job satisfaction, comparison earnings, and gender. *Labour*, 14(3), 473–502.
- Soffia, M., Leiva-Granados, R., Zhou, X., & Skordis, J. (2024a). *Does technology use impact UK workers' quality of life? A report on worker wellbeing*. Institute for the Future of Work.
- Soffia, M., Leiva-Granados, R., Zhou, X., & Skordis, J. (2024b). *From technology exposure to job quality: Evidence from a comprehensive UK survey*. Institute for the Future of Work.
- Sousa-Poza, A., & Sousa-Poza, A. A. (2003). Gender differences in job satisfaction in Great Britain, 1991–2000: Permanent or transitory? *Applied Economics Letters*, 10(11), 691–694.
- Steger, M. F., Dik, B. J., & Duffy, R. D. (2012). Measuring meaningful work: The work and meaning inventory (WAMI). *Journal of Career Assessment*, 20, 322–337.

- Steger, M. F., Littman-Ovadia, H., Miller, M., Menger, L., & Rothmann, S. (2013). Engaging in work even when it is meaningless: Positive affective disposition and meaningful work interact in relation to work engagement. *Journal of Career Assessment*, 21(2), 348–361.
- Suleyman, M. (2023). *The coming wave: Technology, power, and the twenty-first century's greatest dilemma*. Crown.
- Taylor, R. (1984). *Good and evil*. Prometheus Books.
- Trittin-Ulbrich, H., & Glozer, S. (2024). Knowyourworth: How influencers commercialise meaningful work. *Human Relations*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00187267231220260>
- Williams, M., Gifford, J., & Zhou, Y. (2022). Social stratification in meaningful work: Occupational class disparities in the United Kingdom. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 73(3), 536–553.
- Williamson, J. C., & Geldenhuys, M. (2014). Positive work experiences and life satisfaction: The moderating role of gender. *Journal of Psychology in Africa*, 24, 315–320.
- Wolf, S. (2010). *Meaning in life and why it matters*. Princeton University Press.
- Wood, S., & Kelly, J. (1982). Taylorism, responsible autonomy and management. In S. Wood (Ed.), *The degradation of work?* Hutchinson.
- Wright Mills, C. (1951). *White collar. The American middle classes*. Oxford University Press.
- Wrzesniewski, A., Dutton, J. E., & Debebe, G. (2003). Interpersonal sensemaking and the meaning of work. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 25, 93–135.
- Zhou, Y., Davies, R., Felstead, A., Gallie, D., Green, F., & Henseke, G. (2025). *What makes work meaningful? Findings from the skills and employment survey 2024*. Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research and Data, Cardiff University.
- Zou, M. (2015). Gender, work orientations and job satisfaction. *Work, Employment and Society*, 29(1), 3–22.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if you modified the licensed material. You do not have permission under this license to share adapted material derived from this chapter or parts of it.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.



Workers' Proactive Pursuit of Meaning: The Role of Needs-Based Crafting



Martin Tušl , Miika Kujanpää , Merly Kosenkranius ,
and Jessica De Bloom 

Abstract Meaningful work, whether experienced individually or as a characteristic of the job, is often actively shaped by workers. This chapter explores how workers proactively shape meaningful experiences through needs-based crafting—the proactive adjustments of work and nonwork activities aimed at satisfying fundamental psychological needs. We revisit key theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence linking needs-based crafting to experiences of meaningful work and life. We include a section on intervention studies that illustrates how crafting efforts can be fostered through reflective practices and organizational initiatives. The chapter concludes with practical recommendations and discusses key challenges and opportunities for future research, including measurement issues, individual differences, technological advancements, and contextual constraints.

Keywords Meaningful work · Needs-based crafting · Psychological needs

Ultimately, man should not ask what the meaning of his life is but rather must recognize that it is he who is asked. (Frankl, 1984, p. 131)

The quest for a meaningful life is a fundamental human pursuit, deeply rooted in psychological, philosophical, and sociological thought. Viktor Frankl (1984), a

M. Tušl (✉)

Public and Organizational Health, Center of Salutogenesis, Epidemiology, Biostatistics and Prevention Institute, University of Zurich, Zurich, Switzerland
e-mail: martin.tusl@uzh.ch

M. Kujanpää

University of South-Eastern Norway, School of Business, Hønefoss, Norway
e-mail: miika.kujanpaa@usn.no

M. Kosenkranius

HAMK Edu Research Unit, Häme University of Applied Sciences, Hämeenlinna, Finland
e-mail: merly.kosenkranius@hamk.fi

J. De Bloom

Faculty of Business and Economics, HRM&OB, Nettelbosje, University of Groningen, Groningen, Netherlands
e-mail: j.de.bloom@rug.nl

© The Author(s) 2026

M. Nikolova (ed.), *Work Meaning and Motivation*, Economic Studies in Inequality, Social Exclusion and Well-Being,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-23826-9_3

psychologist, neurologist, philosopher, and Holocaust survivor, argued that the search for meaning constitutes the primary motivation in human life, shaping how individuals navigate challenges and define their existence. Psychological research indeed supports this idea, showing that having a sense of meaning in life is linked to greater well-being, resilience, and overall life satisfaction (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002; Lysova et al., 2019; Steger, 2009). Existential philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre emphasized that meaning in life is a deeply subjective experience that must be self-constructed. According to this view, leading a meaningful life is an inherently personal endeavor that requires active engagement in meaning-making. Therefore, meaning is not simply discovered, it is actively constructed through reflection, choices, and the pursuit of activities that align with one's needs, values, and aspirations (Ryff & Singer, 1998).

Work is a key life domain where people seek and create meaning. Beyond a means of livelihood, work serves as a source of purpose, identity, and fulfillment. Perceiving one's work as meaningful is linked to positive outcomes such as increased well-being, resilience, motivation, and reduced risk of burnout (Allan et al., 2019; Bailey et al., 2019; Hu & Hirsh, 2017; Shanafelt et al., 2009; Wrzesniewski et al., 2003). Foundational models in work psychology, such as the Job Characteristics Model (Hackman & Oldham, 1974), suggest that specific job characteristics such as task significance help workers perceive their work as meaningful. This perception, in turn, enhances work motivation and job performance, boosts job satisfaction, and reduces absenteeism and turnover rates (for a review, see, for example, Fried & Ferris, 1987). However, experiencing work as meaningful is not merely a result of job characteristics outside the individual but a dynamic process of meaning-making, where individuals proactively shape their roles and work environments (Rantanen et al., 2021). Accordingly, meaningful work emerges as an interaction between factors outside the individual (e.g., job characteristics, the physical and social environment) and inside the individual (e.g., sensemaking and creating meaning from experiences). The active pursuit of meaning at work has become central in occupational psychology, with scholars exploring strategies to help individuals shape their work in ways that align with their needs, values and that foster meaningful experiences.

Job crafting is an example of one such strategy. Introduced by Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001), job crafting describes workers' proactive efforts to adjust their work tasks, relationships, or how they think about their work to better align with their personal needs, values, and preferences. The idea of job crafting is rooted in the view of humans as purposeful actors who self-regulate, anticipate, and shape their environments, rather than responding to them in a purely reactive manner. Since the introduction of the concept, crafting research has expanded beyond the workplace to include leisure, domestic, and caregiving activities, highlighting the interconnected nature of work and nonwork life domains (e.g., De Bloom et al., 2020; Petrou & Bakker, 2016).

Recent theoretical developments emphasize that crafting is fundamentally motivated by the desire to satisfy core psychological needs (e.g., De Bloom et al., 2020; Napier et al., 2024; Olafsen et al., 2025). Psychological needs are intrinsic motivators that drive human behavior and unify individual motives across life domains

(Sheldon, 2011; see Table 1 for a definition and examples of prominent psychological need theories). The theoretical conceptualization of crafting based on psychological needs is referred to as *needs-based crafting*, defined as the intentional behavioral or cognitive changes individuals make to fulfill their psychological needs (De Bloom et al., 2020). Crafting efforts can occur across multiple life domains, roles, and identities, reflecting a dynamic, self-directed process (De Bloom et al., 2020; Kujanpää et al., 2022; Tušl et al., 2024). Contemporary theories of human motivation such as the Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000, Table 1) support this notion by describing individuals as autonomous agents who seek meaning through purposeful efforts (i.e., behaviors and cognitions) that contribute to the satisfaction of basic psychological needs. According to this framework, autonomy, competence, and relatedness are three fundamental psychological needs that drive intrinsic motivation and personal growth. Meaningful work is often closely tied to these needs, as individuals feel a greater sense of meaning when they exercise control over their work (autonomy), develop and apply their skills (competence), and experience connection with others (relatedness). The link between basic psychological needs and meaningful work has also been demonstrated empirically across different cultural contexts (e.g., Martela & Riekkari, 2018; Nikolova & Cnossen, 2020).

The growing research emphasis in job crafting research on psychological needs indicates a general shift toward a more holistic understanding of individual proactivity, not limited to a single life context (De Bloom et al., 2020; Napier et al., 2024). Needs-based crafting reflects that well-being is shaped by the interplay of work and nonwork factors and highlights the role of self-initiated efforts to address unmet psychological needs. For example, modifying work tasks to reflect personal strengths can foster purpose and self-efficacy, while crafting leisure activities to cultivate social connections triggers feelings of belongingness which promote positive emotions and overall well-being (Kerksieck et al., 2019; Kujanpää & Olafsen 2024; Silapurem et al., 2024). In the following section, we outline the theoretical foundations of needs-based crafting and its role in shaping meaningful work/life experiences.

Needs-Based Crafting as a Pathway to Meaning: Theoretical Foundations

The Identity-Based Integrative Needs Model of Crafting (INMC) (De Bloom et al., 2020) outlines a comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding crafting efforts across life domains by centering on the satisfaction of psychological needs. When individuals craft their roles (e.g., work and family roles) to meet their psychological needs, they promote a sense of meaning in their lives. The INMC broadens traditional, work-centric frameworks of job crafting by integrating crafting efforts across various identity domains and roles, such as work, family, leisure, and community roles.

Table 1 Conceptualization of psychological needs across different theoretical frameworks

Framework	Conceptualization of needs	Needs	References
Maslow's hierarchy of needs	Emotional and mental requirements for healthy personal development organized in a hierarchical structure	• Physiological/survival • Safety • Love/belonging • Esteem • Self-actualization	Maslow (1943)
Three-factor theory	Underlying drives that motivate individuals' behaviors and decision-making; considered learned and developed through experiences, rather than biologically ingrained	• Need for achievement • Affiliation • Power	McClelland (1961)
ERG theory	Extension and refinement of Maslow's hierarchy of needs; not assuming that needs must be satisfied in certain order	• Existence • Relatedness • Growth	Alderfer (1969)
Reversal theory	Motivational states that people regularly switch ("reverse") between, depending on their experiences and their context.	• Seriousness vs. playfulness • Conformity vs. rebelliousness • Mastery vs. sympathy • Ownership vs. sharing	Apter (1982)
Self-determination theory	Nutrients for experiencing personal growth and intrinsic motivation	• Autonomy • Relatedness • Competence	Ryan and Deci (2000)
PERMA model	Core elements essential for human flourishing	• Positive emotions • Engagement • Relationships • Meaning • Accomplishments	Seligman (2011)
Recovery experiences	Experiences supporting recovery after experiencing stress and strain at work	• Detachment • Relaxation • Mastery • Control	Sonnentag and Fritz (2007)
DRAMMA needs	Psychological mechanisms that connect (leisure) activities to subjective well-being	• Detachment • Relaxation • Autonomy • Mastery • Meaning • Affiliation	Newman et al. (2014)

Drawing from the two-process model of psychological needs (Sheldon, 2011), the INMC explains crafting through the dual function of psychological needs as both motivators and rewards (see Fig. 1). Perceived needs discrepancies, when psychological needs are unmet, initiate crafting efforts, motivating individuals to engage in purposeful actions that activate available resources in different roles and

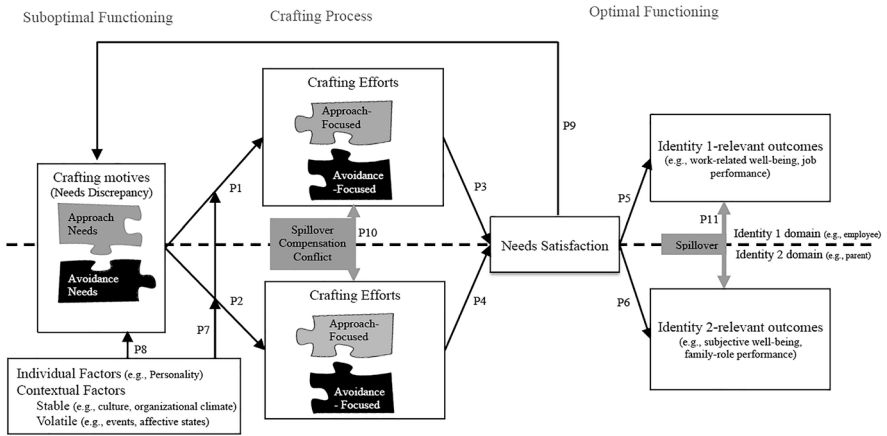


Fig. 1 Integrative needs model of crafting, reprinted from the Journal of Applied Psychology (De Bloom et al., 2020). Reproduced with permission from American Psychological Association. No further reproduction or distribution is permitted

identities. Conversely, needs satisfaction serves as the reward for successful crafting efforts, reinforcing continued crafting (De Bloom et al., 2020). As Fig. 1 illustrates, crafting thus constitutes a dynamic process where individuals assess and address their needs via crafting efforts within and across life domains.

The INMC organizes psychological needs along an approach–avoidance continuum (Green et al., 2017), which shapes the nature of crafting efforts. Approach-oriented needs focus on achieving positive states, fostering growth, and creating resources, such as forming social bonds or acquiring new skills. Avoidance-oriented needs emphasize mitigating negative states, such as reducing stress or minimizing sensory overload. These orientations guide crafting efforts, with approach-oriented efforts enhancing desirable aspects of roles and avoidance-oriented efforts reducing undesirable elements to satisfy psychological needs (De Bloom et al., 2020).

By placing psychological needs at the center, the INMC offers a holistic view on people’s crafting efforts across life domains. For example, the need for relatedness might be met by organizing a family gathering, or by participating in a workplace social event. In addition, identical crafting efforts may serve different purposes for different individuals or situations. For instance, one person might take on a new project to fulfill their need for competence through skill development, while another might pursue the same activity to strengthen social bonds and meet their need for relatedness. Consequently, the INMC provides a comprehensive and flexible framework for understanding crafting as a pathway to meaningful experiences. It highlights the interplay among role identities (e.g., employee, parent, volunteer), psychological needs, and interactions between work and nonwork domains.

The conceptual ideas of the INMC model have been further developed into quantitative questionnaires of needs-based job and off-job crafting (Kujanpää et al., 2022; Tušl et al., 2024). These quantitative measures are based on the so-called

DRAMMA needs (i.e., detachment, relaxation, autonomy, meaning, mastery, affiliation; Newman et al., 2014; Table 1). To holistically consider both approach and avoidance needs, DRAMMA needs extend the set defined by the Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) by adding psychological detachment and relaxation as avoidance needs and the need for meaning as an additional approach need (Newman et al., 2014). Prior quantitative and qualitative studies have provided support for the importance of DRAMMA needs, including meaning, as antecedents to employee well-being (Kujanpää et al., 2021; Loveday et al., 2018; Virtanen et al., 2020). Unlike earlier models that acknowledged meaning as a crafting outcome (e.g., Tims et al., 2016), the needs-based crafting scales explicitly identify “crafting for meaning” as a core crafting strategy, with the need for meaning as a direct key target of crafting efforts.

Individuals do not derive meaning from a single aspect of life, but rather from their various roles and experiences in different life domains. Through needs-based crafting, individuals shape their roles in ways that are experienced as meaningful rather than merely instrumental, thereby enhancing life satisfaction and engagement across both work and nonwork contexts (De Bloom et al., 2020). This ongoing process also allows individuals to continuously redefine and refine what gives their lives meaning and actively strive for personal and professional development (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Accordingly, needs-based crafting offers a flexible and holistic lens for understanding how people actively construct meaning by addressing psychological needs across various domains of life.

Needs-Based Crafting and the Mechanisms of Meaning

In a theoretical review on the meaning of work, Rosso et al. (2010) describe several mechanisms through which workers experience meaning: *authenticity, self-efficacy, self-esteem, purpose, belongingness, transcendence, cultural and interpersonal sense-making*. In this section, we illustrate how individuals can activate these mechanisms through needs-based crafting to enhance meaningful experiences in both work and nonwork contexts.

Authenticity refers to a sense of coherence between one’s actions and one’s true self (Markus, 1977). Authenticity enhances meaningfulness through self-concordant experiences where individuals feel that their activities are aligned with their values and interests (Sheldon & Elliott, 1998). Authentic experiences strengthen intrinsic motivation, making activities feel more fulfilling and energizing (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Deci & Ryan, 1985). In the work context, authenticity can be crafted when workers actively express their core values through their job roles and tasks. For instance, a social worker who values compassion and social justice may find authenticity in advocating for marginalized communities. Similarly, an engineer who is passionate about sustainability may experience work as more meaningful when developing eco-friendly solutions. Organizations that allow workers to personalize their job roles, provide autonomy, and encourage self-expression create conditions

that support authenticity at work. Authenticity also plays an important role in meaningful nonwork experiences. People feel authentic when they engage in activities that resonate with their true interests and values. For example, an individual who values artistic expression may find fulfillment in painting, writing, or playing music during leisure time, while someone who prioritizes adventure and challenge may feel most authentic when engaging in outdoor activities or endurance sports. Individuals can also enhance their sense of authenticity by reflecting on how their daily activities align with their core values and adjusting them to better integrate their true interests into their daily routines.

Self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in their capacity to successfully perform actions required to achieve desired outcomes (Bandura, 1989). Self-efficacy contributes to meaningfulness by allowing individuals to feel capable of shaping their work and nonwork activities according to their needs. When people develop and apply their skills effectively, they experience a sense of mastery and competence, which reinforces their belief in their ability to influence outcomes (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In the work context, self-efficacy enhances meaningfulness by enabling workers to take ownership of their job tasks and make impactful contributions to the organization. For instance, a project manager who successfully leads a team through a complex challenge gains confidence in their leadership abilities and thus develops self-efficacy. Similarly, a junior worker who learns a new technical skill and applies it to improve workflow feels a sense of achievement and competence. Work environments that provide opportunities for skill development, autonomy in decision-making, and constructive feedback empower workers to strengthen their self-efficacy, making their work feel more meaningful. In the nonwork context, needs-based crafting includes engaging in activities that require learning, skill development, and long-term commitment such as mastering a musical instrument, training for a sports event, or acquiring a new language (Kujanpää & Olafsen, 2024b). Additionally, experiences of making an impact in one's community contribute to self-efficacy. For example, volunteering in a non-profit organization, engaging in a local environmental initiative, or coaching a successful youth sports team can reinforce self-efficacy. Whether in work or nonwork contexts, self-efficacy strengthens motivation, fosters resilience, and deepens the sense of meaning individuals derive from their actions.

Self-esteem fosters meaningfulness by affirming one's value as a person (Baumeister, 1998). In both work and nonwork contexts, self-esteem is strengthened when individuals experience personal accomplishments, successfully overcome challenges, or feel a sense of belonging within a group they identify with. For example, people may craft their self-esteem at work by taking on responsibilities such as mentoring a junior colleague or leading collaborative projects. Leaders play a crucial role in fostering workers' self-esteem by providing individualized feedback and recognizing their individual contributions. In the nonwork context, individuals can craft through active participation and contributions to social groups and communities. Engaging in activities such as sports clubs or amateur theater provides individuals with opportunities to develop a sense of belonging, competence, and recognition, which reinforce self-esteem and perceived meaningfulness.

Purpose refers to having a long-term, overarching goal or direction that gives life a sense of intentionality and forward movement by linking present actions to future goals and fulfillment (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002). In the work context, purpose contributes to meaningful experiences when individuals perceive their tasks as important to themselves, their organization, or society at large (Grant, 2008). For example, healthcare professionals may find purpose in improving patients' well-being, educators in shaping future generations, and sustainability consultants in driving environmental change. Additionally, workers can enhance their sense of purpose by actively aligning their work with personal values, such as prioritizing tasks that contribute to social good or pursuing creative projects. Supporting this, a recent intervention study "Discover Your Purpose" found that helping employees reflect on how their work connects to their personal purpose led to a clearer understanding of alignment or lack thereof (Ashraf et al., 2025). Some participants realized their current roles no longer matched their aspirations and chose to leave, while others deepened their engagement, improving their performance and job satisfaction. The company also benefited, as a cost-benefit analysis revealed shared value between employer and employees. In the nonwork context, purpose is experienced through activities that align with personal values and long-term aspirations. Volunteering for a good cause, such as tutoring students, organizing community events, or advocating for social issues fosters a sense of contribution and impact. Hobbies that involve skill development and long-term commitment, such as training for a marathon, composing music, or developing a craft, also provide a sense of purpose by providing clear goals, personal development, and growth.

Belongingness is a key mechanism in the construction of meaningful experiences, as it fulfills the fundamental human need to form and maintain lasting, positive relationships. It highlights the powerful role of social bonds in shaping the experience of meaning in different contexts (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). In the work context, individuals derive meaning through social identification, where membership in workplace groups fosters a sense of shared identity and beliefs, making workers feel like they are part of something valuable. Additionally, interpersonal connectedness plays a crucial role, as close relationships at work provide emotional support and a sense of cohesion. Needs-based crafting could entail participating in team-building activities, engaging in mentorship programs, or contributing to collaborative projects that encourage open dialog and knowledge-sharing. In the non-work context, belonging can be fostered through close relationships, social groups and communities where individuals feel accepted and valued. Needs-based crafting may involve nurturing close personal relationships, such as spending quality time with family members or maintaining meaningful friendships, which often serve as the most fundamental sources of emotional support and connection. Additionally, joining a sports team, a music ensemble, or a cultural organization can provide opportunities to engage with like-minded individuals and build lasting relationships. For instance, amateur cyclists who train together for endurance races or musicians who perform in a local band may develop a strong sense of belonging through shared dedication and mutual encouragement. Across these various relationships, from intimate to communal, individuals experience a sense of shared identity and mutual

support that reinforces their overall sense of belonging and contributes to meaning in life.

Transcendence focuses on the connection to something greater than the self. Unlike the previous mechanisms that explain meaning through self-connection, transcendence suggests that individuals experience meaning when they can set aside themselves in favor of other groups, experiences, or causes (Frankl, 1984). In the work context, transcendence can manifest where individuals perceive their actions as part of an interconnected system that contributes to a broader societal or global impact. For example, medical researchers working on life-saving treatments, humanitarian aid workers responding to crises, or engineers developing sustainable technologies may find meaning in knowing that they are part of a system that is greater than themselves and cannot exist without their efforts. On a smaller scale, cleaning personnel in hospitals or schools might find meaning in providing clean, safe, and pleasant spaces for doctors, patients, educators or children. And even when a person finds their job tasks not meaningful at the task level, they may find meaning by thinking about the contribution of their job (and salary) for their children's education. In the nonwork context, engaging with nature activities such as hiking in remote landscapes, ocean diving or mountaineering often evokes a sense of humility and connection with nature that transcends the individual (e.g., Bai et al., 2021). Creative activities, such as composing music, painting, or writing, allow individuals to contribute to a broader artistic and cultural legacy. Additionally, engagement in cultural traditions, rituals, spiritual or meditative practices can offer moments of transcendence by connecting individuals to broader cultural and spiritual values.

Cultural and interpersonal sensemaking refers to what is considered legitimate or important and how meaning is constructed in a particular sociocultural context (Wrzesniewski et al., 2003). In the work context, workers interpret their roles differently based on the cultural and organizational environment. For example, in a fast-paced tech company that prioritizes innovation, a software engineer may find meaning in developing cutting-edge technology and driving rapid change. In contrast, in a traditional family-owned business that values craftsmanship, an artisan may derive meaning from perfecting their skills and preserving long-standing practices and traditions. Interpersonal sensemaking is also key in how individuals experience and craft for meaning. Workers derive meaning from social interactions with colleagues, managers, and clients. For instance, a teacher who receives positive feedback from students and parents may easily interpret their role as highly impactful, which reinforces their sense of meaning and future proactivity. Conversely, a worker who faces workplace exclusion or undermining leadership may struggle to find and actively seek meaning in their work, even if their tasks can be considered meaningful. In nonwork contexts, culture influences the meaning placed on family, community, or personal achievements. For example, in highly individualistic cultures, meaning may be closely tied to career, personal hobbies, self-development, or self-expression. In collectivist societies that emphasize family and community engagement, individuals may craft for meaning by volunteering

for community initiatives or participating in community traditions. Similarly, interpersonal relationships shape nonwork meaning through shared experiences.

In Box 1, we provide a list of examples of how needs-based crafting can promote meaningful experiences in work and nonwork through the seven meaning-making mechanisms (Rosso et al., 2010).

Box 1 Needs-Based Crafting in the Work and Nonwork Contexts

- Align tasks with personal values, interests, and strengths (e.g., advocating for social causes, designing sustainable solutions).
- Seek autonomy, mastery, and skill development (e.g., learning new skills and competencies, taking ownership of projects).
- Make impactful contributions (e.g., mentoring colleagues, leading personally meaningful initiatives).
- Foster supportive relationships (e.g., participating in team activities, engaging in knowledge-sharing).
- Connect work to a broader purpose (e.g., contributing to societal progress, passing on knowledge).
- Adapt roles within sociocultural and organizational contexts (e.g., emphasizing innovation in tech vs. craftsmanship in artisanal work).

Needs-Based Crafting in the Nonwork Context

- Engage in personal growth through hobbies (e.g., creative arts, endurance sports, skill-based activities).
- Contribute to communities (e.g., volunteering, coaching, organizing social initiatives).
- Strengthen social bonds (e.g., joining clubs, maintaining and nurturing close friendships, participating in community initiatives and cultural traditions).
- Seek transcendence (e.g., connecting with nature, spiritual practices, artistic expression).
- Shape meaning through sociocultural influences (e.g., individual achievements vs. community engagement, shaping interpersonal relationships).

Empirical Insights Into Needs-Based Crafting

Empirical research on crafting typically relies on self-report questionnaires, often administered repeatedly to the same individuals over varying time frames (e.g., hours, days, months, or years). This approach enables researchers to examine how within and between-person variation in crafting relate to changes in outcomes such as well-being and motivation. To date, most empirical research on job crafting is based on the Job Demands-Resources model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017), which provides strong evidence for the benefits of job crafting for employee motivation and performance (see Tims et al., 2022 for an overview). Research using the

needs-based crafting framework (Kujanpää et al., 2022; Tušl et al., 2024) has offered new insights into how proactively satisfying psychological needs across life domains benefits various well-being outcomes. Given the novelty of this conceptualization, empirical studies on needs-based job crafting are still relatively limited. However, a pioneering study that validated a quantitative measure of needs-based job crafting showed that workers who actively align their work with their psychological needs show increased motivation, better recovery from work-related stress, and fewer burnout complaints. Notably, job crafting specifically aimed at enhancing meaning emerged as particularly important for fostering work engagement, job satisfaction, and overall resilience (Tušl et al., 2024).

A growing body of evidence also highlights the importance of crafting in the nonwork domain. Off-job roles, such as being a parent, musician, or active community member, offer individuals opportunities to engage in purposeful and autonomous activities that support optimal functioning. Accordingly, needs-based off-job crafting has been shown to contribute positively to life satisfaction and performance in family roles (Kujanpää et al., 2022). It also predicts subjective workability (i.e., one's perceived ability to meet job demands) above and beyond job crafting, underscoring the role of off-job life in sustaining long-term occupational health.

Off-job crafting supports recovery from work with evidence from both longitudinal and daily study designs which showed its positive impact on occupational well-being. For example, a longitudinal study conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic found that workers' off-job crafting was negatively related to burnout complaints (Pijpker et al., 2022). When combined with job crafting efforts focused on adjusting job demands and resources, needs-based off-job crafting further predicted an increase in mental well-being and work engagement over time (Ho et al., 2024). Diary and ecological momentary assessment studies provide further support. On days when workers more actively crafted both their job and off-job time, they reported higher energy levels compared to days with less crafting (Kosenkranius et al., 2023). Additionally, needs-based off-job crafting has been shown to enhance daily affective well-being and reduce stress by improving recovery experiences (Kujanpää & Olafsen, 2024a).

A cross-cultural study contrasting the longitudinal development in needs-based crafting across Finnish and Japanese workers found that when needs-based crafting increased over time, experiences of subjective vitality also increased in both countries (Kujanpää et al., 2021). Interestingly, older workers in Finland and younger workers in Japan were more likely to engage in crafting for meaning, highlighting that cultural and demographic factors may influence how individuals pursue psychological need satisfaction. Finally, beyond short-term benefits, off-job crafting is also positively linked to the personal resource of sense of coherence—the perception of life as comprehensible, manageable, and meaningful (Antonovsky, 1996). Individuals with a stronger sense of coherence tend to engage more frequently in needs-based off-job crafting, which in turn benefits their well-being (Tušl et al., 2022).

Intervention Studies Aiming to Increase Workers' Crafting Efforts

Crafting interventions can support workers' well-being by increasing their awareness of personal needs and preferences, and by helping them to proactively shape work and nonwork activities in meaningful ways. A central element in such interventions is the formulation of a personally meaningful crafting goal to work toward during the intervention period (e.g., Kosenkranius et al., 2023; van den Heuvel et al., 2015; Van Wingerden et al., 2017). This goal-setting process encourages individuals to analyze their daily routines both at work and/or in private life, through the lens of personal values, needs, and interests. Striving toward these goals may help individuals' experience greater meaning in everyday activities and contribute to their general and work-related well-being (Wrzesniewski et al., 2013).

Most crafting intervention studies employ a quasi-experimental design with a (waitlist) control group to evaluate effectiveness. Overall, research has shown that job crafting interventions can lead to increased well-being and job performance (for an overview, see Oprea et al., 2019). For example, interventions that teach workers how to proactively adjust their job demands and resources have been found to increase participants' crafting efforts, psychological need satisfaction, and work engagement (Gordon et al., 2018; Van Wingerden et al., 2017). More recently, Kuijpers et al. (2020) developed a job crafting intervention focusing on enhancing personal resources. The intervention led to increased crafting behavior, which in turn predicted higher levels of work engagement, particularly among employees experiencing high workload.

By crafting their work environment, workers may experience greater intrinsic motivation, enjoyment, and a stronger sense of meaningfulness in their roles. For example, Laporte et al. (2022) evaluated an online needs-based crafting intervention conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic among 725 Belgian adults (both working and non-working). Their findings showed that more engaged participants reported higher levels of needs-based crafting, greater psychological need satisfaction, and improved well-being compared to less active participants. These findings highlight the importance of understanding not only whether crafting interventions work, but also for whom they are most effective.

Intervention research also points to potential benefits for performance. Ashraf et al. (2025) found that crafting interventions contributed to performance improvement in two ways: lower-performing employees either left the organization or enhanced their performance in their existing roles. This dual mechanism yielded measurable returns for both the organization and its employees. More recent studies suggest that collaborative or team-based crafting interventions may offer additional and lasting benefits. De Jong et al. (2025) found that teams trained to engage in joint crafting efforts showed increases in team performance, both in the short and long terms. These findings point to the potential of crafting interventions not only at the individual level but also as a collective practice. Finally, Fletcher and Schofield (2021) showed that an organizational-level intervention aimed at increasing

meaningfulness led to higher perceived meaningfulness among participants. Participants also reported greater personal initiative over time, suggesting that such interventions may promote proactive behavior beyond the initial intervention period.

In sum, crafting interventions, particularly those designed to enhance perceived meaningfulness, is promising for promoting well-being and performance. However, their success depends on multiple contextual and implementation factors, including participant engagement, sustained motivation, and, most importantly, organizational support.

Practical Implications

This section provides practical guidance for organizations, HR professionals, leaders, and individuals on how to support needs-based crafting and foster meaningful (working) lives. We focus on how leadership, job design, and team dynamics can enable alignment between people's roles and their personal values and strengths. We also discuss the importance of considering cultural and demographic differences in shaping HR policies, and we explore how societal factors like work-life balance, volunteering, and family support can contribute to personal fulfillment. Lastly, we offer guidance on how individuals can identify and engage in meaningful activities for personal growth.

Organizations play a central role in enabling needs-based job crafting by designing HR policies that support autonomy and meaningful work. Autonomy-supportive leadership, flexible job design, and team processes are especially important. Leaders who offer direction while allowing individuals to shape their roles help employees align their tasks with personal needs, values, and strengths (Kim & Beehr, 2018). Encouraging managers to support job crafting, rather than enforcing rigid structures, fosters intrinsic motivation and ownership (Wang et al., 2016; Wu & Parker, 2017).

It is essential to recognize that crafting needs and the way workers construct meaning in their work and personal lives differ across individuals and groups. Needs-based crafting may be particularly valuable for minority groups, as it allows for authentic expression of social and cultural identities in work and nonwork roles. Diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts should integrate a needs-based perspective, acknowledging that meaningful experiences and crafting strategies vary. A key ingredient is engaging in dialog with employees about what matters to them and adapting HR policies accordingly to create inclusive and fulfilling workplaces. This can also entail accepting that work is merely one aspect of life and other life domains also require and demand workers' attention and time. Organizations might consider supporting nonwork activities, such as offering vouchers for sports or cultural engagement, to expand opportunities for crafting off-job time.

At the team-level, safe work environments where employees can share ideas and try new approaches can promote needs-based job crafting (Hu et al., 2022). When team members recognize each other's strengths, provide constructive feedback and

feel that they can express ideas and explore new approaches without fear of judgment, they contribute to a culture where workers feel competent and motivated to shape their roles according to their needs. Regular feedback loops, whether formal or informal, help individuals refine their job crafting while staying aligned with team needs and goals. Early research on team-level job crafting interventions shows promising results, with sustained improvements in team performance observed 6 months to 1 year post-intervention (De Jong et al., 2025).

Flexible job design is another key element in offering workers opportunities to engage in needs-based job crafting and creating meaningful work. Allowing employees to adjust workloads, schedules, or responsibilities to better fit their personal lives creates space for crafting. In digital work environments, aligning job design with sociotechnical and human-centered principles is particularly important to ensure that technology enhances, rather than undermines, meaningful work (Parker & Grote, 2022). Coaching and development programs can also help employees, especially those early in their careers, learn how to craft their roles effectively.

At the societal level, policies that make room for a more harmonic balance between people's engagement in various life domains lay the basis for people to craft their time according to their needs and especially enhance meaning in their lives. Non-profit organizations have a unique opportunity to highlight that volunteering is not just about contributing to a greater cause but also about enhancing personal well-being. Engaging in volunteer work fulfills fundamental psychological needs by fostering a sense of purpose, building social connections, and providing opportunities for personal growth (Mojza et al., 2011; Rodell, 2013). By emphasizing these benefits, non-profits may attract and retain volunteers not only through the impact of their mission but also by showing how volunteering enriches individual lives. Similarly, family systems can foster personal growth, emotional connection, and support (e.g., Hwang et al., 2025), enabling individuals to shape their roles and engage in crafting that supports more meaningful leisure and family experiences.

For individuals, needs-based crafting begins with self-awareness. Understanding one's core psychological needs and the types of activities that fulfill them is the first step. As described in previous sections, people may find meaning in various ways such as creating art, building skills, or spending time with family, depending on their unique values and motivations. Freely available self-assessment tools such as the DRAMMA questionnaire (https://rug.eu.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_bJEhWv-VoohRUJtc) or the validated needs-based crafting scales (<https://osf.io/zsfyk>) can help identify meaningful crafting opportunities (Kujanpää et al., 2020, 2022; Tušl et al., 2024). As an inspiration, Alameer et al. (2023) provide an overview of leisure activities that support specific recovery experiences. Interventions focused on enhancing recovery (e.g., Hahn et al., 2011; Verbeek et al., 2019) offer additional guidance for implementing crafting strategies beyond work. For those looking for structured support, the training manual of an intervention on off-job crafting conducted in Finland is freely accessible online (<https://osf.io/p3ydn/>) and may serve as a valuable resource for developing personalized needs-based crafting efforts. The intervention's outcomes provide empirical support for its effectiveness and can help

guide the design of similar programs in other contexts (for results, see Kosenkranius et al., 2023).

Challenges and Future Research Directions

In this section, we outline several challenges in the study of needs-based crafting and provide suggestions for future research.

Needs-based crafting is a highly dynamic and fluid process, with no clearly defined start or endpoint. Although crafting is generally intentional, individuals may engage in it spontaneously in response to momentary awareness of unmet psychological needs without extensive planning. This fluidity makes it difficult to capture and evaluate the long-term effects of crafting on well-being. While recent research has employed more sophisticated methodologies, such as longitudinal designs and ecological momentary assessment (e.g., Ho et al., 2024; Kosenkranius et al., 2021; Morstatt et al., 2025; Tušl et al., 2022), most studies still focus on short-term outcomes, including job satisfaction, momentary energy, and affective states. More longitudinal research is needed to understand the sustained impact of crafting. For instance, it remains unclear what duration or intensity of crafting is required to produce meaningful experiences. Some studies demonstrate that crafting can positively influence well-being even within a single day (Kosenkranius et al., 2023), while others suggest that aligning one's life with personal values through crafting may take years (e.g., Clinton et al., 2025). The interplay between short-term crafting efforts and long-term outcomes remains largely unexplored. Here, measurement burst designs, which feature intensive, repeated assessments over short intervals (e.g., daily for several weeks) combined with longer-term follow-ups, could be particularly useful (Stawski et al., 2015).

A second challenge relates to the assumptions about rationality in needs-based crafting. The approach presumes that individuals consciously adapt their behaviors to meet intrinsic needs. Yet, human behavior is also shaped by emotional impulses, cognitive biases, social norms, and external environmental constraints. Employees may misjudge which activities fulfill their needs or make suboptimal crafting decisions under stress or time pressure. Organizational structures and policies may further restrict opportunities for rational decision-making, prompting reactive instead of proactive crafting. Moreover, while crafting is generally associated with positive outcomes, unsuccessful or energy-draining crafting attempts may have adverse effects on mental health over time. To address this complexity, the INMC (De Bloom et al., 2020), which positions psychological needs as both motives and outcomes of crafting, offers a helpful framework for further exploration.

Future research should also explore the relational and systemic consequences of crafting. For instance, job crafting by one employee may inadvertently increase the workload or alter the task composition of others (e.g., Sanz-Vergel et al., 2024; Tims et al., 2015). As such, it is important to move beyond the individual level and

examine the effects of crafting within teams, families, and broader social systems, including leaders, colleagues, clients, and patients.

Most existing research has focused on hedonic outcomes such as work engagement and positive affect and only to a small extent on its original foci of shaping work meaning, personal development and identity (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Consequently, there is a need to broaden our conceptualization of well-being by including eudaimonic factors, such as personal growth, authenticity, purpose, and meaning. Eudaimonic well-being offers a more comprehensive view of an individual's sense of fulfillment and life satisfaction. Such a shift would provide a more holistic view of how crafting contributes to making life feel worthwhile and meaningful, especially in the long term.

Cultural and occupational contexts represent another under-researched dimension of needs-based crafting (e.g., Kujanpää et al., 2021). Much of the literature to date is grounded in Western, individualistic cultures, limiting its generalizability to other cultures. In collectivist contexts, for example, the motivations, strategies, and social implications of crafting may differ substantially. Likewise, different professions and organizational structures create varying conditions for crafting. In small organizations with fluid roles, crafting may promote innovation and personal development. However, in larger, more structured organizations with rigid job descriptions and formalized workflows, crafting can introduce challenges, potentially disrupting established processes and requiring adjustments in coordination and accountability. In such settings, crafting opportunities must be carefully managed to balance individual flexibility with organizational coherence.

Technological advancements open new avenues for intervention development. Digital platforms, particularly those that leverage artificial intelligence and machine learning, could offer personalized feedback and support for crafting efforts. These tools might help individuals make better-informed adjustments to their work and nonwork lives based on real-time assessments of their psychological needs. However, more research is needed to assess the effectiveness and unintended consequences of such technological support. It should also be noted that stimulating natural needs-based crafting efforts remains a challenge (Kosenkranius et al., 2023). More work is required to understand how to effectively encourage individuals to craft.

Finally, although crafting research started as mostly qualitative work (Lazazzara et al., 2020; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001), the majority of studies in the field applied quantitative methods. There is a need for more qualitative and mixed-methods approaches to capture the nuances of crafting behaviors and experiences. Qualitative research can reveal personal motivations, contextual constraints, and emotional journeys underlying crafting decisions, while mixed-methods designs can triangulate these insights with statistical findings. For instance, findings from a study where 97 employees were asked to write down examples for each needs-based off-job crafting dimension revealed that political engagement and religious and spiritual activities are often used as avenues for crafting for meaning, despite the fact that these domains have rarely received attention in the context of crafting (Kujanpää et al., 2022).

Conclusion

Actively shaping one's work and nonwork life to fulfill core psychological needs is a dynamic and ongoing process that enhances meaning, well-being, and personal growth. Needs-based crafting allows individuals to take ownership of their experiences, leading not only to healthier, happier, and more engaged employees, but also to more adaptive and resilient organizations. As a holistic approach that bridges work and nonwork life domains, needs-based crafting has strong potential for fostering both individual flourishing and organizational success. Future research should provide a clearer understanding of its long-term effects, its role in supporting eudaimonic well-being, and how it unfolds across cultural and occupational contexts. Investigating the relational dynamics of crafting, the potential of digital support systems, and embracing more diverse methodologies will create more comprehensive and impactful evidence in this evolving field.

Acknowledgments We thank Dr. Luke Fletcher and Dr. Evgenia Lysova as well as the editor Dr. Milena Nikolova for their valuable feedback on earlier versions of this book chapter. During the work on the chapter, we have used ChatGPT (OpenAI, version 4) to improve the clarity and style of the text. We have reviewed, edited, and verified all AI-generated content and retain full responsibility for the final version of the manuscript.

References

- Alameer, K. M., Uitdewilligen, S., & Hulsheger, U. R. (2023). What are the active ingredients in recovery activities? Introducing a dimensional approach. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 28(4), 239–262. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ocp0000354>
- Alderfer, C. P. (1969). An empirical test of a new theory of human need. *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance*, 4(2), 142–175. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0030-5073\(69\)90004-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/0030-5073(69)90004-X)
- Allan, B. A., Batz-Barbarich, C., Sterling, H. M., & Tay, L. (2019). Outcomes of meaningful work: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Management Studies*, 56(3), 500–528. <https://doi.org/10.1111/joms.12406>
- Antonovsky, A. (1996). The salutogenic model as a theory to guide health promotion. *Health Promotion International*, 11(1), 11–18. <https://doi.org/10.1093/heapro/11.1.11>
- Apter, M. J. (1982). *The experience of motivation: The theory of psychological reversals*. Academic Press.
- Ashraf, N., Bandiera, O., Minni, V., & Zingales, L. (2025). 'DP20230 meaning at work'. In *CEPR discussion paper no. 20230*. CEPR Press. <https://cepr.org/publications/dp20230>
- Bakker, A. B., & Demerouti, E. (2017). Job demands–resources theory: Taking stock and looking forward. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 22(3), 273–285. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ocp0000056>
- Bai, Y., Ocampo, J., Jin, G., Chen, S., Benet-Martinez, V., Monroy, M., Anderson, C., & Keltner, D. (2021). Awe, daily stress, and elevated life satisfaction. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 120(4), 837–860. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspa0000267>
- Bailey, C., Yeoman, R., Madden, A., Thompson, M., & Kerridge, G. (2019). A review of the empirical literature on meaningful work: Progress and research agenda. *Human Resource Development Review*, 18(1), 83–113. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1534484318804653>

- Bandura, A. (1989). Human agency in social cognitive theory. *American Psychologist*, 44(9), 1175–1184. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.44.9.1175>
- Baumeister, R. F. (1998). The self. In D. T. Gilbert, S. T. Fiske, & G. Lindzey (Eds.), *The handbook of social psychology* (Vol. 1, 4th ed., pp. 680–740). McGraw-Hill.
- Baumeister, R. F., & Leary, M. R. (1995). The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. *Psychological Bulletin*, 117(3), 497–529. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.117.3.497>
- Baumeister, R. F., & Vohs, K. D. (2002). The pursuit of meaningfulness in life. In C. R. Snyder & S. J. Lopez (Eds.), *Handbook of positive psychology* (pp. 608–618). Oxford University Press.
- Clinton, M. E., Bindl, U. K., Frasca, K. J., & Martinescu, E. (2025). Once a job crafter, always a job crafter? Investigating job crafting in organizations as a reciprocal self-concordant process across time. *Human Relations*, 78(1), 91–119.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience*. Harper & Row.
- De Bloom, J., Vaziri, H., Tay, L., & Kujanpää, M. (2020). An identity-based integrative needs model of crafting: Crafting within and across life domains. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 105(12), 1423–1446. <https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0000495>
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (1985). *Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behavior*. Plenum Press.
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2000). The “what” and “why” of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior. *Psychological Inquiry*, 11(4), 227–268. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327965PLI1104_01
- De Jong, J. P., De Clippeleer, I., & De Vos, A. (2025). Enhancing team crafting through proactive motivation: An intervention study. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 110(2), 282–296. <https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0001220>
- Fletcher, L., & Schofield, K. (2021). Facilitating meaningfulness in the workplace: A field intervention study. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 32(14), 2975–3003. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2019.1624590>
- Frankl, V. E. (1984). *Man's search for meaning: An introduction to Logotherapy*. Simon & Schuster.
- Fried, Y., & Ferris, G. R. (1987). The validity of the job characteristics model: A review and meta-analysis. *Personnel Psychology*, 40(2), 287–322. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1744-6570.1987.tb00605.x>
- Gordon, H. J., Demerouti, E., Le Blanc, P. M., Bakker, A. B., Bipp, T., & Verhagen, M. A. M. T. (2018). Individual job redesign: Job crafting interventions in healthcare. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 104, 98–114. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2017.07.002>
- Grant, A. M. (2008). The significance of task significance: Job performance effects, relational mechanisms, and boundary conditions. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 93(1), 108–124. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.93.1.108>
- Green, P. I., Finkel, E. J., Fitzsimons, G. M., & Gino, F. (2017). The energizing nature of work engagement: Toward a new need-based theory of work motivation. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 37, 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.riob.2017.10.007>
- Hackman, J. R., & Oldham, G. R. (1974). *The job diagnostic survey: An instrument for the diagnosis of jobs and the evaluation of job redesign projects*. Yale University.
- Hahn, V. C., Binnewies, C., Sonnentag, S., & Mojza, E. J. (2011). Learning how to recover from job stress: effects of a recovery training program on recovery, recovery-related self-efficacy, and well-being. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 16(2), 202–216. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0022169>
- Ho, K. L., Mäkkikangas, A., Kerksieck, P., Morstatt, A. I., De Bloom, J., & Bauer, G. F. (2024). Job and off-job crafting profiles: Time-lagged relationships with job, home and personal resources and Well-being outcomes. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 97(3), 952–976. <https://doi.org/10.1111/joop.12506>

- Hu, J., & Hirsh, J. (2017). The benefits of meaningful work: A meta-analysis. *Academy of Management Proceedings*, 2017(1), 13866. <https://doi.org/10.5465/AMBPP.2017.13866abstract>
- Hu, Q., Dollard, M. F., & Taris, T. W. (2022). Organizational context matters: Psychosocial safety climate as a precursor to team and individual motivational functioning. *Safety Science*, 145, 105524. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssci.2021.105524>
- Hwang, S., Zeng, Y., & Lysova, E. I. (2025). Family recognition of work as a source of meaningful work: Examining the roles of self-esteem and parental status. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 156, 104068. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2024.104068>
- Kerksieck, P., Bauer, G. F., & Brauchli, R. (2019). Personal and social resources at work: Reciprocal relations between crafting for social job resources, social support at work, and psychological capital. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10, 2632. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02632>
- Kim, M., & Beehr, T. A. (2018). Can empowering leaders affect subordinates' well-being and careers because they encourage subordinates' job crafting behaviors? *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies*, 25(2), 184–196. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1548051817727702>
- Kosenkranius, M., Rink, F., Kujanpää, M., & De Bloom, J. (2021). Motives for crafting work and leisure: Focus on opportunities at work and psychological needs as drivers of crafting efforts. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18(23), 12294. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph182312294>
- Kosenkranius, M., Rink, F., Weigelt, O., & De Bloom, J. (2023). Crafting and human energy: Needs-based crafting efforts across life domains shape workers' daily energy trajectories. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 28(3), 192–204. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ocp0000347>
- Kosenkranius, M., Rink, F., Weigelt, O., Van den Heuvel, M., & De Bloom, J. (2023). The effectiveness of a hybrid off-job crafting intervention on workers' psychological needs satisfaction and Well-being. *Scandinavian Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 8(1), 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.16993/sjwop.181>
- Kuijpers, E., Kooij, D. T. A. M., & van Woerkom, M. (2020). Align your job with yourself: The relationship between a job crafting intervention and work engagement, and the role of workload. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 25(1), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ocp0000175>
- Kujanpää, M., & Olafsen, A. H. (2024a). Take action, recover well? The role of daily proactive recovery strategies for recovery, stress, affect, and next-day performance. *Journal of Business and Psychology*, 39, 1471–1490. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10869-024-09978-z>
- Kujanpää, M., & Olafsen, A. H. (2024b). Optimizing work and off-job motivation through proactive recovery strategies. *Nature Reviews Psychology*, 3(5), 340–351. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s44159-024-00298-w>
- Kujanpää, M., Syrek, C., Lehr, D., Kinnunen, U., Reins, J. A., & De Bloom, J. (2020). Need satisfaction and optimal functioning at leisure and work: A longitudinal validation study of the DRAMMA model. *Journal of Happiness Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-020-00247-3>
- Kujanpää, M., Syrek, C., Tay, L., Kinnunen, U., Mäkikangas, A., Shimazu, A., Wiese, C. W., Brauchli, R., Bauer, G. F., Kerksieck, P., Toyama, H., & De Bloom, J. (2022). Needs-based off-job crafting across different life domains and contexts: Testing a novel conceptual and measurement approach. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.959296>
- Kujanpää, M., Weigelt, O., Shimazu, A., Toyama, H., Kosenkranius, M., Kerksieck, P., & De Bloom, J. (2021). The forgotten ones: Crafting for meaning and for affiliation in the context of Finnish and Japanese workers' off-job lives. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12(3644). <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.682479>
- Laporte, N., Van den Bogaard, D., Brenning, K., Soenens, B., & Vansteenkiste, M. (2022). Testing an online program to foster need crafting during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Current Psychology*, 43, 8557–8574. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-022-03012-2>
- Lazazzara, A., Tims, M., & de Gennaro, D. (2020). The process of reinventing a job: A meta-synthesis of qualitative job crafting research. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 116, 103267. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2019.01.001>

- Loveday, P. M., Lovell, G. P., & Jones, C. M. (2018). The importance of leisure and the psychological mechanisms involved in living a good life: A content analysis of best-possible-selves texts. *Journal of Positive Psychology*, 13(1), 18–28. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2017.1374441>
- Lysova, E. I., Allan, B. A., Dik, B. J., Duffy, R. D., & Steger, M. F. (2019). Fostering meaningful work in organizations: A multi-level review and integration. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 110, 374–389. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2018.07.004>
- Markus, H. R. (1977). Self-schemata and processing information about the self. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 35(2), 63–78. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.35.2.63>
- Martela, F., & Riekk, T. J. J. (2018). Autonomy, competence, relatedness, and beneficence: A multicultural comparison of the four pathways to meaningful work. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9, 1157. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01157>
- Maslow, A. H. (1943). A theory of human motivation. *Psychological Review*, 50(4), 370–396. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0054346>
- McClelland, D. C. (1961). *The achieving society*. Van Nostrand. <https://doi.org/10.1037/14359-000>
- Mojza, E. J., Sonnentag, S., & Bornemann, C. (2011). Volunteer work as a valuable leisure-time activity: A day-level study on volunteer work, non-work experiences, and well-being at work. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 84(1), 123–152. <https://doi.org/10.1348/096317910X485737>
- Morstatt, A. I., Bauer, G. F., De Bloom, J., Roman, Z. J., Tušl, M., & Kerksieck, P. (2025). Crafting for health: A longitudinal study of job and off-job crafting changes during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Occupational Health Science*, 9(1), 1–36. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41542-024-00153-2>
- Napier, A. D., Slemp, G. R., & Vella-Brodick, D. A. (2024). Crafting one's life and its relationship with psychological needs: A scoping review. *Applied Research in Quality of Life*, 19(4), 2063–2101. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11482-024-10322-z>
- Newman, D. B., Tay, L., & Diener, E. (2014). Leisure and subjective well-being: A model of psychological mechanisms as mediating factors. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 15, 555–578. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-013-9435-x>
- Nikolova, M., & Cnossen, F. (2020). What makes work meaningful and why economists should care about it. *Labour Economics*, 65, 101847. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.labeco.2020.101847>
- Olafsen, A. H., Marescaux, B. P., & Kujanpää, M. (2025). Crafting for autonomy, competence, and relatedness: A self-determination theory model of need crafting at work. *Applied Psychology*, 74(1). <https://doi.org/10.1111/apps.12570>
- Oprea, B. T., Barzin, L., Virgă, D., Iliescu, D., & Rusu, A. (2019). Effectiveness of job crafting interventions: A meta-analysis and utility analysis. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 28(6), 723–741. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1359432X.2019.1646728>
- Parker, S. K., & Grote, G. (2022). Automation, algorithms, and beyond: Why work design matters more than ever in a digital world. *Applied Psychology*, 71(4), 1171–1204.
- Petrou, P., & Bakker, A. B. (2016). Crafting one's leisure: A perspective on how workers create meaningful and enjoyable leisure activities. *Work & Stress*, 30(3), 254–271. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726715590453>
- Pijpker, R., Kerksieck, P., Tušl, M., De Bloom, J., Brauchli, R., & Bauer, G. F. (2022). The role of off-job crafting in burnout prevention during COVID-19 crisis: A longitudinal study. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(4), 2146. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19042146>
- Rantanen, J., Hakanen, J. J., & Tolvanen, A. (2021). The evolving nature of meaningful work: A longitudinal study on work engagement and job crafting. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 94(2), 345–368. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1359432X.2014.969245>
- Rodell, J. B. (2013). Finding meaning through volunteering: Why do employees volunteer and what does it mean for their jobs? *Academy of Management Journal*, 56(5), 1274–1294. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2012.0611>
- Rosso, B. D., Dekas, K. H., & Wrzesniewski, A. (2010). On the meaning of work: A theoretical integration and review. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 30, 91–127. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.riob.2010.09.001>

- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *American Psychologist*, 55(1), 68–78. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.68>
- Ryff, C. D., & Singer, B. (1998). The contours of positive human health. *Psychological Inquiry*, 9(1), 1–28. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327965pli0901_1
- Sanz-Vergel, A. I., Nielsen, K., Rodríguez-Muñoz, A., & Antino, M. (2024). What happens at work does not always stay at work: Daily job crafting and detachment among colleagues. *Applied Psychology*, 73(2), 776–800. <https://doi.org/10.1111/apps.12499>
- Seligman, M. E. P. (2011). *Flourish: A visionary new understanding of happiness and well-being*. Free Press.
- Shanafelt, T. D., West, C. P., Sloan, J. A., Novotny, P. J., Poland, G. A., Menaker, R., Rummans, T. A., & Dyrbye, L. N. (2009). Career fit and burnout among academic faculty. *Archives of Internal Medicine*, 169(10), 990–995. <https://doi.org/10.1001/archinternmed.2009.70>
- Sheldon, K. M. (2011). Integrating behavioral-motive and experiential-requirement perspectives on psychological needs: A two process model. *Psychological Review*, 118(4), 552–569. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0024758>
- Sheldon, K. M., & Elliott, A. J. (1998). Goal striving, need satisfaction and longitudinal Well-being: The self-concordance model. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 76, 482–497. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.76.3.482>
- Silapurem, L., Slemp, G. R., & Jarden, A. (2024). Longitudinal job crafting research: A meta-analysis. *International Journal of Applied Positive Psychology*, 9(2), 899–933. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41042-024-00159-0>
- Sonnentag, S., & Fritz, C. (2007). The recovery experience questionnaire: Development and validation of a measure for assessing recuperation and unwinding from work. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 12(3), 204–221. <https://doi.org/10.1037/1076-8998.12.3.204>
- Stawski, R. S., MacDonald, S. W. S., & Sliwinski, M. J. (2015). Measurement burst design. In *The Encyclopedia of adulthood and aging* (pp. 1–5). Wiley.
- Steger, M. F. (2009). Meaning in life. In S. J. Lopez & C. R. Snyder (Eds.), *Oxford handbook of positive psychology* (pp. 679–687). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhpb/9780195187243.013.0063>
- Tims, M., Bakker, A. B., & Derks, D. (2015). Examining job crafting from an interpersonal perspective: Is employee job crafting related to the well-being of colleagues? *Applied Psychology*, 64(4), 727–753. <https://doi.org/10.1111/apps.12043>
- Tims, M., Derks, D., & Bakker, A. B. (2016). Job crafting and its relationships with person–job fit and meaningfulness: A three-wave study. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 92, 44–53. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2015.11.007>
- Tims, M., Twemlow, M., & Fong, C. Y. M. (2022). A state-of-the-art overview of job-crafting research: current trends and future research directions. *Career Development International*, 27(1), 54–78. <https://doi.org/10.1108/CDI-08-2021-0216>
- Tušl, M., Bauer, G. F., Kujanpää, M., Toyama, H., Shimazu, A., & De Bloom, J. (2024). Needs-based job crafting: Validation of a new scale based on psychological needs. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 29(2), 57–71. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ocp0000372>
- Tušl, M., De Bloom, J., & Bauer, G. F. (2022). Sense of coherence, off-job crafting, and mental well-being: A path of positive health development. *Health Promotion International*, 37(6), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1093/heapro/daac159>
- van den Heuvel, M., Demerouti, E., & Peeters, M. C. W. (2015). The job crafting intervention: Effects on job resources, self-efficacy, and affective well-being. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 88(3), 511–532. <https://doi.org/10.1111/joop.12128>
- Van Wingerden, J., Bakker, A. B., & Derks, D. (2017). Fostering worker well-being via a job crafting intervention. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 100, 164–174. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2017.03.008>

- Verbeek, J., Ruotsalainen, J., Laitinen, J., Korkiakangas, E., Lusa, S., Mänttari, S., & Oksanen, T. (2019). Interventions to enhance recovery in healthy workers; a scoping review. *Occupational Medicine*, 69(1), 54–63. <https://doi.org/10.1093/occmed/kqy141>
- Virtanen, A., De Bloom, J., & Kinnunen, U. (2020). Relationships between recovery experiences and well-being among younger and older teachers. *International Archives of Occupational and Environmental Health*, 93(2), 213–227. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00420-019-01475-8>
- Wang, H., Demerouti, E., & Bakker, A. B. (2016). A review of job crafting research: The role of leader behaviors in cultivating successful job crafters. In S. K. Parker & U. K. Bindl (Eds.), *Proactivity at work: Making things happen in organizations* (pp. 77–104). Taylor and Francis.
- Wrzesniewski, A., & Dutton, J. E. (2001). Crafting a job: Revisioning employees as active crafters of their work. *Academy of Management Review*, 26(2), 179–201. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2001.4378011>
- Wrzesniewski, A., Dutton, J. E., & Debebe, G. (2003). Interpersonal sensemaking and the meaning of work. In R. M. Kramer & B. M. Staw (Eds.), *Research in organizational behavior* (pp. 93–135). Elsevier Science.
- Wrzesniewski, A., Lobuglio, N., Dutton, J. E., & Berg, J. M. (2013). Job crafting and cultivating positive meaning and identity in work. In A. B. Bakker (Ed.), *Advances in positive organizational psychology* (pp. 281–302). Emerald Group Publishing. [https://doi.org/10.1108/S2046-410X\(2013\)00000011015](https://doi.org/10.1108/S2046-410X(2013)00000011015)
- Wu, C. H., & Parker, S. K. (2017). The role of leader support in facilitating proactive work behavior: A perspective from attachment theory. *Journal of Management*, 43(4), 1025–1049. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206314544745>

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if you modified the licensed material. You do not have permission under this license to share adapted material derived from this chapter or parts of it.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.



What Makes Entrepreneurship Worth Doing? A Review and Research Agenda on Entrepreneurial Meaningfulness



Sean M. Dwyer and Boris Nikolaev

Abstract What makes entrepreneurship worth doing? While research on meaningful work has gained significant attention over the years, only recently has research begun to thoroughly examine this topic in the context of self-employment. Self-employment is a complex context for studying meaningful work, considering the positive and negative aspects of this type of work. On the positive side, the self-directed nature of self-employment, the primary focus of this chapter, offers autonomy and control over work that enables fulfilling aspirations, expressing one's identity, and aligning personal values in work in ways that may be less feasible in employed work. On the other side, self-employment often entails long working hours, significant stress, and heightened responsibilities. This chapter provides a review of theoretical perspectives, methods, measurements, findings, and debates in the meaningful work literature to establish a theoretical foundation for research on meaningful work in the context of self-employment. We introduce the concept of *entrepreneurial meaningfulness*, which we define as the subjective global judgment that one's work as an entrepreneur is personally significant and has positive valence. Entrepreneurial meaningfulness is shaped by work characteristics distinct to self-employment—*ownership control*, *ownership responsibility*, and *ownership risk*—as well as those found in traditional work contexts. We theorize that entrepreneurial meaningfulness will have a significant influence on important entrepreneurial outcomes, such as entrepreneurial persistence, well-being, and performance. We outline a research agenda to advance research on this important yet under-examined concept, which holds promise for broadening our understanding of what makes entrepreneurship worth doing.

Keywords Entrepreneurial meaningfulness · Meaningful work · Job characteristics

S. M. Dwyer (✉)

Price College of Business, The University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK, USA
e-mail: SeanDwyer@ou.edu

B. Nikolaev

College of Business, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO, USA
e-mail: Boris.Nikolaev@colostate.edu

© The Author(s) 2026

M. Nikolova (ed.), *Work Meaning and Motivation*, Economic Studies in Inequality, Social Exclusion and Well-Being,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-23826-9_4

Introduction

By launching new ventures, entrepreneurs hope to secure the highly enriched work environments they so strongly crave... their powerful motivation and commitment to such work - to successfully launching and running their new ventures - is almost legendary.—Baron, 2010

Work is one of the most meaningful activities in life (Wolf et al., 2022). While tangible rewards such as job security, income, and promotions are undoubtedly important, research consistently shows that the experience of meaningfulness is considered among the most important aspects of work (Michaelson et al., 2014). This is particularly evident in the context of entrepreneurship (i.e., self-employment),¹ where individuals often give up job security to pursue work that aligns with their passions, values, and desires to make a positive impact in the world. Empirical research on meaningful work reveals that not all types of work are created equal with respect to producing this experience (Hackman & Oldham, 1976) and that people can experience the same type of work and even the same working conditions differently (Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012; Nikolova & Cnossen, 2020; Steger et al., 2012).

Over the past half-century, research on meaningful work has proliferated, driven by important individual-level and firm-level outcomes of meaningful work (Allan et al., 2019). This body of academic research spans a range of academic disciplines (e.g., economics, organizational behavior, human resource management, sociology, and psychology) and has often focused on those working for an employer (Bailey et al., 2019; Blustein et al., 2023; Martela & Pessi, 2018; Nikolova & Cnossen, 2020; Rosso et al., 2010). In recent years, however, scholars have recognized the importance of moving beyond regular employees to also understand the dynamics of meaningful work among the self-employed. This research holds promise to advance our understanding of one of the most central topics in the meaningful work literature concerning “what makes work worth doing” (Pratt et al., 2013, p. 4) by addressing the question of *what makes entrepreneurship worth doing?*

The self-directed nature of self-employed work provides opportunities for individuals to design aspects of their ventures and roles in ways that they believe to be meaningful (Baron, 2010; Parker, 2014). Indeed, self-employment often offers greater work autonomy and control over important job decisions than regular employed work (Nikolova et al., 2022). For instance, the ability to design aspects of their ventures (e.g., product type, team composition) gives the potential for individuals to fulfill their aspirations, express their identity, and work in accordance with their values, which ultimately fosters meaningful work experiences (Stephan et al., 2020).

At the same time, self-employment represents a “complex example” for studies on meaningful work (Blustein et al., 2023, p. 299) because it often entails significant amounts of stress (Lerman et al., 2020) and precarity, which may negatively

¹Following precedent from previous research, this chapter defines entrepreneurship as self-employment (e.g., Nikolova et al., 2022; Stephan et al., 2020).

impact the ability to derive meaningfulness from work. Self-employed work often features long hours, significant stress, and heightened responsibilities, potentially dampening the experience of meaningful work (Binder & Blankenberg, 2020; Cardon & Arwine, 2023). Intriguingly, comparisons between self-employment and wage-employment consistently indicate that the self-employed experience higher levels of meaningfulness in work (Nikolova & Cnossen, 2020; Nikolova et al., 2022; Stephan et al., 2020). While scholars have theorized why this may be (Baron, 2010), there remains limited research on meaningful work in the context of self-employment.

This chapter provides an overview of the literature on meaningful work and introduces opportunities for future research in the context of self-employment. We start by clarifying the distinctions between the commonly interchanged terms of *meaning* and *meaningfulness* to establish an understanding of meaningful work (Rosso et al., 2010). We next review definitions of meaningful work, providing an overview of extant understandings from the literature. Finally, we draw on insights across the broader literature on meaningful work to introduce a theoretical foundation for research on *entrepreneurial meaningfulness*. This entails recommended approaches to measuring meaningful work in a self-employment context and promising directions for future entrepreneurship research.

An Integrated Understanding of Meaning and Meaningfulness in Work

Meaning of Work

The term *meaning* of work refers to “what work signifies” from the perspective of a worker (Rosso et al., 2010, p. 95). It is the broader meaning of what work in general represents to a certain individual. This determination entails subjective personal evaluations of work experiences and interactions that involve complex cognitive meaning-making processes (Allan et al., 2019; Wrzesniewski et al., 2003). Importantly, the meaning individuals make of work may be positive, negative, or neutral (Lepisto & Pratt, 2017). The subjective nature of meaning in the context of work makes matters complex for researchers, particularly when studying self-employed individuals.

For instance, individuals engaged in similar self-employed work may interpret the meaning of their work in vastly different ways. Consider two individuals who start businesses driven by the need to survive in the context of personal poverty. One may find positive meaning in their work, viewing it as an opportunity to overcome daily challenges and provide an escape from poverty for future generations (Shepherd et al., 2020b). In contrast, others may attribute negative meaning to their work due to the stressful and uncertain conditions tied to the work. Hence, the meaning made of similar self-employed work may differ starkly between individuals.

Meaningfulness of Work

While most individuals find some form of meaning in work, not all individuals experience *meaningfulness* in work. Work meaningfulness is about the extent to which someone experiences their working condition as significant, valuable, i.e., how much meaning is experienced. The concept of *meaningfulness* at work is predicated on personal evaluations that work is both *significant* and *positive* in valence (Rosso et al., 2010).² In other words, the experience of work meaningfulness entails subjective appraisals of work that are deemed personally valuable (Grant, 2008; Martela & Pessi, 2018).

While experiencing meaningfulness in work is generally episodic in practice (i.e., having various experiences, with some holding greater meaningfulness than others), much of the research on the experience of meaningfulness in work conceptualizes this as a global judgment of the overall personal significance they make of their work as a whole (see Allan et al., 2019).

Understanding how self-employed individuals form these global judgments about the meaningfulness of their work represents a crucial area for future research. Empirical research reveals a range of characteristics of the work environment as well as personal, social, and cultural factors representing antecedents of meaningfulness in work (Bailey et al., 2019; Boova et al., 2019; Humphrey et al., 2007; Stephan et al., 2020). Meaningfulness may be particularly influenced by factors such as the degree of autonomy, competence, and relatedness they experience in work, the impact they perceive their work to have in the world, and the alignment between their work and their values (e.g., Cnossen & Nikolova, 2024; Martela & Pessi, 2018; Martela et al., 2018). Such factors may be especially salient since self-employment is considered a more self-determined type of work offering individuals “the chance to make ongoing independent decisions about how, with whom and when they work” (Stephan et al., 2020, p. 6). While there are indeed similarities between self-employment and wage-employment, the critical differences between the nature of these work contexts represent promising avenues for advancing our understanding of what it is about entrepreneurship that makes it worth doing.

Defining Meaningful Work

Despite the significant body of research on the topic of meaningful work, there has yet to emerge a unified definition of the term. This reflects the complexity of the concept and its application across various work contexts, including self-employment. For instance, a literature review on meaningful work revealed “no consensus over

²Although work may be perceived as personally significant in a negative sense, existing research tends to conceptualize terms like meaning and personal significance positively (see Rosso et al., 2010).

the definition of meaningful work” (Bailey et al., 2019, p. 88), with another study identifying 36 definitions of meaningful work and related terminology (Martela & Pessi, 2018). This definitional inconsistency poses challenges for researchers studying in a self-employment context. While the fragmentation of definitions in the literature on meaningful work is concerning from a theoretical and empirical standpoint, meta-analyses demonstrate that meaningful work is indeed “conceptually distinct from closely related constructs” such as work satisfaction and engagement, representing a research domain attracting significant academic interest in recent years (Allan et al., 2019, p. 504).

Terminological Variations

In addition to the definitional complexity, scholars often use a wide range of terms when describing meaningful work, such as “experience of meaningfulness,” “sense of work meaning,” and “meaning one finds in work” (Martela & Pessi, 2018, p. 5). In the context of self-employment, scholars have used various terms, including “meaningful work” (Nikolova & Cnossen, 2020), “meaningfulness of work” (Wolfe & Patel, 2019), and “work meaningfulness” (Brieger et al., 2021; Nikolova et al., 2022). Some scholars have even used multiple terms interchangeably in the same study, such as “meaningful work or meaningfulness” (Frémeaux & Henry, 2023, p. 726), further complicating the landscape of research in this area.

For entrepreneurship scholars making use of meaningful work definitions, it is crucial to provide clear definitions, use relevant citations, and not “define it self-referentially as work that is subjectively meaningful to the individual” (Bailey et al., 2019, p. 88).

Reasons for Definitional Inconsistency

The variety of terms and definitional inconsistency can be attributed, in part, to the wide range of theoretical perspectives scholars use to explain meaningful work (Bailey et al., 2019). This diversity of perspectives is particularly evident in self-employment research, where the unique characteristics of entrepreneurial work can add another layer of complexity. While scholars have categorized the meaningful work literature in various ways (e.g., Rosso et al., 2010), conceptualizations of meaningful work tend to differ in the extent to which these emphasize: (1) meaningful work as a property of the *characteristics of work*, and (2) meaningful work as *an experience of meaningfulness in work*.

Characteristics of Work Approach The literature includes definitions that focus on *the characteristics of work* that make work more meaningful. These definitions focus on the nature or design of the work that is inherently meaningful to people

and are generally grounded in theoretical traditions derived from the Job Characteristics Model (JCM), described in greater depth later in this chapter (Hackman & Oldham, 1975). Examples of the definitions that reflect this focus include “*work* which offers opportunities for eudaimonian activity... [and] the development of skills and capacities” (Walsh, 1994, p. 243–244) and “*job and other workplace characteristics* that facilitate the attainment or maintenance of one or more dimensions of meaning” (Fairlie, 2011, p. 510). Hence, the definitional focus emphasizes the characteristics of work itself to a greater extent than the personal experience of the worker.

Personal Experience Approach The literature alternatively includes definitions that emphasize *personal experiences with work*, sometimes expressed as “the experience of meaningfulness” or “work meaningfulness” (e.g., Grant, 2008; Hirschi, 2012). These definitions focus less on the particular features of the work environment and more on the subjective experience of the individual. These definitions align particularly well with theoretical understandings emphasizing that even contextually rich service-oriented jobs (e.g., nursing, social work) may not always be experienced as meaningful by everyone. Indeed, the experience of meaningful work is constructed through individual meaning-making processes that culminate in beliefs about whether work is valuable or not (Bailey & Madden, 2017), which may have more to do with the person or cultural environment than the characteristics of the work. Examples of these definitions include “*an individual subjective experience* of the existential significance or purpose of work” (Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012, p. 657), “*the amount of significance* people perceive in their work” (Hirschi, 2012, p. 480), and “*the subjective experience* that one’s work has significance, facilitates personal growth, and contributes to the greater good” (Allan et al., 2014, p. 545).

Dimensions of Meaningful Work Beyond these distinctions in definitional approaches, conceptions of meaningful work also comprise various dimensions. In a comprehensive review of definitions related to meaningful work, common themes emerged such as the presence of a positive tone, using terms such as “enriching,” “valuable,” “worthwhile,” “morally worthy,” “purposeful,” and “positive” as well as consistency in meaningful work dimensions of *significance*, *self-realization*, and *broader purpose* (Martela & Pessi, 2018, p. 4–5). In other words, prominent definitions of meaningful work from across the literature comprise various configurations of these three dimensions, with some definitions including one dimension, while others comprise more than one. These efforts help advance the field closer to a unified understanding of what is meant by meaningful work.

Interestingly, the dimensional categorizations by Martela and Pessi (2018) align closely with the three core dimensions of meaningful work proposed by Steger et al. (2012) in their popular *Work and Meaning Inventory* (WAMI) scale. These core dimensions of meaningful work include *positive meaning* (similar to significance), *meaning-making through work* (similar to self-realization), and *greater*

good motivations (similar to broader purpose) (Steger et al., 2012). In this section, we provide a brief overview of each dimension before presenting a list of prominent definitions from the literature categorized by definitional approaches and the respective dimensions introduced by Steger et al. (2012).³

Positive Meaning (PS) This dimension represents the most universally regarded aspect of meaningful work (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Grant, 2008; Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012). Positive meaning, or significance, in work is defined as “how much intrinsic value people assign to or are able to find from their work” (Martela & Pessi, 2018, p. 6). In a highly influential review of the literature on meaningful work, Rosso et al. (2010, p. 95) defined meaningful work as “work experienced as particularly *significant* and holding more *positive meaning* for individuals.” While one’s experience of work may hold positive or negative valence, meaningful work is associated with positive valence (Lepisto & Pratt, 2017).

Meaning Making Through Work (MM) This dimension involves how work influences the ability to find and build “meaning in life as a whole” (Steger et al., 2012, p. 324). This dimension concerns ways in which work can help individuals to live in accord with their true self and achieve their potential (Soren & Ryff, 2023). Indeed, work can provide a “sense of coherence or alignment between one’s behavior and perceptions of the true self” (Rosso et al., 2010, p. 108). This occurs when one’s “passions, strengths, and core values interact synergistically in his or her work” (Lieff, 2009, p. 1384), which produces a sense of self-connectedness and authenticity, making work meaningful (Martela & Pessi, 2018).

Greater Good Motivations (GG) This dimension concerns the link between work and positive contributions to the world (Steger et al., 2012). While not reflected in all definitions, there is considerable evidence that people tend to experience work as more meaningful when perceived as “making a positive difference in other peoples’ lives” (Grant, 2007, p. 396) or “making valuable contributions to society” (Berg et al., 2010, p. 974). This aligns with the notion of purpose in the psychology literature, defined as “a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at the same time *meaningful to the self* and *consequential for the world beyond the self*” (Damon, 2008, p. 547; Bronk, 2014) as well as the notions of self-transcendence, considered the highest motivation level according to Maslow (1971).

To summarize this section, we introduce Table 1, which provides examples of prominent definitions of meaningful work from across the literature. We categorized the definitions by (a) definitional *approach*: personal experience (PE) and/or

³See Chapters “Meaningful Work: An Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior Perspective”, “The Meaning and Meaningfulness of Work: The View from Sociology”, and “The Economics of Meaningful Work: A Scoping Review” for in-depth perspectives on meaningful work from organizational psychology, organizational behavior, sociology, and economics, along with related dimensions across these literatures.

Table 1 Selected definitions of meaningful work

Definitions	Approach	Dimensions	Description
“The degree to which the employee experiences the job as one which is generally meaningful, valuable, and worthwhile ” (Hackman & Oldham, 1975, p. 162)	PE	PM	Seminal article highlighting meaningful work
“Work experienced as particularly significant and holding more positive meaning for individuals” (Rosso et al., 2010, p. 95)	PE/WC	PM	Seminal literature review on meaningful work
“Work that is both significant and positive in valence ” (Steger et al., 2012, p. 323)	PE/WC	PM	Developing the <i>WAMI</i> scale
“My work is significant ” (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009, p. 40)	PE	PM	Developing the <i>Work Meaningfulness</i> scale
“An individual subjective experience of the existential significance or purpose of work ” (Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012)	PE	PM, GG	Developing the <i>CMWS</i> scale
“Work and/or its context are perceived by its practitioners to be, at minimum, purposeful and significant ” (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003, p. 311)	WC	PM, GG	Influential article on meaningful work ^a
“ <i>Realizing one’s self through work</i> , and being able to account for <i>worth of one’s work</i> ” (Lepisto & Pratt, 2017, p. 116)	PE	PM, MM	Recent and influential article on meaningful work ^b
“Work that is personally enriching and that makes a positive contribution ” (Bailey et al., 2017, p. 416)	WC/PE	PM, MM	Influential article on meaningful work ^c

^aAt the time of writing, this had over 1800 citations

^bAt the time of writing, this had over 400 citations

^cAt the time of writing, this had over 300 citations

work characteristics (WC) approach and (b) definitional *dimensions*: positive meaning (PM), meaning making through work (MM), and greater good motivations (GG).

Operationalizing Meaningful Work

Along with the many definitions of meaningful work are various ways in which scholars operationalize the construct. From quantitative approach to qualitative approach, empirical researchers have deployed a wide array of approaches to measure dynamics related to meaningful work. A review of empirical studies identified 28 unique measures of meaningful work (Allan et al., 2019; Bailey et al., 2019). These include both unidimensional and multidimensional measures (Rosso et al., 2010). From our review of the literature, there is a surprising lack of entrepreneurship research using established scales from the meaningful work literature. Accordingly, in this section, we introduce two unidimensional measures and three

Table 2 Selected meaningful work scales

Measurement	Perspective	Dimensions	Items	Reference
Experienced Meaningfulness (EM-JDS)	A psychological state	<i>Unidimensional measure</i>	4	Hackman and Oldham (1975)
Meaning in Work (MW-PES)	An aspect of psychological empowerment	<i>Unidimensional measure</i>	3	Spreitzer (1995)
Work and Meaning Inventory (WAMI)	A eudaimonic state	(1) Positive meaning (2) Meaning-making in work (3) Greater good motivations	10	Steger et al. (2012)
Comprehensive Meaningful Work Scale (CMWS)	A means to a meaningful life	(1) Unity with others (2) Service to others (3) Expressing full potential (4) Developing the inner self	28	Lips-Wiersma and Wright (2012)
Meaning and Purpose at Work Scale (MPWS)	An aspect of workplace spirituality	(1) Personal joy (2) Joy for others (3) Energizing work (4) Connection to social good	7	Ashmos and Duchon (2000)

multidimensional measures of meaningful work for scholars to consider employing in future entrepreneurship research.⁴ We present all five measures in Table 2.

Unidimensional Measures of Meaningful Work

A unidimensional measure entails capturing the global judgment of the extent to which work, as a whole, is experienced as meaningful. Two unidimensional measures of meaningful work that entrepreneurship scholars may be interested in come from the *Job Diagnostics Survey (JDS)* and *Psychological Empowerment Scale (PES)*.

The JDS includes a 4-item measure of experienced meaningfulness (EM-JDS), which is comprised of a 2-item measure of one’s experience with work (“The work I do on this job is very meaningful to me,” “Most of the things I have to do on this job seem useless or trivial”) and a 2-item measure of others’ experience in

⁴To date, the most common approaches to measuring meaningful work in entrepreneurship are through operationalizing existing items in secondary databases to measure meaningful work (Nikolova & Cnossen, 2020; Nikolova et al., 2022; Stephan et al., 2020). While creating measures from secondary databases has allowed for important comparisons with regular employees, the lack of use of established measures of meaningful work represents a limitation of extant research. However, this also underscores an opportunity for scholars to leverage decades of insights on meaningful work to introduce new insights into the entrepreneurship literature.

the same position (“Most people on this job feel that the work is useless or trivial,” “Most people on this job find the work very meaningful”) (Hackman & Oldham, 1975). Accordingly, the measure aims to understand both first-person and third-person perspectives on the experience of meaningfulness in work. The first measure focused on the first-person perspective on the experience of meaningfulness in work has been used for research conducted among self-employed individuals (Stephan et al., 2020). Scholars may also seek to utilize the third-person questions, modified to reflect whether most entrepreneurs operating the particular type of venture experience this work as trivial or meaningful, to understand more general perspectives about their work. The PES represents a broader survey instrument on psychological empowerment in work by Spreitzer (1995) with one of the sub-dimensions comprising a 3-item measure of meaningful work: “The work I do is very important to me,” “My job activities are personally meaningful to me,” and “The work I do is meaningful to me” (Spreitzer, 1995, p. 1464). The simplicity and brevity of this scale are advantageous for scholars to capture global judgments of entrepreneurs’ experience of meaningfulness of work.

Both the JDS and PES measures have yet to receive much attention in the entrepreneurship literature beyond construct validation analyses for another measure of meaningful work (see Stephan et al., 2020). Hence, there remain opportunities to include this measure in primary data collection efforts.

Multidimensional Measures of Meaningful Work

Multidimensional measures consider various dimensions that comprise the construct of meaningful work. Multidimensional measures emphasize the “processes or dimensions of meaningful experiences, such as contributing to the greater good, which are likely to bring about meaningful experiences and contribute to an understanding of work as meaningful” (Allan et al., 2019, p. 502). Three multidimensional measures of meaningful work that have received attention in the broader literature that entrepreneurship scholars may consider adopting derive from the *Work and Meaning Inventory (WAMI)*, *Comprehensive Meaningful Work Scale (CMWS)*, and *Meaning and Purpose at Work Scale (MPWS)*.

First, the WAMI is a 10-item multidimensional measure developed by Steger et al. (2012) through an effort to integrate understandings from the conceptual framework developed by Rosso et al. (2010). This measure envelops conceptions of meaningful work as a eudaimonic psychological state comprised of three core dimensions described earlier in this chapter: positive meaning, meaning-making through work, and greater good motivations (Steger et al., 2012). The WAMI is recognized as a “widely adopted measure of meaningful work” (Bailey et al., 2019, p. 91) and has been recognized as the “gold-standard” for measuring meaningful work by entrepreneurship scholars (Cnossen & Nikolova, 2024, p. 4). Although the WAMI has received limited use in entrepreneurship research, the multidimensional

nature of this scale provides promising opportunities for future research. For instance, the *meaning-making* dimension can help explain how self-employed work contributes to eudaimonic outcomes such as purpose in life (Ryff, 2019) and the *greater good motivations* dimension can shed light on how meaningfulness relates to prosocial entrepreneurial motivations (Bacq & Kickul, 2022).

Second, the CMWS comprises a measure of meaningful work derived from perspectives that emphasize that the search for meaning is a fundamental aspect of the human experience (Frankl, 1959; Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009).⁵ Developed by Lips-Wiersma and Wright (2012), the CMWS includes a 28-item measure of meaningful work broken down into four primary categories: unity with others (i.e., working alongside other people), service to others (i.e., contributing to others and the world), expressing full potential (i.e., exhibiting talents and a sense of achievement), and developing the inner self (i.e., being a good person or the best we can be). The multidimensional nature of this measure allows scholars to pinpoint the specific drivers of the experience of meaningful work among the self-employed to develop meaningful work profiles. For instance, an individual may engage in self-employment to make a difference in the world (high in service to others) but find themselves isolated from others (low in unity with others) because of the challenges of work. In this case, measuring specific dimensions can help pinpoint dynamics comprising what is promoting or diminishing the experience of meaningful work.

Third, the MPWS by Ashmos and Duchon (2000) is a 7-item derived from a larger measure of workplace spirituality which focuses on work dynamics related to “spiritual leadership, spiritual work climates, callings, and existential attitudes toward work” (Bailey et al., 2019, p. 100). This perspective emphasizes that individuals “have an inner life that nourishes and is nourished by meaningful work that takes place in the context of community” (Duchon & Plowman, 2005, p. 809). The meaningful work facet of the scale can be broken down into the following dimensions: personal joy (i.e., experience of joy in work), joy for others (i.e., others experiencing joy because of work), energizing work (i.e., spirit energized in work), and connection to social good (i.e., work connects to greater good of community) (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000; Bailey et al., 2019). For entrepreneurship scholars interested in examining meaningful work from a workplace spirituality perspective, this relatively brief scale captures distinct aspects of meaningful work that may be worth comparing with similar dimensions from other scales (e.g., MPWS: joy for others vs. WAMI: greater good motivations vs. CMWS: service to others).

To summarize this section, Table 2 lists each listed *measurement*, the accompanying theoretical *perspective*, the included *dimensions*, the number of scale *items*, and the article *reference*.

⁵ While published around the same period as the WAMI, the CMWS has received significantly less attention than the WAMI, which may, at least in part, be due to the length of the survey being 28 items compared to 10 items. While influential, the CMWS has nearly four times less citations than the WAMI at the time of this publication.

Theoretical Foundation for Research on Meaningful Work in Entrepreneurship

In light of the limited body of research on meaningful work in the context of self-employment, this section builds on theoretical perspectives and empirical insights from the broader literature on meaningful work to set a theoretical foundation for research on this subject in entrepreneurship. Although the broad array of perspectives on meaningful work in some ways presents challenges for advancing research in this relatively unexplored work context, the established stream of literature on meaningful work provides entrepreneurship scholars with a robust theoretical and empirical toolkit for doing so.

The most prominent theoretical perspective on the topic of meaningful work is based on the Job Characteristics Model (JCM) (see Bailey et al., 2019), which emphasizes the *characteristics of work* approach rather than the *personal experience* approach to conceptualizing meaningful work, as described earlier in this chapter. Although a significant body of meaningful work research emphasizes that meaningful work is not only a product of the characteristics of one's job but rather an array of personal, social, and cultural factors (e.g., Boova et al., 2019; Lepisto & Pratt, 2017), we propose that in light of the ability to explain why—by referring to specific job characteristics—individuals experience differing degrees of meaningfulness in self-employed work versus employed work, the characteristics of work approach represents a useful theoretical lens to establish a uniquely entrepreneurial perspective on meaningful work.

The JCM proposes a two-step process model whereby particular job characteristics (i.e., skill variety, task significance, and task identity)⁶ promote the experience of meaningful work, which, in turn, drives work-related outcomes (e.g., work motivation, performance, and satisfaction) (Hackman & Oldham, 1976).⁷ Leveraging this theoretical perspective in entrepreneurship research opens up opportunities to examine the characteristics of self-employed work that promote or diminish the experience of meaningful work, holding promise to address the question in the broader meaningful work literature of “what makes work worth doing” (Pratt et al., 2013, p. 4) in a self-employment context.

Building on theoretical perspectives from the work characteristics approach, we introduce a two-step theoretical model of *entrepreneurial meaningfulness* to establish a theoretical foundation for meaningful work research in entrepreneurship (see Fig. 1). The model explains the process by which characteristics of self-employed

⁶A job is referred to here as a bundle of tasks (Autor et al., 2003).

⁷The JCM proposes that five job characteristics influence three psychological states of workers, which, in turn, result in positive personal and work-related outcomes. Experienced meaningfulness represents only one of the three psychological states (i.e., experienced meaningfulness, experienced responsibility, knowledge of results) theorized to, in turn, drive these outcomes (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). Since the introduction of the JCM, a significant body of research has identified additional job characteristics that influence psychological experiences, such as the experience of meaningfulness (Humphrey et al., 2007).

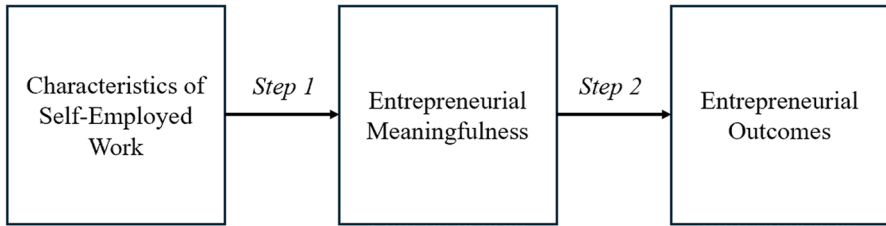


Fig. 1 A Theoretical model of entrepreneurial meaningfulness

work shape entrepreneurial meaningfulness in ways that lead to entrepreneurial outcomes. We introduce the definition of entrepreneurial meaningfulness as the subjective global judgment that one's work as an entrepreneur is personally significant and has positive valence.

An integration of the JCM model into the context of self-employment suggests that particular *job characteristics of self-employed work* influence the extent to which such individuals experience meaningfulness in self-employed work, which we refer to as *entrepreneurial meaningfulness* (Step 1). Entrepreneurial meaningfulness will then, in turn, drive entrepreneurial outcomes (Step 2).

Step 1: Characteristics of Self-Employed Work Drive Entrepreneurial Meaningfulness

Entrepreneurship researchers are interested in determining what it is about self-employment that makes it distinct from traditional forms of work (e.g., Shane, 2003). In certain respects, self-employed work is like waged employment in that both individuals perform jobs inside a business designed to create value for stakeholders. However, research also proposes distinctions between the job characteristics of self-employment and traditional waged employment as reflected by pertinent examples highlighted by Stephan et al. (2020, p. 2):

... From the self-determined choice to pursue such a career in the first place, to the opportunity to express one's identity through work, shape work in line with one's values, skills and needs, and the personal commitment to and legal responsibility for all work-related decisions and actions...

While there are certainly more distinctions between these two types of work discussed in the literature, for the purposes of understanding how work characteristics of self-employed work influence entrepreneurial meaningfulness, we emphasize the importance of distinguishing between (a) *absolute* and (b) *relative* job characteristic differences. By absolute differences, we refer to aspects of self-employed work that are entirely (or absolutely) distinct from traditional employed work. Relative differences refer to distinctions *in the extent to which* a job characteristic differs from one work context to another. For instance, an absolute difference may

refer to job characteristics centered around business ownership as this often reflects an entirely distinct attribute of self-employed work from traditional forms of work. An example of a relative difference concerns the extent to which a job offers a high level of skill variety (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). While both types of work often involve utilizing a variety of skills, research suggests that self-employed individuals, especially, “are expected to experience a high degree of variety in their entrepreneurial work” (Schjoedt, 2009, p. 622) and, thus, we would consider differences between these two types of work based on the job characteristic of variety to be a “relative” difference.

Building on this notion, we propose that establishing a uniquely entrepreneurial perspective on work meaningfulness via *entrepreneurial meaningfulness* requires considering both the (a) absolute and (b) relative differences between the characteristics of self-employed and traditional forms of work. We introduce three distinct job characteristics of self-employment concerned with the role of owning a business (representing “absolute differences”) (see Foss et al., 2020) and theorize how each influences entrepreneurial meaningfulness. We then follow this by discussing eight established job characteristics derived from the literature (“representing relative differences”) and how these are likely to influence entrepreneurial meaningfulness.

We emphasize that neither set of characteristics operates independently. Instead, the distinct job characteristics associated with self-employment may influence aspects of these other job characteristics in distinct ways. For instance, aspects of business ownership (“absolute differences”) can enable entrepreneurs to experience a greater degree of autonomy or task significance (“relative differences”) in their work. Accordingly, working in tandem, the configuration of both sets of job characteristics influences entrepreneurial meaningfulness.

Absolute Differences: Job Characteristics for Entrepreneurship Research

We propose that distinct aspects of self-employment are likely to drive entrepreneurial meaningfulness. Building on extant entrepreneurship research, the distinct job characteristics we propose include (a) *ownership control*, (b) *ownership responsibility*, and (c) *ownership risk*.

Ownership Control We propose that *ownership control* represents a distinct characteristic of self-employed work influencing entrepreneurial meaningfulness. Ownership control represents the right and ability to exercise control over firm resources and activities at the discretion of the entrepreneur (Foss et al., 2020) and serves as the overarching reason individuals often experience a sense of autonomy in self-employed work (Ryff, 2019). We emphasize the term “ability” here, recognizing that not all owners of businesses are necessarily entrepreneurs (e.g., passive investors, ESOP members) with the ability to control resources. Ownership control affords individuals with multiple forms of autonomy over not only their particular job within the firm but also the firm as a whole (Gelderen, 2016). For instance, the

“boss-free” entrepreneur has not only the capacity to decide *when* she or he works but also *when* the business is open or closed; ownership control also enables self-employed individuals to determine *how* to perform their work as well as *how* employees and vendors of the firm perform their work (Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006; Stephan et al., 2020). The ability to not only exercise volition over the design of key elements of their job but also over the firm represents a distinct job characteristic likely to drive entrepreneurial meaningfulness.⁸

Ownership Responsibility We also suggest that *ownership responsibility* is a distinct job characteristic of self-employed work, leading to entrepreneurial meaningfulness. Although many individuals enter self-employment aspiring to no longer have a boss (Gelderen, 2016), the truth is that although self-employed individuals may not be responsible for reporting to a boss, the transition from employment to self-employment often entails trading responsibility for reporting to one boss in exchange for “multiple bosses” as they suddenly become responsible for meeting the demands of a wide range of stakeholders (e.g., customers, workers, investors, lenders). Although this “burden of responsibility” is theorized to hinder mental health well-being (Cardon & Arwine, 2023, p. 233), we propose that this job characteristic, which is unique to entrepreneurs, can also represent a distinct driver of meaningful work. For instance, ownership responsibility bestows individuals with a sense of pride and accomplishment that comes from being ultimately responsible, as the owner of the business, for the value created for stakeholders by the business as a whole (e.g., employing workers, solving problems in society, creating a family legacy).

Ownership Risk Third, we introduce *ownership risk* as an additional distinct job characteristic of self-employed work influencing entrepreneurial meaningfulness. Indeed, self-employment is “an occupational choice to work for one’s own account and *risk*” (Stephan et al., 2020, p. 2). Unlike traditional forms of employment, self-employment often entails putting at risk personal financial capital (Xu & Ruef, 2004) along with other personal resources (e.g., familial relationships, personal reputation) to fulfill entrepreneurial aspirations. We propose that ownership risk represents a double-edged sword in how it influences entrepreneurial meaningfulness. On the one hand, we might expect ownership risk to diminish this experience as individuals experience psychological distress from the possibility of loss of financial capital, reputation, and so forth in the event of business failure. On the other hand, undertaking risk may also amplify entrepreneurial meaningfulness as this characteristic of work significantly intertwines one’s personal life with their work life. Additionally, as their firm succeeds, the experience of entrepreneurial meaningfulness is likely also to be further amplified, knowing they “paid a price” to get there.

⁸We acknowledge that some self-employed individuals may have considerably less ability to shape aspects of their work environment (e.g., necessity-based ventures, ventures with multiple owners, ventures that serve only one major customer).

Table 3 Selected job characteristics scales

Measurement	Job characteristics	Items	Reference
Job Diagnostics Survey (JDS)	Skill variety, task significance, task identity, autonomy, feedback	15	Hackman and Oldham (1975)
Job Characteristics Inventory (JCI)	Task variety, autonomy, feedback, task identity, dealing with others, friendship opportunities	30	Sims et al. (1976)
Work Design Questionnaire (WDQ)	Work scheduling autonomy, decision-making autonomy, work methods autonomy, task variety, task significance, task identity, feedback from job, job complexity, information processing, problem solving, skill variety, specialization, social support, initiated interdependence, received interdependence, interaction outside organization, feedback from others, ergonomics, physical demands, work conditions, equipment use	77	Morgeson and Humphrey (2006)

Relative Differences: Job Characteristics for Entrepreneurship Research

While a large body of research has examined an array of job characteristics and how they influence work-related outcomes (Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006), only a limited amount of this research has been conducted in a self-employment context (e.g., De Jong et al., 2015; Kruse et al., 2023; Schjoedt, 2009). In this section, we propose that while self-employed work exhibits many of the commonly examined job characteristics of traditional work, there are distinct aspects of self-employed work that suggest the experience of meaningful work may differ across work contexts. Accordingly, we focus on relative differences between self-employed and traditional forms of work by focusing on eight examples of job characteristics from extant literature. Before introducing these job characteristics, we first introduce Table 3, presenting the measures from which these job characteristics derive, along with a list of other job characteristics scholars may consider examining within these scales.⁹

Skill Variety (JDS, WDQ) Skill variety measures the extent to which a job “requires a variety of different activities in carrying out the work, which involves the use of a number of different skills and talents of the person” (Hackman & Oldham, 1976, p. 257). The greater the skill variety, the more likely individuals are to experience work as meaningful (Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Humphrey et al., 2007). Skill variety may be especially pronounced among the work performed by the self-employed, who often need to be “jacks-of-all-trades” to run successful businesses (Lazear, 2004) and in doing so tend to “wear many hats,” as they often take on diverse job roles such as marketing, operations, and finance

⁹The acronym for the respective measurement is included in parentheses after the job characteristic below to delineate which job characteristics are measurable by which scale.

(Mathias & Williams, 2017, p. 893). While more skill variety in work is generally theorized to result in positive outcomes (e.g., negative relationship between skill variety and burnout) (Humphrey et al., 2007, there may be cases where skill variety becomes “too much of a good thing” (Baron, 2010, p. 373), resulting in diminished meaningfulness in self-employed individuals as compared to those in traditional work. The need to use a wide variety of skills to perform diverse functions such as accounting, human resources, operations, marketing, and logistics might prevent them from using skills they find most meaningful. Indeed, while self-employed work may generally exhibit higher degrees of skill variety than the employed, the positive effect on meaningful work may diminish at a certain point. Future research may seek to examine the potential “dark sides” of skill variety in self-employment that have historically been perceived as advantageous in traditional forms of work.

Task Variety (JCI, WDQ) Task variety differs from skill variety by focusing on the degree to which the tasks necessary to perform in a job contain variety (Humphrey et al., 2007). Similar to the arguments set forth in the skill variety section, the self-employed often take on many roles, which is likely to result in even higher degrees of task variety than individuals who work for employers. Temporality is especially important to consider when considering differences in task variety between self-employed and traditional work, as early stages of venture development often require the entrepreneur to take on a broader array of tasks than in later stages of development. While we might expect task variety to be greater in self-employment in the early stages of venture development, should we expect this to continue in later stages? Additionally, does this increased variety of tasks in early stages of venture development drive meaningfulness in work, or is this perceived merely as a necessary means to achieving particular objectives (e.g., autonomy, financial success) that ultimately lead to meaningful work? These questions raise important issues for the role of AI in self-employment, as AI may influence the variety of tasks self-employed and traditional workers take on (e.g., replacing, automating, or augmenting tasks) and, thus, may have differential effects on the experience of meaningfulness in work across these two groups of workers (Bankins & Formosa, 2023; Handa et al., 2025).

Task Identity (JDS, JCI, WDQ) Task identity relates to “the extent to which [individuals] do an entire or whole piece of work and can clearly identify the result of their efforts” (Hackman & Oldham, 1976, p. 197). Theoretically, scholars considered work that allowed individuals to be involved from beginning to end as more meaningful than work that involved only part of the process (e.g., manufacturing-line work) (Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006). In self-employment, the concept of task identity presents another interesting paradox, raising questions concerning differences with traditional forms of work. On the one hand, there is sometimes seemingly no end to the entrepreneurial process, and the responsibilities of business owners are often so vast that they often engage in multitasking, which may diminish task identity; on the other hand, the sense of respon-

sibility associated with leading and managing several aspects of the venture that have definitive beginnings and endings (e.g., raising funds, developing a new product) may foster task identity in ways that promote a greater sense of meaningfulness in work than traditional forms of work (Schjoedt, 2009).

Whether the self-employed experience greater meaningfulness in work than their counterparts is likely contingent on a variety of factors. A few important considerations include who is involved in the business (e.g., solo entrepreneur, entrepreneur on a team, entrepreneur manager), the nature of the tasks embedded in the business (e.g., service industry, manufacturing industry), or the particular tasks the entrepreneur takes on in the business (e.g., accountant, salesperson). Future research could explore how different configurations of these variables influence the relationship between task identity and meaningful work, potentially uncovering optimal configurations for enhancing work meaningfulness.

Autonomy (JDS, JCI, WDO) Perhaps one of the most distinct job characteristics of self-employment relative to traditional forms of work concerns the degree of autonomy this type of work often affords (Gelderens, 2016). While autonomy is often used as a broad label for work characteristics resembling independence and freedom in work (e.g., Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Sims et al., 1976), researchers expand on this understanding to break down autonomy into three aspects of work freedom: work scheduling, decision-making, and work methods (Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006). Work scheduling concerns the temporal dynamics of autonomy, such that individuals can work *when* they choose to work; decision-making concerns the ability to use one's judgment in what decisions to make in work; work methods entail the ability to choose *how* to complete one's work (Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006).

While research on autonomy in the context of self-employment has been found to be a salient driver of meaningful work (Nikolova & Cnossen, 2020; Nikolova et al., 2022), this research may benefit from a more nuanced focus on which aspects of autonomy are driving these relationships in self-employment as compared to traditional forms of work. This job characteristic is also similar to that of what we describe as *ownership control* above, raising important questions concerning the extent to which ownership-enabled autonomy in work plays a distinct role in shaping entrepreneurial meaningfulness. We highlight that there remain opportunities to go beyond comparing entrepreneurs with non-entrepreneurs in terms of differences in autonomy in general to consider variations in *types of autonomy* among entrepreneurs themselves. For instance, work-scheduling autonomy may represent more meaningful characteristics of work to a lifestyle entrepreneur seeking to find time to travel outside of work (Morris & Kuratko, 2021) than to a social entrepreneur concerned primarily with sustainable work processes (Vedula et al., 2022). Such research could demonstrate both how and why not all forms of self-employment are created equal with respect to facilitating such meaningful work experiences, potentially leading to a more refined understanding of meaningful work differences between the self-employed and traditional workers.

Task Significance (JDS, WDQ) Task significance entails “the degree to which the job has a substantial impact on the lives or work of other people, whether in the immediate organization or in the external environment” (Hackman & Oldham, 1976, p. 257). The role that self-employed individuals play as primary decision-makers within their firms represents an important distinction from traditional workers that might have a profound effect on task significance. Indeed, self-employed individuals who see the broader impact of their firm on others (e.g., workers, customers) as a reflection of their own efforts are likely to experience an enhanced effect on their task significance (see Ownership Responsibility). Indeed, the self-directed nature of this type of work enables self-employed individuals to design their work in ways (e.g., selling a personally meaningful product) that allow for greater levels of task significance as they see themselves as contributing to the impact through their firm.

Additionally, certain business models designed to generate social and environmental impact are likely to give rise to greater task significance for entrepreneurs leading these firms (Vedula et al., 2022). Important to consider, however, is the unique role that the entrepreneur plays within their firm. In circumstances where the entrepreneur is removed from everyday interactions, employees may experience greater task significance given limited interaction frequency with and proximity to key stakeholders (e.g., employees, customers) in their work (e.g., Grant, 2007). Whether those in self-employment or in traditional roles experience greater task significance is likely shaped by a wide array of contextual factors related to the nature of the firm and the role assumed within the firm.

Friendship Opportunities (JCI) Friendship opportunities concern “the degree to which a job allows [individuals] to talk with one another on the job and to establish informal relationships with other employees at work” (Sims et al., 1976, p. 197). While many individuals, regardless of the type of work, build friendships through work, self-employment represents a complex working environment for establishing and maintaining friendships. While self-employment provides an excellent platform to build friendships with others given the wide range of stakeholders that entrepreneurs often interact with (e.g., customers, workers, investors), self-employment also serves as a double-edged sword in this regard in that this type of work is often considered a lonely endeavor as compared to traditional forms of work (Cardon & Arwine, 2023).

Although entrepreneurship research indicates that supervisor entrepreneurs experience greater meaningfulness in work than solo entrepreneurs (see Nikolova et al., 2022), does the role of boss inhibit their ability to establish authentic friendships with their workers? If so, we might expect traditional workers to be presented with greater friendship opportunities within a company than the entrepreneur. Another factor to consider is that entrepreneurs are often burdened with time pressures and responsibilities, at least to a greater extent than the average worker within a firm, which may limit opportunities to build friendships. Future research may seek to examine the enabling and disabling conditions of self-employed work leading to

friendship opportunities and the related effects on meaningful work experiences. Doing so could shed light on how entrepreneurship promotes eudaimonic well-being, in light of positive relations with others representing one of its core dimensions (Ryff, 2019).

Feedback from Job (JDS, JCI, WDQ) Feedback from the job relates to “the degree to which carrying out the work activities required by the job results in the individual obtaining direct and clear information about the effectiveness of his or her performance” (Hackman & Oldham, 1976, p. 258). Recognizing that entrepreneurs tend to have a greater scope of responsibility in their work (e.g., overseeing the entire company) than regular employees who generally are responsible for a particular activity (e.g., accounting, sales) or managing part of a business (e.g., leading the accounting division), we might expect self-employed individuals to receive a greater breadth of feedback from their work (i.e., feedback from multiple sources) than their employee counterparts. Future research may seek to examine how this aspect of self-employed work relates to feedback and the effects on the experience of meaningfulness in work.

Important to consider is that entrepreneurs are often given full access to financial and operational data as well as ultimately have responsibility for how their business performs. Accordingly, firm performance is likely to play a salient role in shaping the extent to which this job characteristic promotes or diminishes meaningful work experiences among self-employed individuals. An interesting conundrum arises in ventures focused on creating social value even more than economic value (Bacq & Janssen, 2011; Bacq & Kickul, 2022), as feedback related to firm performance may be especially limited given the ambiguous nature of non-economic performance measures (Nason et al., 2018). However, this limited feedback may paradoxically be beneficial for facilitating meaningfulness in low-performing social ventures as it buffers against the entrepreneur knowing whether the firm is performing well or not. Future research may seek to examine ways in which more or less feedback differentially influences self-employed versus regular employees based upon unique aspects of the role of entrepreneur.

Feedback from Others (WDQ) In addition to feedback directly from the job, scholars have also highlighted the importance of receiving feedback from others (e.g., one’s boss) as an important characteristic of work (Hackman & Lawler, 1971). Feedback from others “reflects the degree to which others in the organization provide information about performance” (Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006, p. 1324). Since self-employed individuals generally do not have a boss, the source of feedback from others differs from more traditional forms of work. Rather than receiving feedback from a boss on how they are performing in their job, self-employed individuals may receive little to no feedback from others (e.g., solo entrepreneur with no investors) or significantly more feedback from others than regular employees (e.g., entrepreneur with multiple investors and a board of directors). Future research may consider examining how various configurations of feedback from others (e.g., source, quantity, valence) influence the meaningfulness self-employed individuals

experience through work to understand what it is about self-employment that promotes meaningfulness in distinct ways from traditional employment.

Step 2: Entrepreneurial Meaningfulness Drives Entrepreneurial Outcomes

The study of meaningful work holds importance for entrepreneurship researchers, not only because experiencing entrepreneurial meaningfulness is in itself an end to be realized from a well-being perspective (i.e., entrepreneurial meaningfulness as a dependent variable of a study) but also due to the potential effects on important entrepreneurial outcomes.

Indeed, early research on the JCM proposed that experienced meaningfulness promoted work motivation, performance, satisfaction, and lower employee turnover (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). Subsequent research has expanded that understanding, indicating that meaningful work is also associated with other important outcomes such as work engagement, organizational commitment, life meaning, psychological health, and general health (Allan et al., 2019).

For entrepreneurship scholars, the exploration of how work characteristics drive entrepreneurial meaningfulness can provide unique insight into various entrepreneurial outcomes. Given the relative scarcity of empirical insights on the influence of the experience of meaningful work in a self-employment context (i.e., entrepreneurial meaningfulness) on entrepreneurial outcomes, we propose several promising avenues for future research related to entrepreneurial persistence, entrepreneurial well-being, and entrepreneurial performance.

Entrepreneurial Persistence Research indicates that when individuals experience their work as meaningful, it increases their commitment to their careers or the firms they work for (Duffy et al., 2014; Steger et al., 2012) and reduces withdrawal intentions from work (Allan et al., 2019). In the entrepreneurship context, these findings suggest a potential link between meaningful work and entrepreneurial persistence, a topic of growing interest in entrepreneurship research (e.g., Boss et al., 2023; Yan et al., 2023).

Future research can explore the nuanced role of meaningful work in entrepreneurial persistence, considering two distinct aspects: (1) persistence *within a specific venture* (i.e., individuals not wanting to depart from a particular venture because of the meaningfulness they experience) and (2) *entrepreneurship as a profession* (i.e., individuals find the work of entrepreneurship meaningful and thus may engage in serial entrepreneurship). For instance, if an entrepreneur's primary source of meaning comes from a particular venture, the experience of meaningful work is likely to lead to a reluctance to abandon that particular business. Alternatively, if the primary source of meaning comes from pursuing innovative ideas, solving problems, or working as an entrepreneur, this could foster a broader commitment to

entrepreneurship as a career path, potentially leading to serial entrepreneurship. We emphasize that because persistence is not always beneficial, especially in cases where an individual should pivot or exit altogether from a venture, research should investigate the “dark side” of entrepreneurial meaningfulness. Under what conditions might this lead to detrimental forms of persistence, such as escalation of commitment to a failing venture or even an addiction to entrepreneurship (Spivack & McKelvie, 2021)?

Entrepreneurial Well-Being A growing body of literature in the field of entrepreneurship focuses on the psychological well-being of self-employed individuals (e.g., Nikolaev et al., 2020). While early research primarily focused on hedonic indicators of well-being, such as work and life satisfaction (e.g., Schjoedt, 2009), recent scholarship has begun to explore more eudaimonic dimensions of well-being in the context of entrepreneurship (Dwyer et al., 2023; Nikolova et al., 2022; Ryff, 2019). This shift aligns well with research on meaningful work, which often centers around the development of eudaimonic aspects of well-being, such as personal growth and purpose in life (Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012; Martela & Pessi, 2018). Given the limited research on meaningful work in entrepreneurship, scholars may examine the effect of meaningful work on various dimensions of eudaimonic well-being, such as positive relations with others and a sense of autonomy (Ryff, 2019). While we might expect individuals to experience these eudaimonic outcomes in entrepreneurship (see Shir & Ryff, 2021), the specific role of experienced meaningfulness in shaping these outcomes remains underexplored.

Also, researchers could further explore how the relationship between meaningful work and well-being might differ for entrepreneurs compared to employees (Stephan et al., 2020). Do distinct characteristics of entrepreneurship (e.g., autonomy, responsibility) amplify the well-being benefits of meaningful work? Conversely, could certain characteristics of entrepreneurship (e.g., stress and uncertainty) moderate these benefits? Longitudinal studies could be particularly valuable in understanding how the relationship between meaningful work and well-being evolves over the entrepreneurial journey. Research in this domain would be especially beneficial beyond heavily studied contexts such as Europe and the USA.

Entrepreneurial Performance Given that meaningful work is associated with job performance and work engagement among employees (Allan et al., 2019; Cnossen & Nikolova, 2024), similar effects might be expected in the context of self-employment. However, the unique nature of entrepreneurial work—characterized by high autonomy, personal risk, and perceived impact—suggests that the relationship between meaningful work and performance might manifest differently for entrepreneurs. When self-employed individuals find their work to be meaningful, it might lead to increased effort, enhanced creativity, and more effective interactions with stakeholders such as investors, customers, and employees, which could improve entrepreneurial performance. Research also indicates that meaningful work promotes organizational citizenship among employees (Allan et al., 2019); in a self-employment context, this might translate to the creation of a positive organizational culture, even in smaller nascent ventures.

Future research could explore how meaningful work influences various aspects of entrepreneurial performance, including not only the financial outcomes of the firm but also social and environmental impact (Brieger et al., 2021). This multidimensional approach to performance aligns with recent trends in entrepreneurship research that emphasize broader definitions of success that include those defined by the entrepreneur that go beyond personal pecuniary rewards or purely economic outcomes (Angel et al., 2018). Interestingly, the relationship between meaningful work and entrepreneurial performance might also be bidirectional. While meaningful work could drive performance, achieving better performance might also fuel entrepreneurs' sense of meaningfulness. This interplay between meaningful work and performance over time represents a fascinating area for longitudinal research.

In conclusion, the study of meaningful work in the context of self-employment offers rich opportunities for advancing our understanding of both meaningful work and entrepreneurship. By examining how meaningful work influences persistence, well-being, and performance in this context, researchers can contribute valuable insights to both fields. Future studies should not only investigate these relationships but also consider potential moderating factors such as the type of venture, the entrepreneur's motivations, and the broader cultural and economic context (see below). Such research has the potential to inform both theoretical understanding and practical interventions to support those engaged in entrepreneurship.

Towards an Entrepreneurship-Specific Measure of Meaningful Work

While existing work characteristics measures provide valuable insights, we emphasize that they also fail to capture the unique dynamics of self-employed work. General constructs related to work characteristics overlook critical aspects that are intrinsic to the entrepreneurial journey, such as the personal financial risk that often accompanies owning a business (Xu & Ruef, 2004), deep emotional and identity-related investment in the venture (Fauchart & Gruber, 2011), a heightened state of control over aspects of work (Gelderén, 2016), sense of responsibility related to the broader impact of the firm on society (Vedula et al., 2022), and the constant need for adaptability and innovation in uncertain environments (e.g., Cardon et al., 2009). While we believe our introduction of ownership control, responsibility, and risk provides important steps in the right direction, we call for entrepreneurship scholars to identify other distinct job characteristics of self-employed work in an effort to introduce an *entrepreneurial meaningfulness* scale.

As Cardon et al. (2013) note in their development of an entrepreneurial passion scale, "past research on entrepreneurial passion (EP) has been hindered by the lack of a sound measurement instrument" (p. 373). Similarly, we argue that research on meaningful work in entrepreneurship contexts has been and will remain limited by the lack of a context-specific measure. As we describe in this chapter, the unique aspects of self-employed work suggest that meaningful work may manifest

differently in a self-employment context compared to traditional employment. While Cardon et al. (2013) argue that “passion is at the heart of entrepreneurship” (p. 373), we posit that meaningfulness is equally, if not more, central to the entrepreneurial experience. Unlike passion, which can be intense but fleeting, meaningfulness provides a deeper, potentially more enduring motivation that can sustain entrepreneurs through inevitable challenges and setbacks.

Comprising aspects of greater good motivations (see Steger et al., 2012), entrepreneurial meaningfulness offers a sense of purpose that transcends immediate excitement or financial rewards, potentially fostering greater resilience, improved decision-making aligned with long-term goals, and enhanced overall well-being. Furthermore, a strong sense of entrepreneurial meaningfulness can guide entrepreneurs in creating a lasting impact and legacy, motivating them to think beyond immediate success to long-term value creation.¹⁰

Developing an entrepreneurship-specific measure will likely have its challenges, including determining whether this should involve identifying distinct job characteristics of self-employed work (e.g., ownership control) or, like the entrepreneurial passion scale (Cardon et al., 2013), domains of entrepreneurial activity (e.g., inventing, founding, developing) from which to establish the scale. Scholars will also need to consider that dynamics of self-employed work often change over time through various stages of venture development (e.g., starting, growing, exiting). Hence, particular characteristics of self-employed work may be experienced as more meaningful early on (e.g., starting a venture) or much later on (e.g., exiting a venture) than during the middle stages (e.g., operating a venture). Future research may be required to further understand these temporal dynamics. Additionally, unlike the job characteristics of traditional work contexts that tend to remain fixed over time, job characteristics associated with self-employment may be more apt to shift over time, especially in the early days of venture development.

Like the entrepreneurial passion scale (Cardon et al., 2013), this new measure could incorporate dimensions specifically related to the ways in which individuals experience self-employed work as meaningful. In doing so, this effort could go beyond comparisons between the self-employed and employees to uncover dynamics of meaningful work that are specific to self-employed work to allow for a deeper and more nuanced understanding of meaningful work in this particular work context. Potential dimensions of this measure may include those such as venture-related impact, legacy building, income potential, and personal leadership development, alongside adapted versions of traditional work characteristics found in established models like the JDS, JCI, and WDQ. By capturing these unique aspects of entrepreneurial meaningfulness, such a measure could provide deeper insights into what drives sustained entrepreneurial effort, satisfaction, and success beyond what we already know about concepts such as entrepreneurial self-efficacy and passion.

¹⁰ Of course, entrepreneurial passion and meaningfulness are not mutually exclusive and studying their relationship is an important avenue for future research.

A context-specific measure would also better reflect the realities of self-employment and more effectively predict important business outcomes such as entrepreneurial persistence (Yan et al., 2023), venture endurance (Sarasvathy, 2021), entrepreneurial well-being (Stephan et al., 2020), and capture distinct challenges and rewards of entrepreneurship. As Cardon et al. (2013) indicate, “the domains and dimensions of EP are distinct from each other and from other aspects of emotion and cognition known to play a role in entrepreneurship” (p. 374). Similarly, we expect that an entrepreneurship-specific measure of meaningful work would reveal unique insights beyond the general work meaningfulness measures. Altogether, we believe this approach would enable more nuanced and context-specific investigations into how entrepreneurs experience and derive meaningfulness from their work, potentially leading to better support systems and interventions for enhancing entrepreneurial well-being and venture success. Thus, we believe that the development of an entrepreneurship-specific measure of meaningful work represents a critical step for research in this field.

Expanding the Horizons of Meaningful Work in Entrepreneurship

The field of meaningful work in entrepreneurship offers rich opportunities for future research. While our discussion has centered on measuring work characteristics, the experience of meaningful work, and personal and work-related outcomes, several other areas warrant further investigation in relation to (a) cultural and societal influences on meaningful work as well as (b) the impact of technological advancements on meaningful work.

These areas not only promise to deepen our understanding of meaningful work in entrepreneurship but also broaden the scope of entrepreneurship research as a whole. The limited access to secondary datasets capturing meaningful work measures in the context of self-employment will require scholars to engage in primary data collection efforts to advance our understanding of meaningful work in this context. We encourage researchers to not only employ scales previously mentioned in this chapter but also consider what we next present as ways to further strengthen the research contributions of these future studies.

Cultural and Societal Influences on Meaningful Work

A promising opportunity in this field is to expand our understanding of how societal and cultural factors shape the experience of meaningful work in entrepreneurship. Specific examples include examining the influence of collectivist versus individualistic cultures (Hofstede, 1980), wealthy versus impoverished environments, and various institutional factors on meaningful work in the context of self-employment.

In a review of the literature, scholars recognized that among studies on meaningful work, “the vast majority were from the United States, and all were in a Western context ... and there is reason to suspect that the experience of meaningful work differs across cultures” (Allan et al., 2019, p. 516–517).

Accordingly, future entrepreneurship research on the topic of meaningful work should examine differences in the experience of meaningful work across countries and cultures beyond the Western context. Indeed, research should go beyond examining conditions of decent work in emerging and low-income countries, which tend to be more collectivist (Blustein et al., 2023). Lutz (2009, p. 317) explains that “theories that were created within and for individualistic cultures are not at home within communal cultures.” Research suggests that in rural communities in Ghana, collectivist institutions shape the meaning individuals make of their work as entrepreneurs, such that they prioritize “supporting the community” even to the detriment of the growth potential of their ventures (Slade Shantz et al., 2018, p. 433). In light of this, future research may consider comparing what makes entrepreneurship worth doing in collectivist versus individualistic cultures.

Beyond differences between individualistic and collectivist cultures, future research should compare what makes work meaningful in parts of the world with extreme levels of poverty. While much of the research on these types of entrepreneurs might suggest that income generation represents the primary source of work meaningfulness, research also shows that in impoverished areas, entrepreneurship can provide families with educational opportunities for children, offering a path out of poverty for future generations (Shepherd et al., 2020a). This finding suggests that the meaning derived from entrepreneurial work in impoverished contexts may extend far beyond the immediate financial returns, encompassing long-term family and societal impacts. Thus, future research can examine the potential sources of meaningfulness in work that may be unique to different cultural and economic contexts.

Furthermore, the interplay between individual-level socio-cognitive traits and country-level institutional contexts offers a rich avenue for exploring cultural influences on meaningful work in entrepreneurship. Boudreaux et al. (2019) highlight how economic institutions moderate the relationship between individual traits and entrepreneurial action. This type of multilevel perspective can be extended to the study of meaningful work. For instance, important entrepreneurial variables such as entrepreneurial self-efficacy, alertness to opportunities, and fear of failure may interact differently with institutional contexts to shape perceptions of meaningful work across various cultures. This suggests that the sources of meaningful work in entrepreneurship are not universal but are shaped by the complex interplay between individual traits, cultural values, and institutional frameworks.

The Impact of Technological Advancements on Meaningful Work

The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) and other technologies (e.g., robotics) presents both opportunities and challenges for our understanding of

meaningful work in entrepreneurship. As these technologies reshape the nature of work itself, they are fundamentally altering the entrepreneurial process from problem identification to market entry (e.g., Boussioux et al., 2023; De Cremer & Narayanan, 2023; Dell'Acqua et al., 2023; Obschonka & Audretsch, 2020). AI has the potential to transform various stages of the innovation process (Boussioux et al., 2023). For instance, in the problem identification stage, AI can process vast amounts of data from diverse sources to predict customer needs and pain points, potentially before customers are even aware of them. This predictive power enables firms to anticipate market shifts and consumer challenges with unprecedented speed in ways that were previously not possible through other technologies. Additionally, in the ideation stage, AI tools like ChatGPT have demonstrated the ability to generate business ideas faster and at a lower cost than students from elite universities, with many of these AI-generated ideas ranking highly on measures of commercial potential (Girotra et al., 2023).

These developments raise important questions about the nature of meaningful work in entrepreneurship. As AI takes on more tasks traditionally associated with human creativity and decision-making, how does this impact entrepreneurs' sense of ownership and the meaningfulness they derive from their work? Recognizing that entrepreneurship is often tied to procedural utility (i.e., enjoying the process of being an entrepreneur) (Stephan et al., 2020), does the use of AI to become an entrepreneur minimize the opportunity to experience "entrepreneurial meaningfulness" if one knows they were helped by AI and did not endure the typical challenges associated with becoming an entrepreneur themselves? Do individuals retain the same sense of fulfillment or meaningfulness when developing ideas generated by AI compared to those that emerged from their own cognitive processes? Furthermore, the integration of AI into entrepreneurial processes may impact entrepreneurial well-being.

While AI can potentially reduce certain types of cognitive load (e.g., simplifying tasks), the complexity and unpredictability of AI systems may introduce new challenges. Recognizing that relatedness is considered one of the primary determinants of meaningful work (Nikolova & Cnossen, 2020), AI may lead to more solo-entrepreneurship because there is less need to hire other people inside firms and, thus, might lead to adverse effects on the experience of meaningful work as well as positive relations with others (Ryff, 2019). AI may also introduce new forms of cognitive strain from trying to understand, manage, and oversee complex AI systems and outputs that are often considered a "black box" (Lebovitz et al., 2021). This could lead to a paradoxical situation where the very tools meant to reduce cognitive burden may increase it. What happens when entrepreneurs rely on AI-driven decision-making tools that fail them in practice due to technical challenges such as hallucinations? Will AI influence work meaningfulness in ways that digital technologies have within firms, both negatively (e.g., workers feeling over-monitored) and positively (e.g., opportunities for self-reflection and growth) (Bailey et al., 2019; Stein et al., 2019)?

Finally, recent research on robotics (not AI) suggests that certain technologies can have negative effects on the meaningfulness of work, especially among individuals performing routine tasks (Nikolova et al., 2024). While certain

entrepreneurial tasks are non-routine (e.g., raising funding, inventing new offerings, expanding to new customer segments), this finding raises questions about how different types of technologies might enhance or diminish the experience of meaningful work for entrepreneurs across various stages of the innovation process. As entrepreneurs serve as both users of these technologies and decision-makers regarding their integration, they become “meaning makers” not only for themselves but also for their employees. This dual role presents unique challenges and opportunities in shaping work environments that leverage AI’s benefits while preserving a sense of meaningful work. Future research in this area could focus on longitudinal studies tracking entrepreneurs’ perceptions of meaningful work before and after integrating certain technologies (e.g., AI, robotics) into their ventures. Additionally, exploring strategies entrepreneurs can employ to maintain a sense of meaningful work in an increasingly AI-driven and robotic business landscape would be valuable.

AI Disclosure During the preparation of this work, the authors used Grammarly and ChatGPT to edit and improve parts of the manuscript. After using this tool/service, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

References

- Allan, B. A., Autin, K. L., & Duffy, R. D. (2014). Examining social class and work meaning within the psychology of working framework. *Journal of Career Assessment*, 22(4), 543–561.
- Allan, B., Batz-Barbarich, C., Sterling, H., & Tay, L. (2019). Outcomes of meaningful work: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Management Studies*, 56(3), 500–528.
- Angel, P., Jenkins, A., & Stephens, A. (2018). Understanding entrepreneurial success: A phenomenographic approach. *International Small Business Journal: Researching Entrepreneurship*, 36(6), 611–636. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0266242618768662>
- Ashmos, D. P., & Duchon, D. (2000). Spirituality at work: A conceptualization and measure. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 9(2), 134–145. <https://doi.org/10.1177/105649260092008>
- Autor, D. H., Levy, F., & Murnane, R. J. (2003). The skill content of recent technological change: An empirical exploration. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 118(4), 1279–1333.
- Bacq, S., & Janssen, F. (2011). The multiple faces of social entrepreneurship: A review of definitional issues based on geographical and thematic criteria. *Entrepreneurship & Regional Development*, 23(5–6), 373–403. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08985626.2011.577242>
- Bacq, S., & Kickul, J. R. (2022). Social entrepreneurship. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Business and Management*.
- Bailey, C., & Madden, A. (2017). Time reclaimed: Temporality and the experience of meaningful work. *Work, Employment and Society*, 31(1), 3–18. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017015604100>
- Bailey, C., Madden, A., Alfes, K., Shantz, A., & Soane, E. (2017). The mismanaged soul: Existential labor and the erosion of meaningful work. *Human Resource Management Review*, 27(3), 416–430. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hrmr.2016.11.001>
- Bailey, C., Yeoman, R., Madden, A., Thompson, M., & Kerridge, G. (2019). A review of the empirical literature on meaningful work: Progress and research agenda. *Human Resource Development Review*, 18(1), 83–113. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1534484318804653>
- Bankins, S., & Formosa, P. (2023). The ethical implications of artificial intelligence (AI) for meaningful work. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 185(4), 725–740. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-023-05339-7>

- Baron, R. A. (2010). Job design and entrepreneurship: Why closer connections = mutual gains. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 31(2–3), 370–378. <https://doi.org/10.1002/job.607>
- Berg, J. M., Grant, A. M., & Johnson, V. (2010). When callings are calling: Crafting work and leisure in pursuit of unanswered occupational callings. *Organization Science*, 21(5), 973–994. <https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.1090.0497>
- Binder, M., & Blankenberg, A.-K. (2020). Self-employment and subjective well-being. In K. F. Zimmermann (Ed.), *Handbook of labor, human resources and population economics* (pp. 1–25). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-57365-6_191-1
- Blustein, D. L., Lysova, E. I., & Duffy, R. D. (2023). Understanding decent work and meaningful work. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, 10, 289.
- Boova, L., Pratt, M. G., & Lepisto, D. A. (2019). *11 Exploring work orientations and cultural accounts of work: Toward a research agenda for examining the role of culture in meaningful work*.
- Boss, A. D., Yan, J., & Reger, R. K. (2023). Keep on keeping on: A psychological approach to entrepreneurial persistence. *Journal of Business Venturing Insights*, 19, e00393. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbvi.2023.e00393>
- Boudreaux, C. J., Nikolaev, B. N., & Klein, P. (2019). Socio-cognitive traits and entrepreneurship: The moderating role of economic institutions. *Journal of Business Venturing*, 34(1), 178–196. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusvent.2018.08.003>
- Boussiou, L. N., Lane, J., Zhang, M., Jacimovic, V., & Lakhani, K. R. (2023). *The crowdless future? How generative AI is shaping the future of human crowdsourcing*. The Crowdless Future.
- Brieger, S. A., De Clercq, D., & Meynhardt, T. (2021). Doing good, feeling good? Entrepreneurs' social value creation beliefs and work-related well-being. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 172(4), 707–725. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-020-04512-6>
- Bronk, K. (2014). *Purpose in life: A critical component of optimal youth development* (p. 175). <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-7491-9>
- Bunderson, J. S., & Thompson, J. A. (2009). The call of the wild: Zookeepers, callings, and the double-edged sword of deeply meaningful work. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 54(1), 32–57. <https://doi.org/10.2189/asqu.2009.54.1.32>
- Cardon, M. S., & Arwine, R. P. (2023). The many faces of entrepreneurial loneliness. *Personnel Psychology*, 77, 225–277. <https://doi.org/10.1111/peps.12614>
- Cardon, M. S., Wincent, J., Singh, J., & Drnovsek, M. (2009). The nature and experience of entrepreneurial passion. *Academy of Management Review*, 34(3), 511–532. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2009.40633190>
- Cardon, M. S., Gregoire, D. A., Stevens, C. E., & Patel, P. C. (2013). Measuring entrepreneurial passion: Conceptual foundations and scale validation. *Journal of Business Venturing*, 28(3), 373–396. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusvent.2012.03.003>
- Cnossen, F., & Nikolova, M. (2024). *Work meaningfulness and effort* (No. 17182). IZA Discussion Papers.
- Damon, W. (2008). *The path to purpose: Helping our children find their calling in life*. Simon and Schuster.
- De Cremer, D., & Narayanan, D. (2023). How AI tools can—and cannot—help organizations become more ethical. *Frontiers in Artificial Intelligence*, 6, 1093712.
- De Jong, J. P. J., Parker, S. K., Wennekers, S., & Wu, C.-H. (2015). Entrepreneurial behavior in organizations: Does job design matter? *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, 39(4), 981–995. <https://doi.org/10.1111/etap.12084>
- Dell'Acqua, F., McFowland, E., III, Mollick, E. R., Lifshitz-Assaf, H., Kellogg, K., Rajendran, S., et al. (2023). Navigating the jagged technological frontier: Field experimental evidence of the effects of AI on knowledge worker productivity and quality. In *Harvard Business School Technology & Operations Management Unit Working Paper*, (24-013).
- Duchon, D., & Plowman, D. A. (2005). Nurturing the spirit at work: Impact on work unit performance. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 16(5), 807–833.

- Duffy, R. D., Allan, B. A., Autin, K. L., & Douglass, R. P. (2014). Living a calling and work well-being: A longitudinal study. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 61(4), 605.
- Dwyer, S. M., Lerman, M., & Gras, D. (2023). When the going gets tough: Stressors and purpose in life among social and commercial entrepreneurs. *Journal of Business Venturing Insights*, 20, e00434. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbvi.2023.e00434>
- Fairlie, P. (2011). Meaningful work, employee engagement, and other key employee outcomes: Implications for human resource development. *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, 13(4), 508–525. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1523422311431679>
- Fauchart, E., & Gruber, M. (2011). Darwinians, communitarians, and missionaries: The role of founder identity in entrepreneurship. *Academy of Management Journal*, 54(5), 935–957. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2009.0211>
- Foss, N. J., Klein, P. G., Lien, L. B., Zellweger, T., & Zenger, T. (2020). Ownership competence. *Strategic Management Journal*, 42, 302–328. <https://doi.org/10.1002/smj.3222>
- Frankl, V. (1959). *Man's search for meaning*. Simon & Schuster.
- Frémeaux, S., & Henry, F. (2023). Temporality and meaningful entrepreneurship. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 188(4), 725–739. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-023-05502-0>
- Gelderden, M. V. (2016). Entrepreneurial autonomy and its dynamics. *Applied Psychology*, 65(3), 541–567. <https://doi.org/10.1111/apps.12066>
- Girotra, K., Meincke, L., Terwiesch, C., & Ulrich, K. T. (2023). *Ideas are dimes a dozen: Large language models for idea generation in innovation*. Available at SSRN 4526071.
- Grant, A. M. (2007). Relational job design and the motivation to make a prosocial difference. *Academy of Management Review*, 32(2), 393–417. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2007.24351328>
- Grant, A. M. (2008). The significance of task significance: Job performance effects, relational mechanisms, and boundary conditions. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 93(1), 108.
- Hackman, J. R., & Lawler, E. E. (1971). Employee reactions to job characteristics. *Journal of applied psychology*, 55(3), 259.
- Hackman, J. R., & Oldham, G. R. (1975). Development of the job diagnostic survey. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 60(2), 159–170. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0076546>
- Hackman, J. R., & Oldham, G. R. (1976). Motivation through the design of work: Test of a theory. *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance*, 16(2), 250–279. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0030-5073\(76\)90016-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/0030-5073(76)90016-7)
- Handa, K., Tamkin, A., McCain, M., Huang, S., Durmus, E., Heck, S., et al. (2025). *Which economic tasks are performed with AI? Evidence from millions of Claude conversations*.
- Hirschi, A. (2012). Callings and work engagement: Moderated mediation model of work meaningfulness, occupational identity, and occupational self-efficacy. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 59(3), 479.
- Hofstede, G. (1980). *Culture's consequences: International differences in work-related values*. Sage.
- Humphrey, S. E., Nahrgang, J. D., & Morgeson, F. P. (2007). Integrating motivational, social, and contextual work design features: A meta-analytic summary and theoretical extension of the work design literature. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 92(5), 1332–1356. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.92.5.1332>
- Kruse, P., Chipeta, E. M., & Ueberschär, I. (2023). What keeps social entrepreneurs happy? Exploring personality, work design, external support, and social impact as resources of social entrepreneurs' mental well-being. *Sustainability*, 15(5), 4109. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su15054109>
- Lazear, E. P. (2004). Balanced skills and entrepreneurship. *The American Economic Review*, 94(2), 208–211.
- Lutz, D.W., 2009. African ubuntu philosophy and global management. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 84, 313–328.
- Lebovitz, S., Levina, N., & Lifshitz-Assaf, H. (2021). Is AI ground truth really true? The dangers of training and evaluating AI tools based on experts' know-what. *MIS Quarterly*, 45, 1501–1526. <https://doi.org/10.25300/MISQ/2021/16564>

- Lepisto, D. A., & Pratt, M. G. (2017). Meaningful work as realization and justification: Toward a dual conceptualization. *Organizational Psychology Review*, 7(2), 99–121. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2041386616630039>
- Lerman, M. P., Munyon, T. P., & Williams, D. W. (2020). The (not so) dark side of entrepreneurship: A meta-analysis of the well-being and performance consequences of entrepreneurial stress. *Strategic Entrepreneurship Journal*, 15, 377–402. <https://doi.org/10.1002/sej.1370>
- Lieff, S. J. (2009). Perspective: The missing link in academic career planning and development: Pursuit of meaningful and aligned work. *Academic Medicine*, 84(10), 1383. <https://doi.org/10.1097/ACM.0b013e3181b6bd54>
- Lips-Wiersma, M., & Morris, L. (2009). Discriminating between ‘Meaningful Work’ and the ‘Management of Meaning’. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 88(3), 491–511. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-009-0118-9>
- Lips-Wiersma, M., & Wright, S. (2012). Measuring the meaning of meaningful work: Development and validation of the comprehensive meaningful work scale (CMWS). *Group & Organization Management*, 37(5), 655–685. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1059601112461578>
- Martela, F., & Pessi, A. B. (2018). Significant work is about self-realization and broader purpose: Defining the key dimensions of meaningful work. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9, 363. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.00363>
- Martela, F., Ryan, R. M., & Steger, M. F. (2018). Meaningfulness as satisfaction of autonomy, competence, relatedness, and beneficence: Comparing the four satisfactions and positive affect as predictors of meaning in life. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 19(5), 1261–1282. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-017-9869-7>
- Maslow, A. H. (1971). *The farther reaches of human nature*. Viking Penguin.
- Mathias, B. D., & Williams, D. W. (2017). The impact of role identities on entrepreneurs’ evaluation and selection of opportunities. *Journal of Management*, 43(3), 892–918. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206314544747>
- Michaelson, C., Pratt, M. G., Grant, A. M., & Dunn, C. P. (2014). Meaningful work: Connecting business ethics and organization studies. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 121(1), 77–90. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-013-1675-5>
- Morgeson, F. P., & Humphrey, S. E. (2006). The work design questionnaire (WDQ): Developing and validating a comprehensive measure for assessing job design and the nature of work. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 91(6), 1321–1339. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.91.6.1321>
- Morris, M. H., & Kuratko, D. F. (2021). *What do entrepreneurs create?: Understanding four types of ventures*. Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Nason, R. S., Bacq, S., & Gras, D. (2018). A behavioral theory of social performance: Social identity and stakeholder expectations. *Academy of Management Review*, 43(2), 259–283. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2015.0081>
- Nikolaev, B., Boudreaux, C. J., & Wood, M. (2020). Entrepreneurship and subjective well-being: The mediating role of psychological functioning. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, 44(3), 557–586. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1042258719830314>
- Nikolova, M., & Cnossen, F. (2020). What makes work meaningful and why economists should care about it. *Labour Economics*, 65, 101847. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.labeco.2020.101847>
- Nikolova, M., Nikolaev, B., & Boudreaux, C. (2022). Being your own boss and bossing others: The moderating effect of managing others on work meaning and autonomy for the self-employed and employees. *Small Business Economics*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11187-021-00597-z>
- Nikolova, M., Cnossen, F., & Nikolaev, B. (2024). Robots, meaning, and self-determination. *Research Policy*, 53(5), 104987. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.respol.2024.104987>
- Obschonka, M., & Audretsch, D. B. (2020). Artificial intelligence and big data in entrepreneurship: A new era has begun. *Small Business Economics*, 55(3), 529–539. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11187-019-00202-4>
- Parker, S. K. (2014). Beyond motivation: Job and work Design for Development, health, ambidexterity, and more. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 65(1), 661–691. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-010213-115208>

- Pratt, M. G., & Ashforth, B. E. (2003). Fostering meaningfulness in working and at work. In K. S. Cameron, J. E. Dutton, & R. E. Quinn (Eds.), *Positive Organizational Scholarship: Foundations of a New Discipline* (pp. 309–327). Berret-Koehler.
- Pratt, M. G., Pradies, C., & Lepisto, D. A. (2013). Doing well, doing good, and doing with: Organizational practices for effectively cultivating meaningful work.
- Rosso, B. D., Dekas, K. H., & Wrzesniewski, A. (2010). On the meaning of work: A theoretical integration and review. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 30, 91–127. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.riob.2010.09.001>
- Ryff, C. D. (2019). Entrepreneurship and eudaimonic well-being: Five venues for new science. *Journal of Business Venturing*, 34(4), 646–663. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusvent.2018.09.003>
- Sarasvathy, S. D. (2021). The middle class of business: Endurance as a dependent variable in entrepreneurship. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, 45(5), 1054–1082. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10422587211015983>
- Schjoedt, L. (2009). Entrepreneurial job characteristics: An examination of their effect on entrepreneurial satisfaction. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, 33(3), 619–644. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6520.2009.00319.x>
- Shane, S. A. (2003). *A general theory of entrepreneurship: The individual-opportunity nexus*. Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Shepherd, D. A., Parida, V., & Wincent, J. (2020a). Entrepreneurship and poverty alleviation: The importance of health and children's education for slum entrepreneurs. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1042258719900774>
- Shepherd, D. A., Saade, F. P., & Wincent, J. (2020b). How to circumvent adversity? Refugee-entrepreneurs' resilience in the face of substantial and persistent adversity. *Journal of Business Venturing*, 35(4), 105940. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusvent.2019.06.001>
- Shir, N., & Ryff, C. D. (2021). Entrepreneurship, self-organization, and Eudaimonic well-being: A dynamic approach. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, 46, 1658–1684. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10422587211013798>
- Sims, H. P., Szilagyi, A. D., & Keller, R. T. (1976). The measurement of job characteristics. *Academy of Management Journal*, 19, 195–212.
- Slade Shantz, A., Kistruck, G., & Zietsma, C. (2018). The opportunity not taken: The occupational identity of entrepreneurs in contexts of poverty. *Journal of Business Venturing*, 33(4), 416–437. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusvent.2018.02.003>
- Soren, A., & Ryff, C. D. (2023). Meaningful work, well-being, and health: Enacting a Eudaimonic vision. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 20(16), 6570. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20166570>
- Spivack, A. J., & McKelvie, A. (2021). Measuring addiction to entrepreneurship. *Journal of Business Venturing Insights*, 15, e00212. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbvi.2020.e00212>
- Spreitzer, (1995). Psychological empowerment in the workplace: Dimensions, measurement, and validation. *Academy of Management Journal*, 38, 1442–1465.
- Steger, M. F., Dik, B. J., & Duffy, R. D. (2012). Measuring meaningful work: The work and meaning inventory (WAMI). *Journal of Career Assessment*, 20(3), 322–337. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1069072711436160>
- Stein, M.-K., Wagner, E. L., Tierney, P., Newell, S., & Galliers, R. D. (2019). Datification and the pursuit of meaningfulness in work. *Journal of Management Studies*, 56(3), 685–717. <https://doi.org/10.1111/joms.12409>
- Stephan, U., Tavares, S. M., Carvalho, H., Ramalho, J. J. S., Santos, S. C., & Van Veldhoven, M. (2020). Self-employment and eudaimonic well-being: Energized by meaning, enabled by societal legitimacy. *Journal of Business Venturing*, 35(6), 106047. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusvent.2020.106047>
- Vedula, S., Doblinger, C., Pacheco, D., York, J. G., Bacq, S., Russo, M. V., & Dean, T. J. (2022). Entrepreneurship for the public good: A review, critique, and path forward for social and environmental entrepreneurship research. *Academy of Management Annals*, 16(1), 391–425. <https://doi.org/10.5465/annals.2019.0143>

- Walsh, A. J. (1994). Meaningful work as a distributive good. *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 32(2), 233.
- Wolf, T., Metzing, M., & Lucas, R. E. (2022). Experienced well-being and labor market status: The role of pleasure and meaning. *Social Indicators Research*, 163(2), 691–721. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-022-02884-y>
- Wolfe, M. T., & Patel, P. C. (2019). Labor of love? The influence of work-conditions among self-employed and work stress. *Journal of Business Venturing Insights*, 11, e00118. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbvi.2019.e00118>
- Wrzesniewski, A., Dutton, J. E., & Debebe, G. (2003). Intepersonal sensemaking and the meaning of work. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 25, 93–135. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0191-3085\(03\)25003-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0191-3085(03)25003-6)
- Xu, H., & Ruef, M. (2004). The myth of the risk-tolerant entrepreneur. *Strategic Organization*, 2(4), 331–355. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1476127004047617>
- Yan, J., Boss, A. D., & Reger, R. K. (2023). The unrelenting entrepreneur: Taking stock of research on entrepreneurial persistence and related constructs. *Journal of Business Venturing Insights*, 20, e00420. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbvi.2023.e00420>

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if you modified the licensed material. You do not have permission under this license to share adapted material derived from this chapter or parts of it.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.



Meaningful Work in Historical Perspective



Benjamin Schneider

Abstract Meaningful work is an area of growing interest for economists, sociologists, and psychologists focused on recent trends and possible future developments. This chapter looks backward to historical analysis of work, exploring how historians have discussed work meaningfulness, past changes in work meaning, and whether historical experiences offer precedents for current discussions. The chapter first surveys research on labor in economic history, which has followed traditional views in economics by seeing work as a disutility, and intrinsic motivations for work have been entirely neglected. The chapter then describes the self-determination theory of human behavior developed in psychology and constructs a Historical Work Meaningfulness Framework. The chapter uses this framework to examine literature in labor and social history on work and meaning. Research into deskilling, conflicts over workers' control, the development of working-class identity, and enslaved workers' social relations illuminate levels and shifts in work meaningfulness. The main causal factors suggested by historians are changes in technology, management practices, and worker representation. The chapter concludes by discussing how qualitative and quantitative historical research can contribute to understanding long-run changes and determinants of work meaningfulness.

Keywords Work meaningfulness · Intrinsic motivation · Wellbeing · Labor history · Quality of life

JEL Codes I31 · J81 · N30 · O33

I am grateful to Femke Cnossen, Per Bonde Hansen, Urvi Khaitan, Jan Lucassen, Milena Nikolova, and Jane Whittle for their comments on this chapter. I also thank seminar participants at Uppsala Universitet and attendees at the 2025 Norwegian Winter Games in Economic History, the Groningen Work and Wellbeing Workshop, the 2025 European Social Science History Conference, and the XX World Economic History Congress. This research was supported by the Work and Wellbeing in History project, funded by the Norwegian Centre for Advanced Study.

B. Schneider (✉)
Oslo Metropolitan University, Oslo, Norway
e-mail: benjamin.schneider@oslomet.no

Introduction

Popular narratives about the changing content and experience of work suggest that twenty-first-century jobs are unusually meaningless or unsatisfying to their incumbents, but such views rarely incorporate history.¹ This chapter takes a longer-term perspective on meaningfulness in work, examining the research of historians and placing current concerns in a broader temporal context. It discusses approaches to work analysis and shows that economic historians have viewed human behavior as the result of habitual responses to stimuli, or mechanistic (Deci, 1975), with no attention to meaning or intrinsic motivation. Nevertheless, psychological theories of intrinsic motivation can be used to examine past work with historical sources. Research by labor and social historians has discussed topics related to meaningful work, and the long-run perspective of historical research contributes to a more general analysis of the development and determinants of work meaningfulness.

Readers may query whether the history of work has any useful data or conclusions for the exploration of work and meaning in the present and future. William Blake's "dark satanic mills" of the British Industrial Revolution can feel distant to the point of irrelevance for twenty-first-century office workers. Moreover, is meaningful work not just a present-day concern of workers who have ascended to a higher tier in a Maslowian (1943) hierarchy of labor conditions?

To the contrary, finding meaning in work is not uniquely modern. Psychological research into intrinsic motivation since the 1970s has produced self-determination theory (SDT), which shows that humans have psychological needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy. People who fulfill these needs report experiencing feelings of meaning in life and have higher eudaimonic well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Workers' efforts to satisfy these three psychological needs can be found throughout the history of work. Strikes against increasing employer control in the early twentieth century show workers' concern with autonomy (Braverman, 1974; Montgomery, 1979; Graves, 1981). Defensive industrial action to protect skilled crafts in the nineteenth century demonstrates interest in retaining a feeling of competence (Cohen, 1990). Pride in developing work abilities was not limited to artisans, and textile workers in the Industrial Revolution reported feelings of competence (Dublin, 1979). Past workers complained about repetitive work (Wyatt et al., 1929; Walker & Guest, 1952; Zonderman, 1992) and turnover studies found that some workers left jobs because of their monotony (Frankel, 1919). The social connections of trade unions and workers' efforts to communicate in loud and frantic factory settings show an enduring desire for relatedness (see the section "The Development of Class and Working-Class Communities").

¹The most influential of these perspectives is that of Graeber (2019), who claimed that "bullshit jobs" were widespread and their share of employment was growing in the early twenty-first-century. Graeber's assertions have been disproved by Dur and van Lent (2019), Nikolova and Cnossen (2020), and Soffia et al. (2021), who all find that few workers in Europe report that they feel their work is meaningless. Soffia et al. (2021) also show that the share of workers who consider their jobs meaningless fell from 2005 to 2015.

While employers sometimes offered higher wages to offset low autonomy, competence, or relatedness, extrinsic inducements were not sufficient for all workers, as shown by turnover and strike action. Historical workers had an interest in what we now define as meaningful work, and their perspectives on the content and context of their jobs can contribute to our understanding of how and why meaningfulness has changed.

More broadly, the history of work has much potential to inform discussions about labor in the present and future. As shown in Schneider and Vipond (2023) and discussed further in the section “Connecting History to the Present and the Future,” historical examples can contribute to debates about how developments such as automation and digital technologies may change work and labor markets by providing a long-run perspective, allowing for the analysis of completed processes of change, and offering a variety of examples for analysis. Short-term and long-term effects may differ, and researchers can use history to examine long-run developments and the final outcomes of technological adoption processes. History contains many instances of technological change, which allow researchers to examine the different variables that impact the effects of innovation on labor demand, the content of work, and work meaningfulness. Since the long-term future of innovation paths is uncertain, only by investigating many technological and organizational shifts can we understand the range of possible outcomes. The variety of results from historical innovation episodes shows that outcomes are not predetermined but are affected by the decisions of workers, managers, policymakers, and innovators.

The chapter is organized as follows: the Section “Work in Economic History” describes two ways to categorize work analysis and presents economic history’s focus on extrinsic aspects of work. Next, “Self-Determination Theory, Meaning, and a Historical Framework” outlines the psychological literature on self-determination and meaning in life and constructs a framework to examine historical work meaningfulness. Then, “Work and Meaningfulness in Labor and Social History” turns attention to labor and social history, which have used qualitative methods to understand work in the past. In the synthesis of historical research, several hypotheses are suggested regarding work meaningfulness in history and its development. Potential determinants of meaningful work are also suggested based on the historical literature. In “Connecting History to the Present and the Future,” the chapter elaborates on the value of historical experiences for research on future developments and the general social science of meaningful work, and it suggests approaches for historians and social scientists interested in studying meaningful work in the past. The final section concludes by calling for historians to directly investigate work meaningfulness, and for social scientists to consider historical parallels and evidence in their explorations of trends and determinants of meaningful work.

Work in Economic History

As a discipline that has been concerned with shifts in human living conditions since its origins in the nineteenth century, economic historians might be expected to take interest in work meaningfulness. Debates about the standard of living,

sometimes recently reconceptualized as “quality of life,” are second only to explanations of the development of national income in their salience through the history of the field. The indicators that scholars have chosen for these investigations of living standards reveal their view of what constitutes a good life. If some indicators are used frequently, this implies that the discipline sees a good society as one characterized by high levels and positive trends in such metrics.² Using this intuition, one way to summarize approaches is to examine whether researchers have focused on extrinsic or intrinsic rewards from work. For example, when scholars analyze wages to capture living standards they assume that workers were interested in extrinsic rewards; they impose such an individual welfare function on historical workers, or, less commonly, they present evidence for the importance of this indicator.³

A second approach, focusing on labor, is to apply the scholarship on work orientations to a discipline’s research topics. This literature categorizes workers’ views of work and their main motivation. Work orientations research suggests that people mainly see work as a job for generating income, a career that increases one’s social status, or a calling to fulfilling and socially valuable work (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). The topics of scholarly investigation imply researchers’ views of what workers valued.

Economic historians have almost uniformly taken an extrinsic rewards perspective or a job-oriented perspective, treating work as a source of material benefits (wages, social status), or a risk of pain (occupational risk). They have mainly analyzed real wages, frequently to the exclusion of other subjective and objective job attributes (Schneider, 2025).⁴ There has been some research on skills, skill premia, and social status, but these have been presented as extrinsic motivations for employment; they could also be seen as imposing a career orientation on historical workers. As in mainstream economics (Spencer, 2015), work has been considered a disutility and there has been hardly any discussion of intrinsic motivation to undertake work or to prefer certain working conditions for intrinsic reasons. Economic historians assume or impose an individual welfare function on historical workers in which only income or status motivates employment.⁵

²The evidence examined by social and labor historians that is discussed in “Work and Meaningfulness in Labor and Social History” shows that the availability of sources does not prevent scholars from examining intrinsic facets.

³Most indicators of quality of life are used repeatedly and fresh research into established indicators does not always include a justification for analysis. However, adding a new indicator requires an argument for its inclusion in economic historians’ conceptualization of life quality. Examples are found in the early studies of historical anthropometrics, e.g., Floud et al. (1990).

⁴The first studies of subjective wellbeing in history are very recent (Lack, 2021; Álvarez-Nogal & Prados de la Escosura, 2024) and examine general wellbeing rather than labor.

⁵Almost all discussions of motivation or incentives by economic historians exclusively consider extrinsic motivation: political leaders seek aggrandizement of wealth and power, firms and their managers seek profits, unions aim for wage increases, and congregants of religion seek salvation.

Job-Oriented Perspectives: Real Wages, Hours, and Safety

One extrinsic reward has dominated analyses of work in economic history: income. Since the nineteenth century, scholars have used long-run series of real wages as the main indicator of changes and international differences in the standard of living (Thorold Rogers, 1884; Phelps Brown & Hopkins, 1955; Allen, 2001; de Zwart, 2025). Scholarship on incomes began with Thorold Rogers (1866), and it has been the foremost object of dispute in scholars' debates about whether forces such as industrialization raised or lowered living standards. More recent research using the pathbreaking methodology of Allen (2001) to compute material living standards using consistent consumption baskets has provided new international comparisons to track global relative income. Renewed interest in wage series since the widespread adoption of Allen's welfare ratio approach has encouraged fresh consideration of the important limitations of this indicator (Stephenson, 2018, 2020; Burnette, 2023). Even so, the relative ease of finding wage data in comparison with in-kind payments for work and production for use has meant that real wages for day labor remain by far the most common area of research on labor incomes.

One limitation of wage series may have implications for work meaningfulness in the past: there were many places and times in which people did not mainly make their living from waged labor.⁶ A striking implication is found in the discussion of living standards following the Black Death in England. Day wages increased by up to 160% after the plague, and as a result the early fifteenth century is sometimes referred to as the "Golden Age of Labour." However, Hatcher (2011) showed that the increase in daily wages did not produce a commensurate rise in material living standards because there was not enough demand for day laborers to enable workers to increase their yearly incomes by the same amount. Instead, most workers toiled on their own land or on rented parcels. Instead of specialization in waged labor, most people before the industrial age had a wide range of work tasks, and few of them, especially women, had a single identifiable occupation.⁷ Carrying out many work activities may have produced feelings of autonomy by comparison with a narrow work portfolio, but spreading one's time over different tasks may have limited opportunities to develop abilities and thereby feel competence. In addition to the problems of using money wages to capture living standards in contexts when few people worked regularly for wages (Burnette, 2025), the transition to specialized wage work may have had psychological consequences that have been ignored by economic historians.

Only a few topics have found space around the dominance of real wage series in the economic history of labor. As a complement to income, there have been some studies of working days and hours (Huberman & Minns, 2007; De Vries, 2008; Maneuvrier-Hervieu & Chambru, 2024), although time spent at work is difficult to

⁶At the same time, wage labor did not simply rise monotonically across time. Lucassen (2021) describes a pattern in which wage labor has risen and declined repeatedly over the past 2500 years.

⁷See, e.g., Ågren (2016), Lindström and Ågren (2023), Burnette (2024), Whittle et al. (2025).

capture before the eighteenth or nineteenth century because documentation of days worked is rare. As noted above, most economic historians consider time spent at work as a disutility rather than an occasion to experience relatedness or an opportunity to develop and feel competence. One other objective dimension of job quality that has received attention is occupational safety, either on its own or as part of studies of compensating differentials (Aldrich, 1997, 2006; Boal, 2018). Workplace risks are, of course, an extrinsic disbenefit of employment.

Career-Oriented Perspectives: Skills, Skill Premia, and Social Status

A more popular area of research than non-wage objective dimensions of work is found at the meeting point of economic history and historical sociology: the development of skills and rewards for skill acquisition. Economic historians have primarily investigated the supply of skilled labor and skill premia, while historical sociologists have been more interested in social mobility.⁸ In both cases, the assumed motivation of workers is extrinsic, either to earn higher wages or to ascend to a higher status.

There are three main approaches to capturing the skills of historical workers. The first uses a simple bipartite (skilled or unskilled) or tripartite (skilled, semiskilled, or unskilled) division of workers or occupations, and the incomes of these groups are used to calculate skill premia. This approach is used to assess the contribution of skill levels or human capital development to economic development (Frankema & van Waijenburg, 2023). A second approach looks at education, usually in years of schooling or whether workers have secondary or tertiary education (Goldin & Katz 2008). A more sophisticated hierarchical approach was provided by the developers of the HISCLASS system (van Leeuwen & Maas, 2011). This scheme combines a historical occupational classification system based on the International Labour Organization's ISCO-68 occupational classification scheme, called HISCO (van Leeuwen et al., 2002), with a coding of social class, derived from the skill indicators in the 1965 US Dictionary of Occupational Titles. HISCLASS was constructed to examine North Atlantic economies in the modern period (eighteenth–twentieth centuries), but it is now used to analyze many contexts. One limitation of HISCLASS is that its class ranking of occupations is fixed across time and space.

⁸Historical sociologists' views of work motivations are generally similar to those of economic historians, as shown in the work incentives proposed by Tilly and Tilly (1998). They posit that employment is organized around incentives of compensation (wages and other forms of benefits), commitment (association with a family or other social group), and coercion (extrinsic penalties). The first and third of these are clearly extrinsic motivations. The second may be viewed as intrinsic because workers could experience feelings of relatedness, or extrinsic, as social bonds and obligations provide a motivation external to the individual.

Economic historians use the class ranking as a proxy for skill. In this research, occupational titles are assumed to have a consistent relationship with skill: if a worker is listed in a wage account with some occupation, scholars assume that the worker possessed the typical skill level for that occupation. However, such an approach provides no information about competence as conceived in the self-determination literature. A worker in a high-skilled occupation may be completing tasks that she finds trivial and unchallenging, therefore meaningless; or a worker in a job with low nominal skill requirements may be facing a task that he feels is unachievable and therefore causes him anxiety, stress, and a lack of intrinsic motivation and meaning.

Summary of Economic History Perspectives on Work

While economic historians have conducted many studies of real wages in the past and have related their findings to productivity, living standards, and incentives for technological change, most research has downplayed or even ignored non-wage dimensions of work. The study of intrinsic motivation for labor has been entirely neglected. Skill development has not been examined to see if workers have achieved mastery over tasks or sought challenges, but instead to determine how the provision of skills contributed to production and growth, and whether skills can explain the division of rewards from technological change. Individuals acquired skill to secure material rewards such as higher wages or a higher social status. Autonomy and relatedness have not received any substantial attention from economic historians. Next, we turn to evidence for the importance of these aspects of human experience and behavior, which puts their neglect by economic historians into sharper relief.

Self-Determination Theory, Meaning, and a Historical Framework

An important area of research in psychology is the motivation of human behavior, by which psychologists aim to determine “energy,” the source of behavior, and “direction,” or the types of behaviors individuals choose. In the first half of the twentieth century, psychological views of motivation were dominated by mechanical “drive” theories, which posit that there are learned and consistent relationships between stimuli and behaviors (Deci, 1975). In these theories human behavior is extrinsically motivated by “tissue deficits” such as deficits of food or sex. However, drive theories were unable to explain a variety of empirical findings in studies of humans and animals in which research subjects engaged in exploratory or curious behaviors without extrinsic rewards. The limits of drive theories can be illustrated with examples from some of the many experimental studies in this area. In animal studies, rats explored previously unseen areas of a cage, even when they were

hungry or were suffering pain from an electrical grid, and they did so without any extrinsic inducement. Experiments with humans and monkeys found that subjects completed puzzles even when no reward was offered (Deci & Ryan, 1985, ch. 2).

The inability of drive theories to convincingly explain these and similar findings led to a search for alternative explanations for motivation. The resulting literature on self-determination theory (SDT) and meaning in life has identified three basic psychological needs that are associated with intrinsic motivation: feelings of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci, 1975; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2017).⁹ These basic psychological needs “must be satisfied for psychological interest, development, and wellness to be sustained” (Ryan & Deci, 2017). The concept of “meaning” was introduced through arguments such as those of Maddi (1970) that meaning was fundamental to explaining human motivation, but that it had been neglected by the earlier mechanistic approaches. Satisfying these three basic psychological needs contributes to eudaimonic well-being and is associated with feeling meaning in life (see the survey of literature in Ryan & Deci, 2017), making self-determination an important but unappreciated aspect of historical quality of life. As historical workers spent an even larger share of their lives working than people in the present (Crafts, 2022), work was probably more important as an occasion to experience feelings of meaning in the past because workers had less time in which to feel autonomous, competent, and related outside of work.

As shown throughout this volume, several social science fields take an interest in meaningful work. Some use data-collection scales that capture feelings of meaningfulness such as the Work as Meaning Inventory (WAMI) (Steger et al., 2012). Nikolova and Cnossen (2020) demonstrate that data from the European Working Conditions Survey captures many aspects of meaningful work. The first representative surveys of well-being and working conditions were only conducted in the second half of the twentieth century, and few of these early surveys included questions about autonomy, competence, or relatedness at work. How can work meaningfulness be captured for earlier times?

In place of survey data, we can construct a general framework for work meaningfulness from intrinsically motivated behavior in the past and use it to analyze qualitative historical sources. The first step is conceptualization of each of the three basic psychological needs, drawn from the literature on SDT. *Autonomy* captures whether workers feel an “internal locus of causality” (Ryan & Deci, 2017), which is related to but distinct from the concept of “control” discussed further below in “Work and Meaningfulness in Labor and Social History.” While control can be seen as negative freedom—the absence of a supervisor directing one’s actions—autonomy is

⁹Engaging in beneficent work may also produce feelings of meaning. It is discussed *inter alia* in Martela et al. (2018), and it is part of the Work and Meaning Inventory constructed by Steger et al. (2012), but plays a lesser role in the work meaningfulness framework of Nikolova and Cnossen (2020). Views of what kinds of work are beneficent are socially conditioned, making beneficence an extrinsic motivation. For conceptual cohesion the framework and analysis that follow are based on the elements of meaning that have their origins in intrinsic motivation, so beneficence is not considered here.

positive freedom to pursue “self-endorsed” behaviors. *Competence* is presented in SDT as carrying out activities that offer “optimal challenge” (Deci & Ryan, 1985) or experiencing “effectance” and a feeling of “flow” (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Work or other activities that are too easy or too difficult lead to loss of motivation. *Relatedness* has received somewhat less attention than the other two basic psychological needs, and is sometimes considered a precondition for achieving meaning through autonomy and competence. It has been conceptualized as “relational satisfaction” (Ryan & Deci, 2002) or “feeling socially connected” through reciprocity. It can be experienced when one feels cared for by other people and when one contributes or gives to others as well (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

A framework for analyzing work meaningfulness in the past next requires a unit and bounds of analysis. Present work meaningfulness research commonly uses surveys of job incumbents, and the questions capture respondent characteristics, whether they experience intrinsic motivation, and if they achieve feelings of meaning within employment; intrinsic motivation in non-work activities is not captured. For example, questions examining autonomy may inquire about whether workers can organize their tasks, but employment contracts are not considered. In historical settings forced-labor relationships were more common, which likely reduced feelings of autonomy *in life*. To enable comparison with present research, the historical framework follows current conceptualizations by only considering autonomy, competence, and relatedness within work or employment. However, as situations of forced labor (such as enslavement, discussed in “Enslavement and Community”) surely reduced overall intrinsic motivation, such contextual features should also be discussed. The framework can be used to examine autonomy, competence, and relatedness in all types of historical work, including waged work, production for own use or consumption, and forced labor.¹⁰ Analysis may be carried out for industries, single occupations, or for common work portfolios that ranged across different occupations.

The framework aims to capture whether historical work fulfilled the three basic psychological needs of SDT and produced meaningfulness. In current research, this is achieved by asking study participants to assess their *feelings* of autonomy, competence, relatedness, and meaning. In historical settings, little self-reported subjective information is available, although objective information about work situations is more common. An ideal study should aim to ascertain whether workers *felt* autonomous, competent, and related, and the Subjective Conceptualizations (Level 1) of the framework can be used. Occasionally, it may be possible to find evidence that directly states whether workers felt their work was meaningful, and that such meaning produced feelings of having a meaningful life. However, sufficiently rich evidence is rare, and the Objective Conceptualizations (Level 2) can be applied instead. These versions allow assessment based on factual information about work rather than directly-reported sentiments.

¹⁰ Historians use various definitions for work; for example, Lucassen (2021) adopts the definition from Tilly and Tilly (1998) of “any human effort adding use value to goods or services.”

Level 3 provides historically-adapted versions of questions and items used in current measurement of work meaningfulness and self-determination. For Framework Pillars I–III, we present amended versions of questions from the European Working Conditions Survey used by Nikolova and Cnossen (2020). The EWCS questions are adapted to account for the lack of direct survey responses in historical studies and the variability of historical working arrangements in which many people were not employed consistently in one type of work or one occupation. These specific questions can help to structure analysis when evidence is rich and informative. For Pillar IV, which can be used to assess direct evidence of workers reporting meaningfulness in work, there is no objective conceptualization, and we adapt items from the WAMI (Steger et al., 2012).¹¹

Historical Work Meaningfulness Framework

I. Autonomy

1. Subjective Conceptualization (A-SC): Workers felt that they were able to determine causality in their work environment.
2. Objective Conceptualization (A-OC): Workers exercised choice over the organization and conduct of their work.
3. Adapted EWCS Questions:

AQ1: Did workers evaluate the quality of their work outputs or conduct?

AQ2: Could workers choose or change the order of their tasks?

AQ3: Could workers choose or change the methods they used in work?

AQ4: Could workers choose or change their work speed?

AQ5: Could workers take breaks at their own discretion?

AQ6: Were workers permitted to apply their own ideas in work?

II. Competence

1. Subjective Conceptualization (C-SC): Workers felt that they were able to seek and achieve optimal challenges, and/or experienced effectance.
2. Objective Conceptualization (C-OC): Workers were prepared to accomplish their tasks given the training and tools provided. Workers could find new challenges within existing activities or in new activities.
3. Adapted EWCS Questions:

CQ1: Did workers solve unforeseen problems on their own?

CQ2: Did workers learn new things during work?

CQ3: Did workers have sufficient skills to cope with their duties or more demanding duties?

¹¹ Following the discussion in note 9 above, the WAMI items that capture beneficence are not included.

III. *Relatedness*

1. Subjective Conceptualization (R-SC): Workers felt socially connected at work.
2. Objective Conceptualization (R-OC): Workers could engage in socially connecting activities at work.
3. Adapted EWCS Questions:

RQ1: Did peers help and support each other?

RQ2: Did supervisors help and support their subordinates?

IV. *Meaning in Work and Life*

1. Subjective Conceptualization (MIL-SC): Workers felt and reported experiencing meaning in their work, and that their work contributed to feelings of meaning in life.
2. (No Objective Conceptualization, see the text)
3. Adapted WAMI Items:

MI1: Workers reported having or finding meaningful work or a meaningful career.

MI2: Workers stated how their work contributed to their life's meaning.

MI3: Workers described what made their job meaningful.

MI4: Workers reported that they had found work with a satisfying purpose.

MI5: Workers stated that work contributed to their personal growth.

Human activities can be motivated by both extrinsic and intrinsic rewards, so the former (e.g., a wage or food grown for subsistence) does not preclude intrinsic motivation, though increases or decreases in extrinsic rewards may temporarily shift relative shares of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Deci, 1975). When workers have very low levels of extrinsic rewards (pay) or very high extrinsic demands (work effort), intrinsic motivation may fall as workers are unable to provide for their material needs or find their effectance limited by exhaustion (Vohs et al., 2006; Rosso et al., 2010). Therefore, work meaning from intrinsic motivation should be considered alongside objective job quality.¹²

The absence of survey data before the late twentieth century requires creativity when seeking sources to analyze with this framework. Nonetheless, labor historians have shown that there is a wealth of qualitative material available about work in many places and at many times in the past. Typical sources for objective work facets include the reports of labor regulators, the discussions of social commentators, and trade handbooks that recount the use of different technologies. The content of work has received renewed recent attention by historians using materials such as court records (Fiebranz et al., 2011; Ågren, 2016; Whittle & Hailwood, 2020; Whittle,

¹²A system of indicators to analyze historical job quality is constructed in Schneider (2025).

2024) and the objective quality of work can be analyzed using material produced by workers, employers, and observers (Schneider, 2025). These sources provide an entry point to examining work using the Objective Conceptualizations and some of the Adapted EWCS Questions. Workers' views have a long tradition of analysis in historical scholarship, using diaries, letters, and workers' magazines, among many sources (Dublin, 1979; Blewett, 1990; Zonderman, 1992; Halpern, 1997). For more recent periods (the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries), there are oral histories for some occupations and locations. This material includes objective qualitative data about work conditions (Levels 2 and 3) and might allow use of the Subjective Conceptualizations. The framework and sources can be used to explore variation in meaning between and within jobs across time. The following section surveys labor and social history research using the framework.

Work and Meaningfulness in Labor and Social History

Labor and social history and economic history have diverged since at least the 1970s. This divide is the product of various intellectual and institutional developments including the “cultural turn” of historians,¹³ the increasing subsumption of economic history as a subfield of empirical economics (Margo, 2018) and in some regions, bitter debates about questions of the economic past in which economic historians and social and labor historians found themselves on opposing sides.¹⁴ Although social and labor history have been less interested than economic history in the development of living standards, these fields have investigated topics related to meaningful work, unlike economic historians. There is now limited communication between labor and social history and economic history, and their topics of interest and methods are far apart. Nonetheless, the qualitative approaches of labor and social historians have addressed all three of the psychological needs that form the basis of self-determination theory. Business historians have also contributed to some of these strands of literature.

This section presents scholarship that has discussed relatedness, competence, and autonomy, and instances when the fulfillment of these basic needs at work may have changed. It then uses this research to suggest possible determinants of meaningfulness proposed or implied in the historical literature. In addition to the discussion of large-scale shifts, the section also puts forward hypotheses about

¹³ The cultural turn was a shift in many humanities and social science disciplines beginning in the 1970s that prioritized research into culture and identity, and away from material topics and the use of positivist epistemology. In history, an earlier view that the discipline is a social science (most associated with Leopold von Ranke) was replaced by a stance that historical research should be pursued as a branch of the humanities, with more use of subjectivist epistemology.

¹⁴ Perhaps the most important of these debates followed the publication of Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman's controversial *Time on the Cross* (1974), which analyzed the economics of enslavement in the United States.

meaningfulness tradeoffs in the past and potential questions that could merit further study. As this literature does not explicitly discuss meaningfulness, identifying the intrinsic or extrinsic motivations of historical workers is at least partly inferential. Given the scope of the chapter, it necessarily elides differences between industries and locations to provide a general picture.

Relatedness in Labor and Social History

Particularly since the cultural turn, historians have been very interested in community and the development of group cultures. This literature occasionally borrows concepts from qualitative sociology or anthropology, occasionally from psychology, but not from the literature on intrinsic motivation. Therefore, scholars have tended to discuss concepts similar to relatedness such as community, group identity or consciousness, and the development or expression of shared cultural practices. One concomitant limitation is that while present research on work meaningfulness examines experiences during working hours, labor and social historians rarely draw such distinctions in their analysis of community and identity, and instead express more interest in experiences outside of, but related to, employment. Much literature mentions work as context for emerging class consciousness, the formation of representative institutions, and worker sociability. The following discussion presents research on within-work and work-adjacent experiences to provide a general view of the literature.

The Development of Class and Working-Class Communities

A large part of labor historiography and social historiography has recounted the development of class consciousness and working-class communities. A cornerstone of this research is the work of Thompson (1963) on class consciousness in England during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, although Thompson was not the first historian to investigate these topics. This literature generally draws inspiration from a Marxist expectation that the economic position of a proletariat would lead to the creation of a corresponding class identity. While a rich area of study, its use for the analysis of relatedness is limited because most scholarship focuses on the development of class identity for other ends—principally political representation of the working class, or in campaigns for better pay and conditions—rather than worker association as an end in itself (Ware, 1924; Sullivan, 1955; Foster, 1974). The Marxist inspiration for research on class consciousness in the industrial age has meant scholars have paid less attention to institutions that formed worker communities and likely enabled relatedness in earlier periods, such as guilds.

Research on working-class communities that offers more hints for the experience of relatedness examines connections between socialization at work and informal association in work-related spaces, of which the most stereotypical in Europe and

North America would be the pub or tavern (LeMasters, 1973; DeLottinville, 1981; Kirkby, 2007). Workers also made connections through formal institutions such as friendly societies and trade unions (Cordery, 2003). Relatedness in these organizations could be experienced on multiple levels: there were personal activities such as shopfloor organizing and local meetings, and large unions had national meetings and some published their own magazines. These different levels of engagement and communication embedded workers in communities with reciprocal commitments. Connections may have been strengthened during periods of industrial conflict, when workers were more reliant upon one another.¹⁵ If this were the case, there may have been a short-run wellbeing paradox in which heightened feelings of relatedness may have been achieved at the same time as lower material living standards when workers forwent wages during strikes. Unionism and similar formal and informal groupings enabled workers to socialize within work and in adjacent spaces (R-OC, RQ1). Community gatherings also occurred in institutions not immediately associated with employment. Houses of worship and sports clubs were common organizations where workers built and maintained social connections.

Labor communities had limits, including the gender, race, ethnicity, and religious membership rules of trade unions. Even when women labored in the same establishment as unionized men, they could be excluded from the social interactions that would have provided greater feelings of relatedness as well as bargaining power (Yeo, 2001). On some occasions, workers broke down racial barriers to participation in collective-bargaining institutions (Horowitz, 1997; Martinez, 2001). One reason for such solidarity was a change in employment conditions such as increased work pace, which affected all workers, though solidarity-building could still be contested by prior racial or gender prejudices, and could be reversed.

Ostensible sources of division or exclusion could also give rise to a distinct set of connections around different identities: for example, occupational segregation by gender could facilitate gendered community relations and associations. While historians have traditionally focused on how gender segregation and discrimination shaped identity and the boundaries of solidarity, circumscribed connections also provided satisfaction and meaning to women at work (RQ1) (Tentler, 1982). Similarly, while cultural, racial, or social differences could be used to exclude workers and limit relatedness, such identities could also underpin feelings of community and relatedness among coreligionists, workers sharing a language, or members of the same caste (Chakrabarty, 1989). Identities could shift and communities could be reorganized, meaning that the connections that provided relatedness varied over time (Gooptu, 2001).

The construction and boundaries of labor communities and associated relatedness varied between historical work cultures. Class has been the dominant mode for viewing these networks in Europe and North America, and much scholarship has followed in this Marxist tradition. More recent research that globalizes labor history

¹⁵ Nye (2013) suggested that this process occurred during the United Auto Workers' sit-down strike against General Motors in 1936–37.

has shown that other identities and social groupings provided opportunities for historical workers to experience relatedness. Since the cultural turn, most labor history has been an offshoot of social history and scholars have embedded the conduct and experience of work within experiences of society. Therefore, historians have elided feelings of community experienced by workers during their working time with the formal meetings and informal gatherings of workers after the end of their working day.

Enslavement and Community

One of the most vibrant areas of social history over the last half-century has been the study of enslavement and other forms of forced labor, especially the slave economies and societies of the Americas. As discussed in “Self-Determination Theory, Meaning, and a Historical Framework,” the Historical Work Meaningfulness Framework focuses on experiences *during* labor to enable comparison with present-day analysis of work meaningfulness. Nonetheless, enslavement imposed severe limitations on enslaved peoples’ opportunities to satisfy basic psychological needs, particularly autonomy. Enslavement usually combined forced labor with physical punishment and social control to limit freedom and agency, and entry into enslavement was of course not volitional. Physical harm rarely appears in present discussions of work meaningfulness, but was much more common in historical employment and especially in forced labor. Suffering physical harm from enslaver violence would likely lead to reduced feelings of meaning through lower autonomy (A-SC) and relatedness (RQ2).

Historians’ views of work motivation among enslaved people have varied: Fogel and Engerman’s (1974) argument that enslaved workers took note of their place in an occupational hierarchy could be interpreted as a typically economic imposition of extrinsic motivation for work, or as a search for competence, as discussed briefly by Johnson (1986). Another framing of enslaved work as a source of competence is provided by Stevenson (1996), who asserted that “slave men and women strove to complete work quotas and took pride in their labor” (p. 195). Historians have also examined enslaved peoples’ efforts to develop skills such as reading despite enslaver prohibitions (e.g., Webber, 1978). As this skill may not have offered an immediate extrinsic benefit, it could be seen as a way to satisfy a desire for competence.

Within the coercive system, enslaved people established and sustained connections during their hours of work and in other facets of life associated with the forced labor system such as co-located housing.¹⁶ Scholars sometimes present these activities as a form of resistance, which could be seen as a way to feel autonomy as well

¹⁶ Perhaps unsurprisingly given the scholarly traditions of social and labor history that focus on identity, culture, and community, work itself has been discussed much less than other aspects of enslaved experience (e.g., socialization, enslaver violence, family relations).

as relatedness.¹⁷ Striving to experience meaning through community-building can be viewed as an attempt to actively craft meaningful work, an in extremis example of a phenomenon discussed elsewhere in this volume. Indeed, some scholars have claimed that developing a unique culture under shared oppression fostered a strong sense of community (Blassingame, 1979). Enslaved people found opportunities within gang labor to experience connections and relatedness (Dusinberre, 2009).¹⁸ While the gang system sharply limited autonomy, enslaved people communicated during work, for example, by singing (R-OC, RQ1).

Feelings of relatedness may have varied with the size of the enslaved labor force. Enslaved people on small farms had fewer opportunities for reciprocal caring outside of the few others in bondage to the same enslaver. The enslaver may also have interposed himself or herself in such relationships, perhaps reducing relatedness for the enslaved. Whether this system produced different levels of relatedness from other forced labor regimes such as Russian serfdom, in which thousands of individuals were ensnared by a single lord, may merit further analysis (Kolchin, 1983).¹⁹

Much like the gender-segregated factory work mentioned above, many aspects of enslaved life were divided by gender. This led to opportunities for gendered homosociability: for men, this could include drinking, gambling, and fighting (Lussana, 2016), which were also common social activities for white factory workers. Women were commonly grouped together by enslavers to care for children and to work in separate gangs, which gave rise to ideas about Black femininity and, plausibly, relatedness (White, 1985). Women sometimes oversaw the work of children and teenagers, which might have enabled a closer-knit group than monitoring by white overseers. However, such arrangements may have produced conflicted feelings for

¹⁷ There is a much larger literature on resistance that fits primarily with discussions of autonomy. Classic works discussing resistance include Bauer and Bauer (1942), Stampp (1956), and Ellison (1983); more recently (among many) Camp (2004), although monographs of recent decades usually include at least some discussion of resistance modes.

¹⁸ There were two main systems for organizing enslaved labor in the Americas: a “task” system, in which enslaved people were assigned a specific, sometimes measurable, work task until it was complete or for some time interval; and a “gang” system, in which enslaved people were grouped by age and sex to carry out a set of activities for days or weeks under an overseer. The more restrictive gang system was more common on tobacco, cotton, and sugar plantations; the task system was used more frequently in the Lowcountry and Sea Islands of South Carolina and Georgia, where longer-staple cotton and rice were cultivated. The task system likely provided slightly higher autonomy through reduced supervision, but as task workers also had to tend to their own small garden plots or do domestic work, it perhaps allowed less leisure time (Berlin & Morgan, 1993; Lussana, 2016). Kay and Cary (1995) presented the task system as a method that enslavers used to secure or improve enslaved people’s work motivation.

¹⁹ Kolchin critiqued the literature on enslaved communities in the Americas from the 1960s and 1970s for providing an overly optimistic view of community development. He argued that communal relations and autonomy were much lower among enslaved people in the US South than Russian serfs, primarily because enslavers were usually present, slaveholdings were much smaller, and Black Americans were a minority of the population in the South. His argument suggests that opportunities to find intrinsic motivation in work and life were lower for enslaved people in the US than the other settings he discusses.

the “driveresses” who were placed into a position of coercive authority, so any effect on relatedness requires further consideration (Dusinberre, 2009; Paton, 2020). More broadly, differences in work activities could strain communities: enslaved people who developed work skills had greater mobility and opportunities for resistance, which enslavers tried to exploit to inhibit community feelings (Andrews, 2019). Therefore, there may have been a tradeoff between relatedness and competence for enslaved people.

Historians have also discussed the attempts of enslavers to impose paternalistic communities. Enslavers claimed their system of bondage was a “positive good” and purported to provide for both the bodily (e.g. food, medicine) and spiritual (religious) needs of the people whom they enslaved. While these efforts aimed to burnish the public image of enslavement, they were also intended to make enslaved people more complaisant with their situation (Camp, 2004). This imposed community placed the enslaver as the agent of enslaved social relations and perhaps disrupted voluntary social interactions between enslaved people, which may have produced a perceived external locus of causality (see Deci & Ryan, 1985), reducing feelings of meaning (A-SC). Whether such efforts were an intentional strategy to deprive enslaved people of basic psychological needs is a further aspect of meaningfulness that could be investigated by historical research.

Satisfaction of basic psychological needs within and outside of work was likely lower for enslaved people in the Americas than any of the other historical worker groups discussed in this chapter: enslavers limited their feelings of autonomy, relatedness, and competence through controlling violence. Historians have discussed attempts by enslaved people to resist these strictures and find opportunities to experience relatedness by forming bottom-up communities. Such efforts occurred within and outside of work, although the emphasis in the historiography of slavery on non-work elements of life means there remains much scope for research on the experience of forced *labor* itself.

Competence

The most prosaic but perhaps the most fundamental part of research on labor concerns the content of work, and labor historians have considered its development, albeit to a much lesser extent than class and community. An important strand of research into work content is the historical labor process literature that followed Braverman (1974). The focal point in these debates has been the discussion of “deskilling,” or the substitution of skilled artisans by semiskilled or unskilled workers operating specialized machinery.²⁰ While much of the deskilling literature has focused on the loss of extrinsic rewards such as wage premia and the social status of

²⁰ Braverman and related research have also substantially discussed “workers’ control,” aspects of which are addressed in the section “Autonomy and Control” below.

artisans, the loss of a feeling of achievement from facing new challenges as work was broken up into routine tasks could have reduced motivation and meaningfulness. Two principal settings in which deskilling has been discussed are the experience of factory work in the First Industrial Revolution, and the worker-as-automaton world of the Fordist assembly line in the twentieth century.

Factory Work in the First Industrial Revolution

In general, most factories in the First Industrial Revolution employed a few skilled workers to maintain and adjust machinery and many low-skilled operatives to monitor the machines and make minor interventions to their running.²¹ As there was no formal training for most operatives, typical stories of the learning process tell of workers who were run off their feet by the pace of work and dazzled by the speed of machinery (CQ3) (Zonderman, 1992; Gross, 1993). They could also be shocked by the noise of the factory and feel stifled by the indoor environment of dust, fumes, heat, and humidity. Such an experience was not conducive to the state of “flow” aimed for in facing optimal challenges (Deci & Ryan, 1985). After some weeks or months, operatives usually adjusted to factory work demands. This could lead to satisfaction when one finally achieved a feeling of effectance, but the lack of a subsequent challenge or variety was generally amotivating. Standardized machinery prevented workers from finding new challenges (C-OC, CQ1, CQ2). Studies of textile work have paid particular attention to these experiences (Dublin, 1979; Zonderman, 1992). The greatest continuing challenge was maintaining focus with the high, and at times rising, pace of the automatic or semi-automatic machinery (Dublin, 1979; Tentler, 1982).

The First Industrial Revolution also featured notable changes in the gender division of labor. While later episodes of deskilling replaced male artisans with semi-skilled or unskilled men, such as in the displacement of skilled butchers (Halpern, 1997) or gunsmiths (Hounshell, 1984) in the nineteenth century, the first phase of industrialization included replacement of both predominantly male (e.g., weaving) and female (e.g., spinning, knitting) trades. In factories, the skilled workers were invariably men, while women and children were commonly employed as operatives. Several scholars have suggested that, for women, the disemployment effects of industrial technology outstripped the creation of new work. The result was a reduction in women’s formal employment (Richards, 1974; Humphries & Schneider, 2021). In Britain, women’s labor force participation only returned to pre-industrial levels in the 1980s (Shaw-Taylor et al., 2019).

Women who found work in factories were limited to jobs that probably did not allow them to feel competence. This lack of new challenges may have led them to focus on the extrinsic (income) rewards of employment, or they may only have found intrinsic motivation in social relations with colleagues. The first possibility is

²¹ The dates assigned for the First Industrial Revolution vary by country; in Britain it is commonly dated c. 1760–1830, with some flexibility in either direction.

supported by sociological research that found that women in the UK primarily had a job orientation toward work up to the 1980s (discussed in the chapter “The Meaning and Meaningfulness of Work: The View from Sociology”). Women’s exclusion from the paid labor force and shifts into low-competence factory work probably reduced feelings of meaning, but these changes have received little attention outside of gender history. The long-run development of gendered divisions in work motivation and feelings of competence merits further investigation.

One caveat for the discussion of deskilling during the First Industrial Revolution is in order: some pre-industrial manufacturing employments that commonly employed women such as hand spinning and straw plaiting were also repetitive, and it is possible to overstate the loss of motivation in factory work. At the same time, these earlier employments could allow workers to challenge themselves by improving their output quality (C-OC), which was not possible using factory machinery that was commonly set up to produce a specific quality of output.

Fordism and the Assembly Line

Many twentieth-century labor historians have discussed the effects on perceived competence following a later development of the factory system: the rise of assembly-line production in the twentieth century. This development is most associated with Henry Ford, although Ford himself was not the genius behind the assembly line, mass production, or flow production. In all likelihood there was no single brain, but a group of Ford managers and executives who built on a longer tradition in American manufacturing that favored producing long runs of standardized goods (Hounshell, 1984; Broadberry, 1997; Nye, 2013).

Much as pre-industrial textile production relied on individual craft workers, some of whom were high-skilled, the early auto manufacturing industry featured extensive employment of skilled workers such as machinists and molders. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these workers trained for years to build up knowledge of their trade in an apprenticeship before ascending to the position of a craftsman (Meyer, 1981). Before mass production, work relied on higher-skilled employees using relatively generic tools to carry out a variety of tasks. Automobiles were assembled in place in a system known as “static assembly”, and parts were not always compatible, requiring workers to adjust them, for example by filing, for a suitable fit (Gartman, 1986). These tasks required the skilled workers to address different challenges regularly (C-OC, CQ1, CQ2). To increase production volumes, lower costs, and respond to continuing demand, firms steadily moved toward increasing specialization and introduced more specific tools in the late nineteenth century (Meyer, 1989).

The assembly line, introduced by the Ford Motor Company by 1913, followed partially in a Taylorist tradition.²² A key aim was to decompose work into discrete

²² In some discussions Taylorism (discussed below in the section on “Scientific Management”) and Fordism are elided, or the former is seen as a step towards the latter. While both aimed to increase productivity, Taylor increased the efficiency of individual workers by incentivizing work to a spe-

elements that could be completed by unskilled or semiskilled workers using specialized tools; these workers were expected to perform one or few extremely specific tasks for every vehicle or part that passed on the assembly line (Meyer, 1981). Examples could include *starting* to thread one or two bolts, before the next worker tightened the *same* two bolts. Once a task was assigned, the worker was expected to complete it over and over for the whole day, and possibly for weeks on end. Operative discretion was also reduced or eliminated in the design of machine tools (Meyer, 1989). A necessary concomitant was the introduction of interchangeable parts, which also changed the work of men employed in parts production, making this work more standard and repetitive and lowering skill requirements (Gartman, 1986; Biggs, 1995).

Most of the resulting work was mind-numbingly tedious, with incessant repetition. One Ford worker described his situation: “If I keep putting on Nut No. 86 for about 86 more days, I will be Nut No. 86 in the Pontiac bughouse” (Meyer, 1981, p. 40).²³ Standardization reduced or eliminated unexpected problems or challenges, and the tasks were so simple that most did not require a learning process (C-OC, CQ1, CQ2).

In part because of the tedium, but also the high pace of work, absenteeism and turnover at Ford’s Highland Park plant were outrageously high: in 1913, daily absenteeism was 10% and annual turnover was 370% (Raff & Summers, 1987). To address these problems, Ford increased labor’s extrinsic rewards by raising wages, doubling those for the lowest-paid workers to \$5 per day—a sum so generous that it became a media sensation.²⁴ The only exceptions to assembly-line monotony were in the remaining preserves of higher-skilled workers, in the tool shops and maintenance of specialized machines (Meyer, 1989).

Skilled workers’ knowledge of how to manipulate tools and material inputs was their economic value, and labor historians have discussed how this capacity was important for their self-perception, including their view of their own “manliness” (Meyer, 2016). Older workers felt that their status and competence were particularly threatened, as their long service developing skills and knowledge of auto manufacture was made obsolete at the same time as their age became a hindrance to keeping up with fast-moving assembly-line work. Ford specifically wanted *unskilled* men without experience of setting up and operating machine tools because they would be more malleable. His ideal operative merely took and executed instructions. The shift

cific method, while Ford mechanized the entire flow of production, simplified tasks, and implemented early forms of automation. Common elements included measurement, particularly time studies, and analysis of how materials moved through an establishment. The scientific inspiration of Taylor was also widely influential, including for Ford (see the discussion of the scholarly debates in Watson, 2019), who made use of Taylorist concepts and methods.

²³ Workers who adjusted to one highly repetitive job frequently refused to be transferred because the transfers were invariably to similarly tedious work that was unfamiliar (Peterson, 1987).

²⁴ The five-dollar day was contingent on workers accepting surveillance outside of the factory. The Ford Sociological Department monitored workers’ family lives, including by visiting their homes, and the full \$5 daily wage was conditional on satisfying a series of personal and, for immigrant workers, social integration requirements.

in labor requirements was dramatic: in 1910, 75% of jobs at Ford were skilled, but by 1923, 79% of them required 1 week or less to learn (Peterson, 1987). The assembly line offered a clear tradeoff: workers' experience of competence fell in return for increased extrinsic rewards. The more general application of these approaches eventually led to scholarly and public concern about worker motivation in the second half of the twentieth century (Warhurst & Knox, 2020).²⁵

Autonomy and Control

Labor history has taken great interest in the topic of control, a concept similar to what meaningfulness researchers might refer to as “autonomy,” but with some difference. For historians, “control” can refer to determination of the organization of a work process and methods for task completion, or to workers' management of an enterprise. The Marxist influence returns here, as many historical narratives present conflict between worker control and entrepreneurial prerogatives to organize the methods and conduct of production. Some business historians have also investigated this topic when recounting the origins of modern management techniques.

Factory Discipline

The emergence of factory work during the First Industrial Revolution changed the task content of work, as discussed above, and is commonly depicted as a dramatic change in labor relations and work conditions. There were supervised work settings in the pre-industrial world, including large construction sites, forced labor in agriculture, indoor workshops, and domestic service. However, it is likely that more workers toiled under direct supervision in the secondary sector from the late eighteenth century and into the nineteenth century than before.

Factory work included new labor discipline that has received attention from business and social historians (McKendrick, 1961; Pollard, 1965; Thompson,

²⁵ Later in the twentieth century, competition from Japanese manufacturers led to the widespread adoption of a system called “lean production.” In lean production, skilled workers were expected to carry out processes on a variety of specialized tools. Some scholars have claimed that this system provided greater worker discretion and competence, while others have argued that it remained subject to a low-control Fordist logic. On the one hand, lean methods might have undermined their autonomy (the cause of initial resistance at Toyota in 1950), but they could also have provided new challenges (Ohno 1982). This process of broadening workers' tasks from specialization to more generalist work partly reversed the long transition discussed in the section “Work in Economic History” from pre-industrial work to the twentieth century in which varied work portfolios were replaced by full-time employment in one occupation. Findings about changes in meaning for workers during the introduction of lean production could inform historians' views of how the earlier, specializing transition shaped meaning.

1967).²⁶ Managers sought to use their large fixed capital investment in plant and equipment extensively to spread its costs, and they needed workers to be present consistently. Factory schedules removed choice over working time, reducing autonomy (A-OC, AQ5). The factory bell or clock imposed a scientific, seemingly objective measure of working time on operatives who may have been used to self-disciplined employment at home.²⁷ As absenteeism or slow-working prevented full exploitation of these capital investments, managers and overseers imposed financial and physical punishments on workers who missed work, arrived tardily, stepped away from their machines, or spoke to each other (Pollard, 1965; Chapman, 1967; Huberman, 1996). Fines could range from a few hours' to more than a day's wages for lateness, absenteeism, or other misdemeanors such as swearing at work. Women and children were also subject to corporal punishment for such infringements. As discussed in the context of enslavement, violence likely reduced workers' feelings of autonomy and deterred subsequent autonomous behavior.²⁸ Shaming punishments, such as forcing workers to carry notices of poor conduct, were used in some establishments (Pollard, 1963).

Discipline also included managerial determination of work pace and procedures, which reduced autonomy (A-OC, AQ2, AQ3, AQ4, AQ6). Many textile machines had their speeds set and adjusted by the factory manager or overseer, and operative workers had to maintain this pace. In some industries, artisan production jobs were systematized to ensure that workers produced more standard outputs using established methods, limiting autonomy. An early example of the systematization of skilled work was imposed by the English ceramics entrepreneur Josiah Wedgwood. He implemented much greater division of labor in his growing eighteenth-century pottery works and demanded strict adherence to quality control practices and use of set designs. As the few overseers could only monitor the workers they observed, checks of the quality and quantity of workers' output were the main supervision mechanisms (AQ1). Like Ford, Wedgwood preferred to mold workers from youth to avoid the difficulty of retraining artisans with years or decades of ingrained practice (McKendrick, 1961). Other factory owners also expressed a preference for hiring younger workers, or set up in areas where they believed the population had more disciplined labor habits (Pollard, 1963).

There was little effective labor organization in the sectors that were mechanized in Britain during the late eighteenth century, although this did not stop attempts to resist the adoption of machines. Nuvolari (2002) argued that machine-breaking in

²⁶ A provocative contribution by Clark (1994) claimed that workers "hired" factory owners to impose discipline that would enable the workers to increase their productivity, which workers were unable to maintain themselves.

²⁷ Timekeeping may appear objective to twenty-first-century readers, but some factories used a starting bell that rang early and a closing bell that rang late to lengthen the working day (Myles, 1850; Tucker, 1984).

²⁸ Pollard (1963) argued factory owners' demand that workers "had to be made obedient to the cash stimulus, and obedient in such a way as to react precisely to the stimuli provided" (p. 254) was in opposition to workers' previously self-directed behavior.

the early Industrial Revolution aimed to direct technological change away from centralized, low-autonomy work in factories, as workers did not oppose the adoption of similar, smaller machinery that could be used in homes. These efforts were unsuccessful, but they are illustrative of workers' values.

By the mid-nineteenth century some industries did have labor combinations strong enough to contest the adoption of technologies or management systems that could reduce autonomy or competence. These organizations were generally craft unions that organized narrow occupational groups, so workers in the same establishments likely had different experiences of meaningfulness. Skilled men in British cotton-spinning factories were organized in a strong union that could resist technological changes that reduced their autonomy, while the children they supervised had no parallel organization, little autonomy, and suffered corporal punishment (Bullen et al., 1987). Cotton spinning featured a "subcontracting" system of labor organization in which the men who were employed to operate machines known as "spinning mules" hired, trained, disciplined, and paid their young assistants. Subcontracting has been used at many times and in many industries in the past (Kessler & Lucassen, 2013; Lucassen, 2021). In such a system, workers who toiled alongside each other had quite different experiences of autonomy and intrinsic motivation, and autonomy-reducing discipline was not only imposed by firms.²⁹

Factory discipline reduced worker autonomy and enforced its limitations through extrinsic punishments (corporal punishment, fines) and enticed workers to accept its strictures using extrinsic rewards (wages). Adding eudaimonic well-being to our picture of quality of life strengthens the argument of researchers who have a pessimistic view of the effects of early industrialization on work.

Scientific Management

During the Second Industrial Revolution, scientific management or Taylorism increased the scope of managerial prerogatives beyond the factory discipline already established. The biography of its originator and namesake, Frederick Winslow Taylor (1856–1915), was unusual: after traveling in Europe as a teenager and receiving a private secondary education at the elite Philips Exeter Academy, he declined an offer to attend Harvard. Instead, he went to work as a patternmaker, then a machinist, and later a machine shop foreman, before studying for a degree in mechanical engineering. In the 1880s and 1890s, while working in the steel industry, Taylor developed a system of management techniques that he believed would address important "labor problems" (Wood & Wood, 2002). His methods became famous by the 1910s, in part through extensive self-promotion, and their adoption was the subject of public debates, including in the US Congress (Aitken, 1960).

²⁹ The implications of subcontracting for satisfaction of basic psychological needs are ambiguous and worthy of further investigation. Work in a known group could satisfy feelings of relatedness, but subcontracted work might include extrinsic group pressures for work pacing.

For Taylor, a fundamental cause of “labor problems” was the information asymmetry between workers and managers. Experienced workers knew better than their superior how to complete a task, how long it would take, and how much effort to apply. Their peers also discouraged them from working too quickly, as this would lead to a reduction in piece rates or would show each other’s inefficiency. Therefore, workers engaged in “soldiering,” collectively limiting their effort and output to deny the capitalist maximum returns while retaining their own energy and maintaining the piece rate. For Taylor, autonomy was at the core of “labor problems,” and it prevented the achievement of “maximum prosperity” through decreased production costs, which required workers to labor with “maximum efficiency” (Taylor, 1911). Extrinsic improvement and the satisfaction of basic psychological needs were directly opposed.

The Taylor system included several elements to optimize production, eliminate the information asymmetry, and prevent collective slow-working, although few firms that claimed to use scientific management adopted Taylor’s program in full (Nelson, 1974). The most commonly used elements were time studies, in which managers would ascertain the most efficient way to carry out a process and the time taken to do so, and the “incentive wage,” a two-track piece rate system in which workers were paid a higher piece rate if they completed tasks according to the most efficient method determined by the time study. If workers followed the recommended course, they could earn higher wages, assuming they reached the expected higher output level.³⁰ Workers who used their own methods or did not raise their output would receive lower wages, and might be dismissed or moved to other jobs (Nelson, 1977). Scientific management penalized workers who deviated from the method and work pace established by the time study and incentive wage, clearly reducing autonomy (A-OC, AQ2, AQ3, AQ4, AQ6) (Montgomery, 1979). As the time study established a single best practice, competence was also reduced as workers could not seek new challenges (C-OC, CQ1, CQ2).

Unions objected to the incentive wage system and time studies because they would reduce autonomy and were likely to increase the pace of work (Nelson, 1974, 1977; Graves, 1981). A higher pace likely reduced relatedness by eliminating opportunities for conversation (R-OC). Extensive resistance stymied the adoption of the Taylor system in many firms, or limited its application to only the adoption of piece rates without a time study and an established method. Scientific management was also resisted by some managers who saw it as an intrusion on *their* authority and autonomy, or who were skeptical that the system would achieve its stated aims (Nelson, 1974). The multiple levels of resistance to Taylorism show that reduced autonomy was a widely-shared concern: foremen and middle managers did not want to simply instruct workers on how to carry out a set of tasks and then measure their output (Smith & Boyns, 2005).

³⁰Deci (1975) claimed that the Taylor System assumed the primacy of extrinsic motivation and thereby reinforced those motivations, although he only considered one element of the system, the incentive wage. Piece rates long predated Taylor and scientific management was not limited to payment-by-output.

If anyone gained autonomy and experienced optimal challenges from the Taylor System, it was the time-study man who could move from process to process across an establishment, analyzing work and optimizing production methods (A-OC, AQ6, C-OC, CQ1, CQ2). This perhaps added to the zeal of Taylor's many apostles in the 1910s and 1920s: they may have experienced greater meaning in work in addition to extrinsic rewards in salaries, consulting fees, and attention in academic circles and the business and popular press.

Summary

Scholarship in social and labor history has provided general outlines of the state of work meaningfulness and some likely change-points in the last three centuries. The main limitations of this literature are that it has tended to combine discussions of the satisfaction of basic psychological needs within and outside of work, and that it lacks a direct analysis of work meaningfulness. Nonetheless, we can draw some broad conclusions about work meaningfulness in the past and the factors that have shaped whether workers experienced autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

The rise of factory discipline and Taylorism are a much-discussed historical developments that reduced worker autonomy. In both cases, managers or overseers aimed to secure higher and more regular effort from workers, although both developments saw resistance. Both shifts also reduced workers' pacing discretion, but Taylorism went much further than factory discipline in limiting workers' choice over methods of work. Labor organizations in the twentieth century had more success in resisting the autonomy-reducing changes of scientific management than the machine breakers of the First Industrial Revolution. In addition to reduced autonomy, factory work provided few opportunities for most operatives to experience feelings of competence, and the effects of industrialization on effectance may have been more important for women. In a later episode of deskilling, US auto manufacturing craftsmen were supplanted by the assembly line, which included the decomposition of work into a series of routine tasks. However, the same results did not occur in other countries where strong labor combinations resisted this competence-reducing system (Lewchuk, 1987). Labor historians have long examined social connections through the lens of class consciousness and solidarity, particularly in labor unions, and scholarship has gradually incorporated labor communities based on other identities such as gender and ethnicity. Enslaved workers had no representation, but individuals and groups created opportunities for meaningful and intrinsically motivated experience within regimes of forced labor.

Historians' discussions suggest that technology, management choices, and representation are potential determinants of work meaningfulness. These forces interact: some technological changes may alter workers' feelings of competence, but only if management decides to adopt such techniques and if workers cannot prevent or limit their adoption. Strong labor organizations that enable workers to experience relatedness can be broken by labor-replacing technology, particularly if the legal

system does not support worker representation. Organizational technologies that aim to increase effort levels and include monitoring may reduce autonomy, but they can be challenged by workers. Legal regimes that block worker representation may prevent workers from satisfying their psychological needs and achieving feelings of meaning, although workers have determinedly sought to experience relatedness, competence, and autonomy under such systems.

Connecting History to the Present and the Future

Historians frequently caution against seeing the past as clearly predictive of the future. As noted in the “Introduction,” social scientists can nonetheless analyze history to evaluate mechanisms that may shape work meaningfulness or other outcomes of interest, and to see if mechanisms have consistent relationships across time. Current discussions about changes in work commonly focus on the role of technology. Some of the most-discussed technologies of the twenty-first century appear to be entirely new, but others discussed in “Work and Meaningfulness in Labor and Social History,” like the assembly line, are still in use. Purportedly novel technologies like algorithmic management are new applications of old ideas (Brown et al., 2010; Kellogg et al., 2019), and robots are a descendant of post-World War II automation technologies (Hounshell, 2000). Some scholars have argued that robots grow from the same branch of the technological tree as machinery first introduced in the Industrial Revolution (Fernández-Macías et al., 2021). Most importantly, technologies from different periods may have similar effects on skill demands or the organization of work.

On this basis, past experiences can be used to draw conclusions about the general relationship between innovation and work, and history provides a rich variety of settings in which to investigate the development and determinants of work meaningfulness. The traditional approaches of labor and social historians can be augmented with a direct interest in work meaning using the framework constructed in the section “Self-Determination Theory, Meaning, and a Historical Framework,” and new approaches in digital humanities and quantitative social science can be used to investigate levels and broad trends.

Uses of History and the Future of Work

The most straightforward use of history when evaluating how work may change is analogical reasoning: identifying a past instance that appears familiar and using it to project the future. Analogies are powerful in public and policy discourse, and analogical reasoning based on a single case or few instances of past job-changing innovations is common in popular and academic writing on the future of work (Schneider

& Vipond, 2023). However, analogies frequently mislead when the wrong analog is chosen (May, 1973; Eichengreen, 2012). Analogies also encourage the view that there are fixed paths into the future and may imply technological determinism. Single analogies also offer no variation across the potential determinants of the final outcome and therefore provide only a partial view of mechanisms. If analogies are used, understanding their context and how they resemble and differ from other possible analogies and the present is essential to appreciate the strengths and limitations of parallels. The importance of contextual variables such as the organization of labor markets makes a deep knowledge of history essential if one wishes to use past examples to suggest possible routes into the future.

Public or policy communication may require analogies, although they should be chosen carefully. For social science, historical studies provide rich inductive evidence, and we should not expect that processes will repeat with the same results. Three aspects of historical study are particularly useful for inductive reasoning about technological change. First, the multiplicity of technological changes in the past allows researchers to investigate reasons why historical innovations have had varying effects. Scholars can use variation in potential determinants and outcomes such as meaningful work to isolate the role of individual determinants, and to examine interactions between determinants. Second, history offers the opportunity to explore developments in a long time horizon. While the past usually provides little assistance in predicting short-run developments, the *range of long-run outcomes* can be ascertained more accurately by looking to long-term shifts in the past than to recent developments in the present. Third, history allows us to explore completed processes of change, and to disentangle short-run effects from final consequences, which may not be distinguishable to observers living through such shifts.

Historical research can remind us of the wide *variation* in possible outcomes and the role of human agency in shaping those outcomes. While some present research acknowledges that humans will shape the future of work, technological-deterministic perspectives remain strong, particularly in public discourse.

Future Research Directions

Two broad categories of future research can begin to directly explore meaningful work and its long-run determinants in history, for which this chapter may serve as a starting point. Bottom-up and top-down approaches can contribute to a better understanding of changes across time. They can also consider the causes of shifts in detail and thereby enrich the study of historical quality of life.

A bottom-up approach would build on the labor and social history literature discussed in “Work and Meaningfulness in Labor and Social History” using the Framework constructed in “Self-Determination Theory, Meaning, and a Historical Framework.” The sources are well known to historians, but, as shown here, merit a

fresh, careful investigation from the perspective of work meaning. To carry out a bottom-up inquiry one may wish to begin by investigating some conjunctures proposed above individually, and, unlike the broad discussion above, disaggregating by experiences in different occupations. Some of the hypotheses suggested throughout this chapter, synthesized or inferred from secondary literature, can be studied closely with primary sources.

A top-down perspective may begin from the collection of text corpuses such as oral histories or autobiographies. Natural-language-processing methods could then be used to trace changes in workers' descriptions of labor across time. The use of these methods has only just begun by economic historians interested in subjective well-being (Lack, 2021). Researchers will need to account for changes in the meanings of words across time, place, and language, and measures such as term frequency may be confounded by the varying salience of topics, regardless of any substantive change in working conditions and meaning. As text corpuses can only capture the *discussion* of topics and not necessarily the underlying work and experience of meaning, they should be used with caution.

These approaches should be complementary: the top-down perspective can track broad trends over long periods, while the bottom-up view enables occupational disaggregation that is crucial to capture the effects of specific shifts such as the adoption of identifiable technology or worker organization. Both may be vulnerable to the limitations of historical qualitative and quantitative data: occupational data apart from censuses and population registers may not be representative. Historical studies of work meaning trends and determinants will produce more reliable conclusions when many places and periods are analyzed and compared, to mitigate problems of representativeness and increase external validity.

In addition to broad studies of determinants and trends, several topics raised in this chapter would benefit from dedicated study. The effects of paternalism on enslaved workers' feelings of relatedness were mentioned in the section "Enslavement and Community", and a more general consideration of how paternalism and other managerial practices impact meaningful work would add to historical and current research. Divisions such as racial and gender segregation likely also had implications for workers' experience of meaning. The potential well-being paradox of strikes, in which workers may have experienced high relatedness and low objective well-being, could be of interest to many fields that investigate labor and industrial disputes. This chapter has noted instances when work became less meaningful while some extrinsic rewards rose, but whether there is a consistent relationship between meaningful work and multidimensional objective job quality is not clear. Finally, the long-term shift from the seventeenth to the twentieth century toward less diverse work portfolios—the transition from a worker as a jack-of-many-trades (Burnette, 2023) to the Standard Employment Relationship—may have had conflicting consequences for meaningfulness. On one hand, workers may have felt more competent in their narrower range of work activities, but competence may give way to amotivation if a new challenge is not acquired. A narrower portfolio of tasks may also have had implications for feelings of autonomy.

Conclusion

This chapter has introduced historians and historical social scientists to the literature on meaningful work and has surveyed scholarship on labor in the past that may interest current researchers studying meaningfulness. Workers in the past tried to satisfy their basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and their work experiences have implications for historical scholarship and present efforts to ensure that workers can experience intrinsic motivation.

Economic history has entirely neglected intrinsic motivation for human behavior, including for work. Extensive psychological research shows that experiencing self-determined behaviors is an important motivation, and the satisfaction of basic psychological needs should be part of historical quality-of-life studies. Social and labor historians have shown more interest in topics related to meaning, but have focused their investigations on concepts such as community, culture, control, and identity. The Historical Work Meaningfulness Framework constructed in “Self-Determination Theory, Meaning, and a Historical Framework” enables direct analysis of meaningfulness in the past.

There are many opportunities to use classic and new historical and social-scientific methods to better understand meaningful work in the past. Labor and social historians may be primarily interested in capturing a greater breadth of historical work experience, while social scientists may wish to analyze long-run determinants of work meaning. The existing historical research described above suggests three potential interacting determinants that can be investigated with detailed study. The chapter has also put forward several hypotheses and questions about work meaning in the past. While an extrinsic motivation and therefore not analyzed here, experiencing beneficence in work should also be a topic of historical research.

Incorporating intrinsic motivation provides a more complete view of historical quality of life, and analysis of work meaningfulness in the past can contribute a long-term perspective and fresh evidence for meaningful-work scholarship. Investigating historical work meaning therefore enriches both historical and current research.

References

- Ågren, M. (2016). *Making a living, making a difference: Gender and work in early modern European society*. Oxford University Press.
- Aitken, H. G. J. (1960). *Taylorism at Watertown arsenal; scientific management in action, 1908–1915*. Harvard University Press.
- Aldrich, M. (1997). *Safety first: Technology, labor, and business in the building of American work safety, 1870–1939*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Aldrich, M. (2006). *Death rode the rails: American railroad accidents and safety, 1828–1965*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Allen, R. C. (2001). The great divergence in European wages and prices from the middle ages to the first world war. *Explorations in Economic History*, 38(4), 411–447.

- Álvarez-Nogal, C., & Prados de la Escosura, L. (2024). Subjective well-being and inequality in Spain's decline. *Cliometrica*, 19, 1–27.
- Andrews, W. L. (2019). *Slavery and class in the American south: A generation of slave narrative testimony, 1840–1865*. Oxford University Press.
- Bauer, R. A., & Bauer, A. H. (1942). Day to day resistance to slavery. *The Journal of Negro History*, 27(4), 388–419.
- Berlin, I., & Morgan, P. D. (1993). Labor and the shaping of slave life in the Americas. In *Cultivation and culture: Labor and the shaping of slave life in the Americas*. University Press of Virginia.
- Biggs, L. (1995). Building for mass production: Factory design and work process at the Ford Motor Company. In R. Asher, R. Edsforth, & S. Merlino (Eds.), *Autowork*. SUNY Press.
- Blassingame, J. W. (1979). *The slave community: Plantation life in the antebellum south*. Oxford University Press.
- Blewett, M. H. (1990). *The last generation: Work and life in the textile mills of Lowell, Massachusetts, 1910–1960*. University of Massachusetts Press.
- Boal, W. M. (2018). Work intensity and worker safety in early twentieth-century coal mining. *Explorations in Economic History*, 70, 132–149.
- Braverman, H. (1974). *Labor and monopoly capital: The degradation of work in the twentieth century*. Monthly Review Press.
- Broadberry, S. (1997). *The productivity race: British manufacturing in international perspective, 1850–1990*. Cambridge University Press.
- Brown, P., Lauder, H., & Ashton, D. (2010). Digital taylorism. In P. Brown, H. Lauder, & D. Ashton (Eds.), *The global auction: The broken promises of education, jobs, and incomes*. Oxford University Press.
- Bullen, A., Wyke, T., & Fowler, A. (1987). *The barefoot aristocrats: A history of the amalgamated Association of Operative Cotton Spinners*. G. Kelsall.
- Burnette, J. (2023). Mismeasuring women's work. In *Social Science History Association Annual Meeting*.
- Burnette, J. (2024). The problems with labor force participation as a measure of women's work. *Capitalism: A Journal of History and Economics*, 5(2), 234–265.
- Burnette, J. (2025). How not to measure the standard of living: Male wages, non-market production and household income in nineteenth-century Europe. *The Economic History Review*, 78(1), 87–112.
- Camp, S. M. H. (2004). *Closer to freedom: Enslaved women and everyday resistance in the plantation south*. University of North Carolina Press.
- Chakrabarty, D. (1989). *Rethinking working-class history: Bengal 1890–1940*. Princeton University Press.
- Chapman, S. D. (1967). *The early factory masters: The transition to the factory system in the midlands textile industry*. David & Charles.
- Clark, G. (1994). Factory discipline. *The Journal of Economic History*, 54(1), 128–163.
- Cohen, I. (1990). *American management and British labor: A comparative study of the cotton spinning industry*. Greenwood.
- Cordery, S. (2003). *British friendly societies, 1750–1914*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Crafts, N. F. R. (2022). The 15-hour week: Keynes's prediction revisited. *Economica*, 89(356), 815–829.
- De Vries, J. (2008). *The industrious revolution: Consumer behavior and the household economy, 1650 to the present*. Cambridge University Press.
- de Zwart, P. (2025). The long-run evolution of global real wages. *Journal of Economic Surveys*, 39(2), 489–516.
- Deci, E. L. (1975). *Intrinsic motivation*. Plenum Press.
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (1985). *Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behavior*. Plenum.
- DeLottinville, P. (1981). Joe beef of Montreal: Working-class culture and the tavern, 1869–1889. *Labour/Le Travail*, 8(9), 9–40.

- Dublin, T. (1979). *Women at work: The transformation of work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826–1860*. Columbia University Press.
- Dur, R., & van Lent, M. (2019). Socially useless jobs. *Industrial Relations: A Journal of Economy and Society*, 58(1), 3–16.
- Dusinberre, W. (2009). *Strategies for survival: Recollections of bondage in antebellum Virginia*. University of Virginia Press.
- Eichengreen, B. (2012). Economic history and economic policy. *The Journal of Economic History*, 72(2), 289–307.
- Ellison, M. (1983). Resistance to oppression: Black women's response to slavery in the United States. *Slavery & Abolition*, 4(1), 56–63.
- Fernández-Macías, E., Klenert, D., & Antón, J.-I. (2021). Not so disruptive yet? Characteristics, distribution and determinants of robots in Europe. *Structural Change and Economic Dynamics*, 58, 76–89.
- Fiebranz, R., Lindberg, E., Lindström, J., & Ågren, M. (2011). Making verbs count: The research project 'gender and work' and its methodology. *Scandinavian Economic History Review*, 59(3), 273–293.
- Floud, R., Wachter, K. W., & Gregory, A. (1990). *Height, health and history: Nutritional status in the United Kingdom, 1750–1980*. Cambridge University Press.
- Fogel, R. W., & Engerman, S. L. (1974). *Time on the cross: The economics of American negro slavery*. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Foster, J. (1974). *Class struggle and the industrial revolution: Early industrial capitalism in three English towns*. Weidenfeld & Nicolson.
- Frankel, E. (1919). Labor turnover in Cincinnati. *Monthly Labor Review*, 8(3), 35–52.
- Frankema, E., & van Waijenburg, M. (2023). What about the race between education and technology in the global south? Comparing skill premiums in colonial Africa and Asia. *The Economic History Review*, 76(3), 941–978.
- Gartman, D. (1986). *Auto slavery: The labor process in the American automobile industry, 1897–1950*. Rutgers University Press.
- Goopu, N. (2001). *The politics of the urban poor in early twentieth-century India*. Cambridge University Press.
- Graves, C. (1981). Applying scientific management principles to railroad repair shops—The Santa Fe experience, 1904–18. *Business and Economic History*, 10, 124–136.
- Graeber, D. (2019). *Bullshit jobs: A theory*. London: Penguin Books.
- Gross, L. F. (1993). *The course of industrial decline: The Boott cotton Mills of Lowell, Massachusetts, 1835–1955*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Goldin, C., & Katz, L. F. (2008). *The race between education and technology*. Cambridge: Belknap.
- Halpern, R. (1997). *Down on the killing floor: Black and white workers in Chicago's packing-houses, 1904–54*. University of Illinois Press.
- Hatcher, J. (2011). Unreal wages: Long-run living standards and the 'Golden age' of the fifteenth century. In B. Dodds & C. D. Liddy (Eds.), *Commercial activity, markets and entrepreneurs in the middle ages: Essays in honour of Richard Britnell* (pp. 1–24). Boydell & Brewer.
- Horowitz, R. (1997). Negro and white, unite and fight! In *A social history of industrial unionism in meatpacking, 1930–90*. University of Illinois Press.
- Hounshell, D. A. (1984). *From the American system to mass production, 1800–1932: The development of manufacturing technology in the United States*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Hounshell, D. A. (2000). Automation, transfer machinery, and mass production in the U.S. automobile industry in the post-world war II era. *Enterprise and Society*, 1(1), 100–138.
- Huberman, M. (1996). *Escape from the market: Negotiating work in Lancashire*. Cambridge University Press.
- Huberman, M., & Minns, C. (2007). The times they are not changin': Days and hours of work in old and new worlds, 1870–2000. *Explorations in Economic History*, 44(4), 538–567.
- Humphries, J., & Schneider, B. (2021). Gender equality, growth, and how a technological trap destroyed female work. *Economic History of Developing Regions*, 36(3), 428–438.

- Johnson, M. P. (1986). Work, culture, and the slave community: Slave occupations in the cotton belt in 1860. *Labor History*, 27(3), 325–355.
- Kay, M. L. M., & Cary, L. L. (1995). *Slavery in North Carolina, 1748–1775*. The University of North Carolina Press.
- Kellogg, K. C., Valentine, M. A., & Christin, A. (2019). Algorithms at work: The new contested terrain of control. *Academy of Management Annals*, 14(1), 366–410.
- Kessler, G., & Lucassen, J. (2013). Labour relations, efficiency and the great divergence: Comparing pre-industrial brickmaking across Eurasia, 1500–2000. In P. Maarten & Z. Jan Luiten van (Eds.), *Technology, skills and the pre-modern economy in the east and the west*. Brill.
- Kirkby, D. (2007). ‘Beer, women and grub’: Pubs, food and the industrial working class. In D. Kirkby & T. Luckins (Eds.), *Dining on turtles: Food feasts and drinking in history* (pp. 136–153). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kolchin, P. (1983). Reevaluating the antebellum slave community: A comparative perspective. *The Journal of American History*, 70(3), 579–601.
- Lack, P. (2021). Using word analysis to track the evolution of emotional well-being in nineteenth-century industrializing Britain. *Historical Methods: A Journal of Quantitative and Interdisciplinary History*, 54(4), 228–247.
- LeMasters, E. E. (1973). Social life in a working-class tavern. *Urban Life and Culture*, 2(1), 27–52.
- Lewchuk, W. (1987). *American technology and the British vehicle industry*. Cambridge University Press.
- Lindström, J., & Ågren, M. (2023). Women’s work and the occupational structure in late nineteenth-century Sweden. *International Review of Social History*, 1–23.
- Lucassen, J. (2021). *The story of work: A new history of humankind*. Yale University Press.
- Lussana, S. (2016). *My brother slaves: Friendship, masculinity, and resistance in the antebellum south*. University Press of Kentucky.
- Maddi, S. R. (1970). The search for meaning. In M. Page (Ed.), *Nebraska symposium on motivation* (pp. 137–186). University of Nebraska Press.
- Maneuver-Hervieu, P., & Chambru, C. (2024). Working time, holidays, and labour conditions in early modern Normandy. *HAL Working Papers*.
- Margo, R. A. (2018). The integration of economic history into economics. *Cliometrica*, 12(3), 377–406.
- Martela, F., Ryan, R. M., & Steger, M. F. (2018). Meaningfulness as satisfaction of autonomy, competence, relatedness, and beneficence: Comparing the four satisfactions and positive affect as predictors of meaning in life. *Journal of Happiness Studies: An Interdisciplinary Forum on Subjective Well-Being*, 19(5), 1261–1282.
- Martinez, J. (2001). ‘Coolies’ to comrades: Internationalism between Australian and Asian seamen. In R. Markey (Ed.), *Labour & community: Historical essays* (pp. 295–312). University of Wollongong Press.
- Maslow, A. H. (1943). A theory of human motivation. *Psychological Review*, 50(4), 370–396.
- May, E. R. (1973). *“Lessons” of the past: The use and misuse of history in American foreign policy*. Oxford University Press.
- McKendrick, N. (1961). Josiah Wedgwood and factory discipline. *The Historical Journal*, 4(1), 30–55.
- Meyer, S. (1981). *The five dollar day: Labor management and social control in the Ford Motor Company, 1908–1921*. State University of New York Press.
- Meyer, S. (1989). The Persistence of Fordism: Workers and Technology in the American Automobile Industry, 1900–1960. In N. Lichtenstein & S. Meyer (Eds.), *On the line: Essays in the history of auto work*. University of Illinois Press.
- Meyer, S. (2016). *Manhood on the line: Working-class masculinities in the American heartland*. University of Illinois Press.
- Montgomery, D. (1979). *Workers’ control in America: Studies in the history of work, technology, and labor struggles*. Cambridge University Press.
- Myles, J. (1850). Chapters in the life of a Dundee factory boy: An autobiography., J. Myles.

- Nelson, D. (1974). Scientific management, systematic management, and labor, 1880–1915. *The Business History Review*, 48(4), 479–500.
- Nelson, D. (1977). Taylorism and the workers at Bethlehem Steel, 1898–1901. *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 101(4), 487–505.
- Nikolova, M., & Cnossen, F. (2020). What makes work meaningful and why economists should care about it. *Labour Economics*, 65, 101847.
- Nuvolari, A. (2002). The “machine breakers” and the industrial revolution. *The Journal of European Economic History*, 31(2), 393–426.
- Nye, D. E. (2013). *America’s assembly line*. MIT Press.
- Ohno, T. (1982). “How the Toyota Production System was Created”, *Japanese Economic Studies* 4(1982), 83–101.
- Paton, D. (2020). The driveress and the nurse: Childcare, working children and other work under Caribbean slavery*. *Past & Present*, 246(Supplement_15), 27–53.
- Peterson, J. S. (1987). *American automobile workers, 1900–1933*. State University of New York Press.
- Phelps Brown, E. H., & Hopkins, S. V. (1955). Seven centuries of building wages. *Economica*, 22(87), 195–206.
- Pollard, S. (1963). Factory discipline in the industrial revolution. *The Economic History Review*, 16(2), 254–271.
- Pollard, S. (1965). *The genesis of modern management: A study of the industrial revolution in Great Britain*. E. Arnold.
- Raff, D. M. G., & Summers, L. H. (1987). Did Henry ford pay efficiency wages? *Journal of Labor Economics*, 5(4), S57–S86.
- Richards, E. (1974). Women in the British economy since about 1700: An interpretation. *History*, 59(197), 337–357.
- Rosso, B. D., Dekas, K. H., & Wrzesniewski, A. (2010). On the meaning of work: A theoretical integration and review. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 30, 91–127.
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2002). Overview of self-determination theory: An organismic dialectical perspective. In E. L. Deci & R. M. Ryan (Eds.), *Handbook of self-determination research* (pp. 3–36). University of Rochester Press.
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2017). *Self-determination theory: Basic psychological needs in motivation, development, and wellness*. Guilford Press.
- Schneider, B. (2025). Job quality in history. *European Review of Economic History*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ereh/hae022>
- Schneider, B., & Vipond, H. (2023). The past and future of work: How history can inform the age of automation. *CESifo Working Papers No. 10766*.
- Shaw-Taylor, L., Sugden, K., & You, X. (2019). *A preliminary estimate of the female occupational structure of England and Wales 1700–1911*. Group for the History of Population and Social Structure Working Papers.
- Smith, I., & Boyns, T. (2005). Scientific management and the pursuit of control in Britain to c.1960. *Accounting Business and Financial History*, 15(2), 187–216.
- Soffia, M., Wood, A. J., & Burchell, B. (2021). Alienation is not ‘bullshit’: An empirical critique of Graeber’s theory of BS jobs. *Work, Employment and Society*, 36(5), 816–840.
- Spencer, D. A. (2015). Developing an understanding of meaningful work in economics: The case for a heterodox economics of work. *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 39(3), 675–688.
- Stampp, K. M. (1956). *The peculiar institution: Slavery in the ante-bellum south*. Knopf.
- Steger, M. F., Dik, B. J., & Duffy, R. D. (2012). Measuring meaningful work: The work and meaning inventory (WAMI). *Journal of Career Assessment*, 20(3), 322–337.
- Stephenson, J. Z. (2018). ‘Real’ wages? Contractors, workers, and pay in London building trades, 1650–1800. *The Economic History Review*, 71(1), 106–132.
- Stephenson, J. Z. (2020). Working days in a London construction team in the eighteenth century: Evidence from St Paul’s cathedral. *The Economic History Review*, 73(2), 409–430.

- Stevenson, B. E. (1996). *Life in black and white: Family and community in the slave south*. Oxford University Press.
- Sullivan, W. A. (1955). *The industrial worker in Pennsylvania, 1800–1840*. Historical and Museum Commission.
- Taylor, F. W. (1911). *The principles of scientific management*. Harper & Brothers Publishers.
- Tentler, L. W. (1982). *Wage-earning women: Industrial work and family life in the United States, 1900–1930*. Oxford University Press.
- Thompson, E. P. (1963). *The making of the English working class*. Victor Gollancz.
- Thompson, E. P. (1967). Time, work-discipline, and industrial capitalism. *Past and Present*, 38(1), 56–97.
- Thorold Rogers, J. E. (1866). *A history of agriculture and prices in England: From the year after the Oxford parliament (1259) to the commencement of the continental war (1793)*. Clarendon Press.
- Thorold Rogers, J. E. (1884). *Six centuries of work and wages: The history of English labour*. W. S. Sonnenschein.
- Tilly, C., & Tilly, C. (1998). *Work under capitalism*. Westview Press.
- Tucker, B. M. (1984). *Samuel Slater and the origins of the American textile industry, 1790–1860*. Cornell University Press.
- van Leeuwen, M. H. D., & Maas, I. (2011). *HISCLASS: A historical international social class scheme*. Leuven University Press.
- van Leeuwen, M. H. D., Maas, I., & Miles, A. (2002). *HISCO: Historical international standards classification of occupations*. Leuven University Press.
- Vohs, K. D., Mead, N. L., & Goode, M. R. (2006). The psychological consequences of money. *Science*, 314(5802), 1154–1156.
- Walker, C. R., & Guest, R. H. (1952). *The man on the assembly line*. Harvard University Press.
- Ware, N. J. (1924). *The industrial worker, 1840–1860: The reaction of American Industrial Society to the advance of the industrial revolution*. Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Warhurst, C., & Knox, A. (2020). Manifesto for a new quality of working life. *Human Relations*, 75(2), 304–321.
- Watson, D. (2019). Fordism: A review essay. *Labor History*, 60(2), 144–159.
- Webber, T. L. (1978). Deep like the rivers: Education in the slave quarter community, 1831–1865.
- White, D. G. (1985). *Ar'n't I a woman?: Female slaves in the plantation south*. Norton.
- Whittle, J. (2024). Putting women back into the early modern economy: Work, occupations, and economic development. *The Economic History Review*, 77(4).
- Whittle, J., & Hailwood, M. (2020). The gender division of labour in early modern England. *The Economic History Review*, 73(1), 3–32.
- Whittle, J., Hailwood, M., Robb, H., & Aucoin, T. (2025). *The experience of work in early modern England*. Cambridge University Press.
- Wood, J. C., & Wood, M. C. (2002). Introduction. In J. C. Wood & M. C. Wood (Eds.), *F. W. Taylor: Critical evaluations in business and management* (pp. 1–14). Routledge.
- Wrzesniewski, A., McCauley, C., Rozin, P., & Schwartz, B. (1997). Jobs, careers, and callings: People's relations to their work. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 31(1), 21–33.
- Wyatt, S., Fraser, J. A., & Stock, F. G. L. (1929). *The effects of monotony in work*. Industrial Health Research Board.
- Yeo, E. (2001). Labour and community, past and future. In R. Markey (Ed.), *Labour & community: Historical essays* (pp. 18–30). University of Wollongong Press.
- Zonderman, D. A. (1992). *Aspirations and anxieties: New England workers and the mechanized factory system, 1815–1850*. Oxford University Press.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if you modified the licensed material. You do not have permission under this license to share adapted material derived from this chapter or parts of it.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.



The Economics of Meaningful Work: A Scoping Review



Martijn Hendriks and Femke Cnossen

Abstract Meaningful work plays a central role in many people's lives, and the topic attracts interest across a range of social science disciplines. What is the economists' view on meaningful work? This chapter presents a scoping review on the economics of meaningful work. We identified 43 relevant English-language articles in top-quartile economics journals through a systematic search in EconLit and citation tracking. We synthesize how these studies conceptualize, perceive, and operationalize meaningful work, along with their insights into individuals' preferences for meaningful work, how meaningful people consider their work to be, the antecedents and outcomes of meaningful work, and the broader conclusions, implications, and recommendations.

Keywords Purpose • Bullshit jobs • Useful job • Meaning at work • Task significance • Literature review

Introduction

Traditional economic theory views work as a source of disutility: a necessary trade-off in which individuals exchange their time and effort for money (Cassar & Meier, 2018). In this view, work is necessary to attain consumption levels, and the labor supply decision is subject to one's preferences for consumption on the one hand and leisure on the other. A growing body of evidence, both within and beyond economics, has challenged the traditional economic view by demonstrating that people care

M. Hendriks (✉)

Erasmus Happiness Economics Research Organisation (EHERO), Erasmus University
Rotterdam, Rotterdam, The Netherlands

University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa

e-mail: hendriks@ese.eur.nl

F. Cnossen

University of Groningen and Global Labor Organization (GLO), Groningen, The Netherlands

© The Author(s) 2026

M. Nikolova (ed.), *Work Meaning and Motivation*, Economic Studies in
Inequality, Social Exclusion and Well-Being,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-23826-9_6

151

about nonmonetary job attributes (for discussions, see e.g. Maestas et al., 2023; Burbano et al., 2024; Cassar & Meier, 2018; Spencer, 2023). One notable example is the theory of compensating wage differentials (Rosen, 1986), which states that workers require higher pay to accept jobs with less desirable attributes (e.g., higher risk, unpleasant environment, irregular hours) and are willing to accept lower pay for jobs with more desirable attributes (e.g., safer conditions, flexible hours, pleasant environment). The wage differential acts as a compensation for the positive or negative aspects of the job beyond the wage itself. Taking it one step further, economists increasingly acknowledge that work itself can have intrinsic value that enhances utility when its contents fulfill (mostly psychological) needs of workers, such as viewing one's work as a purposeful activity (e.g. Bénabou & Tirole, 2003; Besley & Ghatak, 2005; Cassar & Meier, 2018; Nikolova & Cnossen, 2020). These studies seek to bridge a clear disciplinary divide. Economists tend to emphasize monetary incentives and extrinsic motivation, while fields such as work psychology, organizational psychology, organizational behavior, and (human resource) management place greater importance on intrinsic motivation and nonmonetary incentives, including meaningful work (e.g., Allan et al., 2019).

One specific nonmonetary reason to work lies in people's search for meaning. This can be considered a eudaimonic dimension of well-being, in which jobs allow workers to flourish and live a life that realizes their potential (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Graham & Nikolova, 2015). People gain motivation from the intrinsic satisfaction they feel when tasks align with their values, interests, and sense of purpose. This positions task significance as a salient nonmonetary job attribute, and the related perception of doing meaningful work as a salient nonmonetary job outcome, with notable implications for labor market behavior and worker performance, as will be demonstrated in "What Are the Consequences of Meaningful Work?" section of this chapter. To align with the growing desire for meaningful work, companies are placing greater emphasis on social missions and corporate social responsibility efforts (Cassar & Meier, 2018). This has led several pioneering economists to conclude that there is a gap between the importance workers and organizations place on meaningful work and the importance that economists have traditionally assigned to it (Nikolova & Cnossen, 2020; Kaplan & Schulhofer-Wohl, 2018; Ariely et al., 2008), even though related concepts such as the organizational mission and prosocial motivation have received earlier attention (e.g., Bénabou & Tirole, 2003; Besley & Ghatak, 2005). As a result, mainstream economists have traditionally struggled to explain employee behavior, such as discretionary effort, which contradicts their assumption that workers are inherently effort-averse (Lopes, 2018).

In recent years, a small but growing body of literature in economics has emerged that recognizes the significance of meaningful work alongside other nonmonetary aspects of a job. Yet, there is limited integrated knowledge about the contemporary economic discourse on meaningful work, in part because contributions are fragmented across the economic literature and terminology is used inconsistently (e.g., meaning, purpose, usefulness, or "bullshit" jobs). To foster a more systematic understanding of meaningful work in economics, we conducted a scoping review to

map existing perspectives and research in this field. The research question guiding this review is: What is the economists' view on meaningful work?

Our chapter is structured as follows: We begin by explaining how we conducted the scoping review. The remainder of the chapter draws on and is limited to the identified studies. The discussion starts with how meaningful work is conceptualized and perceived in the economics literature and the extent to which people experience meaningful work. Section "What Are the Antecedents of Meaningful Work?" explores insights from the economics literature on the antecedents of meaningful work. Section "What Are the Consequences of Meaningful Work?" examines the consequences of meaningful work. Finally, "Discussion" section presents the main conclusions, implications, and recommendations from this literature, as well as (dis)connections with other literatures on meaningful work, open questions, and directions for further research.

Methodology Scoping Review

We conducted a scoping review following the principles and protocol outlined in the PRISMA extension for scoping reviews (Tricco et al., 2018). We prospectively registered the protocol with the Open Science Framework (<https://osf.io/vmj6u/>). We utilized a two-step search strategy in this review. In the first step, a systematic search was conducted in the EconLit database on December 18, 2024, to identify relevant articles. The search targeted English-language journal articles with combinations of specific words in the abstract or title: one from the first group: meaning*, purpose*, bullshit, fulfil*, worthwhile, useful*, or useless*, and one from the second group: work, job*, entrepreneurship, or task*.¹ The words could be separated by up to two intervening words. Asterisks functioned as truncation characters to capture word variants (e.g., meaning* captures meaning, meaningful, meaningfulness, and meaningless). At the pre-screening stage, the inclusion criteria were limited to articles published in top-quartile journals, as listed in the 2023 Scimago Journal Rankings under the categories "Economics and Econometrics" and "Economics, Econometrics, and Finance (miscellaneous)," resulting in a pool of 171 peer-reviewed journals. During the screening process, we excluded articles for containing misaligned terminology (e.g., when "purpose of our work" refers to the article's intention rather than meaningful work), not being grounded in economics (e.g., articles in multidisciplinary journals that do not engage with the economics literature), being unrelated to the work context, or lacking a significant contribution to the field (e.g., loosely referring to meaningful work in the abstract but no substantial discussion/analysis in the main text). The initial search identified 21 eligible articles. In the second step, an additional 22 studies published in top-quartile journals were identified by

¹ We included "bullshit" because Graeber popularized this term in his influential work referring to meaningless jobs as "bullshit" jobs (Graeber, 2018). We also tested additional search terms, such as "labor/labour," but these did not yield any further articles that met the inclusion criteria.

backward and forward snowball searches of all eligible studies, resulting in a total of 43 studies included in the scoping review. The most common reasons these studies were not identified in the first step are: (1) meaningful work was discussed in the main text but not explicitly mentioned in the abstract or title—often as part of a broader set of job attributes or outcomes; and (2) different phrasing was used in the abstract or title, with sometimes the search terms from the two groups being too far apart (we limited the distance between search terms from the two groups to a maximum of two words to avoid retrieving an unmanageable number of studies from EconLit with a low likelihood of eligibility). The references section separately lists the articles identified in the scoping review. For further details on the review strategy and study selection process, please refer to the OSF webpage (<https://osf.io/vmj6u/>). It includes the review protocol, a flow diagram and an Excel-overview of the study selection process, and the PRISMA-ScR-Checklist with information on each essential reporting item of the PRISMA-ScR protocol.

The 43 articles are distributed across 27 journals. *Small Business Economics* features the most studies (5), followed by *Labour Economics*, *Oxford Review of Economic Policy*, *Ecological Economics*, and *Journal of Business Ethics* with three studies each. The journal distribution shows that studies on meaningful work are spread across core economics journals. We excluded articles in multidisciplinary journals, particularly business ethics journals, that were not grounded in economics. Most of the articles are recent, with 70% published in 2020 or later. This statistic demonstrates that meaningful work has only recently started receiving attention in economics. The literature includes 15 cross-sectional studies, 11 experimental studies, 9 position papers, 3 qualitative studies, 2 panel studies, reviews, and theoretical papers, and single studies using observational, time-series, or census data.² The experimental studies are typically stylized, often using trivial and brief work tasks, with a notable exception being the field experiment of Fracchia et al. (2023). Out of the 27 empirical studies, 11 used data from the United States, 10 used data from a single Northwestern European country, 6 use cross-national datasets (focusing primarily but not exclusively on WEIRD countries), and some single studies used data from other countries including Japan, India, China, Guinea-Bissau, and Slovakia. In general, the empirical work is dominated by samples from WEIRD countries.

The review will focus on economic literature that explicitly discusses meaningful work. However, meaningful work plays a vital, implicit role in several nascent strands of literature in economics. We will briefly discuss two of these important literature streams. First, the economics literature contains an extensive body of research on compensating wage differentials, demonstrating that workers are willing to accept lower wages and work longer hours for jobs that provide social value. Non-pecuniary job rewards, such as the warm glow derived from engaging in altruistic (and implicitly meaningful) work, can compensate for lower financial rewards. This kind of prosocial motivation is typically associated with employment in the

² See data charting form on the OSF webpage for details. The total exceeds 43 because some studies used multiple types of data.

public sector, non-profit organizations, or social enterprises (e.g., Preston, 1989; Francois, 2000; Besley & Ghatak, 2005; Gicheva, 2020; Schneider et al., 2025). Second, a vast literature demonstrates increased worker motivation and performance in mission-oriented jobs and when workers are aligned with organizational missions that transcend business goals and serve the greater good, such as a prosocial or pro-environmental higher purpose (e.g., Ashraf et al., 2014; Giné et al., 2022; Henderson & van den Steen, 2015).

How Is Meaningful Work Conceptualized?

Of the 43 articles, the majority, 30, primarily refer to meaningful work, jobs, or tasks. Eight studies primarily refer to useful/useless work, six to purposeful work, and single studies refer to bullshit jobs, fulfilling work, impactful work, or significant work.³ Ten studies provide definitions of meaningful work, which are presented in Table 1.⁴

Six out of ten studies do not specify whether meaningful work is determined by the individual worker (a subjective approach) or externally (a more “objective” approach). The remaining four studies consider meaningful work to be a subjective experience or evaluation of the individual worker, using phrases such as “an individual’s sense of,” “their understanding of,” “the perception that,” “that individuals view as,” and “the degree to which people believe that” (Brieger et al., 2021; Burbano et al., 2024; Nikolova & Cnossen, 2020; Nikolova et al., 2023). This distinction is relevant because, as argued by Hoeyer and Wadmann (2020), “What is considered meaningless in one place or situation is typically considered meaningful for others or in other situations and places” (p. 435). Seven of the ten studies referred in their definition to “purpose,” three studies referred to “significance,” “impact,” and “recognized,” two studies referred to “worthwhile,” and single studies referred to related terms including “valuable,” “fulfillment,” “has some point,” “achieved,” and “external appreciation.” Four studies specified who should benefit from the work, including three references to “others,” two to “society,” one to “community,” and one to “the greater good.”

Taken together, there is substantial but no full consensus of what constitutes meaningful work, with main differences being whether meaningful work is a purely

³See data charting form for details. The total exceeds 43 because some studies used two terms interchangeably. Although manuscripts often include multiple relevant terms, specific expressions (e.g., socially useful work), and related concepts (e.g., prosocial work), we focus here on the most common and general terminology most closely associated with meaningful work in each paper.

⁴The terminology “useful/useless jobs” was mostly used in empirical studies to align with survey questions in secondary data, such as “my job is useful to society,” typically referring to socially useful jobs. “Purposeful work” is commonly defined as work that aligns with personal goals and values or with an organization’s higher purpose beyond profit (e.g., contributing to a better world).

Table 1 Definitions of meaningful work in the economics literature

Source	Concept	Definition
Ali et al. (2021)	Meaningful job	“A job is considered meaningful to the extent that it is recognized and/or has a purpose”
Ariely et al. (2008)	Meaningful labor	“We view labor as meaningful to the extent that (a) it is recognized and/or (b) has some point or purpose”
Brieger et al. (2021)	Work meaningfulness	“The perception that their work is valuable and significant (Rosso et al., 2010)”
Burbano et al. (2024)	Meaning at work	“Meaning at work refers to an individual’s sense of impact as a result of their work: their understanding of the purpose and what they believe is achieved as a result of their work”
De Schouwer and Kesternich (2025)	Work meaning	“The ability to positively impact one’s community or society through work”
Kesternich et al. (2021)	Work meaning	“The significance of a job for others or for society”
Kosfeld et al. (2017)	Meaningful work	“A task that is recognized by others and/or has some point or purpose” (Ariely et al., 2008)
Nikolova and Cnossen (2020)	Meaningful work	“Job-related activities that individuals view as purposeful and worthwhile”
Nikolova et al. (2023)	Work meaningfulness Meaningful work perceptions	“Activities that individuals view as purposeful and worthwhile and bring external appreciation and fulfillment” “The degree to which people believe that what they do at work has personal significance, contributes to finding meaning in life, facilitates personal growth, and positively impacts the greater good”
Non et al. (2022)	Job meaning	“A job that has some purpose for others”

subjective concept, whether it requires external recognition or appreciation, and whether it requires prosocial impact.

Some studies view work meaningfulness as a eudaimonic dimension of worker well-being. Eudaimonia entails flourishing and living a life that realizes one’s potential, which is separate from but related to *hedonic* (e.g., engagement or stress at work) and *evaluative* (e.g., job satisfaction) dimensions of subjective well-being (Nikolova & Cnossen, 2020; Boudreaux et al., 2022; Kautonen et al., 2024; Nikolova et al., 2023).

Other studies distinguish between different forms of work meaningfulness. Burbano et al. (2024) distinguish between meaning derived from social impact and nonsocial impact, which are both nonmonetary attributes. Social impact refers to the impact that an individual’s work has on the broader community, society, or environment. Nonsocial impact refers to the impact that an individual’s work has on clients and customers, the own organization, and a worker’s own feeling of accomplishment. When classifying the ten definitions using this distinction, three studies defined work meaningfulness solely in terms of social impact, including three of the four studies that specified who should benefit from the work (Kesternich et al.,

2021; Non et al., 2022; De Schouwer & Kesternich, 2025). The others took a more general approach that could also include nonsocial impact. Asuyama (2021) distinguishes between the prosocial meaning and economic meaning of work, proposing that a job can be economically meaningful to a person because it entails pecuniary rewards, such as career opportunities, high income, and financial security. Similarly, Santos et al. (2024) take such a broad definition by stating that, in essence, meaningful work embodies the question “Why am I here?” as it pertains to the workplace. Finally, Peters et al. (2020) use meaningful work in a more general way to refer to intrinsically rewarding work as measured by four indicators: task variation, challenging assignments, interesting assignments, and work autonomy.

The distinction between meaning and meaningfulness is key to understanding the varied definitions of meaningful work discussed in the studies. While many studies in Table 1 focus on what makes work meaningful, it’s important to clarify that meaning and meaningfulness are related but not identical concepts (Rosso et al., 2010). As outlined earlier, meaning refers to the understanding or interpretation of what work represents: its purpose, value, or significance within the broader context of an individual’s life. For example, a worker might interpret their role as contributing to a larger societal good or simply providing financial support. In contrast, meaningfulness is the depth of significance or emotional weight that this interpretation holds for the individual. It is not just about understanding what the work means, but about how deeply that understanding resonates, providing a sense of fulfillment, purpose, or alignment with personal values. In the studies presented, many definitions of meaningful work implicitly refer to meaning, such as the idea of work having “purpose” or “significance” (e.g., Ali et al., 2021; Kosfeld et al., 2017). However, meaningfulness emerges when considering how much personal significance that work holds. This distinction is critical because an individual may understand their work’s purpose or value (meaning) without feeling it is deeply fulfilling or worthwhile (meaningfulness). Therefore, the variations in how economists define meaningful work may reflect whether they are focused more on understanding the work’s significance (meaning) or on the subjective experience of its personal value (meaningfulness). The subjectivity of meaningfulness explains why the perception of meaningful work can vary significantly among individuals, as some may experience their work as profoundly meaningful while others may not, despite having similar interpretations of its meaning. Notably, the economics literature on work meaningfulness is much smaller compared to the job meaning and task significance scholarship. In the remainder of this chapter, when discussing articles, we will, where possible, refer to the same concepts (meaning, meaningfulness, useful work, etc.) as those used by the article under discussion. Nevertheless, the limited literature precludes attributing differences between studies to conceptual distinctions.

How Is Meaningful Work Operationalized?

Most experimental studies manipulated meaningful work by varying task or job significance. This is done by informing participants or showing them that a task

does or does not have practical use (Ariely et al., 2008; Chandler & Kapelner, 2013; Kesternich et al., 2021; Kosfeld et al., 2017), presenting alternate job descriptions with varying levels of positive societal impact (Maestas et al., 2023), or using different videos about the job's significance (Fracchia et al., 2023). Other manipulations involve varying the company's mission (Non et al., 2022) or monetary donations from organizations and their workers to causes that are more (UNICEF) or less (National Rifle Association) widely supported (Reggiani & Rilke, 2024).

All non-experimental studies use subjective measures in the form of self-reports. The survey questions commonly include short scales with one to three items, with the majority of studies using secondary data. Items measuring prosocial impact are included in 13 of the 18 studies. Examples include "My job is useful to society" and "How often does your job provide opportunities to make a positive impact on your community or society?". More general questions are asked in six studies, such as "Feeling of doing useful work" and "Your job gives you the feeling of work well done." Most scales refer to "useful" work (ten studies), which far exceeds other terminology such as "a positive impact," "important or significant work," "helping others" (three studies each), "meaningful work," "influence," and "contribution" (two studies each). The word use in the operationalization is often inconsistent with the name of the concept ("meaningful") and its common definition in terms of "purpose." Most scales also refer to "society" (ten studies), followed by "others" or "other people" (five studies), and "community" (three studies). A detailed overview can be seen in the data charting form on the OSF webpage.

Do People Consider Meaningful Work Important?

Several studies have assessed the extent to which people consider having meaningful work important. Using data from the 2015 International Social Survey Program across 37 countries, Dur and van Lent (2019) find that close to 77% of responders report having a job useful for society as important or very important to them. Kesternich et al. (2021) report that while contributing to society is considered at least somewhat important by 75% of the German population, it ranks below job security and fair wages, which are the two most appreciated job attributes for both employed and unemployed individuals. In the United States, Cotofan et al. (2023) find that the working-age population considers doing important work that gives a feeling of accomplishment more important than having a high income, chances for advancement, job security, and short working hours. By contrast, Maestas et al. (2023) find that the working-age population in the United States is less willing to sacrifice wages for more frequent opportunities to make a positive impact on society than for other nonmonetary benefits, such as autonomy, paid time off or training opportunities. A discrete choice experiment by de Schouwer and Kesternich (2025) shows that Dutch people are willing to sacrifice as much of their wage for a socially useful job as they are for high schedule adaptability, and slightly more than for the option to work from home.

Preferences for meaningful work differ strongly across demographic groups. One particularly well-studied pattern is that women place higher value on meaningful work than men (e.g., Fortin, 2008; Chevalier, 2007; Burbano et al., 2024; Non et al., 2022; de Schouwer & Kesternich, 2025). Gender differences in preferences for meaning are particularly large and widespread when it comes to making a social impact, with smaller differences noted for nonsocial impact, especially in wealthier countries and among educated individuals (Burbano et al., 2024). This helps explain critical behavioral outcomes, including women's self-selection into more prosocial occupations and increased likelihood of working in the public rather than the private sector. Chevalier (2007) provides direct evidence that these value differences contribute to the gender wage gap.

Beyond gender, the literature documents a few other patterns in preferences across demographics. The first is parental status: mothers value work meaning lower than women without children (de Schouwer & Kesternich, 2025). Kesternich et al. (2021) demonstrate that unemployed individuals value work meaning less than employed individuals. Cotofan et al. (2023) find that preferences for job meaning increase with age and decrease with income. This contradicts the observation of Baudot et al. (2022) that younger generations desire more purposeful work, based on their research on accounting firms. Macroeconomic conditions also shape preferences for meaning: Cotofan et al. (2023) find that economic recessions during young adulthood, known as the impressionable years, create cohorts of workers who give higher priority to income, whereas booms make cohorts care more about job meaning for the rest of their lives. They also demonstrate an impact of contemporaneous booms and decreases, with people's preference for meaningful work being higher during prosperous economic times.

In conclusion, having meaningful work is important for many, though not all, people. Its relevance is not new; the longstanding view that humans are guided instinctively by a desire for purposeful work can be traced back to, for instance, Karl Marx and Thorstein Veblen in the 1800s (Wisman, 2023; Spencer, 2023; Dean et al., 2022; Nikolova & Cnossen, 2020). Yet, results on the relative importance of meaningful work compared to other job attributes are mixed. It remains an open question whether people consider having meaningful work more important nowadays than in the past.

Do Most People Consider Their Work Meaningful?

Empirical studies show that most people perceive their work as meaningful. The influential work of the anthropologist David Graeber suggests that 20–50% of jobs in the developed world are meaningless to the point that even the employee cannot justify its existence, referring to them as “bullshit jobs.” In response, Dur and van Lent (2019) find much lower rates in a cross-national survey: only 8% of workers disagree or strongly disagree with the statement “My job is useful to society,” while nearly three quarters of respondents consider their job useful, and the remaining

17% are doubtful about the usefulness of their job. Using the same survey, Asuyama (2021) shows that responses are similar for the question “In my job, I can help other people.” For college-educated individuals in the [USA](#), Dean et al. (2022) show that approximately half are very satisfied with “their job’s contribution to society,” while 36% are somewhat satisfied, 10% are somewhat dissatisfied, and 3% are very dissatisfied. For a representative adult population in the United States, Bolotnyy et al. (2022) report that 63% of the working-age population finds their work to be useful always or most of the time, while 53% of the population feels that they have opportunities to make a positive impact on their community or society. In Europe, Nikolova and Cnossen (2020) find that only 5% of workers disagree or strongly disagree that they do useful work and that it gives them the feeling of work well done. While these studies report lower percentages of people with meaningless jobs than suggested by David Graeber, they are not negligible.

Kaplan and Schulhofer-Wohl (2018) examine using time-use data how perceptions of having meaningful work have evolved in the United States from 1950 to the present due to shifts in occupational structures. They estimate that the share of meaningless jobs is lower than in the past. Women have shifted toward occupations that produce more meaningfulness while men have shifted toward occupations that produce less meaningfulness. These shifts are concentrated among people with lower education levels. The trends in meaningfulness are the same across races; it has risen for both white and black women and fallen for both white and black men. Dur and van Lent (2019) examined time trends across 37 countries for the period 1989–2015. They find that the percentage of perceived useless jobs has remained stable and has not fluctuated with the business cycle.

Half of socially useless jobs are occupied by workers who find it important to have a socially useful job (Dur & van Lent, 2019). This raises the question to what extent preferences for meaningful work translate into actual meaningful work. The initial evidence is mixed. Maestas et al. (2023) find no evidence for a sorting effect in relation to meaningful work, that is, individuals who value meaningful work more do not select into jobs with meaningful work. By contrast, Burbano et al. (2024) and de Schouwer and Kesternich (2025) show that preferences for meaning shape sorting on the labor market, where women are more likely to sort into certain occupations where there is a larger chance of finding meaningful work.

The economic literature on meaningful work has given relatively much attention to the question: Who considers their work meaningful? Considerable heterogeneity in the incidence of meaningful work is observed. The percentage of useless jobs varies between 5% and 14% across the 37 nations covered by Dur and van Lent (2019). The variation seems to be more driven by country-specific reasons than by broader geographic, cultural, or development patterns (see also Asuyama, 2021).

There are considerable demographic differences. Young workers consider having the least meaningful jobs, with meaningfulness increasing with age afterwards (Dur & van Lent, 2019) or peaking in people’s late 30s and 40s (Maestas et al., 2023). More educated workers consider having more meaningful work (Dur & van Lent, 2019; Maestas et al., 2023), and workers with more intellectually challenging jobs are more satisfied with their job’s social contribution (Dean et al., 2022). However,

the evidence on education levels is not fully consistent. Kaplan and Schulhofer-Wohl (2018) find different results when exploring, with a different dataset, a similar representative sample of American workers as Maestas et al. (2023). They observe that less-educated women experience more meaningful work than their higher-educated counterparts, while lower-educated men experience the most meaning, followed by the high-educated, while medium-educated men experience the least meaning. The evidence on gender is also mixed. Maestas et al. (2023) find that women perceive to have more socially useful jobs in the United States. Similarly, for the Netherlands, de Schouwer and Kesternich (2025) find that 47.8% of women report having a highly meaningful job, as opposed to just 32.5% of men. However, Dur and van Lent (2019) do not find this across nations despite women's greater preference for meaningful work (Burbano et al., 2024). Concerning race, whites tend to have more meaningful jobs than non-whites in the United States (Maestas et al., 2023), and upon further inspection, white women experience more meaningfulness than black women, but black men experience more meaningfulness than white men (Kaplan & Schulhofer-Wohl, 2018).

There is also strong variation in perceptions of meaningful work across sectors and occupations (Dur & van Lent, 2019; Nikolova & Cnossen, 2020; Dean et al., 2022). Studies consistently find that workers in the public or non-profit sector consider their job to be more meaningful and are more satisfied with their job's social contribution than workers in the private sector (Dur & van Lent, 2019; Dean et al., 2022). Workers in smaller firms tend to experience more meaningful work (Dean et al., 2022; Nikolova & Cnossen, 2020). Virtually all workers in objectively "essential" jobs such as teachers, healthcare workers, and police officers consider their job highly meaningful to society. Moreover, occupations providing creativity and autonomy tend to have greater meaningfulness perceptions, such as jobs in the craft and related trades industry and agricultural sector. Occupational groups considering their work the least meaningful include elementary professions with simple and routine tasks, as well as certain white-collar jobs in, for instance, finance, sales, marketing, and public relations.

Several studies find that top managers, and to a lesser extent middle managers, are likely to report more socially useful work, and greater satisfaction with their job's contribution to society, than regular workers (Dur & van Lent, 2019; Dean et al., 2022; Nikolova et al., 2023). Correspondingly, self-employed supervisors experience slightly more work meaningfulness than solo entrepreneurs (Nikolova et al., 2023). However, Nikolova and Cnossen (2020) find that management, along with elementary occupations, is associated with the lowest levels of job meaningfulness in Europe, compared to the seven other occupational groups in the 1-digit ISCO-88 classification, after controlling for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. A manager's number of subordinates has no effect (Nikolova & Cnossen, 2020).

Finally, there is mixed evidence on the relationship between pay and meaningful work. Maestas et al. (2023) find that higher-wage workers in the United States tend to have jobs that offer more opportunities to make a positive impact on society. However, Dean et al. (2022) find that higher-wage workers in the United States

are less satisfied with their job's social contribution. For Europe, Nikolova and Cnossen (2020) find no clear relationship between income and meaningful work.

How Is the Future of Meaningful Work Perceived?

In ecological economics, some recent publications argue the need to reorient work toward socially useful and ecologically sustainable outcomes while phasing out socially useless or harmful jobs (Gerold et al., 2023; Bohnenberger, 2022; Mair et al., 2020). Mair et al. (2020) argue that much work in modern Western society is something people are coerced into doing in order to secure their livelihoods. If people are free to choose, they are likely to choose work they believe is socially useful. One approach discussed by Gerold et al. (2023) to reduce people's dependence on work for their livelihood is universal basic income, which could be financed through increased taxes on wealth, luxury consumption, inheritances, resources, and energy. Workers may not only be coerced into socially useless or harmful jobs but may also perceive their work as meaningful while unknowingly engaging in harmful activities. This perception can be shaped by contextual factors, such as misinformation. Robbins and Sharp (2003) demonstrate how this dynamic sheds light on why individuals who seek to engage in meaningful environmental action—by cultivating and preserving a “green” lawn—nonetheless persist in using lawn chemicals despite their harmful ecological effects.

Some other studies discuss how technological progress will influence the future of meaningful work. If technological progress led to less need for work, this would be considered desirable in (neo)classical economics that views work as a “disutility.” However, Spencer (2023) argues that having no work to do threatens people's need for purpose and achievement derived from pursuing meaningful activities in work, even if leisure offers a source of meaning in its own right. This issue might be alleviated by the fact that automation might reduce the exposure of workers to work that lacks meaning, such as simple and repetitive tasks, while at the same time enabling them to potentially do other work that is more meaningful and life-enhancing. Spencer (2023) argues that the extent to which future work brings meaning to workers, even while technological progress accelerates, offers important input in the discussion between proponents for preserving work by upskilling work while leaving burdensome, low-skilled jobs for robots and proponents for eliminating work and supporting, for instance, a universal basic income.

What Are the Antecedents of Meaningful Work?

Most of the papers described in the scoping review implicitly or explicitly discuss the antecedents of meaningful work: what factors are likely to increase workers' meaning(fulness) at work? However, theories on the antecedents of meaningful work in economics are scarce.

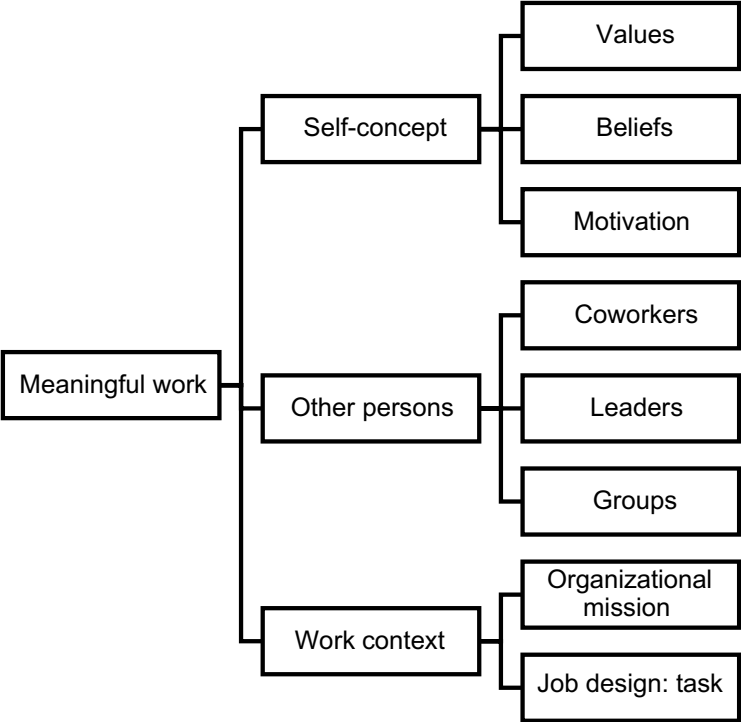


Fig. 1 Visualization of antecedents of meaningful work, based on Rosso et al. (2010)

Three Categories of Antecedents

To structure the discussion on which antecedents economists have described so far and how they function, we build on the theoretical framework proposed by Rosso et al. (2010), visualized in Fig. 1. Originating in organizational psychology, this framework was developed to bring conceptual structure to the otherwise fragmented meaning of work literature. It therefore also offers a useful guide for economists, who face a similar challenge in explicitly incorporating meaning into formal economic theory.

The framework distinguishes three main sources of meaning at work: the self, others, and the work context.⁵ These range from more intrinsic sources, such as personal values or preferences, to more extrinsic ones, like relationships with coworkers or organizational mission. We begin by explaining this framework and how it relates to economic perspectives, followed by a detailed discussion of empirical evidence from the economics literature in “The Economic View on the Antecedents of Meaningful Work” section.

⁵The original model also includes a fourth “spiritual” aspect, but we have excluded it from the discussion for brevity, as it has little direct link to existing economic studies.

The Self

An individual's self-concept, the way in which they see themselves, influences their perception of the world and, by extension, their perception of the meaning of work. Studies indicate that a person's values, motivations, and beliefs play a significant role in shaping their perception of the meaning of work (Rosso et al., 2010). Importantly, from an economic perspective, this self-concept can be viewed as either a time-varying or constant characteristic of individuals that influences preferences. These can pertain to preferences for consumption and leisure, but also for meaning in work (Burbano et al., 2024).

The self-concept influences how individuals experience meaning at work through three key factors: values, motivations, and beliefs related to work. Values, shaped by cultural, institutional, and personal factors, significantly affect how people interpret their work. In the workplace, work values represent the outcomes individuals hope to achieve through their jobs—and thus how they make sense of their work. However, the broad range of definitions and interpretations of work values complicates efforts to generalize across different contexts. Similarly, internal beliefs about the role of work in life can shape one's experience of meaning.

Motivation, and particularly intrinsic motivation, also plays a critical role in shaping perceptions of meaningful work. Intrinsic motivation stems from engaging in activities that individuals find inherently enjoyable or interesting, with affective motivation theories suggesting that it arises when individuals feel they are the primary cause of their own actions, i.e., have an internal locus of control (De Charms, 1968; Seo et al., 2004). Alternatively, cognitive motivation theories propose that motivation results from the interaction between a person's preferences and the work environment (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In this category, self-determination theory posits that people feel intrinsically motivated when three psychological needs are met: feeling competent, autonomous, and related at work. Workers who are intrinsically motivated are able to actually experience meaningful work. Both theories imply different perspectives on the antecedents of meaningful work for economists: intrinsic motivation originating from internal locus of control may lead individuals to self-select into jobs with the right working conditions to find meaning, whereas cognitive motivation theory would predict that the environment may help shape the degree to which work is perceived as meaningful.

Others

A second area of research within the meaning of work literature examines how individuals' interactions and relationships with others, both inside (e.g., colleagues, supervisors) and outside the workplace (e.g., clients, customers, patients), impact their perceptions of work's meaning. Scholars in organizational studies have investigated the influence of various relationships on the meaning of work, focusing on coworkers, leaders, groups and communities, and family. Social recognition and peer appreciation, which are external non-financial rewards, can have internal effects on work meaningfulness and intrinsic motivation (Rosso et al., 2010).

The roles individuals play in their groups and their sense of identification with these groups significantly impact their perceived levels of meaningfulness at work. Organizations can shape the meaning of work by providing opportunities for employees to develop stronger connections to their larger communities. When organizations enable employees to contribute meaningfully to their community, they experience a greater sense of purpose, agency, and impact, which enhances their perception of meaningfulness (Rosso et al., 2010).

Leaders play a crucial role in framing the mission, goals, purpose, and identity of the organization, which influences employees' perceptions of their work's meaning. Leadership styles that facilitate social recognition of a subordinate's accomplishments can enhance meaningfulness, as demonstrated, for instance, by the experiments of Ariely et al. (2008). When leaders articulate work in ideological terms and emphasize higher-order values, followers may perceive their work as aligned with their personal values, thus enhancing its meaning. Leaders can effectively connect the individual self to the organizational mission, and are therefore crucial in linking the self to the work context in creating meaning at work.

The Work Context

Perhaps most significant to economists is the third source of meaning: the work context. Consistent with the framework of Rosso et al. (2010), Cassar and Meier (2018) emphasize two key antecedents of meaningful work in relation to the work context: the mission of the organization and job design as a mechanism to promote task significance.

The organizational mission represents the fundamental goals, values, and purposes to which an organization is committed. Consistent with person–organization (P–O) fit theory, these missions serve as sources of meaning when employees perceive a congruence between their core values and those of the organization (e.g., Brieger et al., 2021). While perceived congruence can enhance meaning for employees, the deep meanings inherent in organizational missions can also have drawbacks. Organizations that establish psychological contracts with employees based on their mission or ideology may encounter stronger negative reactions if they are seen as violating these ideals (Cassar & Meier, 2018). While many organizations do not have an obvious and direct social purpose beyond profit maximization, they can nonetheless seek to create this purpose through concrete socially responsible business activities, such as philanthropic activities, and more generally, by paying attention to corporate social responsibility (Henderson & van den Steen, 2015).

Job design, which refers to the process of organizing work tasks, responsibilities, and roles, is considered important in helping fulfill the three psychological needs at the basis of self-determination theory: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. When work is designed to promote a sense of purpose and impact, it contributes to greater perceived task significance. In turn, greater task significance, which refers to the extent to which individuals feel their work impacts others, increases perceptions of having meaningful work. Job tasks are critical in shaping this experience,

especially regarding social context. Job crafting also plays a role, as individuals can redesign their jobs to align their values with their tasks, thereby enhancing meaningfulness.

Intrinsic Versus Extrinsic Meaning-Makers

The conceptual model illustrates a range of antecedents to meaningfulness, ranging from the individual self, through social relationships, to the broader work context. This spectrum reflects a progression from intrinsic to extrinsic sources of meaning. Motivation, primarily driven by intrinsic psychological needs, emerges from internal drivers, similar to personal beliefs and values. Although these intrinsic factors may be influenced by external conditions, either through the satisfaction of or the shaping of these needs, values, and beliefs, they are largely of internal origin. In contrast, meaning derived from other people, such as leaders or communities, is more extrinsic in nature, illustrating the ways in which the surrounding environment can shape the experience of meaningful work. Finally, the work context itself, including the nature of tasks and their broader societal impact, represents the most extrinsic factor. As such, it is also the most amenable to change through policy interventions, making it particularly relevant for economists.

Nevertheless, although the model and the proposed spectrum suggest that meaningfulness originates from distinct sources, these antecedents are, in practice, always interrelated. While individuals possess intrinsic needs, values, and beliefs, the fulfillment of these needs or the alignment of their values with their work requires interaction with specific work contexts or relationships with others. Meaningfulness arises from the dynamic interplay between internal factors and external circumstances. The subjective weighting of the perceived importance of certain meaning-makers, based on person-specific values or needs, then influences the perception of extrinsic meaning-makers. Together, they determine the meaning experienced by the individual.

Empirically, this poses challenges in distinguishing between the antecedents, and not all empirical studies make or even discuss the explicit distinction. Importantly, what the economist can empirically *observe* most likely occurs in a combination of the three elements: e.g., leaders that communicate an organization's mission, that might appeal more to some than others because of their belief system. Nevertheless, conceptually understanding that these elements interlink helps understanding the origins of meaningfulness at work.

The Economic View on the Antecedents of Meaningful Work

This section will discuss some of the papers of the scoping review that explain differences in the antecedents of meaningful work, structured according to the three categories of antecedents identified in "Three Categories of Antecedents" section

and a separate category for papers that explicitly focus on the interrelation between some of the factors. Of the 43 papers in the scoping review 32 papers make mention of the origins of meaningful work. Eleven don't mention it explicitly, for instance because they focus on the outcomes of meaning (see "What Are the Consequences of Meaningful Work?" section on the consequences of meaningful work for a discussion of these papers).

The Self-Concept

Eleven studies explicitly highlight the role of antecedents that are rooted in personal values, beliefs or motivations in shaping perceptions of meaningful work.

A relatively large subgroup in this part focuses on differences between workers in *preferences for meaning*. In most cases, this is driven by personal values: (some) workers find it important to be useful to society and therefore sort into occupations and firms that allow them to be useful to society. They also tend to organize their work in ways that make their tasks more meaningful, largely driven by their values around the importance of meaningful work. There can be various channels through which this occurs: racial identity (Santos et al., 2024), prosocial attitudes (Non et al., 2022), ideas on how donations of volunteer work should be spent (Mertins & Walter, 2021), and by forming internal preferences for useful or impactful work (e.g. Chen et al., 2020; Maestas et al., 2023; Reggiani & Rilke, 2024; Mair et al., 2020; Fortin, 2008). Importantly, the self-concept can also be formed by external factors, as Cotofan et al. (2023) demonstrate: workers have higher preferences for meaning when they entered the labor market during an economic boom.

In many cases, these preferences are gendered, where women tend to assign more value to doing intrinsically meaningful work (Peters et al., 2020), useful work (Chevalier, 2007), meaning derived from social impact (Burbano et al., 2024), the ability to positively impact one's community or society through work (de Schouwer & Kesternich, 2025), and the importance of being useful to society (Fortin, 2005). As a result, women are more likely to sort into meaningful work both by sorting into more meaningful occupations, and within occupations sorting into more meaningful tasks (Kaplan & Schulhofer-Wohl, 2018).

Some studies that deal with meaningful work from the self-concept focus explicitly on the case of entrepreneurs. For instance, Boudreaux et al. (2022), Kautonen et al. (2024) and Nikolova et al. (2023) argue that entrepreneurship facilitates the development of one's potentials, through self-actualization and a sense of purpose, leading to eudaimonic well-being. Santos et al. (2024) discuss how entrepreneurship can be a means of expressing identity and finding meaning in work. They focus on African American entrepreneurs who find meaning by building ventures that express their racial identity and inspire others in their community.

Drawing on cognitive motivation theories, particularly self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), several studies emphasize the role of fulfilling psychological needs in experiencing meaningful work. Cassar and Meier (2018), Burbano et al. (2024) and Nikolova and Cnossen (2020) explore the role of autonomy,

competence, and relatedness in enhancing work meaningfulness, demonstrating that these intrinsic factors significantly contribute to perceptions of work meaningfulness. An individual's personal needs for the three psychological elements are then part of the self-concept, whereas the satisfaction of these needs can only emerge in interaction with their environment.

Others

Of the three channels, the “others” is the least discussed in economics papers from our scoping review. De Schouwer and Kesternich (2025) show that higher levels of interpersonal interaction are correlated with higher levels of meaning. Nikolova and Cnossen (2020) go even further to show that relatedness, whether workers feel appreciated by their colleagues and supervisors, is the strongest predictor of perceived meaningfulness at work, even more so than objective job indicators such as wage, job security and occupation. This makes it all the more intriguing that this component is often the least emphasized in economics papers.

Furthermore, leaders play a crucial role in framing the mission and goals of an organization, which influences employees' perceptions of their work's meaning. Leadership styles that facilitate social recognition can enhance meaningfulness (Ariely et al., 2008). Nikolova et al. (2023) suggest that self-employed supervisors experience more meaning due to higher levels of autonomy, self-efficacy, but also (societal) recognition. In their study on economics graduate students, Bolotnyy et al. (2022) argue that effective PhD advisers are essential in helping students identify meaningful research questions, and as a guide to finding purpose outside academia.

Kosfeld et al. (2017) also focus on recognition, but as a social status tool, and find that task meaning and meaning from recognition work via the same motivational channel. In tasks where students are both recognized for their effort and informed about the direct meaning of the tasks, both factors contribute to motivation. While Kosfeld et al. treat recognition and meaning as separate elements, one could view their definition of meaning as encompassing both task meaning (originating from the work context) and social meaning (originating from the recognition of others). In this sense, we align with their conclusions that recognition and meaning have a crowding effect, as both serve to provide meaning to work: one through the “context” channel and the other through the “others” channel. Similarly, Levitt and Neckermann (2014) distinguish between task meaning and worker recognition, both of which, following Rosso et al. (2010), can be seen as contributing to meaning: task meaning through the context channel and recognition through the others channel.

The Work Context

The work context is the most frequently discussed source of meaning, as it is the most extrinsic factor and heavily influenced by firm or policy interventions, making it particularly relevant to economists. Out of the 43 papers in our scoping review, 21

discuss the context as a meaning-maker. Given that 32 papers explicitly address the origins of meaning, this indicates that roughly two-thirds of the economics literature describing antecedents of work meaningfulness focuses on the context in which work occurs.

Cassar and Meier (2018) identify two key pathways through which meaning influences labor market outcomes: the organization's mission and job design. Jobs with a social mission are more likely to fulfill employees' need for meaning by linking their actions to a larger social impact. Job design that fosters autonomy, competence, and relatedness is crucial for satisfying workers' psychological needs. Employees can derive meaning from the higher organizational purpose (Thakor, 2024; Song et al., 2023) or from job-specific roles and responsibilities. Most papers in the scoping review focus on job design, particularly task significance, i.e., the degree to which tasks are seen as useful, meaningful, or impactful (e.g., Chandler & Kapelner, 2013; Kosfeld et al., 2017). Another central theme is the mission, often linked to an organization's goals or broader societal missions, such as the distinction between "green" and "brown" jobs (Bohnenberger, 2022).

Task significance, the perception that one's work positively benefits others, is one of the strongest predictors of meaningful work, as well as the autonomy a person has on their job (Santos et al., 2024). This is in line with the work by Ariely et al. (2008), who understand the motivational foundations of meaning to be in purpose, the idea that employees understand how their task is linked to a larger objective, as well as in recognition (as described above). There seems to be, however, an upper boundary to the extent to which perceived task significance can be increased for workers with high levels of meaningfulness. In a field experiment, Fracchia et al. (2023) find that a video treatment emphasizing the task significance of community health workers, who are typically unpaid volunteers with high levels of intrinsic motivation, did not consistently raise the perceived social impact of their work.

A common complaint among healthcare workers is that bureaucratic tasks, particularly data registration for which they don't see a direct benefit to the patient, are often perceived as meaningless, leaving them with insufficient time to care for patients (Hoeyer & Wadmann, 2020). Pathways to more meaningful work include improved job design, such as identifying which data are essential, to what extent forms should be standardized versus customized, and optimally delegating these tasks, and better communication to ensure healthcare workers understand the relevance of the data they handle. This is also what Levitt and Neckermann (2014) highlight: meaning can be embedded in seemingly "mundane" tasks, such as bureaucratic ones, thus stimulating the meaningfulness of a job. Furthermore, the same task can be seen as significant in one part or occupation within an organization, but not the other, such that task significance is not a uniformly understood concept (Hoeyer & Wadmann, 2020).

Dur and van Lent (2019) study whether people perceive their jobs as being useless to society and identify several factors that contribute to this perception. They present five potential causes, supported by tentative empirical evidence. First, they highlight the role of occupation: professions like salespersons, lawyers, and finance

professionals rank highest in terms of individuals believing their work is socially useless. This may stem from the nature of these jobs, which can involve activities perceived as harmful to society, such as selling unnecessary products, exploiting psychological vulnerabilities, or engaging in rent-seeking and lobbying for harmful causes. Second, alienation caused by division of labor into highly specialized parts can make meaningful work look meaningless, a concept dating back to Marx and Taylorism. Third is management quality, which is a concept that touches on “others.” Fourth, job protection legislation may keep people in a job, but with very few tasks to do—which makes their work less meaningful. Their fifth and final potential cause is labor hoarding: the tendency of firms to hold on to more workers than necessary (Dur & van Lent, 2019).

Bohnenberger (2022) argues that green jobs enable workers to transform their work into sustainable, responsible and meaningful activities, in contrast to brown jobs, as the significance of their tasks is to contribute to a larger goal, namely that of a green economy. Bolotnyy et al. (2022) focus on the importance of meaningful research questions for a specific subsample of workers: economics graduate students. Dean et al. (2022) document a series of objective job characteristics and their relationship to meaningful work: income, firm size, intellectual challenge, private versus public sector, IT use and hierarchical position. They find that of all managers, those in education and in healthcare, sectors with a clear mission, are most likely to be satisfied with their job’s contribution to society.

Self-employment can lead to higher levels of work meaningfulness, as it often follows from a self-directed journey, driven by a personal purpose (Nikolova et al., 2023). Reasons that supervisors could experience more meaning include their higher levels of autonomy, self-efficacy, empowerment, recognition, participation in decision-making, visible impact on others’ well-being, and the ability to motivate, coach, and advise employees while aligning their roles with the organization’s mission. The fact that self-employed supervisors are more financially successful may be one reason why they experience slightly more work meaningfulness than solo entrepreneurs. Kautonen et al. (2024) add to that that a sense of place, or place attachment, also contributes to shaping meaningful work for entrepreneurs. The fact that they can achieve social impact for their local community helps shape experiences of meaning.

The Interplay of Three Meaning-Makers

Most of the empirical findings from the papers of the scoping review either implicitly or explicitly study a combination of the three meaning-makers, where the combination of the self-concept and the work context is the most common.

Nikolova and Cnossen (2020) emphasize that meaningful work arises from the interplay between personal motivations (the self) and the work context. They argue that intrinsic motivation, driven by feelings of enjoyment, interest, and satisfaction, emerges when the environment is able to satisfy workers’ psychological needs, allowing them to experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness in their work.

This aligns with cognitive motivation theories, such as self-determination theory, which suggest that motivation arises from the alignment between one's self-concept and the work environment (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Cassar and Meier (2018) treat the three psychological need aspects of a job as (exogenously or endogenously) chosen by the employer, while Nikolova and Cnossen (2020) treat them as emerging in the interaction between personal needs and the environment.

Whereas Burbano et al. (2024) focus mostly on differences in preferences for meaning originating from the self-concept, they also highlight the importance of task significance, measured as the (non)social impact of their job. This concerns the interaction between the self-concept and the job design. In a similar vein, Non et al. (2022) focus on the match between the mission of the organization and the employees' preferences and values.

Entrepreneurship can facilitate the development of one's best potentials and a sense of purpose and meaning in life (Boudreaux et al., 2022). Drawing on the concept of eudaimonic well-being, Boudreaux et al. (2022) state that entrepreneurs often experience flourishing through the everyday tasks that entail autonomy, engagement, meaning, and a sense of achievement, all of which are fundamental for greater well-being. Entrepreneurial actions are themselves forms of expression and autonomy. Thus, entrepreneurship embodies the very process of self-actualizing one's human potential through purposeful activities that can lead to a fulfilling life. Hence, entrepreneurial work may offer much in terms of self-determination and personal fulfillment even for those struggling to make ends meet. Kautonen et al. (2024) provide tentative evidence that entrepreneurs' sense of place, their psychological bond with the local setting of their entrepreneurial activities, can provide them with more purpose in life.

All in all, this section reviewed several papers from our scoping review that explain the antecedents of meaningful work, structured around the three categories of the self, others and the work context, with a separate category for studies focusing on the interrelation between these factors. Of the 43 papers reviewed, 32 explicitly discuss the origins of meaningful work. The studies explore different sources of meaning, including personal values and motivations, job design, and the role of relationships with others. Other research suggests that meaningful work emerges from the interplay of intrinsic factors, such as autonomy and self-concept, as well as extrinsic elements like job significance and social recognition. These findings highlight the complexity of meaningful work and underscore the importance of both personal and contextual factors in shaping individuals' perceptions of work meaning.

What Are the Consequences of Meaningful Work?

Standard models of labor supply exclude intangible factors such as meaning, identity, and pride because these were traditionally difficult to quantify (Ariely et al., 2008). With more data available, Cassar and Meier (2018) propose to extend the basic neoclassical model of work motivation and labor supply to include work

meaning as the third argument in the utility function, which then includes: the utility from income Y as a means to consumption, a cost C of providing effort (or foregoing utility from leisure), and the utility from meaningful work. Drawing on self-determination theory, work meaning enters positively into the utility function representing a source of intrinsic motivation (see also Asuyama, 2021). In relation to this proposed framework, “What Are the Consequences of Meaningful Work?” section will explore the following question: How, and to what extent, does meaningful work shape labor market behaviors and experiences, including labor supply, (reservation) wages, performance, and well-being?

Effect on Labor Supply and (Reservation) Wages

Cassar and Meier (2018) argue that job meaning could be either a substitute or a complement to monetary compensation, which in turn will influence whether people accept lower pay for a meaningful job, or whether job meaning and pay tend to rise together (see also Thakor, 2024; Song et al., 2023). On the one hand, the theory of compensating wage differentials suggests that workers are willing to accept lower wages to perform tasks that offer intrinsic rewards, one prominent example being the fulfillment of the intrinsic desire to spend time and effort in a meaningful way. On the other hand, workers may demand higher compensation for doing work that contributes more to society out of fairness concerns (Kesternich et al., 2021). Alternatively, if a job is described as meaningful, workers may infer from this that a high level of effort is required to do the job properly, which in turn may increase the reservation wage (Kesternich et al., 2021).

Experimental studies elicit respondents’ reservation wages or labor supply based on meaningful or meaningless tasks (Ariely et al., 2008; Chandler & Kapelner, 2013; Kesternich et al., 2021), job descriptions (Non et al., 2022; Maestas et al., 2023; de Schouwer & Kesternich, 2025), or donation incentives (Reggiani & Rilke, 2024). As predicted by the theory of compensating wage differentials, Ariely et al. (2008) and Chandler and Kapelner (2013) demonstrate that more meaningful tasks elicit a lower reservation wage and increase labor supply. Yet, the results seem context-dependent given that Chandler and Kapelner (2013) find these effects to a lesser extent for Indian workers than US workers. Kesternich et al. (2021) find that, overall, work meaning has no significant effect on labor supply. Indeed, there is no effect for subjects for whom work meaning is not “very important.” However, for subjects who consider work meaning as very important (18%), a more meaningful task reduces the reservation wage. By contrast, among unemployed individuals (14%), work meaning increases the reservation wage. This is explained by their observation that unemployed individuals value work meaning less than employed individuals, allowing the opposing mechanisms discussed above to dominate. Thus, making jobs meaningful is not necessarily an inexpensive way to increase one’s willingness to accept a job.

More consistent support for the theory of compensating wage differentials is observed by experimental studies using job descriptions. Using a representative

sample of the US population, Maestas et al. (2023) observe that individuals are willing to forgo 3.6% of their wage to have frequent opportunities to impact the community/society relative to occasional opportunities. While the compensation differential for work meaning is substantial, it is smaller than that of some other job attributes, such as work flexibility. The willingness to pay for meaningful work is similar across gender, race, education level, and age. Using a representative sample of the Dutch population, de Schouwer and Kesternich (2025) find that a job offering “often or always” a positive influence on the person’s community or society, as opposed to “never or sometimes,” is valued at 9.0% of the wage by women without children, 6.7% by women with children, 4.8% by men without children, and 4.5% by men with children.

Non et al. (2022) elicit meaning by manipulating the organization’s mission in the job description. They provide evidence that high-tech companies with a mission centered on innovation or corporate social responsibility (CSR) are the most preferred, followed by non-profit organizations, while profit-driven companies are least preferred. These results suggest that commercial organizations with social missions enjoy a competitive edge in attracting talent. Furthermore, women and individuals who exhibit higher levels of prosocial behavior and lower levels of competitiveness are more likely to be drawn to non-profit organizations and commercial companies with social missions. Notably, these preferences do not appear to negatively impact the ability to attract talented candidates, as there are no significant differences in respondents’ grade point averages or self-efficacy across different groups. In terms of reservation wages, workers are on average willing to forgo €170 in terms of net monthly salary to work in a company that focuses on innovation, and €220 to work in a company that focuses on CSR and sustainability, which equals around 10% of the wage. Non et al. (2022) and de Schouwer and Kesternich (2025) find similar reservation wages and gender differentials, which are more pronounced compared with Maestas et al. (2023). Possible reasons are that the degree of meaning differs less in the experimental conditions of Maestas et al. (2023) (“frequent” vs. “occasional”) or the country context (the USA versus the Netherlands).

Reggiani and Rilke (2024) manipulate meaning through different types of donation incentives. They show that gig workers are more likely to take the job when donation incentives are unifying (donating to UNICEF) rather than polarizing (donating to the National Rifle Association). However, labor supply decreases when unifying donation incentives become larger at the expense of their own wages. The experiment also includes a condition without donation incentives, leaving workers with a higher wage, as donations come at the expense of the worker’s wage. Gig workers are just as likely to accept the job when no donation is offered as when a small unifying donation incentive is offered at the worker’s expense. However, labor supply is lower when unifying donations become larger, and thus their wages lower, compared to the job without donation incentives. Job acceptance for polarizing donation purposes is lower for all relative donation sizes than when no donation is offered. This study shows that adding meaning through donations does not give companies a competitive advantage if it comes at a cost to the worker’s wage.

The main advantage of these experiments is that they provide causal insights. However, the experimental studies have various limitations. Hypothetical job

choices in experiments using job descriptions may not equate to actual job choices. Effects observed by manipulating perceptions of task significance may not equate to experiencing work meaningfulness in one's overall job. Moreover, these experiments assume choice freedom. However, Spencer (2023) points out that, in reality, choice freedom to do meaningful work is limited. Many workers must work to live and have little choice between jobs. Moreover, once workers agree to undertake jobs, they face having to take orders from managers. The extent to which workers' choices for a meaningful job are realized depends on the actions of those with power in the workplace. These issues limit the theory of compensating differentials in predicting how wages are traded off against meaningful work.

Some studies take these issues into account by exploring non-experimental survey data. Cross-sectional studies provide mixed evidence. Consistent with the experimental evidence, Chevalier (2007) observes lower wages in the United Kingdom among workers who consider having a useful job more important, particularly among men. By contrast, Dur and van Lent (2019) find, contrary to the theory of compensating wage differentials, that workers in socially useless jobs are not financially compensated for this disadvantage. Dur and van Lent (2019) also explored effects on job leavers. They find that workers who perceive their job as socially useless are more likely to take action to leave the organization and find work elsewhere, particularly those who care about holding a socially useful job. Similarly, Nikolova and Cnossen (2020) demonstrate that workers who believe they have meaningful work are more willing to delay retirement, as well as participate in training.

Effect on Effort and Performance

The default approach in economics is to promote effort and improve performance through formal structures and practices, financial incentives, and extrinsic motivation (Ali et al., 2021). Economics lags behind other disciplines in incorporating non-financial and intrinsic drivers in modeling the determinants of performance. A growing number of economists consider that incorporating intrinsic drivers more in economic models of performance is a major opportunity to improve such models. Advocates of considering the role of meaningful work argue that an employee engaged in meaningful work gains marginal returns not only from a potentially higher financial reward but also from the increased utility derived from performing intrinsically meaningful tasks (Song et al., 2023; Lopes, 2018). In this regard, some studies explain how meaningful work reduces the principal-agent problem (Spencer, 2023; Song et al., 2023). The assumption is made in modern economics that workers wish to "shirk" where work is assumed to be painful and unattractive. This leads to the view that managers cannot rely on the voluntary effort of workers to achieve their goals. Economic theory rarely considers that people might benefit from not shirking and contributing positively to activities that they find meaningful.

The impact of meaningful work on effort and performance has been empirically explored in experimental studies by varying task significance across respondents.

For instance, in certain studies (Chandler & Kapelner, 2013; Kesternich et al., 2021; Kosfeld et al., 2017), participants in the control group are either informed or shown that the simple tasks they completed have no practical use, for instance, by destroying the completed work or stating it won't be utilized further. Conversely, participants in the treatment group are told that their output will be preserved and used, or that it will make a difference. Chandler and Kapelner (2013) and Kosfeld et al. (2017) find that workers who are assigned "significant" tasks are more likely to increase their quantitative and qualitative output compared to the control group (see also Levitt & Neckermann, 2014). Conversely, Kesternich et al. (2021) find no effect of work meaning on productivity in the German population, and upon further inspection, the effort of unemployed but not employed individuals increases in work meaning.

Kosfeld et al. (2017) further investigate the interplay between worker recognition and task meaningfulness. They find that recognition significantly boosts performance only when workers perceive the task as having low meaning. In such cases, recognition provides meaning to an otherwise meaningless task. Conversely, task meaningfulness does not enhance performance when recognition is present. This suggests that recognition and task meaning may act as substitutes, operating through the same motivational channel, for instance by contributing to a positive self-image.

Some studies used a different type of experimental manipulation. Reggiani and Rilke (2024) varied donation incentives and showed that productivity is higher when donations are unifying (donating to UNICEF) compared to when they are polarizing (donating to the National Rifle Association) or when no donation incentive is provided. Inspired by the notion that many organizations whose core purpose is to advance a social mission pay employees below-market wages, Chen et al. (2020) manipulated earnings in social-mission jobs. Those attracted to social-mission organizations that pay below-market wages perform better individually and cooperate more effectively in teams than those attracted to social-mission organizations that pay higher wages. The individual performance effect arises because below-market pay facilitates the selection of value-congruent employees who are naturally inclined to work hard for the organizational mission. This finding is consistent with agency theory, which suggests that employees whose values and goals are congruent with those of the organization work harder toward the organizational mission. By contrast, for a simple task, Kosfeld et al. (2017) find that financial incentives do not crowd out intrinsic motivation derived from meaning.

In summary, existing evidence indicates that meaningful work can enhance effort and performance, with its impact depending on the context.

Effect on Well-Being

More meaningful work is associated with more job satisfaction and job pride, particularly for those who care about holding a socially useful job (Dur & van Lent, 2019), as well as better mental health (Bolotnyy et al., 2022), more engagement and

job enthusiasm, and less stress and absenteeism (Nikolova & Cnossen, 2020). Brieger et al. (2021) demonstrate, among entrepreneurs, that work meaningfulness mediates the relationship between the belief that their organization creates social value and both lower burnout and higher work engagement, particularly among entrepreneurs with strong social concerns. They explain their finding using the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory. This theory argues that resource gains, such as positive self-evaluations that work is meaningful and worthwhile for themselves or others, fuel positive work energy (e.g., higher work engagement) and prevent energy depletion (e.g., lower work burnout). The positive impact is stronger than a possible dark side of work meaningfulness in that it can spur workaholism and enhance work-life conflict. In summary, the literature consistently shows that meaningful work is associated with better well-being.

Other Studies

In line with the literature on well-being, Asuyama (2021) shows for Western high-income countries that perceived prosocial meaning of a job is the most important predictor of job interestingness, and that its relevance is larger among public sector workers. By contrast, the economic meaning of a job (career opportunities, job security, and wage) is not a prominent predictor of job interestingness.

De Schouwer and Kesternich (2025) show that meaningful jobs typically offer less flexibility, such as work in healthcare and education. They show that women and parents value flexibility more but do not work more flexible jobs. The gender dimension of this flexibility puzzle is related to differences in meaningful work, which women value higher and sort into, at a significant price corresponding to 20–70% less flexibility. Using counterfactual scenarios, they estimate that if work meaning did not come at a cost to flexibility, the gender gap in compensation would be reduced by up to a quarter. Yet, it would have only a modest effect on the motherhood gap in compensation. Along these lines, Peters et al. (2020) find that achieving meaningful work in a broader sense (task variation, challenging and interesting assignments, and work autonomy) simultaneously with a good work-life balance and financial independence is difficult in female freelancers' careers.

Lubyova and van Ours (1999) studied meaningful work from a different angle than the other studies discussed in this review. They studied the system of active labor market policies (ALMP) in the Slovak Republic in the 1990s, which largely revolved around the creation of government-subsidized “socially purposeful jobs” and “publicly useful jobs.” Socially purposeful jobs were primarily subsidized positions created in the private sector, targeting higher-qualified functions. These jobs were socially purposeful in the sense that they were designed to reduce unemployment by offering temporary employment, improving participants' employability, and facilitating their transition to regular jobs. Publicly useful jobs were typically lower-skilled roles in the public sector that benefited the community, such as maintenance of public spaces or infrastructure projects. They find that subsidizing

publicly useful jobs, but not socially purposeful jobs, increased the chance of transition from unemployment into regular jobs.

In closing, the evidence base generally, though not in every context, aligns with the proposed framework of Cassar and Meier (2018) that workers derive utility from meaningful work. Accordingly, several studies follow Cassar and Meier (2018) in advocating for integrating the concept of meaningful work into economic models, arguing that it provides crucial insights into labor market behaviors and the structuring of work environments (see, e.g., Nikolova & Cnossen, 2020). The findings generally align with the statement of Ariely et al. (2008; p. 672): “Meaning is cheap [to improve], so to speak, but ignoring the dimension of meaning may be quite expensive, for employers and for society.”

Discussion

Conclusions

In this chapter, we summarized the extant literature in the field of economics of meaningful work. The economics literature on meaningful work comprises 43 studies, with 70% published in 2020 or later. This statistic demonstrates that meaningful work has relatively recently emerged as a focal topic of interest among economists, with the literature still being in its infancy. Compared to other disciplines, meaningful work has received relatively little attention within economics. Furthermore, existing research in the economic literature has concentrated more on the consequences of meaningful work than on its antecedents, a pattern that contrasts with the focus observed in other fields investigating meaningful work. Among the studies included in this scoping review that address antecedents, most merely discuss potential factors without empirically testing them, often relying on theories and insights borrowed from other fields.

The core contribution of the economics literature on meaningful work lies in its exploration of the economic consequences of meaningfulness, including its effects on labor supply, (reservation) wages, and worker performance. The current evidence suggests that more meaningful work generally, though not always, leads to increased labor supply, lower (reservation) wages, and improved performance.

An important observation is that preferences for meaningful work, and by extension the willingness to trade financial compensation for meaningfulness, vary according to economic conditions and socio-demographic factors such as gender. These variations can help explain broader labor market dynamics, including the gender wage gap, employee turnover, and retirement decisions. While meaningful work is a relevant job attribute, it is neither the only nor necessarily the most important nonmonetary factor influencing worker behavior.

Conceptually, the literature reveals partial consensus on what constitutes meaningful work, with key differences regarding whether it is purely subjective, whether it requires external recognition or appreciation, and whether it necessitates a

prosocial impact. A notable discrepancy exists between conceptualization and operationalization: while conceptual definitions often emphasize purpose and intrinsic meaning, operationalizations in survey-based studies tend to focus more on prosocial impact and the notion of “useful work.”

Implications

The economics literature on meaningful work suggests deeper limitations of a “pure” focus on economic incentives and outcomes, in particular, neglecting the importance of meaningful work. Incorporating nonmonetary job attributes, such as meaningful work, enriches economic models and enhances their ability to explain labor market dynamics and worker performance. Given that other nonmonetary job attributes show similar relevance, meaningful work should be perceived as part of a broader set of relevant nonmonetary job attributes that should be considered rather than as the dominant nonmonetary job attribute. The findings of the scoping review have implications on three levels.

At the societal level, the prevalence of jobs perceived as lacking meaning is concerning due to its implications for labor supply and productivity. In particular, in economies facing labor shortages driven by aging populations, promoting meaningful work can help boost labor supply and productivity, thereby alleviating workforce shortages. Many of these jobs could either be made more meaningful through improved job design and clearer communication of their purpose or replaced with work that has a clearer societal function. The findings also contribute to a better understanding of labor market dynamics such as the gender wage gap and the ways in which preferences for meaningful work vary with macroeconomic conditions. Moreover, the evidence reviewed on the prevalence of meaningful jobs across occupations, sectors, and industries can inform policy decisions aimed at designing more resilient and optimal economic structures, including strategies for managing the decline of “old” industries.

At the organizational level, meaningful work reduces the principal-agent problem. Given the impacts of meaningful work on productivity and effort, there is all the more reason for employers to invest in creating meaningful work for their employees. Employers who facilitate meaningful work can reduce labor shortages and reservation wages while enhancing organizational productivity. An example is to structure work environments more based on worker-centered job design, rather than fragmented technologically optimal task design, or Taylorism, that is commonly associated with perceptions of less meaningful work. Investing in job design that aligns with workers’ values and promotes autonomy, competence, and relatedness can yield long-term benefits for organizations.

Lastly, at the individual level, meaningful work can enhance well-being and performance. By implication, meaningful work is important for people to reach their full potential. It can also explain individual behaviors, such as job-switching, absenteeism, and early retirement decisions.

Recommendations from the Literature

We found a number of recommendations from the papers in the scoping review that are worth repeating here. A key recommendation is the proposal of Cassar and Meier (2018) to extend the basic neoclassical model of work motivation and labor supply to include work meaning as the third argument in the utility function. The reviewed literature demonstrating the economic implications of meaningful work generally supports the relevance of incorporating meaningful work in economic models. However, other nonmonetary job attributes matter as well, implying that nonmonetary job attributes should be considered in general rather than only meaningful work specifically.

Burbano et al. (2024) use the gendered origins of meaning as an explanation for gender segregation by industry of work and therefore propose policies to take into account and seek to rebalance existing gender differences in preferences for meaning at work in order to achieve more equity in the labor market. Dur and van Lent (2019) focus on the role of governments in this. They may use taxation to discourage employers from creating or retaining pointless and harmful jobs and encourage them to create socially useful jobs. Stricter regulation of harmful economic activities (e.g., through consumer protection laws) may, of course, also contribute to reducing the number of socially useless jobs. When the social uselessness of jobs is a matter of perception rather than reality, employers may use nudging or adapt job design. Boudreaux et al. (2022) propose that entrepreneurial accessibility is an important pathway to more eudaimonic equality, thus allowing more equal opportunities for meaningful work.

Divergences from Other Literatures on Meaningful Work

Given its focus on the consequences of meaningful work, the economics literature includes a relatively high number of experimental studies manipulating task significance. Psychologists might argue that most of this economic literature captures the “meaning” of work, but not the depth of significance or emotional weight they refer to as “meaningful” or “meaningfulness” (Rosso et al., 2010). Future research in economics could move beyond solely manipulating task significance by, for instance, measuring the extent to which different manipulations evoke a sense of fulfillment, purpose, or alignment with personal values.

Furthermore, our discussion on the antecedents of meaningful work showed that most of the economics literature either assumes meaning to originate from personal values—leading individuals to sort into jobs based on their preferences for meaning—or on the work context that generates meaningful work. These include the mission of the organization or the perceived importance, relevance or meaningfulness of the tasks they execute. However, the specific source of meaning(fulness) at work is often not explicitly identified, in contrast to the (organizational) psychology

literature, which tends to be more explicit and systematic in categorizing the antecedents of meaningful work.

Open Questions and Suggestions for Future Research

Several open questions remain that could be studied within the field of economics on this matter. First, the field lacks conceptual models on why meaningful work is relevant for economics, and specifically for the labor supply decision. Some studies build on self-determination theory (e.g., Cassar & Meier, 2018; Nikolova & Cnossen, 2020), borrowing its insights to formalize how meaningfulness may shape utility from labor and thus labor supply. A crucial step will be to further develop formal models of work meaning. For example, we need to explore how the dimensions of meaning (the self, the others and the context) interact with each other, whether they are substitutes and complements, and how monetary incentives are affected and affect the different dimensions (Cassar & Meier, 2018).

Second, mixed findings are observed in various respects. Notable examples are mixed findings on how individuals trade-off work meaningfulness relative to other job attributes, whether preferences for meaning shape sorting on the labor market, how preferences for meaning vary by education level, and the impact of meaningful work on labor supply and worker performance. Given the small literature, what causes these differences could not be isolated in this review, such as the role of study design, the operationalization of meaningful work, and/or the study population. This aligns with a need for further exploration of labor market behaviors. Most likely, meaningful work is related to an array of labor market outcomes, yet the current literature has mostly focused on a few outcomes like labor supply and performance. Future research could investigate the full range of labor market behaviors impacted by meaningful work, such as more research on absenteeism, job search, and employee turnover.

Third, measurement issues could be addressed, such as reducing the commonly observed inconsistency between definitions and measures. One particularly helpful step would be for authors to clearly connect their definition of meaningful work to existing literature, as our scoping review shows this is often done implicitly, leading to various, distinct concepts to be classified as meaning(fulness). Moreover, to date, no economic study has used the Work As Meaning Inventory (WAMI), a widely recognized survey-based measure of meaningful work in other disciplines.

Fourth, further research is needed on the effectiveness of interventions to increase job meaning, and its effects on work performance, particularly when traded off against monetary incentives or other nonmonetary incentives. Finally, digitalization and technological advances, such as Artificial Intelligence and robotics, influence the meaning of work (Hoeyer & Wadmann, 2020; Spencer, 2023; Nikolova et al., 2024). Further research is needed to explore how the sense of meaningful work can be optimized in this evolving future landscape.

Acknowledgments The authors would like to thank Milena Nikolova, Heiner Schumacher, and Katharina Kolb for their valuable feedback.

References

Included in the Scoping Review

- Ali, A. J., Fuenzalida, J., Gómez, M., & Williams, M. J. (2021). Four lenses on people management in the public sector: An evidence review and synthesis. *Oxford Review of Economic Policy*, 37(2), 335–366.
- Ariely, D., Kamenica, E., & Prelec, D. (2008). Man's search for meaning: The case of Legos. *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, 67(3–4), 671–677.
- Asuyama, Y. (2021). Determinants of job interestingness: Comparison of Japan and other high-income countries. *Labour Economics*, 73, 102082.
- Baudot, L., Kelly, K., & McCullough, A. (2022). Contemporary conflicts in perspectives on work hours across hierarchical levels in public accounting. *The Accounting Review*, 97(6), 67–89.
- Bohnenberger, K. (2022). Is it a green or brown job? A taxonomy of sustainable employment. *Ecological Economics*, 200, 107469.
- Bolotnyy, V., Basilico, M., & Barreira, P. (2022). Graduate student mental health: Lessons from American economics departments. *Journal of Economic Literature*, 60(4), 1188–1222.
- Boudreaux, C. J., Elert, N., Henrekson, M., & Lucas, D. S. (2022). Entrepreneurial accessibility, eudaimonic well-being, and inequality. *Small Business Economics*, 59(3), 1061–1079.
- Brieger, S. A., De Clercq, D., & Meynhardt, T. (2021). Doing good, feeling good? Entrepreneurs' social value creation beliefs and work-related well-being. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 172, 707–725.
- Burbano, V., Padilla, N., & Meier, S. (2024). Gender differences in preferences for meaning at work. *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy*, 16(3), 61–94.
- Cassar, L., & Meier, S. (2018). Nonmonetary incentives and the implications of work as a source of meaning. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 32(3), 215–238.
- Chandler, D., & Kapelner, A. (2013). Breaking monotony with meaning: Motivation in crowd-sourcing markets. *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, 90, 123–133.
- Chen, C. X., Pesch, H. L., & Wang, L. W. (2020). Selection benefits of below-market pay in social-mission organizations: Effects on individual performance and team cooperation. *The Accounting Review*, 95(1), 57–77.
- Chevalier, A. (2007). Education, occupation and career expectations: Determinants of the gender pay gap for UK graduates. *Oxford Bulletin of Economics and Statistics*, 69(6), 819–842.
- Cotofan, M., Cassar, L., Dur, R., & Meier, S. (2023). Macroeconomic conditions when young shape job preferences for life. *Review of Economics and Statistics*, 105(2), 467–473.
- De Schouwer, T., & Kesternich, I. (2025). Work meaning and the flexibility puzzle. *Journal of Labor Economics*.
- Dean, E., Dadzie, R. B., & Pham, X. (2022). The instinct of workmanship and the incidence of bullshit jobs. *Journal of Economic Issues*, 56(3), 673–698.
- Dur, R., & van Lent, M. (2019). Socially useless jobs. *Industrial Relations*, 58(1), 3–16.
- Fortin, N. M. (2005). Gender role attitudes and the labour-market outcomes of women across OECD countries. *Oxford Review of Economic Policy*, 21(3), 416–438.
- Fortin, N. M. (2008). The gender wage gap among young adults in the United States: The importance of money versus people. *Journal of Human Resources*, 43(4), 884–918.
- Fracchia, M., Molina-Millán, T., & Vicente, P. C. (2023). Motivating volunteer health workers in an African capital city. *Journal of Development Economics*, 163, 103096.

- Gerold, S., Hoffmann, M., & Aigner, E. (2023). Towards a critical understanding of work in ecological economics: A postwork perspective. *Ecological Economics*, 212, 107935.
- Hoeyer, K., & Wadmann, S. (2020). 'Meaningless work': How the datafication of health reconfigures knowledge about work and erodes professional judgement. *Economy and Society*, 49(3), 433–454.
- Kaplan, G., & Schulhofer-Wohl, S. (2018). The changing (dis-)utility of work. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 32(3), 239–258.
- Kautonen, T., Soto-Simeone, A., & Kibler, E. (2024). Unpacking the relationship between sense of place and entrepreneurs' well-being. *Small Business Economics*, 64, 1111–1139.
- Kesternich, I., Schumacher, H., Siflinger, B., & Schwarz, S. (2021). Money or meaning? Labor supply responses to work meaning of employed and unemployed individuals. *European Economic Review*, 137, 103786.
- Kosfeld, M., Neckermann, S., & Yang, X. (2017). The effects of financial and recognition incentives across work contexts: The role of meaning. *Economic Inquiry*, 55(1), 237–247.
- Levitt, S. D., & Neckermann, S. (2014). What field experiments have and have not taught us about managing workers. *Oxford Review of Economic Policy*, 30(4), 639–657.
- Lopes, H. (2018). The moral dimensions of the employment relationship: Institutional implications. *Journal of Institutional Economics*, 14(1), 103–125.
- Lubyova, M., & Van Ours, J. C. (1999). Effects of active labor market programs on the transition rate from unemployment into regular jobs in the Slovak Republic. *Journal of Comparative Economics*, 27(1), 90–112.
- Maestas, N., Mullen, K. J., Powell, D., Von Wachter, T., & Wenger, J. B. (2023). The value of working conditions in the United States and implications for the structure of wages. *American Economic Review*, 113(7), 2007–2047.
- Mair, S., Druckman, A., & Jackson, T. (2020). A tale of two utopias: Work in a post-growth world. *Ecological Economics*, 173, 106653.
- Mertins, V., & Walter, C. (2021). In absence of money: A field experiment on volunteer work motivation. *Experimental Economics*, 24(3), 952–984.
- Nikolova, M., & Cnossen, F. (2020). What makes work meaningful and why economists should care about it. *Labour Economics*, 65, 101847.
- Nikolova, M., Nikolaev, B., & Boudreaux, C. (2023). Being your own boss and bossing others: The moderating effect of managing others on work meaning and autonomy for the self-employed and employees. *Small Business Economics*, 60(2), 463–483.
- Non, A., Rohde, I., de Grip, A., & Dohmen, T. (2022). Mission of the company, prosocial attitudes and job preferences: A discrete choice experiment. *Labour Economics*, 74, 102087.
- Peters, P., Blomme, R., De Jager, W., & Van Der Heijden, B. (2020). The impact of work-related values and work control on the career satisfaction of female freelancers. *Small Business Economics*, 55(2), 493–506.
- Reggiani, T., & Rilke, R. M. (2024). Designing donation incentive contracts for online gig workers. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 190(3), 553–568.
- Robbins, P., & Sharp, J. T. (2003). Producing and consuming chemicals: The moral economy of the American lawn. *Economic Geography*, 79(4), 425–451.
- Santos, S. C., Liguori, E. W., Morris, M. H., & Gibbs, S. R. (2024). A racial identity approach to entrepreneurship: The lived experiences of African American and Black entrepreneurs. *Small Business Economics*, 64(2), 599–623.
- Song, F., Thakor, A., & Quinn, R. (2023). Purpose, profit and social pressure. *Journal of Financial Intermediation*, 55, 101031.
- Spencer, D. A. (2023). Automation and well-being: Bridging the gap between economics and business ethics. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 187(2), 271–281.
- Thakor, A. V. (2024). Higher purpose, employees, and the firm. *The Review of Corporate Finance Studies*, 14, 651.
- Wisman, J. D. (2023). The 2023 Veblen-Commons Award Recipient: Jon D. Wisman: Thorstein Veblen, the meaning of work, and its humanization. *Journal of Economic Issues*, 57(2), 355–374.

Other References

- Allan, B. A., Batz-Barbarich, C., Sterling, H. M., & Tay, L. (2019). Outcomes of meaningful work: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Management Studies*, 56(3), 500–528.
- Ashraf, N., Bandiera, O., & Jack, B. K. (2014). No margin, no mission? A field experiment on incentives for public service delivery. *Journal of Public Economics*, 120, 1–17.
- Bénabou, R., & Tirole, J. (2003). Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. *The Review of Economic Studies*, 70(3), 489–520.
- Besley, T., & Ghatak, M. (2005). Competition and incentives with motivated agents. *American Economic Review*, 95(3), 616–636.
- de Charms, R. (1968). *Personal causation: The internal affective determinants of behavior*. Academic Press.
- Francois, P. (2000). ‘Public service motivation’ as an argument for government provision. *Journal of Public Economics*, 78(3), 275–299.
- Gicheva, D. (2020). Occupational social value and returns to long hours. *Economica*, 87(347), 682–712.
- Giné, X., Mansuri, G., & Shrestha, S. A. (2022). Mission and the bottom line: Performance incentives in a multigoal organization. *Review of Economics and Statistics*, 104(4), 748–763.
- Graeber, D. (2018). *Bullshit jobs: A theory*. Simon and Schuster.
- Graham, C., & Nikolova, M. (2015). Bentham or Aristotle in the development process? An empirical investigation of capabilities and subjective well-being. *World Development*, 68, 163–179.
- Henderson, R., & Van den Steen, E. (2015). Why do firms have “purpose”? The firm’s role as a carrier of identity and reputation. *American Economic Review*, 105(5), 326–330.
- Nikolova, M., Cnossen, F., & Nikolaev, B. (2024). Robots, meaning and self-determination. *Research Policy*, 53(5), 104987.
- Preston, A. E. (1989). The nonprofit worker in a for-profit world. *Journal of Labor Economics*, 7(4), 438–463.
- Rosen, S. (1986). The theory of equalizing differences. In O. Ashenfelter & R. Layard (Eds.), *Handbook of labor economics* (Vol. 1, pp. 641–692). Elsevier Science, North-Holland.
- Rosso, B. D., Dekas, K. H., & Wrzesniewski, A. (2010). On the meaning of work: A theoretical integration and review. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 30, 91–127.
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *American Psychologist*, 55(1), 68–78.
- Schneider, F. H., Brun, F., & Weber, R. A. (2025). Sorting and wage premiums in immoral work. *Review of Economics and Statistics*, 1–46.
- Seo, M., Barrett, L. F., & Bartunek, J. M. (2004). The role of affective experience in work motivation. *Academy of Management Review*, 29, 423–439.
- Tricco, A. C., Lillie, E., Zarin, W., O’Brien, K. K., Colquhoun, H., Levac, D., et al. (2018). PRISMA extension for scoping reviews (PRISMA-ScR): Checklist and explanation. *Annals of Internal Medicine*, 169(7), 467–473.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if you modified the licensed material. You do not have permission under this license to share adapted material derived from this chapter or parts of it.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.



Work Orientations and Economics



Milena Nikolova

Abstract A growing body of research in economics shows that workers care about more than just pay, often seeking social status, career mobility, or meaningful work. This chapter introduces the work orientations framework—a concept from psychology—as a lens for understanding these motivations in economics. Work orientations capture individuals’ core beliefs about the role of work: earning a living (“pay-check”), achieving recognition and advancement (“career”), or finding fulfillment (“calling”). These orientations are not mutually exclusive, and many people hold a mix that shapes their workplace behavior. Economists have long examined financial incentives, alignment with an organization’s mission, and career ambitions, but these strands remain fragmented. Integrating them within the work orientations framework broadens standard economic models, offers a richer view of labor supply and effort, and suggests new priorities for data collection, measurement, and theory development. The chapter reviews current evidence and outlines avenues for future empirical and conceptual research.

Keywords Work orientations · Job orientation · Career orientation · Calling orientation · Labor economics

JEL Codes J22 · J24 · J28 · I31

Introduction

Standard labor economics has long assumed that people work primarily to earn an income. In the (neo-)classical framework, labor supply reflects the trade-off between the utility of income and the utility of foregone leisure, implying that effort

M. Nikolova (✉)
The University of Groningen, Faculty of Economics and Business,
Groningen, The Netherlands
e-mail: m.v.nikolova@rug.nl

is merely a means to an end (Cassar & Meier, 2018; Spencer, 2015). This “work-as-pain” viewpoint prescribes a simple solution for managers: they can motivate workers using appropriate levels of pay.

However, a growing body of theoretical and empirical work in behavioral and labor economics has challenged this viewpoint, suggesting that non-monetary motivations for working matter (e.g., Ariely et al., 2008; Camerer & Malmendier, 2007; Cassar & Meier, 2018; Chadi et al., 2016; Delfgaauw & Dur, 2008; Heyes, 2005; Kosfeld et al., 2017).

This chapter contributes to this body of work by suggesting that people’s motivations for working can be understood by looking at their work orientations. Work orientations—conceptualized as “job,” “career,” or “calling”—capture stable beliefs about the role of work in life and provide an organizing lens for integrating heterogeneous worker motivations into economic models. These orientations help explain why people value different aspects of work and can enrich existing economic models. Proposed by Bellah et al. (1985) and operationalized empirically by Wrzesniewski et al. (1997), work orientations comprise three dimensions: job, career, and calling.^{1,2} Individuals with a job orientation view work as a way to earn a living, nothing more than that. Furthermore, the career-motivated view their work as a way to get social recognition, promotions, and advancement in their profession. In contrast, the calling-oriented view their work as an end in itself and a beckoning to work that is morally, socially, or personally important or fulfilling (Rosso et al., 2010). The calling-oriented are typically engaged in activities that seek to make the world a better place and contribute to society, in addition to viewing work as a source of fulfillment (Rosso et al., 2010; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997).

¹The idea that people have different work orientations goes back to Goldthorpe et al.’s *The Affluent Worker: Industrial Attitudes and Behaviour* (1968). Based on interviews with manual workers in Britain in the 1960s, they proposed three types of work orientations: instrumental (= job orientation, workers view their work as a means to an economic end), bureaucratic (= career orientation, workers view their work as a career, associated with social status and promotion), and solidaristic (= work as a group activity, including social interaction and intrinsic rewards; work satisfies workers’ need for relatedness). The instrumental and bureaucratic work orientations correspond closely to Bellah et al.’s “job” and “career” orientations, respectively. The solidaristic orientation focuses more on group identity and relatedness. Goldthorpe et al. (1968) did not consider these orientations to be mutually exclusive: “[...] these three orientations to work are not intended to stand in *total* contrast to each other: the point that *all* work activity, in industrial society at least, tends to have a basically instrumental component is fully accepted.” (p. 41). I am grateful to Duncan Gallie for pointing me to this important work.

²Bellah et al. (1985) introduced the concept of work orientations in terms of job, career, and calling in a chapter titled “Finding Oneself,” which discusses how Americans define themselves through work. Work that is a job is about “economic success, security, and all that money can buy” (Bellah et al., 2008, p. 66). Furthermore, the “self” for whom work is a career looks not just for economic success, but also prestige, social status, and power. Finally, for those with a calling orientation, work is an indivisible and moral part of their life; it is about performing meaningful and valuable activities for the benefit of the larger community and does not serve personal self-interest (Bellah et al., 2008).

What people are called to do may or may not be pleasurable or challenging (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997).³

While the economics literature has not specifically examined work orientations, several prominent theoretical models have explored non-monetary motivations for working. For example, the preferences-for-meaning framework (Cassar & Meier, 2018) suggests that individuals derive utility not only from wages but also from the intrinsic meaning of their work, which is based on the organization's mission, as well as workers' ability to achieve competence, autonomy, and relatedness. This framework assumes that workers have different preferences for meaning. Consequently, workers with strong preferences for meaning will accept lower wages in exchange for meaningful jobs. Yet, not all workers search for meaning, and the same job characteristics may matter differently to individuals, implying that there are substantial heterogeneities in people's preferences for meaning (De Schouwer et al., 2023). At the same time, the causes and consequences of these heterogeneities remain unclear (Cassar & Meier, 2018).

One key difference between the preferences-for-meaning and work orientations frameworks lies in the understanding of worker motivation. The preferences-for-meaning framework categorizes individuals as having stronger or weaker preferences for meaningful work, typically treating wages and meaning as trade-offs (e.g., Kesternich et al., 2021), even though the original theory allows for the possibility that they can be complements (Cassar & Meier, 2018). However, the preferences-for-meaning framework does not account for having a career orientation.

In this sense, the work orientations framework is broader than the preferences-for-meaning model, as it recognizes that individuals may relate to their work in multiple ways and that career considerations are also important. For instance, a truck driver might view working primarily as a source of income, but also identify with the work and believe that their line of work is central to who they are as a person because of a family tradition or a belief in the social value of transporting goods. In this case, both higher pay and a sense of purpose could motivate effort. Similarly, a worker may view their work as a stepping stone in achieving social status, while also seeing the broader job as meaningful. The work orientations framework then offers a more comprehensive and flexible view of how people approach working.

But is the work orientations framework a meaningful addition to economics or merely a cosmetic addendum? I argue that the work orientations framework can be a unifying factor bringing together disconnected strands of literature related to preferences for meaning (Cassar & Meier, 2018) and career concerns (e.g., Dewatripont et al., 1999a, b). Integrating career orientations into the preferences-for-meaning framework can offer useful insights for economists, explaining, for example, why workers with both strong career and meaning preferences exert the highest effort and may accept low wages for meaningful work or work that offers promotion possibilities. Empirical evidence shows that work orientations explain a non-trivial

³A calling can be linked to enjoyment, but it doesn't have to be. It is more clearly tied to a sense of fulfillment.

share of the variation in labor market attitudes (Nikolova, 2024) and job quitting behavior (Nikolova & De Wit, 2025), even after accounting for job satisfaction and personality traits. This so far limited evidence suggests that work orientations matter and should receive further attention by economists.

What Are Work Orientations?

Measuring Work Orientations

Work orientations are the deeply held beliefs about the role of work in people’s lives and their main motivation for working. Wrzesniewski et al. (1997) introduced the concept into psychology and measured three orientations—job, career, and calling—using an 18-item questionnaire administered to a sample of 196 non-faculty university employees. The original scale was later shortened to ten items (Dekas & Baker, 2014; Jiang & Wrzesniewski, 2023), and the true/false format was replaced with a five- or seven-point Likert scale (see Table 2). In addition to the items, Wrzesniewski et al. (1997) presented respondents with three vignettes, each illustrating one orientation (Table 1). Participants rated how closely each vignette

Table 1 Work orientations vignettes

Category A people work primarily enough to earn enough money to support their lives outside of their jobs. If they were financially secure, they would no longer continue with their current line of work, but would really rather do something else instead. To these people, their jobs are basically a necessity of life, a lot like breathing or sleeping. They often wish the time would pass more quickly at work. They greatly anticipate weekends and vacations. If these people lived their lives over again, they probably would not go into the same line of work. They would not encourage their friends and children to enter their line of work. Category A people are very eager to retire
Category B people basically enjoy their work, but do not expect to be in their current jobs 5 years from now. Instead, they plan to move on to better, higher-level jobs. They have several goals for their futures pertaining to the positions they would eventually like to hold. Sometimes their work seems a waste of time, but they know that they must do sufficiently well in their current positions in order to move on. Category B people can’t wait to get a promotion. For them, a promotion means recognition of their good work, and is a sign of their success in competition with coworkers
For Category C people, work is one of the most important parts of life. They are very pleased that they are in their line of work. Because what they do for a living is a vital part of who they are, it is one of the first things they tell people about themselves. They tend to take their work home with them and on vacations, too. The majority of their friends are from their places of employment, and they belong to several organizations and clubs relating to their work. They feel good about their work because they love it, and because they think it makes the world a better place. They would encourage their friends and children to enter their line of work. Category C people would be pretty upset if they were forced to stop working, and they are not particularly looking forward to retirement

Source: Personal communication with Amy Wrzesniewski, based on Wrzesniewski et al. (1997)

Table 2 Work orientations items in Nikolova (2024), based on Wrzesniewski et al. (1997)

Q1 I enjoy talking about my work with others
Q2 My work is one of the most important things in my life
Q3 My main reason for working is financial: to support my family and lifestyle
Q4 I am eager to retire
Q5 If I was financially independent, I would continue my current work even if I wasn't getting paid for it
Q6 My work makes the world a better place
Q7 I would choose my current line of work again if I had the chance
Q8 I expect to be in a higher-level job in 5 years
Q9 I view my job as a stepping stone to other jobs
Q10 I expect to be doing the same work in 5 years

Source: Wrzesniewski et al. (1997)

described them, from “very much like me” (scored as 3) to “not at all like me” (scored as 0).

There are several ways to construct measures of work orientations based on the items and vignettes. In the original study, Wrzesniewski et al. (1997) classified respondents into three mutually exclusive categories based on the highest score they received on the vignettes. Wrzesniewski et al. (1997) showed that roughly a third of respondents aligned primarily with each of the three orientations, forming the basis of the tripartite model of work orientations.⁴

Another way to construct work orientations measures from the collected survey data is to use Principal Component Analysis (PCA) to construct three indices of job, career, and calling orientations using the items in Table 2. Workers can then be classified into mutually exclusive categories based on the highest score they receive on either the job, career, or calling index, as in Nikolova (2024). This approach does not allow for the coexistence of work orientations.

Nikolova and De Wit (2025) offer an alternative way of measuring work orientations based on the items in Table 2. They use PCA to construct work orientations as continuous indices rather than categorizing respondents into mutually exclusive categories.⁵ This approach allows workers to have coexisting work orientations. The regression analyses then explore the association between each of the work orientations with the relevant outcome variable while holding constant the other two orientations. Furthermore, Nikolova and De Wit (2025) also provide results with archetypal analysis, which offers a way to construct overlapping work orientations by identifying

⁴Wrzesniewski et al. (1997) showed within the same occupation—administrative assistants ($n = 24$)—roughly a third identified with each dimension, thus reflecting the distribution of the overall sample. Subsequent studies among university students (Gandal et al., 2005), accounting professionals in China (Lan et al., 2013), and IT project managers (McKevitt et al., 2017) also found meaningful variation in work orientations within a single profession, suggesting that work orientations do not simply depend on occupation.

⁵Nikolova and De Wit (2025) exclude the “I am eager to retire” item from Table 2 because it is unclear how respondents at the beginning of their career answer such a question.

“pure types” or idealized profiles of work orientations. Unlike cluster analysis, archetypal analysis does not assign respondents to mutually exclusive categories; instead, each individual is represented as a weighted combination of archetypes (Cutler & Breiman, 1994; Eugster & Leisch, 2009). Archetypal analysis allows for a configurational understanding of work orientations, reflecting the possibility that people can simultaneously identify with multiple orientations to varying degrees.

There is a debate in the literature on the number of relevant work orientations. Schabram et al. (2023) critique the idea of three mutually exclusive work orientations and propose a more flexible framework in which job and calling are opposites of the same dimension, while the career orientation functions as an independent dimension. This framework results in four distinct work orientation profiles. The job-oriented profile (low calling, low career) includes individuals who view work primarily as a means of financial security and stability, prioritizing predictability over growth or purpose. The career-oriented profile (low calling, high career) consists of those focused on personal success and upward mobility, without viewing work as a calling. The calling-oriented profile (high calling, low career) represents individuals who are deeply committed to experiencing meaningful work but do not emphasize career advancement, such as social workers, teachers, and nurses who prioritize purpose over prestige. Finally, the hybrid profile (high calling, high career) includes individuals who find their work intrinsically meaningful while also striving for professional growth and achievement. This revised typology challenges the traditional tripartite model (job, career, calling) by demonstrating that career ambition and a sense of calling can coexist rather than being mutually exclusive. Yet, this typology does not allow for the coexistence of job and calling orientations, which may be problematic.

Using cross-sectional data from over 2000 working individuals in the Dutch LISS panel collected in April/May 2023, Nikolova (2024) finds support for the tripartite model of work orientations, based on the 10-item scale from Wrzesniewski. According to Nikolova (2024),⁶ the job and the calling orientation index load onto separate dimensions, with a moderate correlation. These low correlations between the job and calling orientations imply that these orientations are not simply opposite ends of a single continuum, but rather represent distinct constructs. By contrast, Jiang and Wrzesniewski (2023) treat calling and job orientations as opposite poles of the same underlying dimension. However, Jiang and Wrzesniewski (2023) focused on unemployed individuals and excluded two items that capture the job orientation (Q4 and Q5 in Table 2). This raises an important empirical question about whether the job and calling orientations are best seen as separate or as opposites of the same construct.

In addition, Willner et al. (2020) propose a five-dimensional model of work orientations, whereby, in addition to the job, career, and calling orientations, they find evidence for the existence of two other dimensions: *social embeddedness* and

⁶Nikolova (2024), which is the only study to date in economics that has used work orientations the way psychologists conceptualize them, also measured work orientations using the vignettes from Wrzesniewski et al. (1997), but reports that these yielded very noisy and inconsistent results.

busyness. The social embeddedness orientation, which is similar to relatedness from Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017), reflects the desire for belonging and connection at work, emphasizing relationships and feeling part of a group, while the busyness orientation represents working primarily to fill time, avoid boredom, and maintain a sense of activity. Future research should prioritize understanding whether social embeddedness and busyness are indeed additional work orientations and how they interact with the job, career, and calling orientations, and whether and how they matter for labor market outcomes.

While valuable, psychological studies on work orientations often rely on small, non-representative samples, making it difficult to draw broad conclusions. As a result, many questions about the validity, reliability, and development of work orientations remain unanswered. In particular, the relative influence of social and genetic factors, the impact of the work environment, the long-term stability of work orientations in large representative samples, and their cross-cultural comparability have yet to be systematically studied. For example, it is not yet fully understood whether and how work orientations change over the life course.⁷ While Wrzesniewski (1999) shows that work orientations are stable over a short period of 6 months, in a 7-year longitudinal study of amateur musicians, Dobrow (2013) found that calling levels declined over time, even among those who initially reported strong callings. Similarly, Zhang et al. (2021) observed changes in calling during the transition from university to work among Chinese students. Most students began with a high calling, but for the majority, it declined over time. Overall, work orientations tend to be “sticky” once formed but can change at pivotal moments (Schabram et al., 2023).

Distinguishing Work Orientations from Related Concepts

The psychology literature clearly distinguishes between *meaning in work* (i.e., work meaningfulness) and *meaning of work* (i.e., the role of work in people’s lives) (Willner et al., 2020). The meaning of work has three aspects (Roberson, 1990): work values, work centrality, and work orientations. *Work values* are the desired outcomes of work, i.e., what individuals seek to achieve through their jobs, such as high income, job security, or autonomy (Rosso et al., 2010). Therefore, work values influence the self-selection into particular types of jobs, while work orientations are about how someone thinks about work in general and what determines their motivation for working in the first place. Furthermore, extrinsic work values (i.e., valuing pay, promotions, and benefits) do not need to fully overlap with the job and career

⁷Cotofan et al. (2023) show evidence on the stability of work values by documenting long-term trends in preferences for meaning, career advancement, and income using repeated cross-sectional data from the United States between 1973 and 2004. They present results by age group and survey year, illustrating how these preferences vary across cohorts and over time. The young tend to rank income and promotions higher and meaning lower than older respondents. I thank Robert Dur for pointing me to this fact.

orientations, and likewise, intrinsic work values (e.g., valuing autonomy or work that allows for socialization) do not need to coexist with having a calling orientation. An example of this would be the leader of a nonprofit organization who sees their work as a calling but may negotiate a high salary, a permanent contract, and work benefits because they believe that their expertise is unique or valuable and deserves financial recognition. Having a strong job orientation may also coincide with intrinsic job values—for example, someone may view work as a means to earn money but still value autonomy and working with others.

Work values are typically elicited in surveys by asking people about the importance of job security, high income, advancement opportunities, having an interesting job, doing work that allows people to help others, or is useful to society. Individuals may have both extrinsic and intrinsic work values at the same time, but one type may be more dominant depending on personal preferences and cultural influences. Sociological and economic research has often referred to work values as work orientations (Clark, 1997, 2010; Clark & Kozák, 2023; Gallie, 2019; Kalleberg & Marsden, 2013, 2019; Zou, 2015). A more accurate term for work values is therefore *job preferences*, as used in Gallie et al. (2012), as this term accurately reflects the notion of desired outcomes of work.

Work centrality reflects the relative importance of work in a person's life compared to other activities and domains (e.g., family, leisure, religion). For people with high work centrality, work is a crucial part of their identity and a source of meaning. Research on work centrality has studied whether people would continue working even if they were financially independent. It is typically measured using survey items, such as: "I would enjoy having a job even if I did not need the money," and "A job is just a way of earning money—no more." Unlike psychological studies that frame work orientations as deeply held beliefs about the meaning of work, sociological research often uses the terms "work orientations" and "work centrality" synonymously (Haller et al., 2023). Yet, work centrality is about the extent to which work is prioritized relative to other life domains such as family or religion. Work orientations, which are distinct from both work centrality and work values, concern how individuals define the meaning of work itself—whether they see it primarily as a job (a means to earn money), a career (a path to success), or a calling (a source of purpose and fulfillment) (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). Work orientations are therefore broader than work centrality. Work orientations are about *why* work matters and what meaning it holds, while work centrality is about *how much* work matters in someone's life *relative to other life domains* (e.g., religion, family, volunteer activities). For example, a social worker may view their daily job as a calling, but still find their family the most important source of meaning in their life. Conversely, a CEO may have high work centrality, but have a high career and not a calling orientation, seeking work as a way to achieve social status. It may also be possible to have a high work centrality, because of cultural or social expectations, where work is viewed as a moral duty (reflecting a strong work ethic), but still view work as a means to earning money.

The partial conceptual overlap between work values, work orientations, and work centrality makes it challenging to clearly distinguish them. In addition, measures of work centrality, from the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP)

Work Orientations module, fielded in 1989, 1997, 2005, and 2015, such as “A job is just a way of earning money—no more” and “I would enjoy having a paid job even if I did not need the money” directly correspond to two of the items comprising the job and calling orientations, respectively, from the Wrzesniewski et al. (1997) scale (see Table 2). This becomes empirically tricky if individuals score high on both work centrality and calling orientation measures, but identify predominantly with a career orientation. In addition, the ISSP has a work values module asking respondents to rate the importance of having a job that offers “Good opportunities for advancement,” which is arguably related to the career orientation, which again muddies the concepts of work values and work orientations.

In addition, work orientations are distinct from the concept of “work ethic.” As Congleton (1991) explains, an internal work ethic involves a moral commitment to work for its own sake—an internalized norm that may be transmitted from parents to children and leads people to supply more effort regardless of extrinsic rewards. In contrast, work orientations reflect personal beliefs about what work is for, i.e., what its broader purpose in a person’s life is: income, status, or meaning. A job-oriented worker may have a strong work ethic, while a calling-oriented worker may work hard not out of duty, but because the work is personally fulfilling.

A final distinction I explore is between *work meaningfulness* (experiencing tasks and work as personally fulfilling or socially purposeful) and having a calling orientation (having the deeply rooted belief that work is morally, personally, or socially significant). Some individuals may primarily identify with a calling orientation but still encounter tasks that feel less meaningful within their work. For example, a teacher who finds educating students a calling may feel that administrative paperwork is meaningless. However, this does not necessarily mean their overall work orientation shifts, but rather, the meaningfulness of specific tasks varies. In addition, a NASA scientist and a janitor can both find their tasks meaningful in terms of helping ‘put a man on the moon’ (Carton, 2018), but they may have different work orientations. Yet, currently, the well-known scale for measuring work meaningfulness, the WAMI (Steger et al., 2012), contains the item “I know my work makes a positive difference in the world” that seems very similar to the calling item in the work orientations scale by Wrzesniewski “My work makes the world a better place,” which are empirically and conceptually very similar.

Given these ambiguities, there is an urgent need to further refine the distinctions among work values, orientations, work ethic, and centrality to ensure that empirical studies accurately capture individuals’ perspectives on work and the meaningfulness they experience from work.

Work Orientations and Economics

Work orientations, conceptualized as the long-term views on work as a job, career, and calling, do not yet feature in the economics literature beyond Nikolova (2024) and Nikolova and De Wit (2025). This chapter argues that they should. Several

existing conceptual frameworks in economics can serve as a basis, starting with classical and neoclassical economics, the preferences-for-meaning framework, identity utility theory, models of career concerns, and tournament theory. At their core, these theories make different assumptions about people's work motivations, which have implications for the labor supply and effort that workers put in, and the optimal incentive schemes.

Work as a Disutility

According to Spencer (2014), mainstream economics sees work as a disutility for three key reasons. First, classical economists like Adam Smith and Jeremy Bentham saw work as an inherently painful economic necessity—something people endure only to earn a wage. Smith called work “toil and trouble,” while Bentham described it as “pain.”⁸ Second, work reduces leisure time, a view emphasized in neoclassical economics, where work is a trade-off against leisure. Third, traditional economic models assume that workers naturally try to avoid work, i.e., they are “shirking.” To reduce workers' natural inclination to shirk, firms pay efficiency wages, i.e., wages that exceed the marginal product of labor. This reduces the demand for labor and creates involuntary unemployment, which serves as a deterrent: if a worker is caught shirking and fired, finding a new job becomes more difficult in the presence of unemployment (Shapiro & Stiglitz, 1984).

These perspectives largely ignore the possibility that work can be more than a source of income and that workers can have non-monetary motivations for working. Traditional economic models, therefore, broadly assume that work is a “paycheck” (Farzin, 2009). Based on research in psychology and economics (Mantler et al., 2022; Nikolova, 2024; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997), work is primarily a disutility for roughly a third of workers. They may dislike working for its own sake or simply value their leisure time more. For them, a job is mainly a means to earn a living and pay the bills, even though they may identify with the career and calling orientations to some degree as well. However, it is still unclear whether these individuals should be labeled as “shirkers.” After all, they are fulfilling their job requirements and value non-working time.

⁸Lazear (2018) argues that the idea that non-monetary aspects of work are important is spelled out in Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), Book I, Chapter X. Smith outlines five key factors influencing wage differences across occupations, laying the foundation for compensating wage differentials theory. These factors are: agreeableness of the job (i.e., how pleasant or unpleasant it is), the difficulty and cost of learning the job (i.e., how much training or education is required), the stability of employment (i.e., whether work is constant or subject to layoffs), the level of trust and responsibility involved, and the probability of success in the occupation. However, rather than explaining the non-monetary motivations for working, these factors primarily account for why wages differ across jobs, as Smith generally viewed labor as something people engage in out of necessity rather than intrinsic fulfillment.

A growing body of research suggests that workers value their working conditions and the social purpose of their organization (Cassar & Meier, 2018). Furthermore, according to procedural utility theory, individuals can derive satisfaction from the process of working in and of itself (Frey et al., 2004). For example, the self-employed choose their career path over a more stable and secure career as an employee because they value procedural aspects of work, such as having autonomy and control over their work (Benz & Frey, 2008; Binder & Blankenberg, 2020). Furthermore, scientists and nonprofit workers often accept lower financial compensation in exchange for work that aligns with their intrinsic motivation (Hamermesh, 2018; Leete, 2001; Preston, 1989; Stern, 2004). Furthermore, some workers accept a pay cut to engage in meaningful work (Bäker & Mechtel, 2018; Hu & Hirsh, 2017; Kesternich et al., 2021) or work for an employer offering corporate social responsibility (Burbano, 2016).

At the same time, not all workers search for meaning. For example, not all scientists want to contribute to science (Sauermaun & Roach, 2014), not all self-employed individuals enjoy “being their own boss” (Binder & Blankenberg, 2020; Fuchs-Schündeln, 2009), and some individuals demand higher and not lower wages for engaging in meaningful work (De Schouwer et al., 2023; Kesternich et al., 2021). This suggests that there are substantial heterogeneities in the beliefs that people have about the role of work in their lives. Studying work orientations could therefore be important to understanding these heterogeneities.

Mission-Based Matching Models

Some models in economics take into account intrinsic motivation, assuming that some workers have a calling (i.e., “dedication to the job”), while others view their work as a job (Rebitzer & Taylor, 2011; Taylor, 2007). For example, Heyes (2005) assumes that individuals either have a vocation (i.e., a calling) or they do not, treating it as a binary state rather than a continuum. In his model, workers with a vocation are intrinsically motivated to go above and beyond their contractual obligations, while non-vocation-driven workers provide only the required level of effort. Because vocation is unobservable to employers, wages act as a self-selection mechanism—low wages deter non-vocational workers, ensuring that only those with a true calling enter the profession. This assumption underpins his argument that raising wages in vocational fields may attract the “wrong” type of workers (i.e., those without a true calling), ultimately lowering overall workforce quality.

Similarly, Besley and Ghatak (2005) argue that mission-driven organizations (e.g., nonprofits or public service organizations) function best when workers’ motivations align with the organization’s mission. The authors show that when this alignment exists, organizations can rely less on monetary incentives, as workers derive intrinsic motivation from their work.

Furthermore, Delfgaauw and Dur (2007, 2008) analyze how workers’ motivation, firms’ hiring decisions, and incentives interact. Their 2007 paper focuses on

signaling and screening. Because firms cannot directly observe worker motivation, they must design compensation schemes carefully. Higher wages attract more applicants but also more low-motivated workers, creating a trade-off between filling vacancies and maintaining a motivated workforce. Employers may intentionally offer lower wages to filter out less motivated workers, even at the risk of leaving some positions unfilled.

Delfgaauw and Dur (2008) analyze how public sector incentives influence worker selection and motivation, explaining why some civil servants are highly “dedicated” while others appear disengaged (i.e., “lazy”). Their model predicts that the public sector attracts both dedicated workers, who accept lower pay for meaningful work, and lazy workers, who seek low-effort environments. To balance costs and productivity, governments distort incentives by offering weaker effort requirements to lazy workers while demanding higher effort from motivated ones. This creates a pay structure different from the private sector, where performance-based incentives are more common. When effort is unverifiable, lazy workers may crowd out dedicated workers, leading to lower overall motivation. As a result, public sector organizations must carefully design incentive structures to retain dedicated employees without enabling disengagement among others.

While these papers highlight the role of intrinsic motivation (e.g., Delfgaauw & Dur, 2007), mission (e.g., Besley & Ghatak, 2005), and calling (e.g., Heyes, 2005), they do not explain the *sources* of heterogeneity in intrinsic motivation. The preferences-for-meaning framework explicitly specifies the sources of heterogeneity by explaining that workers’ preferences for meaning depend on the following job characteristics: mission, autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Cassar & Meier, 2018).

Identity Utility

Another economic model that is related to work orientations is identity utility theory. According to Bellah et al. (2008, p. 66), work is about how we define our sense of self, or as they put it, “What we ‘do’ often translates to what we ‘are’.” This statement seems to link work orientations with identity utility theory, though, as I argue below, the match between the two frameworks is far from perfect.

Specifically, Akerlof and Kranton (2000, 2005) argue that identity, i.e., how workers see themselves in relation to their organization, shapes workplace behavior and effort. Akerlof and Kranton (2005) classify workers into *insiders* (who internalize the organization’s values) and *outsiders* (who see work as transactional). According to their framework, organizations do not merely recruit workers who match their mission but actively shape workers’ identities (e.g., military indoctrination and corporate cultures). Employees who internalize the firm’s mission require less extrinsic motivation (lower wages, fewer incentives), while those who do not (i.e., the outsiders) need stronger financial incentives. The parallel with the work orientations framework is that job-oriented individuals are like outsiders, requiring

high financial incentives to exert effort. Calling-oriented individuals are more likely to internalize organizational identity, aligning with Akerlof and Kranton's insider concept.

Yet, identity utility cannot fully explain career orientations. Career-motivated individuals are not simply insiders or outsiders; they work for status and social mobility, regardless of their mission alignment. Moreover, while Akerlof and Kranton's (2005) identity-based model shares similarities with the mission-based sorting framework (e.g., Besley & Ghatak, 2005), it assumes that firms actively shape worker identity over time. Akerlof and Kranton assert that firms create worker identities, whereas the work orientations framework suggests that motivations are largely dispositional. While Akerlof and Kranton emphasize the power of organizations to shape worker identities, they consider the role of workers' initial motivations. These initial motivations affect how effectively an organization can foster a sense of belonging and align workers with the firm's mission. Consequently, both workers' initial motivations and organizational efforts to shape identities play a significant role in influencing behavior and performance. This implies that firms cannot easily convert a career-oriented individual into a calling-driven worker, even with identity-driven HR practices. Yet, this ability of organizations to mold identity is a key distinction between the two frameworks. While Akerlof and Kranton focus on organizational identity, the work orientations framework emphasizes how individual motivations interact with work, regardless of the organization's efforts to shape identity.

Preferences for Meaning

The preferences-for-meaning model (Cassar & Meier, 2018; Kesternich et al., 2021; De Schouwer et al., 2023) suggests that individuals derive utility from meaningful work, i.e., work that they consider personally fulfilling or societally important. This framework assumes that workers have heterogeneous preferences for meaning, with some valuing purpose-driven work highly, while others do not. Job meaning is a function of the sources of meaning: mission, autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and individuals have heterogeneous preferences for meaning, which means that they assign different weights to the sources of meaning (Cassar & Meier, 2018).

The model predicts that workers with strong preferences for meaning will accept lower wages in exchange for jobs that are personally fulfilling or serve a social purpose. This has important implications for labor market sorting. For example, mission-driven organizations can offer lower wages but still attract highly motivated workers who value purpose over pay. The model builds on standard utility theory but extends it by incorporating non-monetary job attributes as a direct input into the utility function. A worker's total utility U from a job is:

$$U = Y(w, e) + M(\theta, x, e) - C(e) \quad (1)$$

where w captures monetary compensation, M represents utility from meaningful work, and C denotes the cost of effort. Here, θ reflects an individual's preference for work meaning, while x represents the sources of meaning (i.e., autonomy, competence, relatedness, and mission). Workers with high θ are willing to accept lower wages for meaningful jobs because meaning increases their overall utility, leading to lower reservation wages and higher effort. These individuals are the “calling-oriented” in the work orientations model. Conversely, those with low θ prioritize wages and show little response to meaning.

While this model accounts for heterogeneity in worker preferences, it oversimplifies motivation by assuming that workers seek only money or meaning from their jobs. However, this framework overlooks the career orientation, where workers are driven by social status, promotions, and career advancement rather than direct intrinsic meaning (i.e., a calling) or financial incentives (i.e., a paycheck). Furthermore, the preferences-for-meaning model is primarily oriented toward the trade-off between money and meaning, even though Cassar and Meier (2018) acknowledge that wages and meaning could be substitutes.

Ultimately, while the preferences-for-meaning model explains how individuals trade-off wages and meaning, it does not fully account for why some workers thrive in low-meaning but high-status jobs or disengage even in mission-driven organizations. A more comprehensive framework—such as work orientations theory—could be useful to provide additional insights into heterogeneous motivations for working and career concerns in particular.

Career Concerns and Tournament Theory

Career concerns matter to individuals. For example, one in five respondents in the 2015 ISSP survey reported that they consider good opportunities for career advancement very important in their job, which is higher than the importance of income and flexible working hours (Clark & Kozák, 2023). Dewatripont et al. (1999a) model how workers are motivated by the reputational effects of their performance, which influence future career prospects and earnings. More or better information does not always strengthen incentives—in some cases, it can make effort less worthwhile if it weakens the link between performance and perceived talent. In a follow-up paper (1999b), the authors apply this model to public sector agencies and argue that unclear or multiple missions weaken these career-based incentives.

Career concerns models relate to the career orientation from the work orientations model. A career orientation reflects a person's understanding of the meaning of work as seeking status, advancement, and recognition. Relatedly, career concerns models explain how individuals are incentivized to perform well because others use their current performance to judge their ability, which affects future job opportunities and rewards.

Furthermore, tournament theory (Lazear, 2018; Lazear & Oyer, 2007; Lazear & Rosen, 1981) offers a complementary view to conceptualize career orientations.

This framework views promotions as competitive tournaments, where employees compete for limited higher-level positions based on relative rather than absolute performance. The winners receive substantial rewards, such as higher wages, increased responsibilities, and career advancement opportunities, while those who do not advance remain at lower levels with smaller pay increases.

While tournament theory and career concerns theories effectively explain career-driven motivation, they do not fully fit within the broader work orientations framework, as they do not consider the calling and job orientations.

Work Orientations in Economics: Sketching a Conceptual Framework

This chapter's main argument is that labor economics can be enriched by incorporating work orientations into a unified framework that integrates insights from existing models. A natural starting point is Cassar and Meier's (2018) preferences-for-meaning framework, which can be extended to incorporate overlapping motivations for work. Such a modified framework would accommodate overlapping motivations for working, recognizing that workers may simultaneously view work as financial stability, social prestige, and intrinsic fulfillment. This new model could facilitate the empirical investigation of the role of work orientations for labor supply, job sorting, organizational incentives, and the design of employment policies.

To extend Cassar and Meier's (2018) preferences-for-meaning model, I introduce career utility alongside intrinsic meaning and financial utility. The original model considers utility as a function of income (Y), meaning (M), and effort costs ($C(e)$). In this framework, work meaningfulness depends on the satisfaction of one's innate needs of working: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Nikolova & Cnossen, 2020).⁹

$$U = \lambda Y(w, e) + \theta M(x, e) + \nu S(p, e) - C(e) \quad (2)$$

where $Y(w, e)$ is income utility, dependent on wage (w) and effort (e); $M(x, e)$ is meaning utility, based on work characteristics x (autonomy, competence, relatedness), and $C(e)$ is the disutility from work. The novel term here is $S(p, e)$, or career utility, which is a function of the probability of promotion p , increasing in effort e . Finally, the parameters λ , θ , ν represent each orientation, where $\lambda + \theta + \nu \neq 1$. The three orientations do not need to add up to 1, as there are, in principle, no trade-offs necessary between the orientations. A person could have high values on all three orientations, for example, a social entrepreneur who is mission-driven but also believes that working is about their reputation, social status, and pay.

⁹According to Nikolova and Cnossen (2020), autonomy, competence, and relatedness explain 60% of the variation in work meaningfulness in a sample of European workers.

This modified framework allows empirical examination of how different motivational systems interact, not just in isolation, but in combination. It connects existing strands of literature in labor economics, most prominently career concerns models and preferences for meaning, into one coherent framework that reflects the complex, overlapping worker motivations.

The model predicts that when both θ (meaning orientation) and ν (career orientation) are high, effort will be high even when λ (financial orientation) is low. In addition, career-oriented workers may accept lower wages initially if promotion prospects are strong. This helps explain why PhD students, junior researchers, and unpaid interns often engage in high-effort work despite low pay and sometimes low-meaning tasks. If promotion possibilities are low or uncertain, however, career-oriented individuals are likely to have low attachment to their jobs, as shown in Nikolova and De Wit (2025). Refining, extending, and empirically validating this framework could be important next steps for integrating work orientations more fully into economic analysis.

Work Orientations and Economic Outcomes

Like studies in the psychology literature (Mantler et al., 2022; Wrzesniewski, 1999), Nikolova (2024) finds that work orientations significantly influence job search behavior, quit intentions, and self-reported effort. Individuals with a predominant job orientation tend to exhibit lower effort than those with a calling orientation. Career-oriented individuals display higher quit intentions and job search activity than job-oriented individuals, but also report exerting less effort. These relationships hold even after controlling for job satisfaction, work meaningfulness, and personality traits.

Nikolova and De Wit (2025), a revised version of Nikolova (2024), confirm the job search and job-quit findings using actual job-switch data. They show that a higher career orientation is associated with greater quit intentions, on-the-job search behavior, and actual job changes, particularly when career prospects are limited. In contrast, calling-oriented individuals are less likely to intend to quit or seek alternative employment, regardless of opportunities for meaningful work.

Given the scarcity of economics research on work orientations, these results highlight ample opportunities for further investigation into their causes and consequences.

Future Outlook and a Research Agenda

Work orientations, capturing whether individuals see their work as a job, a career, or a calling, could enhance economists' understanding of labor market behavior, such as effort and job quits. However, significant gaps remain in our understanding of how these orientations develop, change over time, and interact with economic, social, and technological factors. Addressing these questions will require systematic

data collection, theorizing, and interdisciplinary collaborations. Below, I sketch some priorities for advancing empirical and conceptual inquiry related to work orientations in economics.

Longitudinal Data Collection

One of the most pressing research needs is longitudinal data tracking the work orientations of the same individuals over time, in combination with their life events, workplace characteristics, and behaviors. Most existing studies rely on cross-sectional data, making it difficult to determine whether work orientations evolve in response to career transitions, economic shocks, or personal experiences.

Key questions that would make use of such longitudinal data include: How do work orientations change following career transitions, such as promotions, job loss, or moves into self-employment? How are they shaped by major life events, such as marriage, parenthood, or retirement? To what extent do coworkers' values, peer attitudes, or workplace cultures influence the development of calling or career orientations? And how do changes in work orientations interact with incentives, job satisfaction, effort, and workplace behavior over time?

Formation

It is furthermore crucial to understand how work orientations form in the first place. Psychological theories suggest that orientations stem from early socialization, yet we lack robust economic models capturing these processes (Dekas & Baker, 2014). Potential early-life correlates of work orientations may include parental influence and conditions experienced during childhood and adolescence. Research by Cotofan et al. (2023) suggests that economic conditions during the impressionable years (ages 18–25) shape lifelong *job preferences*. Workers entering the labor market during a recession prioritize financial security, while those starting careers in booming economies place greater emphasis on meaning. Future studies should test whether this extends to work orientations more broadly. What is the role of one's experience at the first job in shaping work orientations? Are work orientations fixed in adolescence, or can they emerge or change later in response to work experiences?

Expanding the Work Orientations Framework

The widely used tripartite model of work orientations—job, career, and calling—has generated valuable insights but may not fully capture the diversity of motivations that drive workers. Recent research suggests additional orientations, such as *social embeddedness* and *busyness* (Willner et al., 2020). Socially embedded

workers value collegiality and belonging more than career advancement or societal impact, while those with a business orientation seek work primarily to stay occupied and maintain a routine.

Other possible orientations extend even further beyond the current framework. One is a *work-as-enjoyment* orientation, in which individuals value work for the pleasure or fun it provides, independent of income, status, or purpose. Another is a *work-as-salvation* orientation,¹⁰ where work functions as a way to avoid inner emptiness or to attain a sense of moral worth. If such orientations exist alongside—or instead of—the job, career, and calling framework, they could alter economic predictions about labor supply, effort, motivation, and employer-provided working conditions. Future research should examine whether these orientations are conceptually distinct, economically significant, and worth incorporating into labor market models. At the same time, expanding the framework risks blurring the distinction between work orientations and related concepts such as work values.¹¹

Work Orientations and Technological Change

As technology continues to replace or restructure certain tasks or create new activities (Acemoglu & Restrepo, 2019), understanding how work orientations interact with technology is essential. Key questions include: Will AI-driven technological change reduce the prevalence of career-oriented workers if promotion opportunities diminish or job ladders flatten? Does technology expand opportunities for calling-oriented individuals to realize their purpose in work? More broadly, do emerging work environments reinforce existing orientations, or do they give rise to new and distinct ways of relating to work?

Integrating Work Orientations with Work Values, Work Centrality, and Work Meaningfulness

Although research on work orientations, work values, work centrality, and work meaningfulness has grown, these constructs remain partly fragmented. Each captures a related but distinct aspect of why people work and what they seek in their jobs, and the choice of which to study—whether as an outcome or as an explanatory variable—should depend on the research question. For example, work values are often more relevant for studying job satisfaction: the economics of happiness literature shows that income is not the sole determinant of job satisfaction (Clark, 2001, 2010) and that values such as having an interesting job or good interpersonal

¹⁰ I thank Davide Lunardon for the “work as salvation” suggestion.

¹¹ I thank Arne Kalleberg for raising this point.

relationships matter more than pay (De Neve et al., 2018). By contrast, work orientations have proven useful for understanding outcomes such as motivation and effort (Nikolova, 2024) or job quits (Nikolova & De Wit, 2025).¹²

Understanding the interactions and interdependencies between work values, work centrality, and work orientations can deepen economists' insights into labor market behavior, motivation, and job satisfaction. It may even be argued that work orientations can be understood as higher-order patterns that reflect stable combinations of intrinsic and extrinsic work values.¹³

However, current surveys that collect information on these constructs do not clearly distinguish between the different concepts of work orientations, work values, work centrality, and work meaningfulness. Many existing datasets include measures of work values and centrality, but often leave out work orientations and meaningfulness or treat them interchangeably. This makes it hard to know what is actually being measured. Because of the conceptual and empirical overlap, researchers must be cautious in interpreting measures that could reflect more than one construct.

In conclusion, work orientations arguably offer a promising area for economic research, both conceptually and empirically. Adding them to economic models can deepen our understanding of motivation by linking ideas from psychology and sociology to labor economics. As work keeps changing with new technology and labor market trends, understanding how people view work could be key to better policy and workplace decisions.

Acknowledgments I am grateful to Duncan Gallie, Robert Dur, Juliette de Wit, Arne Kalleberg, Lea Cassar, Heiner Schumacher, and participants at the 2025 Groningen Work and Well-being Workshop and the 2025 BEHCHA Scientific Workshop *Meaningful Work, Well-being, and Mental Health: Recent Advances* at the University of Cagliari for their valuable comments. I am grateful to Amy Wrzesniewski for sharing the wording of the work orientations vignettes and items. I have used ChatGPT (OpenAI, version 4) to improve the clarity and style of the text and to generate occasional summaries of relevant papers. I have reviewed, edited, and verified all AI-generated content and retain full responsibility for the final version of the manuscript. All errors are my own.

References

- Acemoglu, D., & Restrepo, P. (2019). Automation and new tasks: How technology displaces and reinstates labor. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 33(2), 3–30.
- Akerlof, G. A., & Kranton, R. E. (2000). Economics and identity. *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 115(3), 715–753.
- Akerlof, G. A., & Kranton, R. E. (2005). Identity and the economics of organizations. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 19(1), 9–32.
- Ariely, D., Kamenica, E., & Prelec, D. (2008). Man's search for meaning: The case of Legos. *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, 67(3–4), 671–677.

¹²I am thankful to Arne Kalleberg for this insight.

¹³I thank Arne Kalleberg for raising this point.

- Bäker, A., & Mechtel, M. (2018). The role of task meaning on output in groups: Experimental evidence. *Managerial and Decision Economics*, 39(2), 131–141.
- Bellah, R. N., Madsen, R., Sullivan, W. M., Swidler, A., & Tipton, S. M. (1985). *Habits of the heart: Individualism and commitment in American life*. University of California Press.
- Bellah, R. N., Madsen, R., Sullivan, W. M., Swidler, A., & Tipton, S. M. (2008). *Habits of the heart: Individualism and commitment in American life*. University of California Press.
- Benz, M., & Frey, B. S. (2008). The value of doing what you like: Evidence from the self-employed in 23 countries. *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, 68(3–4), 445–455.
- Besley, T., & Ghatak, M. (2005). Competition and incentives with motivated agents. *American Economic Review*, 95(3), 616–636.
- Binder, M., & Blankenberg, A.-K. (2020). Self-employment and subjective well-being. In K. F. Zimmermann (Ed.), *Handbook of labor, human resources and population economics*. Springer Verlag.
- Burbano, V. C. (2016). Social responsibility messages and worker wage requirements: Field experimental evidence from online labor marketplaces. *Organization Science*, 27(4), 1010–1028.
- Camerer, C., & Malmendier, U. (2007). Behavioral economics of organizations. In P. Diamond & H. Vartiainen (Eds.), *Behavioral economics and its applications* (pp. 235–290). Princeton University Press.
- Carton, A. M. (2018). ‘I’m not mopping the floors, I’m putting a man on the moon’: How NASA leaders enhanced the meaningfulness of work by changing the meaning of work. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 63(2), 323–369.
- Cassar, L., & Meier, S. (2018). Nonmonetary incentives and the implications of work as a source of meaning. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 32(3), 215–238.
- Chadi, A., Jeworrek, S., & Mertins, V. (2016). When the meaning of work has disappeared: Experimental evidence on employees’ performance and emotions. *Management Science*, 63(6), 1696–1707.
- Clark, A. E. (1997). Job satisfaction and gender: Why are women so happy at work? *Labour Economics*, 4(4), 341–372.
- Clark, A. E. (2001). What really matters in a job? Hedonic measurement using quit data. *Labour Economics*, 8(2), 223–242.
- Clark, A. E. (2010). Work, jobs, and well-being across the millennium. In E. Diener, J. Helliwell, & D. Kahneman (Eds.), *International differences in well-being* (pp. 436–468). Oxford University Press.
- Clark, A. E., & Kozák, M. (2023). *Twenty years of job quality in OECD countries: More good news?* IZA Discussion Paper No. 16597. Retrieved from <https://docs.iza.org/dp16597.pdf>
- Congleton, R. D. (1991). The economic role of a work ethic. *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, 15(3), 365–385.
- Cotofan, M., Cassar, L., Dur, R., & Meier, S. (2023). Macroeconomic conditions when young shape job preferences for life. *Review of Economics and Statistics*, 105(2), 467–473.
- Cutler, A., & Breiman, L. (1994). Archetypal analysis. *Technometrics*, 36(4), 338–347.
- De Neve, J.-E., Krekel, C., & Ward, G. (2018). Work and well-being: A global perspective. In J. F. Helliwell, R. Layard, & J. D. Sachs (Eds.), *World happiness report* (pp. 74–128). Sustainable Development Solutions Network.
- De Schouwer, T., Gsottbauer, E., Kesternich, I., & Schumacher, H. (2023). *Work meaning and fair wages*. Working paper (pp. 1–68).
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2000). The ‘what’ and ‘why’ of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior. *Psychological Inquiry*, 11(4), 227–268.
- Dekas, K. H., & Baker, W. E. (2014). Adolescent socialization and the development of adult work orientations. In H. R. Greve & M.-D. L. Seidel (Eds.), *Adolescent experiences and adult work outcomes: Connections and causes* (Vol. 25, pp. 51–84). Emerald Group Publishing Limited.
- Delfgaauw, J., & Dur, R. (2007). Signaling and screening of workers’ motivation. *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, 62(4), 605–624.
- Delfgaauw, J., & Dur, R. (2008). Incentives and workers’ motivation in the public sector. *Economic Journal*, 118(525), 171–191.

- Dewatripont, M., Jewitt, I., & Tirole, J. (1999a). The economics of career concerns, part I: Comparing information structures. *Review of Economic Studies*, 66(1), 183–198.
- Dewatripont, M., Jewitt, I., & Tirole, J. (1999b). The economics of career concerns, part II: Application to missions and accountability of government agencies. *Review of Economic Studies*, 66(1), 199–217.
- Dobrow, S. R. (2013). Dynamics of calling: A longitudinal study of musicians. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 34(4), 431–452.
- Eugster, M. J., & Leisch, F. (2009). From spider-man to hero—Archetypal analysis in R. *Journal of Statistical Software*, 30, 1–23.
- Farzin, Y. H. (2009). The effect of non-pecuniary motivations on labor supply. *Quarterly Review of Economics and Finance*, 49(4), 1236–1259.
- Frey, B. S., Benz, M., & Stutzer, A. (2004). Introducing procedural utility: Not only what, but also how matters. *Journal of Institutional and Theoretical Economics*, 160(3), 377–401.
- Fuchs-Schündeln, N. (2009). On preferences for being self-employed. *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, 71(2), 162–171.
- Gallie, D. (2019). Research on work values in a changing economic and social context. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 682(1), 26–42.
- Gallie, D., Felstead, A., & Green, F. (2012). Job preferences and the intrinsic quality of work: The changing attitudes of British employees 1992–2006. *Work, Employment and Society*, 26(5), 806–821.
- Gandal, N., Roccas, S., Sagiv, L., & Wrzesniewski, A. (2005). Personal value priorities of economists. *Human Relations*, 58(10), 1227–1252.
- Goldthorpe, J. H., Lockwood, D., Bechhofer, F., & Platt, J. (1968). The affluent worker: Industrial attitudes and behaviour. London: Cambridge.
- Haller, M., Klösch, B., & Hadler, M. (2023). The centrality of work: A comparative analysis of work commitment and work orientation in present-day societies. *SAGE Open*, 13(3), 21582440231192114.
- Hamermesh, D. S. (2018). Why are professors ‘poorly paid’? *Economics of Education Review*, 66, 137–141.
- Heyes, A. (2005). The economics of vocation or ‘why is a badly paid nurse a good nurse’? *Journal of Health Economics*, 24(3), 561–569.
- Hu, J., & Hirsh, J. B. (2017). Accepting lower salaries for meaningful work. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 8, 1649.
- Jiang, W. Y., & Wrzesniewski, A. (2023). Perceiving fixed or flexible meaning: Toward a model of meaning fixedness and navigating occupational destabilization. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 68(4), 1008–1055.
- Kalleberg, A. L., & Marsden, P. V. (2013). Changing work values in the United States, 1973–2006. *Social Science Research*, 42(2), 255–270.
- Kalleberg, A. L., & Marsden, P. V. (2019). Work values in the United States: Age, period, and generational differences. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 682(1), 43–59.
- Kesternich, I., Schumacher, H., Siflinger, B., & Schwarz, S. (2021). Money or meaning? Labor supply responses to work meaning of employed and unemployed individuals. *European Economic Review*, 137, 103786.
- Kosfeld, M., Neckermann, S., & Yang, X. (2017). The effects of financial and recognition incentives across work contexts: The role of meaning. *Economic Inquiry*, 55(1), 237–247.
- Lan, G., Okechuku, C., Zhang, H., & Cao, J. (2013). Impact of job satisfaction and personal values on the work orientation of Chinese accounting practitioners. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 112, 627–640.
- Lazear, E. P. (2018). Compensation and incentives in the workplace. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 32(3), 195–214.
- Lazear, E. P., & Oyer, P. (2007). *Personnel economics*. NBER Working Paper 13480.
- Lazear, E. P., & Rosen, S. (1981). Rank-order tournaments as optimum labor contracts. *Journal of Political Economy*, 89(5), 841–864.

- Leete, L. (2001). Whither the nonprofit wage differential? Estimates from the 1990 census. *Journal of Labor Economics*, 19(1), 136–170.
- Mantler, J., Campbell, B., & Dupré, K. E. (2022). Jobs, careers, and callings: Exploring work orientation at mid-career. *Journal of Career Development*, 49(5), 1152–1167.
- McKevitt, D., Carbery, R., & Lyons, A. (2017). A profession but not a career? Work identity and career satisfaction in project management. *International Journal of Project Management*, 35(8), 1673–1682.
- Nikolova, M. 2024. *Loud or quiet quitting? The influence of work orientations on effort and turnover*. GLO Discussion Paper No. 1429. <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/294143/1/GLO-DP-1429.pdf>
- Nikolova, M., & Cnossen, F. (2020). What makes work meaningful and why economists should care about it. *Labour Economics*, 65, 101847.
- Nikolova, M., & De Wit, J.. (2025). Work orientations and turnover. Working Paper.
- Preston, A. E. (1989). The nonprofit worker in a for-profit world. *Journal of Labor Economics*, 7(4), 438–463.
- Rebitzer, J. B., & Taylor, L. J. (2011). Extrinsic rewards and intrinsic motives: Standard and behavioral approaches to agency and labor markets. In O. Ashenfelter & D. Card (Eds.), *Handbook of labor economics* (Vol. 4, pp. 701–772). Elsevier.
- Roberson, L. (1990). Functions of work meanings in organizations: Work meanings and work motivation. In P. Brief & W. R. Nord (Eds.), *Meanings of occupational work: A collection of essays*. Lexington Books.
- Rosso, B. D., Dekas, K. H., & Wrzesniewski, A. E. (2010). On the meaning of work: A theoretical integration and review. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 30, 91–127.
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2017). *Self-determination theory: Basic psychological needs in motivation, development, and wellness*. Guilford Publications.
- Sauermann, H., & Roach, M. (2014). Not all scientists pay to be scientists: PhDs' preferences for publishing in industrial employment. *Research Policy*, 43(1), 32–47.
- Schabram, K., Nielsen, J., & Thompson, J. (2023). The dynamics of work orientations: An updated typology and agenda for the study of jobs, careers, and callings. *Academy of Management Annals*, 17(2), 405–438.
- Shapiro, C., & Stiglitz, J. E. (1984). Equilibrium unemployment as a worker discipline device. *American Economic Review*, 74(3), 433–444.
- Spencer, D. A. (2014). Conceptualising work in economics: Negating a disutility. *Kyklos*, 67(2), 280–294.
- Spencer, D. A. (2015). Developing an understanding of meaningful work in economics: The case for a heterodox economics of work. *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 39(3), 675–688.
- Steger, M. F., Dik, B. J., & Duffy, R. D. (2012). Measuring meaningful work: The work and meaning inventory (WAMI). *Journal of Career Assessment*, 20(3), 322–337.
- Stern, S. (2004). Do scientists pay to be scientists? *Management Science*, 50(6), 835–853.
- Taylor, L. J. (2007). Optimal wages in the market for nurses: An analysis based on Heyes' model. *Journal of Health Economics*, 26(5), 1027–1030.
- Willner, T., Lipshits-Braziler, Y., & Gati, I. (2020). Construction and initial validation of the work orientation questionnaire. *Journal of Career Assessment*, 28(1), 109–127.
- Wrzesniewski, A. E. (1999). *Jobs, careers, and callings: Work orientation and job transitions* (PhD dissertations, University of Michigan).
- Wrzesniewski, A. E., McCauley, C., Rozin, P., & Schwartz, B. (1997). Jobs, careers, and callings: People's relations to their work. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 31(1), 21–33.
- Zhang, C., Hirschi, A., & You, X. (2021). Trajectories of calling in the transition from university to work: A growth mixture analysis. *Journal of Career Assessment*, 29(1), 98–114.
- Zou, M. (2015). Gender, work orientations and job satisfaction. *Work, Employment and Society*, 29(1), 3–22.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if you modified the licensed material. You do not have permission under this license to share adapted material derived from this chapter or parts of it.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

