

A Short Guide to Meaningful Work

Understanding and applying the win-win concept
for employees and organizations alike





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Executive Summary

Meaningful work is not restricted to specific professions but can be experienced in all kinds of jobs. It can arise from a variety of sources and can fluctuate over time. Thus, rather than a final goal, meaningfulness is a way, which everyone needs to find and create on their own.

People who find their work meaningful are more engaged, committed, and more satisfied with their job. This has large positive implications for organizations, in turn. Therefore, although meaningfulness is highly subjective, organizations should strive to create a work environment that fosters the experience of meaningfulness. Measures should target multiple points, such as stating a clear vision and values, creating participative structures, prioritizing learning & development, ensuring authentic leadership, and fostering employee well-being. Above all, meaningful work is an act of combination and balance. Lastly, given its interrogative approach and its strong focus on individual needs, coaching can be an ideal tool to support employees in finding and creating meaningfulness in the workplace.

How often do you think about work? But not in the form of your last meeting, next week's to-dos, or the upcoming quarter's goals revision. Instead, think about your work from a meta-perspective. Most of the time we are so engaged in our daily routines that we seldomly question what we do there and why we do it. How often do you ask yourself:

- What do I value in life? How far do I live up to these values at my job?
- Who of my coworkers do I feel intricately connected to? In which situations do I feel a sense of community with my team?
- What am I really good at? How often do I use these strengths and skills at work?
- Does my work have a positive impact on others? What is my job's contribution to society?

All these questions address potential sources of meaningfulness at work. But what exactly do we mean when we say 'meaningfulness at work'? In this white paper, you will get a better understanding of this concept, and what you can do to foster the experience of meaningfulness among employees in your organization.

Part I

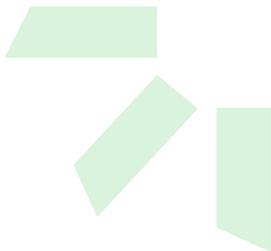
What is Meaningful Work?

One could compare meaningfulness to the concept of love: We all know it, but when being asked to explain it, we are likely to hesitate. But why is that? Just like love, meaningfulness consists of different facets and can arise in many forms. The term has been discussed in various disciplines from philosophy to sociology, psychology, theology, and ethics. In recent years, fields such as organizational psychology and management studies have shown elevated interest in it, as well. To manage expectations early on: There is no easy way or universal solution to it.

The meaning of meaning

Even in the literature the concept of meaningful work is subject to an ongoing debate. However, there is a consensus: meaningful work is something intrinsically valuable and worth doing. More specifically, it can be defined as “the global judgement that one’s work accomplishes significant, valuable, or worthwhile goals that are congruent work with one’s existential values”¹.

Meaningful work is not a continuous state². It can fluctuate over time, arising from the constant evaluation and combination of various meaningful experiences and thoughts in relation to work. Notably, meaningfulness does not only arise from positive emotions but can also correlate with negative ones. Think of a nurse who must deal with a lot of suffering each day, a construction worker whose duties come along with high physical demands, or a project manager who must often deal with conflicting interests.



¹ Allan, Batz-Barbarich, Sterling, & Tay, 2018 ² Bailey & Madden, 2016

A multidimensional approach

Different situations can trigger meaningful experiences at work. Hence, many researchers argue that the concept can be best described using a multidimensional approach. A common conceptualization differentiates between two dimensions: 'self' vs. 'other' and 'being' vs. 'doing'³. Four clusters emerge that describe the fundamental sources of how meaningful work arises:



Self-integrity

People experience meaningfulness if they can be fully authentic at work, meaning they are given the opportunity to act upon their values and interests.

Expressing full potential

A sense of meaning arises when people use their strengths at work and develop their skills even further. Being successful by unleashing one's full potential feels, to most people, significant and meaningful.

Service to others

Work is often perceived as meaningful if people feel their efforts make a positive contribution to society. But even on a lower level, meaningfulness can arise: when meeting the needs of a specific (target) group, or something simple as supporting individual people, like a customer or a colleague.

Unity with others

Lastly, meaningfulness can arise when people feel a sense of belonging. It emerges from shared values, joint forces, support and cohesion within a team. This can be something simple as enjoying working together.

³ Lips-Wiersma, 2011



Meaningful work can arise in many forms and can be experienced in all kinds of professions.

It becomes clear, contrary to the common belief, meaningful work does not solely mean serving a greater good. It is not restricted to a particular workforce, such as environmental activists, firefighters, or medical doctors. Meaningful work can arise in many forms and can be experienced in all kinds of professions.

Yet, it is crucial to combine multiple sources of meaning⁴. Missing balance or focusing on just one source can lead to a significant loss of meaningfulness. Take a trauma surgeon who inherently benefits from a high level of meaningfulness in terms of 'service to others'. But if there is no cohesion and social support within their team, they might feel isolated, and experience work as burdensome and little effective. A trainee who is repeatedly asked to do printing jobs or to write protocols, and never gets the opportunity to go beyond their comfort zone, might suffer from such constant understimulation. Chances are the trainee will lose interest and become less engaged – perhaps despite working in a social business with a glorious mission.

Of course, some jobs come with a greater potential of experiencing meaningfulness than others. But this does not mean that not all jobs have the potential to induce a sense of meaningfulness. People find and create meaning on their own.

The innate will



Rather than a destination, meaningfulness is a way.

Viktor Frankl is the founder of logotherapy, an anthropological theory that assumes a universal human will to experience meaning. He states that people's search for meaning is the primary motivation in their lives, even in difficult life situations and adverse circumstances⁵. This is backed up by a vast body of research demonstrating that different employees do not only seek but also actively create meaning. For example, butchers often perceive their job as sacrifice, thereby creating a sense of purpose⁶. Repetitive work in a factory can be fulfilling when employees create a strong sense of community and fun within their team⁷. People actively take measures to alter their work environment so it is better aligned with their identity⁸.

It becomes clear, meaningfulness depends on the individual and is highly subjective. It can be caused by different events and can change over time. Rather than a destination, meaningfulness is a way. Yet, a way worth exploring.

⁴ Lips-Wiersma, 2011; Schnell, 2016 ⁵ Frankl, 1959 ⁶ Simpson, Hughes, Slutskaya, & Balta, 2014

⁷ Isaksen, 2000 ⁸ Dutton, 2010

Part II

Why is Meaningful Work important?

The meaning of work has changed. Whereas work has primarily been perceived as a burden in the antiques, its value has increased drastically over the past centuries. Whereas people's professions have long been dictated by strict societal hierarchies, today's world provides us with an almost overwhelming flood of opportunities and career pathways. Work has become an essential part of not only our lives but also of our identities. 'What do you do?' is one of the first questions we ask when we initiate small talk. We introduce ourselves by saying, 'I'm a teacher', 'I'm an artist' or 'I'm a banker'.

Missing meaning

Unsurprisingly, with our jobs playing a crucial role in our lives, we strive to engage in work that feels meaningful. Contrary to the widespread assumption that particularly younger workers, the so-called 'Generation Y', has an increased orientation towards purpose, research suggests that the desire for meaningful work is not generationally specific, but spans across the entire current workforce⁹. However, just like people ascribe different meanings to their lives, people have different preferences for what they find meaningful in their job¹⁰. The question should therefore not be whether people want to engage in meaningful work, but what kind of meaningfulness people aspire to.

At the same time, globalization and new disruptive technologies have changed the job market and the way we work. The increased occurrence of so-called 'bullshit jobs' has been brought up¹¹. In line with that, many people report their work as meaningless, not making a significant contribution to their lives, or to the world. German workers, for instance, seem to be satisfied with their job, but only 15% are actively engaged¹². A survey in the UK revealed that 37% of workers perceive their job as meaningless¹³. Globally, 85% of the workforce is not engaged or actively disengaged in their job¹⁴.

The question should therefore not be whether people want to engage in meaningful work, but what kind of meaningfulness people aspire to.

⁹ Weeks & Schaffert, 2017 ¹⁰ Twenge, Campbell, Hoffman, & Lance, 2010

¹¹ Graeber, 2019 ¹² Nink & Schumann, 2018 ¹³ Dahlgreen, 2015 ¹⁴ Gallup, 2017

Benefits of meaningful work

This is a travesty, considering the many positive effects of meaningful work for the individual and the organization alike. A comprehensive meta-analysis revealed that meaningfulness has large correlations with work engagement, job satisfaction, and commitment¹⁵. Even beyond work, people who experience meaningfulness tend to be more satisfied with their lives, experience less stress and depression, and show higher levels of well-being, in general¹⁶.

Many of these variables are subsequently related to positive business outcomes. Unsurprisingly, employees who are happier, motivated, and highly identified are associated with lower levels of absenteeism and little fluctuation. Other organizational outcomes are organizational citizenship behavior, increased creativity and knowledge sharing, just to name a few¹⁷. Lastly, high levels of engagement lead to heightened productivity, profitability, and an overall increase of 21% in composite performance¹⁸.

We can conclude that experiencing meaningfulness in relation to work is highly beneficial for employees, but also has tremendous effects on business outcomes, in the second step.

Part III

How can you create Meaningful Work?

By designing and cultivating a nurturing environment, you can actively influence your people's experience of meaningfulness.

Top-down and bottom-up

So how do you create meaningful work? Is it the responsibility of the organization or the employee to 'make their job meaningful'? Given the many positive effects of meaningful work, we state both.

As we have seen above, meaningfulness is highly subjective. Employers cannot control it. This suggests that meaningful work is the responsibility of the individual. However, the organizational context does play a crucial role. Work is never being executed in isolation but always takes place in a system. It can either support or hinder the experience of meaningfulness. With that in mind, people often underestimate how they can influence other people's experiences of meaningful work: not just as CEO, but also as manager, and HR professional. By designing and cultivating a nurturing environment, you can actively influence your people's experience of meaningfulness. Here's how.

¹⁵ Allan et al., 2018 ¹⁶ Bailey, Yeoman, Madden, Thompson, & Kerridge, 2018 ¹⁷ TBailey, Yeoman, Madden, Thompson, & Kerridge, 2018 ¹⁸ Gallup, 2020



Seven Levers for Meaningful Work

Again, there is no one-size-fits-all-approach. In order to meet the pluralistic demands of today's workforce you should target different sources of meaningfulness. Fortunately, multiple sources mean multiple levers to pull.

1 Vision & Values

The importance of asking 'Why?' is repeatedly being popularized by various public figures, but has originally been ascribed to no other than Socrates himself. Originally known as the 'Socratic method' the Greek philosopher has early stated the importance of asking this simple question, guiding us to the dawn of our decisions. 'Narrative' or 'purpose-driven' companies have raised this approach of asking 'Why?' from the individual to the organizational level. Following a purpose can be just as important for an organization as for a human-being. Stating a clear vision and values can help to not only attract new talent that fit, but also keep it, by fostering people's commitment, engagement, and identification with their job.

With that being said, a company does not necessarily need to be a 'social business' to be purpose-driven. The key is to create a coherent vision and clear values serving as a beacon for all managerial decisions. Authenticity is crucial. Missing legitimacy and integrity within management can cause a significant loss of perceived meaningfulness in people's job, leading to lower commitment and loyalty.¹⁹

An initial step is to involve employees in the process of setting up and discussing your values. People are more inclined to act upon principles if they contributed to them in the first place. Next, make them visible. Do not just hide them on your website but print them, post them in at the workplace, regularly integrate them into status updates, meetings, and discussions. Making your values all-time prevalent in people's workday will underpin their importance.

Finally, a major pitfall one needs to avoid is that values or principles are too abstract. How do you perform 'integrity'? What does 'respect' look like in a workday? When do your people have the opportunity to be 'passionate'? Make sure to translate your values into actual behaviors, otherwise it is exceedingly difficult to put them into action. Moreover, support your employees in finding ways to live up to these values considering their specific roles and functions. Make the abstract as concrete as possible.

Authenticity is crucial.

Make sure to translate your values into actual behaviors.

¹⁹ Holbeche, Springett, & Limited, 2004



2 Structure

Autonomy, dignity, and freedom have been discussed as fundamental prerequisites of meaningful work²⁰. In line with that, participative structures, responsibility, and autonomous problem-solving lead to higher engagement among employees²¹. The importance of making an impact, being seen and heard have not only been shown in research but most people can relate to quite well from a personal perspective.

Create opportunities for mutual exchange and active involvement of employees at all levels. Ask and listen to ideas and suggestions. Harness everyone's knowledge and insights. Each person is an expert in their specific role and might spot chances, weak points, or bottlenecks, management can sometimes be blind to. Perhaps not every suggestion leads to tremendous improvements, but every tremendous improvement has once been a simple suggestion.

3 Leadership

Leaders are among the most influential on people's perception and execution of work. In a good way and a bad way. Consequently, they can have a significant impact on their team's perceived sense of meaningfulness. An authentic²² or transformational²³ leadership style appears to be beneficial for people's experience of meaningful work. However, new and supposedly innovative leadership models pop up all the time. What makes a good leader, however, does not change in essence. Steger & Rose²⁴ identified the six underlying characteristics that lead to meaningful work: Clarity, authenticity, respect, mattering, autonomy, and self-actualization – key characteristics that have already been brought up on the organizational level. It is now the responsibility of your leaders to integrate them into their team's daily work: Managers shall be clear in communicating and acting upon your values and vision, convey each person's contribution to your company's success, create psychological safety, foster ownership and autonomy, give their team room to tailor their job to their strengths and abilities, and, lastly, support people's personal development and growth.

Leaders that internalize these six attributes can actively contribute to their team's sense of meaning and purpose. The motto is, do not just tell, act. Support your leaders in doing so.

Clarity, authenticity, respect, mattering, autonomy, and self-actualization.

The motto is, do not just tell, act.

²⁰ Yeoman, 2013 ²¹ Kahn & Fellows, 2013 ²² Dianne, Stefanie, & Lauren, 2013

²³ Walumbwa, Christensen, & Muchiri, 2013 ²⁴ Rose & Steger, 2017; Steger, 2016

4 Culture

Compared to other organizational factors, culture cannot be solely managed from above. Culture is invisible, yet all-time prevalent, emerging from the interplay of all parts of the organizational system: a company's vision, values, strategy, processes, people's actions and decisions at all levels. Obviously, it is fluid and can change over time.

Regular pulse surveys can give you valuable insights into how people experience their work environment, how comfortable they feel, and what is missing in order to act upon their full potential. Questionnaires like the 'Comprehensive Meaningful Work Scale' (CMWS) (Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012) or the 'Work and Meaning Inventory' (WAMI) (Steger, Dik, & Duffy, 2012) are specifically designed to measure people's perceived level of meaningfulness at the workplace.

Although culture is complex, you can take measures to make a positive impact. As aforementioned, a sense of 'unity with others' can increase people's experience of meaning and purpose. One measure can be organizing events that allow people to connect, to share their interests and passions, discover commonalities, learn from each other – also beyond work-related topics. Fostering psychological safety is another way to go. Allow people to be vulnerable, make mistakes and learn from them. Only then, people will come forward with creative ideas, speak truthfully, accept and give honest feedback, leave their comfort zone, and take on new challenges.

How do you manifest a 'good culture'? If a certain behavior is positively reinforced, it is likely to be repeated. Actively celebrating employees who live up to values and principles reinforces their actions, which can then cascade through an entire organization. Calling out actions of support, kindness, openness, and bravery can create and manifest a culture where everyone feels valued and safe – being able to grow in the long run.

5 Job-Fit, Personal Development & Growth

How well a person fits into their job is one important predictor of meaningful work²⁵. In all circumstances, avoid overworking or underworking your employees, but support them to experience 'flow'. This well-known concept has been introduced by Mihály Csíkszentmihályi. It describes an optimal state in which a person's skills perfectly meet the requirements of a task, leading to high involvement and enjoyment of a task.

To do so, Learning & Development (L&D) is a great lever to pull. For many people, their job is the most important area of life for self-actualization. Learning new skills and developing the self can lead to an increased sense of meaning²⁶. You can create opportunities for personal growth wherever possible: set an individual L&D budget

²⁵ Schnell, Höge, & Pollet, 2013 ²⁶ Chalofsky, 2010

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Learning new skills and developing the self can lead to an increased sense of meaning.



for each employee, create custom training plans, offer mentoring, coaching, talent programs, online courses – there are a plethora of possibilities.

However, be clear that all measures are a sign of appreciation and support, not of ‘correction’. Make your people owner of their personal development journeys – needs and interests are different and can be best addressed when making your people active drivers of these journeys.

6 Corporate Social Responsibility

The concept of corporate social responsibility has gained increased attention over the past years. The intention to pursue goals that go beyond profit-orientation do not only exist in NGOs but are becoming more popular in all types of companies.

Potential initiatives can be directed towards sustainability and climate justice, humanitarian work, ethically oriented work practices, or ensuring diversity and inclusion in the workplace. Especially younger generations set great store by the opportunity to provide service to others, which increases their interest in companies that support such initiatives next to their usual business²⁷.

For example, you can organize charity events, support a local community, or offer a fixed amount of paid working hours for your employees to engage in voluntary activities. Thereby you can not only offer your people a sense of meaningfulness, but also make a positive contribution to society as a company.

7 Employee Well-Being

Notably, meaningful work needs to be balanced out. People who are highly committed and identified with their job, focusing on just one source of meaningfulness, do often forget about their other needs and can be prone to burnout. Hence, you should not just keep an eye on engagement scores but also check in on your people’s well-being on a regular basis. Without a doubt, openly talking about physical and mental health at the workplace is difficult. It requires a trustful environment that feels safe and non-judgmental. Train managers in being able to have those difficult but vital conversations when people do not do well.

Rather than imposing solutions, give people control to take care of their needs. This can look like flexible working hours, or encouraging activities and hobbies beyond work to foster balance and recovery. A person who works 10 hours while being constantly stressed and tired will for sure perform worse than a person who is fully focused for 6 hours and then leaves when work is done. Lastly, if professional help is needed, eliminate stigmatization but provide support wherever possible.

Rather than imposing solutions, give people control to take care of their needs.

²⁷ RLundrum, 2017

However, care work is equally important and needs to be taken into account as well.



Meaning beyond (wage) work

When we speak about work most people think of wage work. However, care work is equally important and needs to be taken into account as well. Without second thought, raising kids, taking care of a parent, and ensuring a home where everyone feels welcome and comfortable, can be people's pivotal source of meaningfulness in life. At the same time, some people want their job just to be a job. A means to make money and, at the end of the day, serves no higher purpose than ensuring financial security – this is fine and needs to be acknowledged just as much.

An increasing number of workers decide to 'downshift', which means to reduce their level of responsibility, change to a lower hierarchical position, and accept lower salary to gain more free time – because they find meaningfulness in other areas of their lives, outside the workplace. This can look like spending plenty of time with friends and family, cultivating a certain hobby, doing voluntary work, engaging in a side hustle, writing a book, or taking a sabbatical to travel the world. Support your employees in doing so – it does not mean they will do a bad job. Rather the contrary, chances are, they will become more balanced and satisfied at work, as they are clear about the role their job plays in the bigger picture of their lives.

Part IV

What is the role of coaching in meaningful work?

Coaches keep the outside perspective, challenge our presumptions, and have the ability to reveal our blind spots.

Unfortunately, finding and creating meaningfulness is not trained at school. Stuck in our daily routines we often lose sight of the bigger picture, are subject to our own biases, and understand ourselves way less than we would ever admit. Having a coach to people's side can solve this problem. Coaches keep the outside perspective, challenge our presumptions, and have the ability to reveal our blind spots. Moreover, they increase our commitment to put intentions into actions.

Coaching as a L&D measure is becoming increasingly popular, not just for top managers but also for employees of all levels and functions. The pivotal advantage of coaching is that it is centered around one's individual needs and strengths – a criterion that is more important than ever in today's fast changing world. Personal development is no longer a nice-to-have but has become a key driver for a company's success.

The practice of coaching and one's search for meaning share one vital premise: Both are based on the fundamental assumption that the answers lie within the person. Considering that people's experience of meaningfulness is subjective and largely heterogeneous, coaching can be seen as the most suitable tool to support your employees in finding and creating meaning. If we stick to the metaphor of seeing meaningfulness as a way, coaching is the guide or the signs along the way. Coaching does not tell people where to go, but instead it empowers people to decide where to go, to find their individual way.

So how exactly does it work? If we get lost and someone hands us a map, we can only start walking if we know where we are and which direction we want to take. Hence, coaching usually starts with getting clarity about ourselves, fostering self-awareness – a skill most people claim to have, but in fact only 10-12% possess²⁸. A coach, however, can guide through this process.

Both are based on the fundamental assumption that the answers lie within the person.

Priya Venkatesan is an executive coach specialized in career growth and progressive leadership behaviors. She says that people often come to her with a specific question such as, 'How do I increase visibility?', 'How do I create a brand for myself?', 'How can I become a better leader?'. Although these questions seem quite different at first glance, they cannot be holistically answered without unraveling one's fundamental 'Why?', people's core values. Values can be understood as individual principles that guide our attitudes and behavior. Compared to goals, values cannot be reached for good. On our way to meaningfulness our core values give us direction. Living up to them can create a coherent self and identity that helps us to preserve in adverse circumstances.

²⁸ Eurich, 2018



**On our way to
meaningfulness our
core values give us
direction.**

Following this approach, Priya always starts with exploring people's fundamental values, their strengths, and interests – and see how far they overlap with their current role and situation at work. “In most cases people are satisfied with their job in general”, Priya tells. “However, they often say they feel like something is missing, there should be more to it”. Such a feeling usually arises because there is a discrepancy between the desired and actual level of meaningfulness. As coaching mainly consists of asking questions, it is a great tool to identify these gaps. Once people are aware of discrepancies, a coach can guide them in initiating change.

Job Crafting

‘Job crafting’ is a powerful technique to personalize a job based on one's strengths, interests and values²⁹. The idea behind it is that one's functional role is usually defined by general features and requirements, but does not take into account the unique person that performs it. Hence, a job should always be tailored to one's personal strengths and competencies. Three areas of change can be addressed: People can expand or alter their tasks and responsibilities, change the way and frequency of their social interactions, or take on new perspectives.

A coach can guide your people to craft their job, so it becomes more meaningful to them. If one values responsibility, why not take over a side project? If one wants to improve their communication skills, why not ask their supervisor to moderate the next meeting? If one likes helping others, why not start a mentoring or buddy program within the company? We see, coaching is, to a large extent, empowerment. Empowering people to take ownership of their role and their development. “Coaching can help people find and create meaningfulness in their immediate environment”, Priya sums up.

Creating congruence

Moreover, you can use coaching to drive your company's values or principles. A coaching program can be designed in such a way that it supports managers in linking their roles, actions, and decisions to the values or principles of their organization. Within the coaching session, people explore how their personal values overlap with those of the organization, creating congruence between their individual and your company's purpose.

In the next step, coaching can guide people to translate values into actual behaviors. In a very few cases, people live up to a company's values, as they are often generic

²⁹ Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001

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Meaningful work does not mean blindly following your passion, meaningful work is a choice.

and rather abstract. Only when values are understood in relation to one's individual role, they can be fully applied. Only then, your people can internalize them in the long run.

Balance out

Due to its high focus on the individual, coaching has the power to provide constant and highly effective support. Especially in challenging times coaches are reliable sparring partners that help your people to find balance when it is lost. When people are stressed or overworked, a coach helps to regain control: Prioritize, manage time, delegate, and communicate effectively. As Priya states, “Meaningful work does not mean blindly following your passion, meaningful work is a choice.” It is an active decision to become creator and owner of one's work. Meaningfulness is about balance, knowing ourselves and dedicating our resources in the most effective way. Coaching can guide your people in doing so.

All things considered, meaningful work is a process. It is a way that everyone can explore and create alike. When being asked to give people one piece of advice on how to find meaningfulness, Priya says “Be a seeker, don't stop looking. You might find meaningfulness in the most unsurprising moments and in the littlest things.” As manager or HR professional, you can support your people along this journey by creating a work environment that nurtures and maintains the experience of meaningful work.



About the coach

Priya Venkatesan is an executive coach who works with business leaders and their teams to achieve organisational and personal outcomes. She has 21 years of experience, 15 years in the corporate sector and 6 years in coaching. Priya typically works with Vice Presidents, Directors & Senior Managers to scale their organizations, enhance team's capability towards strategic direction, support fast-track career progression, and navigate career transition.

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