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# Describing work as meaningful: towards a conceptual clarification

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Providing employees with meaning in their work has inspired numerous researchers to study the role of personal meaningful work and its related outcomes. Despite this high level of interest, the theoretical views and methodological approaches used to explore this concept still require refinement and development. Without a comprehensive review of these views and approaches, the concept of meaningful work will remain an ill defined notion. The purpose of this paper is to address this gap with a review of the theoretical and empirical research on meaningful work.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The paper includes a discussion on the concepts of “meaning” and “work”, and its importance and the sources for conceptual confusion, and a synthesis of the common features that form the idea of meaningful work in numerous empirical and theoretical studies.

**Findings** – The paper found meaningful work is derived when the employee has a perfect understanding of the nature and expectations of the task environment (i.e. the work has a clear goal, purpose and value that is connected to the employee), the employee feels a sense of fit or congruence between their own core values and the job requirements and organizational mission and goals, and when perfect understanding exists of how employees’ roles contribute to the purpose of the organization.

**Practical implications** – As part of an effective HRM strategy, organizations should actively encourage and develop managers’ abilities to redesign jobs and the climate to build enhanced feelings of meaning in work. Furthermore, organizations can promote greater experiences of meaningful work among employees by implementing the “job crafting” concept. Also, the role of top management is to focus on job elements that would possibly change personal needs of employees and hence perceive their jobs to be more meaningful.

**Originality/value** – Given the limited amount of recent literature focused on defining meaningful work, this paper provides valuable resources to help organizations succeed in their understanding of how to engage in creating meaningful work environment. It also examines the underlying features that constitute the meaningful work concept and offers guidance for future research by presenting the current state of knowledge about meaningful work.

**Keywords** Organization development, Employee relations, Career management

**Paper type** Research paper

## The concept of “meaning” in “work”

Until recently, the concept of “meaning” has been considered to be too philosophical to be applied to the practical world of work (Schlechter and Engelbrecht, 2006). However, the contemporary work environment has generated increased interest in the concept.

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Organizational behaviour scholars agree that individuals' primary motive is to look for work that is meaningful, personally fulfilling and that which provides motivation (Britt *et al.*, 2001; Chalofsky, 2010; Hackman and Oldham, 1976; Antonovsky, 1996). This perspective is evident in some of the previous work on motivational theories. For example, Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs theory suggests that once the lower survival needs (psychological, safety and social needs) are met, individuals seek to address their higher order needs such as belonging, esteem and self-actualization. Experiencing personal meaning has been shown to relate closely to satisfying these higher order needs (Chalofsky, 2003). According to Chalofsky (2010), once these higher order needs are met, individuals will seek a job that is meaningful and which fulfils their life purpose. Thus, individuals seek to experience personal meaning that gives them a sense of motivation. Hackman and Oldham (1976) established the interconnection of meaningful work and personal motivation, and found that meaningful work – in addition to feedback and autonomy – maximizes the possibility of internal motivation.

The concept of “work” is considered to be an important aspect of a person's life, because a significant part of most people's lives is devoted to their job (Baumeister, 1991; Wrzesniewski, 2003; Michaelson *et al.*, 2013). Work provides individuals with self-identity and self-worth; every employee seeks to find these in their workplace. Accordingly, many researchers have studied meaningful work because of its prominent role in peoples' personal lives (such as Steger and Dik, 2009) and because workers increasingly work to fulfil their psychological, social and financial needs (Rosso *et al.*, 2010). Therefore, it is essential for management to understand their responsibility for ensuring that employees are highly motivated. This responsibility requires them first to understand how their employees perceive their jobs. The literature suggests numerous needs that help in producing personal meaning in work, such as the needs of self-purpose, self-efficacy, self-worth and comprehension (Baumeister, 1991; Steger and Dik, 2010). These needs are discussed in more detail later. Overall, individuals' motivations to achieve certain needs contribute to their experience of meaningful work in their organization.

#### *The importance of finding meaning in work*

Several disciplines have considered the importance of finding or experiencing meaning in work, with the greatest popularity among the existential psychology and existential social science scholars. Researchers in psychology (such as Nielsen *et al.*, 2008b; Wrzesniewski, 2003; Clausen and Borg, 2011) recognize meaning in individuals as a subjective interpretation of work experiences and interactions. However, researchers in the social sciences examine meaning in terms of the norms or shared perceptions of individuals (Sosik, 2000; Isaksen, 2000). For instance, Sosik (2000) describes meaning as the recognition of order, importance, coherence, worth and purpose in one's existence. Despite variations in the construction of this body of research, the findings from numerous studies at the cross-sectional, longitudinal, individual and organizational levels reveal the significance of finding meaning in work in predicting a series of required outcomes.

Many psychology scholars have identified outcomes for workers derived from meaningful work, including workers' well-being (Arnold *et al.*, 2007; Nielsen *et al.*, 2008b), their job and life satisfaction (Wrzesniewski *et al.*, 1997) and a reduction in withdrawal behaviours (Steger *et al.*, 2011). Organizational outcomes have also been identified, and these include high organizational commitment (Wrzesniewski, 2003; Morin, 2009; Cohen, 1997), low levels of staff turnover (Clausen and Borg, 2011) and low

levels of absenteeism (Steger *et al.*, 2011). In contrast, when workers experience a lack of personal meaning in their work, they are exposed to experiencing negative outcomes, such as stress symptoms (Isaksen, 2000), becoming workaholic to a point that would be harmful (Steger and Dik, 2010), psychological stress (Morin, 2009), long-term absence due to sickness (Clausen *et al.*, 2010) and cynicism (Holbeche and Springett, 2004).

These outcomes, which link to the importance of finding meaning in work, as well as changes that have occurred in the workplace environment, inform several studies of the concept of meaningful work and confirm the relevance of their findings. Meaningful work is a better predictor of work-related outcomes than other indicators that were previously used for this purpose (Steger *et al.*, 2011). Fairlie (2011) states that the value of indicators (such as job satisfaction and work ethic) has decreased over the last few decades in relation to the achievement of desirable organizational outcomes for employees. This increased interest in studying meaningful work is reflected by the appearance of the term “meaningful work” in different models and theories, such as in the empowerment model (Spreitzer, 1995), the spirituality model (Milliman *et al.*, 2003), Antonovsky’s (1985, 1991, 1996) framework of sense of coherence, charismatic leadership theory (Shamir *et al.*, 1993), employee personal engagement (Kahn, 1990, 1992) and work centrality (MOW International Research Team, 1987).

However, while the aforementioned researchers confirm that experiencing meaning in work plays a significant role in predicting work-related outcomes, the different presentations of the concept in several models and theories in which it appears may contribute to a conceptual confusion of the term.

The next section addresses some potential sources of conceptual confusion that makes meaning in work hard to define, and why it is important to understand these sources of conceptual confusion.

*The gap: potential sources of conceptual confusion relating to meaning in work*

Rosso *et al.* (2010) argue that, despite the importance of experiencing meaning in work and the prevalence of studies related to the concept, no generally agreed definition exists for the term. Published research confirms the perspective that “meaningful work” is ambiguous and needs further clarification (Rosso *et al.* 2010; Wrzesniewski, 2003). For example, scholars such as Steger *et al.* (2011) identify the need for greater understanding when referring to work as meaningful. Wrzesniewski (2003) argues that because little agreement exists on the definition of meaningful work, its interpretation is often “left to the imagination of the reader or to the interpretation of the research respondent” (p. 297). Rosso *et al.* (2010) argue that, based on the fragmented nature of meaningful work, confusion abounds regarding what is known about meaning in work and its identity. Hence, in order to direct the understanding of the term “meaning in work”, we need to understand the sources of this conceptual confusion followed by evidential examples from the relevant literature.

Four possible reasons for this conceptual confusion can be identified in the relevant literature. First, because people are unique in nature, what is meaningful for one person may not be the case for another. The differing beliefs that give meaning to work have encouraged scholars to build several definitions of meaningful work. Wrzesniewski (2003) argues that each person senses different meanings in different ways, according to their personal internal experience and sources of meaning. For example, Caudron (1997) states that if a researcher asked five workers what makes their work personally meaningful, they would receive five different answers, each with a different view or perspective. Adding to this picture, the rapid transformations that have occurred in recent

decades – such as changes in economic conditions, globalization, the expanding complexity of organizational structures and increase in job requirements and technological development – have affected workers' behaviours and their personal perceptions of meaningful work (Kuchinke *et al.*, 2008; Chalofsky, 2010; Cartwright and Holmes, 2006). Thus, previous studies have neglected to provide a full understanding of the impact of the environment on workers' experience of meaning in work, and may not fully depict its reality; therefore, they may be irrelevant to the present situation (Rosso *et al.*, 2010).

A second possible source of this conceptual confusion is the concept of “meaning” itself, which different authors perceive and describe in different ways. For example, Csikszentmihalyi (1990) refers to “meaning” from three different perspectives: the first perspective describes “meaning-making” as generally describing the process of identification and clarification of a concept; the second perspective views “meaning” in reference to the intention that an individual has about a subject/thing; and the third perspective considers “meaning” to be the reason for an employee to work productively. Although distinctions can be drawn between the three perspectives of “meaning”, they are interdependent. In order to sense something that is significant (the third perspective), a person should have the intention to do so (the second perspective). To illustrate, an individual will experience meaningful work when they can identify the importance of certain tasks and personally establish an intention to achieve them. Thus, leaders need to understand what represents affirmative meaning to their employees[1].

Third, a possible source of conceptual confusion surrounding the term meaningful work is the establishment of the association between “meaning” and “work”. Many different terms result when the words are linked. The literature includes many examples, such as meaning at/in/of work, meaningfulness in working, meaningfulness at work and work meanings. In some cases, even within a single study, several explanations are presented to explain the relationship between the two terms (Davis *et al.*, 1998; Pratt and Ashforth, 2003; Steger *et al.*, 2011). Chalofsky (2003) argues that linking these two terms is challenging and produces three different terms, namely: meaning at work, meaning of work (MOW) and meaning in work. Meaning at work involves a relationship between the employee and the organization or the workplace, in terms of commitment, loyalty and dedication. MOW refers to a sociological and anthropological concern for the role of work in society – in terms of the norms, values and traditions of work in people's day-to-day lives. Finally, meaning in work is an inclusive state of being where each individual expresses the meaning and purpose of their life through work activities (p. 73). These diverse explanations of meaningful work from a single author highlight the difficulties associated with establishing a clear definition for the concept[2].

For others, such as Pratt and Ashforth (2003), meaningful work is perceived differently, and is explained in two distinct forms: meaningfulness at work and meaningfulness in working. Meaningfulness at work refers to the membership in the social aggregate that shapes a person's identity. This identity is created by integrating a person's identity with their role and membership. Meaningfulness in working refers to the significance of the tasks for an employee (Pratt and Ashforth, 2003; Cohen-Meitar *et al.*, 2009). In summary, while Chalofsky (2003) refers to individuals' perceptions of work as valuable, Pratt and Ashforth (2003) attaches work to an individual's self-identity.

Other researchers (such as Arnold *et al.*, 2007) point out that many authors use “meaning” and “meaningfulness” interchangeably. However, Rosso *et al.* (2010) argue that these terms do not have the same meaning. They elaborate that, in reference to “work”, the term “meaning” is an output that results from having made sense of something at work, or

the employee's perception of the role of the work in their life setting. Rosso *et al.* (2010) claim that the term "meaning" in the literature usually refers to the positive traits of the concept; whereas "meaningfulness" refers to the significance that an employee attributes to their work, which differs considerably between individuals.

The fourth and final reason for this confusion might be due to the appearance of meaning in work as a prominent factor in multiple models. This may have also contributed to the complex explanations of meaningful work and the sources used to define meaningful work. Of particular note is the variety of different explanations of "the meaning of work" employed by researchers, where the bases of these explanations mainly cover work centrality in comparison to other domains (MOW International Research Team, 1987), deeper levels of purpose and significance, self-identity (Pratt and Ashforth, 2003) and orientations and beliefs that a person holds towards work (Wrzesniewski, 2003). Other researchers consider meaningful work as a broad term that is assessed through other well-defined terms (Britt *et al.*, 2001; Fairlie, 2011). These different representations, in turn, result in the development of different subdomains of meaningful work, each of which indicates a different integration of the two terms.

#### *The structure of the paper*

As explained by the examples presented above, the association between "meaning" and "work" has created many conflicting perspectives in the definitions and conceptualizations of meaning in work. To reduce confusion, several scholars have recommended that future research to be more precise and explicit in their definitions when assessing meaning in reference to work (Rosso *et al.*, 2010; Steers *et al.*, 2004).

In order to identify the common attributes of meaningful work, next we review the formulation of this concept in ten theoretical models:

- (1) the MOW International Research Team (1987) framework;
- (2) Baumeister's (1991) framework of needs;
- (3) the Chalofsky triple model of meaningful work, which is based on finding a sense of self, of the work and of a work/life balance (Chalofsky, 2003, 2010);
- (4) Pratt and Ashforth's (2003) model, which defines meaningfulness with work on the basis of self-identity theory;
- (5) Antonovsky (1985, 1991, 1996) view of meaningfulness in the senesce of coherence framework;
- (6) Isaksen's (2000) model of meaningful work, which is based on the degree of fit between employee traits and environment characteristics;
- (7) Wrzesniewski's (2003) perspective on employees' orientation towards work;
- (8) the three approaches for studying meaning by Morin (2009);
- (9) Steger and Dik's (2010) framework, which states that meaningful work is found when there is a sense of comprehension and purpose towards work; and
- (10) Martela's (2010) framework, which is based on the discourse that employees are integrally connected to the fundamental human need for meaningfulness in life, and that the experience of meaningful work must play a major role in fulfilling this need.

In summary, the concept of meaning in work can be perceived in different ways (Yeoman, 2014; Veltman, 2014), which has led to many disagreements in the field. The following

section highlights the diverse interpretations and conceptualizations of the concept, and outlines the dominant frameworks that have been built on the meaningful work concept. The review presented in this study does not criticize any of these frameworks or theories; rather, it builds on them, then reviews and clarifies the experiential dimensions of meaningful work in order to identify general common features. These findings will potentially enrich the current understanding of meaning in work and further clarify the concept.

### **Towards a further explanation of the meaning of “meaning in work”**

Our aim is to review the literature on the conceptual frameworks of meaning in work, and to present the important empirical studies on the topic. For the purpose of this study, we divided the relevant conceptual perspectives of meaningful work into two subcategories, the work-related and human-centred conceptual frameworks based on our understanding to these understandings. Those that use a work-related approach are classified into two categories based on their focus: the centrality of the work in relation to other domains; and the context in which the job is conducted (i.e. the design of job characteristics). These frameworks appear to be comprehensive, and incorporate both the sources of meaningful work and meaningful work itself. However, the human-centred approach frameworks are classified into three categories based on their focus: the significance and importance of work and the value or importance that a person places on the work; the coherence between the core values an employee has in the job; and the orientations and beliefs held towards work.

#### *Work-related conceptual frameworks*

The work-related conceptual frameworks present meaning in work in two forms: the importance of work in a worker's life; and consideration of the context in which the job is conducted. The first form of meaningful work incorporates both its incremental and expressive meaning in that person's life. This representation views work as more than simply necessary to get money to help meet physical needs (such as food and shelter). Rather, it is linked to an individual's self-concept, identity and social standing. The MOW framework (MOW International Research Team, 1987) and the job characteristics model (Hackman and Oldham, 1976) are two popular frameworks that use the first form of meaningful work. The MOW International Research Team (1987) was developed to investigate how people evaluate their work heuristically. Harpaz and Fu (2002) review this framework and comment that meaningful work emerges from the strength of the relationship between an individual and the domain of work. However, the experiences differ based on individuals' expectations. The MOW International Research Team (1987) lists meaningful work as a term comprised by five dimensions:

- (1) work centrality, which is concerned with how much significance a person perceives work to have in comparison with other areas of life (such as leisure, religion and community);
- (2) societal norms, which considers the opportunities in work and the obligation of work towards the society;
- (3) valued work outcomes; that is, outcomes that are sought through working (e.g. job satisfaction);
- (4) importance of work goals, which refers to a person's work objectives and the importance of these objectives to that person; and

- (5) work role identification, which considers the degree to which a person identifies and evaluates work in terms of various roles and their function (Harpaz and Fu, 2002, p. 641).

These five dimensions are empirically and theoretically related to meaningful work (Kuchinke *et al.*, 2009; Kuchinke *et al.*, 2008). Although the MOW framework is often used as a basis from which assessment of meaningful work can begin, recently, Clausen and Borg (2011) have argued that the understanding of meaningful work in this MOW framework is comprehensive, because it focuses on work as a social institution societal norms regarding work and more individually held work-related values work centrality as a life role, valued work outcomes, importance of work goals and work role identification.

Although these work-related frameworks have contributed to the understanding of the concept and sources of meaning in work, Steger *et al.* (2011) argue that “it is quite common for there to be comingling between the sources of meaningful work and the experience of meaningful work itself” (p. 2). Numerous studies have tested meaning in work by assessing the causes of meaningful work, rather than assessing meaningful work itself (e.g. Kuchinke *et al.*, 2008). In response, several frameworks have been developed to understand the nature of meaningful work itself in a specific and dynamic way. This is evident in the work of Rosso *et al.* (2010), who found that several researchers have developed specific models for understanding meaningful work (Steger and Dik, 2010; Chalofsky, 2003; Pratt and Ashforth, 2003), rather than taking the comprehensive perspective previously favoured to models presented in the first form of meaning in work.

#### *Human-centred conceptual frameworks*

Human-centred conceptual frameworks can be classified using three different approaches. The first is concerned with the significance of work and the value that a person perceives in the work (Baumeister, 1991; Steger and Dik, 2010; Chalofsky, 2003; Pratt and Ashforth, 2003). Here, workers seek to do more than just make sense of the work; they need work that has importance, significance and purposefulness. The second approach is concerned with the levels of fit or coherence between an employee’s core values in relation to the job and the work characteristics (e.g. organizational mission) (Morin, 2009; Isaksen, 2000; Scroggins, 2008). Morin (2009) argues that frameworks that use this approach in relation to meaningful work dominate the organizational behavioural literature. When an employee finds this coherence effect, they feel that the work is more likely to provide them with a sense of psychological security and serenity. This in turn helps them to cope with the challenges that are involved in performing their tasks, hence their sense of meaning in work. The final approach is related to the individual orientation of shaping work; that is, what kind of value a person seeks in work. This is the value that builds a person’s intentions to achieve desired goals, and is an approach mainly presented in the work of Wrzesniewski (2003) and Wrzesniewski *et al.* (1997). These three approaches are relevant for explaining meaningful work. Due to space limitation, the main studies and dominant frameworks that use the human-centred approach are presented under three subcategories.

The first subcategory is significance of work and value derived from work. According to Baumeister (1991), finding meaning in work is a critical component for finding meaning in life. Meaningful work here is described as “a shared mental representation of possible relationships among things, events and relationships; thus meaning connects things” (p. 15). Two main elements are indicated in this definition. First, to categorize and distinguish the patterns in one’s environment. When employees



face a unique situation or event, they are usually motivated to understand why such a situation occurred and how it relates in general to their understanding of the jobs, organizations and their lives. By having a sense of meaningful work, employees are more likely to organize situations to allow them to place the events in a more complex and turbulent environment. However, without this sense of meaningfulness at work, the workplace would be a disordered and random place. Second, a sense of meaning enhances employees' self-control and the regulation of internal states. Employees are more likely to sense meaning when they face events where they are more likely to think and behave in ways that support an orderly environment. Without meaning, employees' behaviours are directed by their own impulses and instincts.

Regarding the sources of meaning in work, Baumeister (1991) states that personal meaning is derived from four inner needs one in searching to fulfil; namely, the needs of purpose, the needs of reason value, the needs of self-efficacy and the need for feelings of dignity and self-worth. Purpose directs individuals' attention to what is important. Individuals with a need for purpose, needs to have an object, aim and goal for living to direct future states. Value is found when individuals believe that what they are doing is useful and desirable. Values contribute to the amount of effort that a person is ready to exert (Sosik, 2000, p. 62). Efficacy refers to the feelings that individuals have of control over their destiny and effectiveness in events. Self-worth needs appear when individuals feel that they contribute to the common good and that their opinions are respected and favoured. Overall, each of these needs is relevant in making an employee's work more meaningful (Sosik, 2000).

The sense of coherence framework developed by Antonovsky (1985, 1991, 1996) is a theoretical framework that shows the role of meaningfulness in human functioning. Antonovsky argued that sense of coherence it as a global orientation that expresses the extent to which one has a pervasive, enduring though dynamic feeling of confidence that: the stimuli deriving from his/her internal and external environments in the course of living are structured, predictable and explicable; the resources are available to one to meet the demands posed by these stimuli; and these demands are challenges, worthy of investment and engagement (Antonovsky, 1985). Antonovsky (1985, 1991, 1996) argued that sense of coherence has three components. These components – comprehensibility, manageability and meaningfulness – are the three components from the basis of the sense of coherence framework. In short, comprehensibility is characterized by a belief that things happen in an orderly and predictable fashion and a sense that person can understand events in his life and reasonably predict what will happen in the future. The second component is manageability. Here, person belief that he/she have the skills or ability, the support, the help or the resources necessary to take care of things, and that things are manageable and within your control. Finally, meaningfulness is felt when person belief that things in life are interesting and that things are really worthwhile and that there is good reason or purpose to care about what happens. He argued that if a person believes there is no reason to persist and survive and confront challenges, i.e. if they have no sense of meaning, then they would have no motivation to comprehend and manage events.

The framework developed by Steger and Dik (2010) explains that feelings of meaningful work arise when a person has a clear sense of self, an accurate understanding of the nature and expectations of their work environment, and an understanding of how to transact with their organizations to accomplish work objectives. The authors identify two sources of meaningful work: sense comprehension and purpose towards work. Comprehension refers to people's ability to make sense of their selves, and how their

experience in work fits the organization. The authors mainly argue that comprehension appears when employees develop a sense of self-identity by understanding how their roles contribute to the purpose of the organizations and the life around them. Relationships with colleagues and clarifying the personal roles in society are considered essential for comprehension. Purpose, however, refers to “people’s identification of, and intention to pursue, particularly highly valued, over-arching life goals” (p. 133). People need to be able to recognize and follow life goals that have personal value. When work provides a clear understanding of the participative role in fulfilling the purpose for the organization, people are more likely to understand how they fit in and contribute to the organization. This, in turn, will help them to connect to the greater good, and hence need of purpose is found.

Under the significance of work and the value derived from work category, Chalofsky (2010) stipulates that experiencing meaningful work is not only about the extrinsic benefits person needs in work; it is about the sense of balance that arise when an interaction occurs between an individual’s competencies, purpose, values, relationships and activities that they pursue in life (p. 80). Chalofsky (2003) develops a framework based on the claim that the deeper the levels of intrinsic motivations, the more these individuals perceive work as meaningful.

Chalofsky (2003) differentiates between: meaning at work, MOW and meaning in work (or meaningful work). First, meaning at work involves a relationship between the employee and the organization or the workplace, in terms of commitment, loyalty and dedication. Second, MOW refers to a sociological and anthropological concern for the role of work in society-in terms of the norms, values and traditions of work in the day-to-day life of people. Chalofsky (2003) further states that meaning in work, or meaningful work, is an inclusive state of being where individuals express the meaning and purpose of their lives through activities in work (p. 73).

For Chalofsky, the question of describing a person as having meaningful work is related to the ability to balance between multiple sources to help employees to build intrinsic motivation. These sources are represented in a framework that includes a sense of self (i.e. individuals need to have a clear sense of their own identity and understand the relationship with others), the work itself (job requirements must be related to values and connections, which makes the workplace worthwhile) and finally, the sense of work/life balance (whether the work complements or competes with an individual’s personal life). When individuals balance these sources, they will have the ability to express a sense of self through work activities. In turn, they will align their identities with job tasks.

In another and more comprehensive framework, Pratt and Ashforth (2003) connect meaningful work with the with the theory of self-identity as a type of sense making. Self-identity refers to an individual’s perception of self in relation to any number of characteristics. Meaningful work involves the ability to enhance one’s own identity by making the tasks one performs at work intrinsically motivating and purposeful. That is, when employees show a sense of identity with a group to which they belong, they will be more likely to enhance the sense of meaningfulness they perceive in working. The authors focus on the nature of the relationship in the work environment as a basis for studying meaningful work. Specifically, they refer to meaningfulness as a subjective sense of the individual that “enhanc[es] the roles, tasks and work that individuals perform, or enhanc[e] the characteristics of group membership and/or attendant goals, values and beliefs” (p. 314). Based on this explanation, Pratt and Ashforth (2003) distinguish between two distinct forms of meaningfulness in this framework: meaningfulness at work and meaningfulness in working. Simply, meaningfulness at work refers to membership in a

social aggregate that shapes a person's identity created by integrating personal identity with role and membership; whereas meaningfulness in working is the consistency between employees' and the organization's identity that makes the work situation significant.

Other frameworks focus mainly on identifying the experiential dimensions of meaningful work (Steger *et al.*, 2011). These authors believe that meaningful work results from the reciprocal dynamics between individuals and groups. The person works to benefit the self and the collective, and the fruits of this work enhance both the self and the collective. This framework was built on the belief that meaningful work is a subjective term that consists of three primary aspects: positive meaning in work (the sense of how one's job significantly matters and is personally meaningful), meaning-making through work (the individual's sense of whether the job influences them to perceive meaningfulness in life, because meaning in work and meaning in life are inseparable) and "greater good" motivations (where the desire to make a positive impact on the greater good is consistently related to the experience of meaningful work; see p. 4).

In another framework, Kahn (1990, 1992) explains how meaning in work is derived when one receives a return for investments of one's self in a currency of physical, cognitive or emotional energy. "People experienced psychological meaningfulness when they felt worthwhile, useful, and valuable – as though they made a difference and were not taken for granted" (pp. 703-704). Kahn's studies mainly focus on the psychological conditions that are responsible for deriving meaning in work. Their analyses show that receiving return for investment in one's self is derived from three psychological conditions: task characteristics, role characteristics and work interactions. Kahn (1990) argues that psychological meaningfulness can be attained by providing employees with challenging work, different skills, personal directions and opportunities to make important contributions.

Integrating from different streams of research, Martela (2010) describes how every person needs to find meaningfulness in their own life. Because work is a major part of a person's life, experiencing meaningful work must play a major role in fulfilling this need. Martela (2010) connects meaningful work with the extent to which an individual's life can fulfil a sense of meaningfulness. Accordingly, "meaningful work is about making sense of the work in a way that not only makes work comprehensible but also provides a positive significance for one's own existence" (p. 11). Martela's framework of meaningful work distinguishes between four sources of meaningfulness in work:

- (1) job characteristics (the intrinsic qualities of the work itself, goals and values the work is thought to serve and the identity that the work provides);
- (2) the individual (engaging in the job, with a goal oriented and the sense of need for meaningfulness);
- (3) organization (a feeling of self-worth, emotions, a sense of contribution and leadership and organizational practices); and
- (4) wider society (providing the elements for the process, a source of support for certain interpretations and a source of resistance for certain interpretations).

This framework confirms Baumeister's (1991) view that meaningful work is derived from the individual's ability to satisfy the four needs.

Followed the first subcategory the significance of work and the value derived from work, the second subcategory involves personal coherence and alignment with characteristics of the work. Under this category, Isaksen (2000) defines meaningful

work as a satisfactory state of mind. Isaksen (2000) conceptualizes meaningful work as an intra-psychological process that is experienced when interaction occurs between a person's coherence and their work characteristics. Similar to the perspective of job characteristics model and the notion of coherence (Morin, 2009), Isaksen (2000) states that meaningful work is mainly concerned with the "reasons an individual has for working, what he or she seeks to accomplish by working and the continuity that he or she experiences in work" (p. 87). Workers experience meaningful work when a satisfactory state of mind results from the interaction between individual characteristics (personality traits) and work conditions (external events). However, when a poor fit between environment and self-exists, poor working conditions and lack of beliefs in of the attempts to construct meaningful work, workers will not experience meaningful work.

Eight scenarios are proposed for deriving meaningful work in Isaksen's framework: the attachment between an employee and the workplace, social relations that employees have at work, outside activities that employees experience in private life that make work easier, the level of happiness that employees feel when they learn new aspects at work, the level of satisfaction employees feel when they exert extra effort to do tasks, employees' contribution to others' well-being, the development of employee contributions to work procedures, routines and conditions and the employee experience of autonomy that gives a sense of freedom. However, Isaksen found that only the first three characteristics are important for finding meaningful work.

In more recent framework, Fairlie (2011) states that specific job characteristics can help a person to derive a sense of personal coherence and alignment with work characteristics. Seven characteristics of the job are proposed: intrinsic rewards, extrinsic rewards, leadership and organizational features, supervisory relationships, co-worker relationships, organizational support and work demands and balance.

Following the first and second, the third and final subcategory is the personal orientation towards the domain of work. Wrzesniewski (2003) proposes another approach for meaningful work based on the framework proposed by Bellah *et al.* (1985), which is based on the notion that employees shape the domain of work in general according to their own orientations, attitudes and beliefs. Wrzesniewski (2003) describes three different work orientations that affect employee's disposition to find meaningfulness in work. This model can be viewed on a continuum of three orientations. The first orientation is job orientation. Work can be experienced as job orientation when people focus on the material benefits that help them to increase their enjoyment and pleasure outside work. Meaningful work primarily concerns the financial aspects without seeking any other type of rewards from it. Hence, work itself is basically a necessity of life. The second work orientation is career orientation. In contrast to job orientation, people perform at work for the purpose of rewards and advancement that accompany the development of the organization. The final work orientation is calling orientation. In contrast to other orientations, calling orientation focuses on work as an end in itself (Rosso *et al.*, 2010; Wrzesniewski *et al.*, 1997). Rather than searching for financial benefits and advancements at work, this orientation appeals to employees who believe that doing the job is pleasurable and enjoyable. By fulfilling it, employees socially contribute to their self-worth, and also to the greater good, by making the world a better place (Rosso *et al.*, 2010). All these orientations can grow or diminish at all levels in a given hierarchy as a result of contextual factors (Wrzesniewski *et al.*, 1997).

Researchers agree that these frameworks have been built in order to understand the nature of meaningful work itself in a specific and dynamic way (e.g. Rosso *et al.*, 2010; Yeoman, 2014; Veltman, 2014). The present discussion focuses on the latter perspective – a human-centred approach. Next, we will review relevant empirical studies on the human-centred approach of meaningful work.

### *Empirical research on meaningful work*

Despite many empirical studies being conducted on meaningful work, no consensus exists regarding its conceptualization and assessment. This lack of consensus reinforces the confusion surrounding the concept (Rosso *et al.*, 2010). Table I summarizes some of the significant empirical studies in the field. By synthesizing and understanding how these researchers assess meaningful work, and understanding the frameworks used as the basis of these assessments, some of the common features of meaningful work at a conceptual level can be identified.

It is important to note that the aim of this review was to search the relevant literature and to find a conceptualization of meaning in work. To extract relevant research from the published literature the electronic databases for business were scanned prior to more detailed searches. Key words used in the literature searches included meaningfulness work, meaning at work, MOW, meaning in work and meaningful work. Due to the limited amount of research that has examined the conceptualization of meaning in work; any published researches that include the term meaning in work were included in this review. The sample consisted of peer-reviewed research studies published in a ranked business and organizational psychology journals. Nearly 25 papers were reviewed, of which 18 are referenced in this manuscript. From the body of literature reviewed, a sample of nine studies reporting on the meaning in work. The study design, conceptualization of term meaningful work and findings relating to meaningful work of these nine studies are summarized in Table I.

### **Conclusion: a common ground for defining meaning in work**

The above discussion on the conceptual perspectives and empirical research of meaningful work demonstrates that the term “meaningful work” has been conceptualized in various ways, based on the aim and context of each study (Arnold *et al.*, 2007; Steger *et al.*, 2011; Rosso *et al.*, 2010). However, and in addition, those studies contain several inconsistencies. For instance, Arnold *et al.* (2007) suggest that meaningful work is a positive psychological state that does not depend entirely on extrinsic benefits, such as pay and rewards. Rather, they refer to it as “finding a purpose in work that is greater than the extrinsic outcomes of the work” (p. 195). Arnold *et al.* developed their own measure of meaningful work to fit this definition. Steger *et al.* (2011) argue that Arnold *et al.*’s “measures do not seem to apply this definition very evenly” (p. 5). In their response, Steger *et al.* (2011) propose a new way for assessing meaningful work based on the positive meaning in work, work as a means of making meaning and the desire to positively contribute to the greater good. Rosso *et al.* (2010) note that the meaning in work incorporates much more than strictly financial aspects for most people (p. 98), which can be interpreted as a disagreement with Arnold *et al.*’s definition.

In another inconsistency, for example, some researchers claim that other specific constructs fall under the umbrella of meaningful work. For example, Britt *et al.* (2001) refer to meaningful work as a multidimensional term that resembles three different sub-dimensions: a person’s identity; the extent to which the person is

**Table I.**  
Empirical research  
on meaningful  
work – definitions,  
theoretical  
frameworks and  
assessments

Authors	Study design	Conceptualization of term meaningful work	Findings relating to meaningful work
Clausen and Borg (2010)	Quantitative and a longitudinal analysis	Using the theoretical frameworks of Pratt and Ashforth (2003), meaning at work has been tested as a significant work-related state of mind. Meaning at work is perceived by individual when the roles and work context provide purpose and significance for employees, thereby affirming central aspects of individual identity and satisfying basic psychological needs	Experiencing meaning at work significantly reduces the risk of turnover, and partially mediates the relationship between psychosocial work characteristics and turnover
Cohen-Meitar <i>et al.</i> (2009)	Quantitative analysis and cross-sectional	Using Pratt and Ashforth's (2003) theoretical framework, organizational identity and perceived external prestige are used to assess meaningfulness at work, while challenging task and task sense of freedom in work are used to assess meaningfulness in working	The findings support a sequential mediation model in which meaningfulness in working/ meaningfulness at work is positively associated with employee creativity through identification and positive psychological experiences (namely vitality, positive regard and mutuality and organization-based self-esteem)
Scroggins (2008)	Quantitative and cross-sectional. The sample consisted of subjects employed in several organizations	The self-concept job fit theory is used as a theoretical framework. Scroggins argues that work is likely to be experienced as meaningful when tasks in the work are consistent with: (1) individual's perceptions of oneself; (2) individuals' perceptions of what they want to become; and (3) their evaluations of their own self-esteem. Meaningful work is assessed by asking participants to rate their perceptions about the extent to which the task performance gave them consistency between themselves and the work environment	Meaningful work predicts job satisfaction, intention to quit and organizational commitment The self-concept job fit theory is a better predictor for meaningful work than other person-job fit perspectives This study contributes to the research literature by examining a person-job fit approach to meaningful work, provides evidence for the need to expand the person-job fit construct

(continued)

Authors	Study design	Conceptualization of term meaningful work	Findings relating to meaningful work
Arnold <i>et al.</i> (2007)	Quantitative and cross-sectional among two sample from health care and service workers	Meaningful work is found when a person finds a purpose in work that transcends the financial outcomes. In the first sample, meaningful work is assessed in terms of spirituality framework and the second sample meaningful work is assessed in terms of degree to which work fulfils, rewards and gives important outcomes for respondents	Both samples provide extensive empirical evidence to support one of the central tenets of transformational leadership theory – that leaders can transform followers' beliefs to perceive meaningful work and hence enhance well-being Assessing and conceptualizing meaningful work differently also produces different results. Arnold <i>et al.</i> found that the full mediation relationship that appears in the second sample might be due to the control of that humanistic work values (the normative beliefs individuals hold about whether work should be meaningful) when assessing the model. The results also reveal a partial mediation in the first study and a full mediation in the second study
Colbert and Bloom (2007)	Quantitative and cross-sectional	Using Pratt and Ashforth's (2003) theoretical framework, both forms of meaningful work (meaningfulness in working and meaningfulness at work) are assessed on the spirituality scale developed by Spreitzer (1995)	Through the behaviours of transformational leadership, managers can create consistency between their own vision towards the organization and follower self-concept. This in turn influences followers to experience a consistency between their own identity and the organization's identity, leading to higher levels of meaningfulness at work Transformational leaders influence employees to perceive meaningfulness in working by enhancing followers' consistency between who they are and what they do in work Both meaningfulness at/in working are positively related to employee engagement

*(continued)*Describing  
work as  
meaningful

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Table I.

Table I.

Authors	Study design	Conceptualization of term meaningful work	Findings relating to meaningful work
May <i>et al.</i> (2004)	The research design was a field study using survey methodology. The study was conducted on employees and managers in large insurance firm located in USA	Using Khan's theoretical framework of employee engagement, respondents were asked to rate the extent to which they perceives importance, significance and values in their work-related activities	Meaningfulness influences employee engagement and has the strongest relationship with it compared to other psychological work conditions. Meaningfulness fully mediates the effects of both job enrichment and work role fit on employee engagement
Milliman <i>et al.</i> (2003)	Quantitative and cross-sectional survey design was used. The sample population was part-time, evening MBA students attending a business school in the southwest USA	Meaningful work appears as a fundamental aspect in the theoretical framework of spirituality at work. Milliman <i>et al.</i> advocate that every worker should have inner motivation in the day-to-day work to search for deeper meaning and greater purpose in work	Meaningful work is positively related to intrinsic work satisfaction, organizational commitment, organizational-based self-efficacy and job involvement; and negatively associated with intention to quit the job
Britt <i>et al.</i> (2001)	Qualitative and cross-sectional design	Meaningful work is conceptualized as a multidimensional construct that involves three concepts: a persons' identity, the extent to which person are engaged in a task and the degree of importance of the task according to the person	A soldier's personality hardiness is associated with engagement in meaningful work during a deployment, and in turn this is strongly associated with deriving benefits from the deployment, months after it is over
Spreitzer <i>et al.</i> (1997)	Quantitative and cross-sectional. The sample was divided into two sample primary: mid-level employees from the Fortune 500, and employees from 393 middle managers who represent diverse units of the organization	Meaningful work is a critical dimension or mechanism of empowerment. When a fit occurs between employees' value system (values, beliefs and behaviours) and their work activities, meaningful work is experienced. Spreitzer <i>et al.</i> base their conceptualization on the work of Brief and Nord (1990)	Meaningful work positively relates to three selected work-related outcomes: work satisfaction, job-related strain and stress



engaged in task; and the degree of importance of the task according to the person. The dimensions of identity and work importance are also used in Pratt and Ashford's (2003) and Wrzesniewski's (2003) frameworks. However, the inclusion of engagement as a third dimension contradicts May *et al.*'s (2004) empirical findings. Indeed, meaningful work is defined in terms of employee engagement, but then it is also used to predict employee engagement. May *et al.* (2004) found that meaningful work is one of the strongest predictors for employee engagement. The authors argue that an employee finds meaning when they perceive the tasks that they accomplishes to be important, and the work to be significant, to have value and to be very important.

The above summary provides only some instances of the numerous inconsistencies in the field of meaningful work. Together, these contradictions in definitions and assessments that appear in empirical research contribute to the incorrect and confusing conceptualizations of meaningful work, and to the potential for misinterpretation of the term. Hence, it has been challenging to draw theoretical conclusions and develop beneficial implications related to meaningful work, because it is difficult to compare the understandings, meanings and findings from different perspectives due to the lack of a clear and agreed definition (see Table I for findings related to meaningful work).

Within the literature that discusses meaningful work, there are four general areas of agreement and consistency. The identification of these areas should assist in setting the basis for clarifying the common features of the term meaningful work. The first area of consistency is that meaningful work is experienced when alignment exists between personal values and work activities. When this alignment occurs, a person is more likely to express themselves through work activities; this in turn contributes to a person's identity and enhances identification with work tasks. These elements are considered common features of meaningful work (Clausen and Borg, 2011; Steger *et al.*, 2011; Clausen and Borg, 2010). The second area of consistency is that meaningful work is a positive psychological state which can be observed through individuals' perceptions towards the work and activities involved in the relevant role (e.g. Pratt and Ashforth, 2003; Clausen and Borg, 2010). The third area, as described by Rosso *et al.* (2010), is that need to be more deliberate about defining meaning in work (p. 100). The current research builds on this recommendation and focuses on meaning in terms of the amount of the importance and significance that work gives to a person (i.e. meaningfulness) rather than on what work means to a person or the role of work in a person's life (i.e. what work signifies). When an employee feels, experiences and perceives that the tasks they undertake in the work have a reason, and when performing those tasks provides them with a sense of significance, this demonstrates meaningfulness. The final area that all studies agree on is that meaningful work is influenced, and in return predicts, a series of positive, individual and organizational outcomes that are important for any organization to survive. Most of the studies reveal that employees who lack or do not sense meaningful work experience negative outcomes.

The underlying features that bind the meaningful work concept together are that: meaningful work is experienced when an employee feels that the work tasks they perform are important; the work is significant; the work is valuable and the work is important for satisfying the employee's basic needs, which are influenced by several sources and affect several outcomes according to their own perceptions and standards.

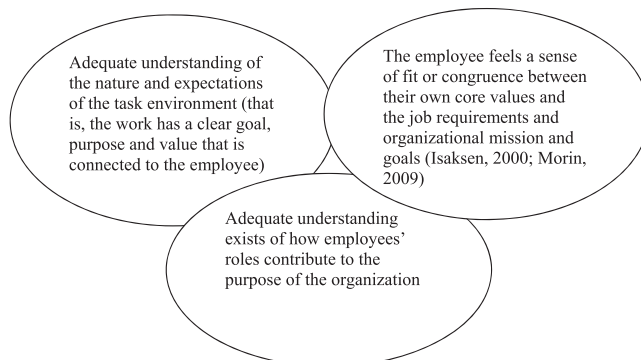
Altogether, the empirical studies presented above found that these feelings regarding importance, significance and the value of tasks are derived. When an organization provides a clear understanding of the participative role in fulfilling the purpose of the organization, an employee is more likely to understand how they fit into and contribute to the organization. Hence, this understanding increases an employee's belief that the work is personally meaningful (Steger and Dik, 2010). This discussion is presented in Figure 1.

In conclusion, although several explications of meaningful work exist, some aspects of convergence are evident in the explanations of the concept of meaningful work within the existing literature through the identification of these common features.

### Implications

As part of an effective human resource management strategy, it is essential for organizations to manage employees' experiences of meaningful work, because this has been shown to influence several organizational outcomes. Organizations should actively encourage and develop managers' abilities to redesign jobs and the climate to build enhanced feelings of meaning in work. Managers can take several formal actions to propose interventions in a way that increases meaning in work. For example, this could be achieved by conducting self-management programs to either improve current behaviours, or to teach new behaviours, by providing employees with opportunities to develop their self-awareness, by inciting passion in the job, by helping employees to identify their skills, by uncovering employees' work values, by evaluating the environment in which their values will be met, by empowering employees to participate in the decision and by encouraging regular and constant feedback (Caudron, 1997; Fairlie, 2011). Furthermore, these formal actions need to take into account the similarities and differences of employees' meaning in work, and the physical and psychological environment that exists when developing, creating or redesigning jobs. For example, by having the ability to design work in a way that aligns organizational goals with employees' own self-interests and to provide rich resources such as socio-emotional, physical and economic resources, employees perceive consistency between the work experience and the self which will enhance self-esteem, and result in more meaningful work.

There is another potential practical implication for organizations from enhancing meaning in work. Indeed, by shaping meaningful work, managers could have a more positive, albeit indirect, effect on organizational outcomes. Organizations can promote greater experiences of meaningful work among employees by implementing the



**Figure 1.**  
Common ground for  
defining meaning  
in work

“job crafting” concept. Job crafting is defined as “spontaneous changes made by individuals to satisfy their own, personal needs and not necessarily the needs of the organization” (Lyons, 2008, p. 25). In other words, job crafting involves the ability to adjust employees’ skills and preferences with the current job to make it more satisfying, purposeful or meaningful. According to Wrzesniewski (2003) and Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001), redesigning the job using the job crafting approach gives organizations the chance to shape the job in ways that would possibly change how employees do, or think about, their work which, in turn, positively improve related outcomes in the organizations. The strength of this approach is that it allows increasing the control employers have over their own professional life and it also indicates employers with areas of weakness in the construction of job tasks.

The role of top management, therefore, is to focus on job elements that would possibly change personal needs of employees and hence perceive their jobs to be more meaningful. A suggested process for this change would be as follows. First, top management needs to decide the area/s in the job that are weak and needs crafting. These areas might be in the employee-manager or employee-employee relationships, or in the ways employees perform the task in organizations. After pointing to the areas that were crafted, the next step is to assess how crafting influences the working environment. Stakeholders such as employees, clients, managers and leaders need to be considered. Second, top management then starts to implement job crafting reactions in the workplace. For example, recognizing a clear description of careers, tasks and roles, encouraging employee responsibility and development in work by changing the working methods and understanding employees’ needs in the job may facilitate employees’ feelings about what is meaningful at work. The literature refers to factors that elevate behaviours of job crafting. Fairlie (2011) added several exercises through which job crafting behaviours can be developed such as asking for employees for ideas on how they could have a larger impact on people within organizations. In addition, Lyons (2008) found that focusing on job elements such as employees’ self-image, employees’ perceptions of control and the willingness or readiness to change relates to increased job crafting behaviours. Third, top management needs to constantly check whether the job crafting approach actually achieved what it was supposed to achieve. This can be ensured by obtaining feedback from employees and their managers/supervisors. If these crafting processes produced desired positive changes, top management can include this approach as a possible practice in their job redesigning programs to shape the work to be more meaningful.

### Notes

1. For a further explanation of these three terms, see Csikszentmihalyi (1990).
2. For further explanation for these differences see Chalofsky (2003, 2010).

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