



A shorter version of this article appeared in [HR Magazine](#), Vol. 56, No. 1, January 1, 2011.

Meaningful Work: The What, Why and How Guide

By Paul Fairlie

“How do I engage my people?” Leaders have been asking this question ever since engagement became ‘the’ HR buzz word. [But it’s the wrong question, or at least too narrow a question.](#)

What about “How do I get my people engaged, satisfied, committed and healthy?”, “How do I keep them from being absent, depressed or burnt out?”, and “How do I retain them and get them to expend more effort?”

Engagement is one of many employee outcomes, all with their own drivers, costs and benefits. However, a handful of work factors are emerging as some of the strongest drivers of all of these outcomes. It’s called [meaningful work](#). I’ll tell you what that is, why it’s important, and how something so seemingly allusive can be provided to employees in tangible ways. Helpful references are at the end.



What is Meaningful Work?

Which work characteristics would be considered meaningful? When you analyze over 200 of them, a number of ‘buckets’ emerge. Most of them are fairly typical (e.g., intrinsic and extrinsic rewards, leadership, supervision).

However, one dimension stands apart. It’s having a job that:

- ◆ Helps you to fulfill a life goals, purpose and values;
- ◆ Helps you to realize your full potential as a person;
- ◆ Has a positive impact on people, things, and the world in general;
- ◆ Makes you feel like you’re accomplishing something worthwhile;
- ◆ Involves tasks that are enjoyable, in and of themselves;
- ◆ Is a major source of overall, life happiness.



It's also about seeing your job as a calling, being authentic and having a connection to something bigger than yourself at work. These are classic existential themes. And while it's true that people differ in what they find meaningful, these tend to matter to most people, even if we don't all speak the same language. Social scientists have formed taxonomies of our deepest strivings, concerns, personal projects and life longings. Each of these link to work characteristics that enable them.

Meaningful work is not new. It's echoed in Maslow's self-actualization, McGregor's Theory Y Management and Herzberg's Motivator-Hygiene Theory. You'll recognize it in Dan Pink's *Drive*, Dave Ulrich's *Why of Work* and Simon Sinek's *Start With Why*. Malcolm Gladwell talked about it in *Outliers*, and Eckhart Tolle has extolled the virtues of meaning, in general, in *A New Earth*.

Why Provide Meaningful Work?

The Importance of Meaning to People



Meaning is what people say they most want in life. It's what *really matters* to them. When researchers ask thousands of people to identify their life longings, most satisfying life events or conceptions of the 'good life', the things that come up again and again are found in models of human meaning. *Ironically, these things are absent from many models of employee motivation.* If you want employees to be fully present in their jobs, you must provide work

characteristics that build and maintain meaning.

Meaningful Work is Healthy Work

Do you have rising drug and disability costs? Meaningfulness has repeatedly been linked to physical and mental health. In fact, the actual concept of mental health is being re-defined by mental health professionals as *flourishing*, which combines both happiness and meaning. Meaningful work is healthy work.

The Growing Crisis of Meaningful Work

Job satisfaction and work ethic levels have been slipping for decades in North America and Europe. People appear to be psychologically withdrawing from work as an important life pursuit.

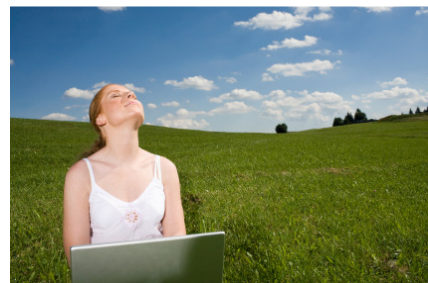
What is happening? The last few decades have seen organizations go through more frequent, rapid and radical changes. Jobs are more intense and insecure. Three-quarters of Americans cite money and work as the leading causes of their stress. Yet, real income remains flat. Corporate scandals have also eroded confidence in organizations, and global events such as terrorism and climate change have people thinking about their impacts on the world through their work.

More people are asking *Who am I? What do I really want? Why am I here? What should I be doing with my life?* As a result, a growing number of people on national surveys are saying that they want more **interesting work** and **social usefulness through work**.

Meaningful Work Drives Critical Outcomes

I surveyed 1,000 people in 50 states on nearly 40 work dimensions as part of an academic study.

Out of 80 questions, the meaningful work questions were among the strongest correlates of satisfaction, commitment, stay intentions, discretionary effort, engagement and low burnout, as well as low depression, low anxiety, physical health, and mental health as indexed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).



For example, employees with jobs that helped them to:

- ◆ Fulfill a life purpose were 41% more likely to get interested and absorbed in their work;
- ◆ Achieve life goals were 34% more likely to work beyond what was expected of them;
- ◆ Realize their personal values were 52% more likely to feel committed to their employers;
- ◆ Become who they were 'meant to be' in life were 41% more likely to dislike stopping work;

- ◆ Do what they do best had 33% weaker intentions to quit
- ◆ Do ‘good things in the world’ had 24% weaker intentions to quit;
- ◆ See their connection to a vision and mission were 58% more likely to feel committed to their employers.

Overall, meaningful work factors had the second highest correlation with a composite of high satisfaction, commitment, stay intentions, and low burnout. This is ironic, given that meaningful work questions are *missing from most employee surveys*.

Work Dimension	Correlation
Intrinsic Rewards (e.g., autonomy, recognition, involvement)	.72
Meaningful Work	.67
Extrinsic Rewards (e.g., pay, promotion, benefits, vacation)	.65
Work Demands & Balance	.59
Leadership & Organizational Features	.59
Supervisory Relationships	.40
Co-Worker Relationships ¹	.37

Some employers may think that meaningful work factors will be less important to employees when the economy is bad. Yet, these surveys were conducted during a period of the last recession which saw some of the deepest dives in employment, GDP and the S&P 500.



¹ These lower-ranked work factors are not unimportant, only less important. The surveys measured *only* important work factors. Additionally, while Leadership & Organizational Factors and Supervisor Factors were lower-ranked, it may be argued that *all* of these work factors come under the purview of leaders and supervisors.



A 'How-To' Guide for Meaningful Work

How do you provide meaningful work to employees? This can be challenging for some organizations. Luckily, there are multiple routes to meaningful work, and one or more of these may be possible for your own organization.

Assessment

First, find out 1) who your employees are, and 2) how they perceive their work. The first one involves personality, values and interests inventories. The second one involves employee surveys. With both, you'll learn what motivates employees, and how much or how little of what motivates them is present in their jobs.



Many people find similar things meaningful, but there will be differences. And simple heart-to-heart talks won't cut it. Use validated tools to assess the gaps and inform dialogues.

There are several good employee surveys, but make sure they tap themes such as growth and development, realizing strengths and potential, realizing values and life goals and social impact. Intrinsically-rewarding work factors are also important (e.g., employee involvement, recognition, freedom to be creative, project ownership, clear processes and communication).

Communicate Meaningful Work

Meaningful work is often already present, but unnoticed. Once you know how employees see their jobs and workplaces, consider the *validity* of those perceptions. For example, employees may disagree on a survey that they have job autonomy, even though it exists 'unused' in their job descriptions. They may also feel that they have no significant impact on people. More care could be taken to show employees what effects they have on clients and customers. Focus groups, client testimonials, and 'twinning' programs among employees and clients may help to cement these connections. Meaningful work is partly a mind set. Some employees are naturally better at finding meaning than others.

Re-Tool Jobs to Be More Meaningful

If possible, modify people's jobs so to shore up the kinds of meaningful work that are found lacking on surveys. Don't assume that meaningfulness is inherent only in certain jobs. Most jobs can be changed in small ways to address what most matters

to people. For example, supervisors and direct reports could engage in ‘job crafting’ to create more intrapreneurial roles (e.g., realizing potential, growth opportunities). As well, ask employees how *they* think they can have a bigger impact on clients and society at large.

If you’re really brave, try asking this on your next survey: “If you woke up tomorrow morning with \$20 million in the bank and five years to live, what things would you do for the rest of your life?” Together with your employees, identify key themes in these dreams and then modify their work to address some of them.

Make the Work Environment More ‘Un-Work’ Like

Sometimes you can’t increase the meaningfulness of your organization’s products and services, nor the nature of people’s jobs. But perhaps the work environment can be transformed to be more like the places where people would rather be. You’ll find basketball courts and games rooms in some larger companies, but you could score more points with smaller scale environment changes that link more deeply to what most matters to employees. It’s like coming clean and saying “If you *had* to work somewhere, wouldn’t you rather work *here*?”

Make Non-Work Lives Meaningful

If you can’t provide meaningful work or meaningful work environments, help employees to create more meaning in their non-work lives. This isn’t your responsibility, but it helps. Research shows that contributing *directly* to employees’ non-work lives can lead to higher commitment. By this, I don’t mean paying people more or topping up benefits. And although on-site concierge and day care can help employees to breathe easier, these accouterments are not necessarily aligned with many employees’ sense of a meaningful life.

Studies show that less than 8% of people’s life longings are work-related. Finding out what the other 92% are for your employees could provide a palette of easy wins. Perhaps it’s paid time off for volunteer work. Also, not all employee development is career-related. People are human beings before they come to work. Consider what they’re trying to accomplish in their nonwork lives and who they’re trying to become, and find easy ways to support those efforts.



Paul Fairlie, Ph.D. is President and CEO of Paul Fairlie Consulting, a firm that helps employers and employees to create meaningful and effective workplaces. He is also the developer of the Meaningful Work Inventory® (www.paulfairlieconsulting.com).



References

What is Meaningful Work?

- Baumeister, R. (1991). *Meanings of life*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Ebersole, P. (1998). Types and depth of written life meanings. In P.T.P. Wong & P.S. Fry (Eds.), *The human quest for meaning: A handbook of psychological research and clinical applications* (pp. 179-191). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Emmons, R.A. (1999). *The psychology of ultimate concerns: Motivation and spirituality in personality*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Frankl, V. (1992). *Man's search for meaning* (4th. ed.). Boston: Beacon Press.
- Gladwell, M. (2008). *Outliers: The story of success*. Boston: Little, Brown And Company.
- Maslow, A.H. (1970). *Motivation and personality* (2nd ed.). New York: Harper and Row.
- Pink, D. (2009). *Drive: The surprising truth about what motivates us*. New York: Putnam.
- Rogers, C.R. (1961). *On becoming a person*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Ryan, R.M., & Deci, E.L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *American Psychologist*, 55, 68-78.
- Ryff, C.D., & Keyes, C.L.M. (1995). The structure of psychological well-being revisited. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 69, 719-727.
- Sinek, S. (2009). *Start with why: How great leaders inspire everyone to take action*. New York: Portfolio.
- Tolle, E. (2005). *A new earth: awakening your life's purpose*. New York: Plume Books
- Ulrich, D. et al. (2010). *The why of work: How great leaders build abundant organizations that win*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Wong, P.T.P. (1998). Implicit theories of meaningful life and the development of the Personal Meaning Profile. In P.T.P. Wong & P.S. Fry (Eds.), *The human quest for meaning: A handbook of psychological research and clinical applications* (pp. 111-140). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

The Importance of Meaning to People

- King, L.A., & Napa, C.K. (1998). What makes a life good? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 75, 156-165.
- Kotter-Grühn, D. et al. (2009). What is it we are longing for? Psychological and demographic factors influencing the contents of Sehnsucht (life longings). *Journal of Research in Personality*, 43, 428-437.
- Ryan, R.M., & Deci, E.L. (2001). On happiness and human potentials: A review of research on hedonic and eudaimonic well-being. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 52, 141-66.
- Sheldon, K.M. et al. (2001). What is satisfying about satisfying events? Testing 10 candidate psychological needs. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 80, 325-339.

Meaningful Work is Healthy Work

- Brunstein, J.C. et al. (1998). Personal goals and emotional well-being: The moderating role of motive dispositions. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 75, 494-508.
- Diener, E. et al. (1999). Subjective well-being: Three decades of progress. *Psychological Bulletin*, 125, 276-302.
- Keyes, C.L.M. (2007). Promoting and protecting mental health as flourishing: A complementary strategy for improving national mental health. *American Psychologist*, 62, 95-108.
- Lent, R.W. (2004). Toward a unifying theoretical and practical perspective on well-being and psychosocial adjustment. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 51, 482-509.
- McKnight, P.E., & Kashdan, T.B. (2009). Purpose in life as a system that creates and sustains health and well-being: An integrative, testable theory. *Review of General Psychology*, 13, 242-251.

Ryan, R.M., & Deci, E.L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *American Psychologist*, 55, 68-78.
Ryan & Deci (2001), *ibid.*
Ryff & Keyes, *ibid.*

The Growing Crisis of Meaningful Work

American Psychological Association (2007). *Stress in America* (October 24, 2007). Report. (Pub. No. 212329). Washington: Author.
Cascio, W.F. (2010). The changing world of work. In P.A. Linley, S. Harrington, & N. Garcea (Eds.), *Oxford handbook of positive psychology and work* (pp. 13-23). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Davis, J.A. et al. (2009). *General Social Surveys, 1972-2008: Cumulative codebook*. Chicago: National Opinion Research Center.
England, G.W. (1991). The meaning of working in the USA: Recent changes. *European Work and Organizational Psychologist*, 1, 111-1124.
Glenn, N.D., & Weaver, C.N. (1983). Enjoyment of work by fulltime workers in the U.S.: 1955-1980. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 46, 459-470.
Highhouse, S. et al. (2010). Would you work if you won the lottery? Tracking changes in the American work ethic. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 95, 349-357.
Twenge, J.M. et al. (2010). Generational differences in work values: Leisure and extrinsic values increasing, social and intrinsic values decreasing. *Journal of Management*, 36, 1117-1142.
Vecchio, R.P. (1980). The function and meaning of work and the job: Morse and Weiss (1955) revisited. *Academy of Management Journal*, 23, 361-367.
Weaver, C. N. (1997). Has the work ethic in the USA declined? Evidence from nationwide surveys. *Psychological Reports*, 81, 491-495.

Meaningful Work Drives Critical Outcomes

Fairlie, P. *The Meaningful Work Inventory: Development and initial validation*. Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association, San Diego, CA, August, 2010.

A 'How-To' Guide for Meaningful Work

Cohen, A. (1997a). Personal and organizational responses to work-nonwork interface as related to organizational commitment. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 27, 1085-1114.
Cohen, A. (1997b). Nonwork influences on withdrawal cognitions: An empirical examination of an overlooked issue. *Human Relations*, 50, 1511-1536.
Cohen, A., & Kirchmeyer, C. (1995). A multidimensional approach to the relation between organizational commitment and nonwork participation. *Journal of Vocational Behaviour*, 46, 189-202.