

# Meaningful Work and Work Engagement: A Relationship Demanding Urgent Attention

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## Abstract

There are many models arguing on the work characteristics (Hackman & Oldham, 1975; Spector, 1975; Blazer et al., 2000). Sadly very few models explain as what could be of prime importance for individuals at work (Fairlie, 2011b). The current paper has attempted to outline that, out of the several antecedents empirically highlighted in the work engagement literatures; meaningful work could one of the most significant. The paper has critically appraised the literature, pin pointing towards the paucity of empirical studies on meaningful work and its relationship with work engagement and how it could be value for business practitioners to address this issue respectively.

The paper has extended the idea to encourage future researchers to investigate the relationship and forward robust evidence on the importance of meaningful work for predicting work engagement and work wellbeing. The review aims to highlight meaningful work as an important job resource, necessary for enhancing psychological wellbeing at work.

**Keywords:** Meaningful work, Work Engagement, Work wellbeing, positive psychology.

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## Introduction

Meaningful work has remained understated in the work engagement literatures and its popular models. Ironically, the critical appraisal has suggested potential of meaningful work in predicting employee work-wellbeing. The current paper appraises the handful studies (Fairlie, 2011a; 2011b) available on the concept meaningful work and outlines how it can be of considerable value for employees to boost their work engagement. The paper underlines how meaningful work can elevate employees to make a sense (Asik-Dizdar & Esen, 2016) out of their jobs thus, fostering engagement at work. Through experiencing work as meaningful,

the individuals experience connectivity of their efforts with the organizational objectives and how they facilitate towards business success and societal wellbeing at large. The paper has attempted to outline that meaningful work can make people feel joy and look forward coming to work most of the days (Petchsawanga & Duchon, 2012).

### **Meaningful Work**

Studies on employees' work wellbeing suggest that there is a notable role of meaningful work. Meaningful work refers to the perception pertaining to the job role and responsibilities to be noteworthy, valuable and serving some purpose (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). It is principally the evaluation of individual about the work, its purposefulness and importance (Rosso, Dekas & Wrzesniewski, 2010).

Individual is potentially to experience meaningfulness of work when they comprehend the job and its significance towards the common as well as wider societal objectives. Notable literature on the construct has outlined its importance in predicting critical employee outcomes such as work motivation, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment (Chalofsky & Krishna, 2009; Littman-Ovadia & Steger, 2010; Arnold et al., 2007; Steger, Dik & Duffy, 2012). Additionally, past studies have also linked meaningful work with general well-being factors such as intrinsic motivation, organizational citizenship behavior, and satisfaction with life (Steger, Dik, & Duffy, 2012; Littman-Ovadia & Steger, 2010; Hackman & Oldham, 1980).

The concept of meaningful work has been of significance for organizational scientists since the mid twentieth century whereby, studies strived to explore the significance of work towards to people (Dubin, 1956; Morse & Weiss, 1955). Moreover, research on work motivation (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Brief & Nord, 1990) have also outlined that when people view the work to be meaningful it enhances their value and contribution respectively. Petchsawanga and Duchon (2009) have outlined meaningful work as a critical component for employee work wellbeing whereby, May et al., (2004) expresses that perception of work being meaningless can create boredom and less concerned about the work.

On a recent note, scholars in the area of work engagement have also pointed towards its critical significance (Shuck & Rose, 2013). Furthermore, report by Towers and Perrin (2003) has expressed that fostering work engagement entails the development of employees' perception about the work being meaningful. More recently, Asik-Dizdar and Esen (2016) have critically appraised to outline how sense-making is important whereby, they have expressed that individuals make sense of their work and enhance their work wellbeing and performance when they are believe their work to be meaningful.

The authors have outlined that the nature and critical significance of meaningful is crucial in order for people to make sense and understanding of their work, job roles and how that has a recognizing contribution towards organizational specific as well as wider societal goals. The review also stresses on the fact that the increasing competitiveness of work and how people are required to perform multitasking often results in people losing out on the meaning of the work and this on a longer scale hinders their psychological wellbeing at work. The research on the concept of meaningful work is accelerating for the reason that organizational scientists have realized that meaningful work can potentially induce more convincing, productive and dedicated workforce (Setger & Dik, 2009).

### **Work Engagement**

Work engagement and research on this concept has deposited a huge deal of interest since Kahn (1990) first coined the term. Notable scholars since then, have worked to outline its nature, instruments for measurement and its consequences (Ahmed, Majid, & Zin, 2016; Macey & Schneider, 2008; Schaufeli, Bakker, & Salanova, 2006; Bakker, 2011; Bakker & Leiter, 2010; Sak, 2006). Out of the various definitions, the most popular definition has come from Schaufeli and colleagues which explains work engagement as a positive psychological state, characterized by vigor, dedication and absorption (Schaufeli et al., 2002). Vigor denotes to higher mental energy levels; dedication indicates robust involvement at work and absorption entailing complete concentration in work (Schaufeli et al., 2006).

Work engagement is significant for organizations that intend to augment their workforce's performance and productivity (Demerouti et al., 2010; Rich, Lepine, & Crawford, 2010; Salanova, Agut, & Peiro, 2005). Studies have outlined towards the fact that many of the businesses are facing problems of employees not coming with that required energy, dedication and absorption at work due to which their performance is not as per expectation (Salanova, Agut, & Peiro, 2005; Ahmed et al., 2015).

### **Meaningful work and Work Engagement**

Meaningful work is believed to arise when individuals at work have a thorough understanding of their abilities, expectations and what objectives they are working towards both, company specific as well as societal ones at large (Steger & Dik, 2010; Steger & Dik, 2009). People experience more meaningful work when individuals experience view their efforts to be working for a clearly outlined purpose in the organization. Henceforth, meaningful work would occur when people can considerably view their job roles to be playing a significant role and serving some real purpose. On the grounds, of this, it can also be asserted that when employees constitute meaningful work, it would dominantly help them to remain more engaged at work. However, this conceptual relationship has not been rigorously studied till date as only a few studies could be unearthed in this regard.

For instance, Stegar et al., (2012) examined on employees working in university in United States. The study found that individuals that perceived work to be meaningful were significantly found high in work engagement. the study concluded that employees' sensing meaningfulness with work is of critical nature especially when it comes to fostering their wellbeing at work. Parallel to this, the authors have also underlined towards lack of research in the area in order to better strengthen the relationship and highlight its importance. Moving further, Fairlie (2011a) in his study on employees from a company in North America has highlighted that meaningful work predicted work engagement more than any other employee outcomes.

The author forwarded several recommendations including the need for further attention on the relationship due to shortage of research; development and testing of robust meaningful work inventory to help facilitate businesses address the work engagement issue and comprehension of the concept of meaningful work as a concept in a holistic manner. Critical appraisal of this underlines to the fact that there is not just the need or gap for understanding the concept of meaningful work but also concerning the development of tools, necessary for its effective examination and implementation.

Oliver and Rothmann (2007) examined employees working in a MNC in South Africa. The study found that meaningful work is important job resource as per conservation of resource theory (Hobfoll, 2001) and significantly predicts work engagement. The authors suggested that meaningful work can have a varied impact on employees' wellbeing at work through

which, they can maintain high work connectivity. In the similar fashion, Stringer and Broverie (2007) have also reported similar findings on the relationship ship.

Rothmann and Buys (2011) also investigated to conclude how meaningful work can influence work engagement. The authors reported significant work engagement amongst the employees who reported higher meaningfulness in their work. The study indicated towards the lack of research due to which majority of firms facing engagement issues are not aware of.

Fairlie (2011b) therefore has termed meaningful work as a 'sleeping giant' whereby the author suggests that it is yet to be explored and strengthened. The authors has empirically outlined its acute significance and towards the fact that researchers on positive occupational psychology need to consider meaningful work as an important job resource that can not only boost employees` work engagement but can also help them to maximize the use of other available resources to further their engagement levels. Similarly, Chalfsky (2010) outlined that meaningful work is important in order to predict work engagement.

Critical appraisal of these studies highlight that there is a need for understanding the importance of meaningful work as a significant job resource that can boost the psychological work well-being. Through perceiving the work to be meaningful, individuals see a broader themselves serving a noteworthy objective(s) in the organization with clear understanding of the significance of their efforts. The review also pin points towards the fact that every organization can dominantly enhance employee outcomes and their well-being at work through making the work full of meaning.

Employees experiencing meaningfulness in their work would be more at ease in cognitively linking themselves with the work thus, enhancing their dedication, absorption and vigor at work. The pioneer work of Kahn (1990) has also outlined towards the prominence of work meaningfulness towards boosting cognitive components of work engagement.

Henceforth, the current paper proposes that further investigation could be conducted to understand the role and importance of meaningful work in fostering work engagement. Employees seeing themselves engaged would be more prompted towards viewing their work to be full of purpose and driven towards some value which also seems promising to understand how employees view their engagement in their work (May et al., 2004).

## **Conclusion**

The current study therefore proposes that meaningful work can be of acute importance particularly for predicting work engagement. the paper has outlined that there is a lack of research and the handful past studies have also indicated towards its importance and significance. More importantly, taking the recommendations of past researchers (Fairlie, 2011a; 2011b; Shuck & Rose, 2013; Chalfsky, 2010; Stringer & Broverie, 2007; Rothmann & Buys, 2011) forward, the paper encourages future researchers to investigate and highlight the importance of meaningful work in the work engagement literatures in order to help scholars as well as corporate leaders to better understand the issue of work engagement and respond to it in an effective manner as well. Consequently, the work of Shuck and Rose (2013) has proposed it as an important area for HR practitioners to consider in order enhancing work engagement in their respective organizations.

Gladwell (2008) has also thoroughly explained the importance of meaningful work and how it can be of massive value for every working professional. Thus, assuming engagement as a psychological state of mind, it can be asserted that people would engage in work more

actively when they feel that their work is of value and notably serves some significant organizational objective.

Lastly, keeping in view the performance issues (Ahmed et al., 2015; Salanova, Agut, & Peiro, 2005), the paper suggests that work engagement can considerably enhanced through meaningful work and through further empirical attention, considering it as an important job resource, organizations will learn about its importance and effectiveness.

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