

# Work as Meaning: Individual and Organizational Benefits of Engaging in Meaningful Work

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## Abstract

We review the literature on work as meaning and propose a theoretical model of factors that support engagement in meaningful work. We argue that meaningful work arises when people have a clear sense of self, an accurate understanding of the nature and expectations of their work environment, and understand how to transact with their organizations to accomplish their work objectives. We argue that this comprehension of the self in work provides the foundation for people to develop a sense of purpose and mission about their work that both motivates their engagement and performance and helps them transcend their own immediate interests to achieve concern for their contributions to their organization and the greater good. We describe potential and documented benefits of meaningful work to individuals and organizations and provide some suggestions for practical applications and future research.

**Keywords:** meaningful work, calling, work purpose, mission, leadership

For much of human history, work has defined the environment in which people developed. People's time was consumed with assuring safety, finding and acquiring food and water, maintaining effective shelter, negotiating contact with rival or confederate groups, safeguarding children, and ensuring personal protection. All of these tasks once constituted the constant, daily activities of survival. Now they constitute the bedrock activities of the world of work. As humans established more stable societies, and as innovations in energy production and technology required increasingly specialized tasks to be performed, individuals developed their own niches. Increasingly, that which people did for work came to define them. For example, the Millers milled, the Coopers made barrels, and the Bakers and Butchers fed them. One's occupation became who one was, and working was closely linked to identity. At a deep level the reasons, means, activities, and products of working have largely created who we are because, historically, working—doing the tasks needed by our social groups—was how we survived as a species. We should anticipate, therefore, that work plays a

powerful role in how people understand their lives, the world around them, and the unique niche they fulfill.

In the 19th century, the forces of industrialization and urbanization converged to change economies in many Western countries from being primarily agricultural to increasingly manufacturing-based. Encouraging this shift were dramatic improvements in technology and production methods, resulting in machines that performed specific functions, requiring more highly skilled workers to operate, maintain, and repair them. Employers began to hire workers to perform circumscribed clusters of tasks, ultimately leading to the division of labor into specific occupations (e.g., administration, research, sales, accounting; Savickas & Baker, 2005). Undeniably, the world of work has only continued to grow more complex and specialized, with many of our emerging professions orienting around abstract products and services far removed from the historical tasks of our species (e.g., nanotechnology, mobile entertainment and business applications; see Šverko & Vizek-Vidović, 1995).

The tangible products of work have thus been removed from the work itself for many occupations. Educational requirements for many occupations have increased with the sophistication and specialization of the products and services offered. Additionally, the level of technological proficiency required for traditional labor and technical jobs has grown enormously. Drafters need software savvy, surveyors manage complex electronics, and the most frightening thing to hear from an auto mechanic is that your Central Processing Unit has broken down. Yet, people may desire work that resonates with their identities as much as ever (Hall & Chandler, 2005; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Wrzesniewski, 2003). In recent years, more attention has been given to identifying the causes and facilitators of success, mastery, and achievement, with enormous implications for the world of work. One of the most exciting new areas of inquiry focuses on understanding what happens when people approach their work as a source of valued meaning in their lives, or as an avenue through which they tangibly demonstrate the meaning and purpose they experience in life.

### Work as Meaning—Historical and Conceptual Context

The earliest accounts of the meaning of work reach back to religious teachings about the purpose of human existence. This heritage provides a rich theoretical grounding for understanding the characteristics of meaningful work. The word “vocation” reflects this religious heritage, coming from the Latin word *vocare*, “to call.” For most of Western religious history, vocation referred to the belief that people were called by God to engage in religious vocation. This perspective maintained a hierarchical separation between the idealized, sacred work of monastic life and the more base, secular work of the common people. However, Augustine, Aquinas, and Benedict discussed “good work” in various occupations, and the Protestant Reformers embraced the idea that people could be called to any line of work, as long as it served a greater purpose and a greater good (see Barendsen & Gardner, Chapter 24, this volume, for a modern perspective on “good work”). Luther, for example, viewed work as a specific call to love one’s neighbor through the duties that accompany their social place or “station.” Calvin affirmed the view that all legitimate areas of work possessed inherent dignity to the extent that they contributed to the common good, and argued that a person’s station had to be judged according its capacities as an

instrument of direct or indirect social service (Hardy, 1990; Schuurman, 2004). This idea, further developed by the Puritans in 17th-century England and America, persists to the present day in many respects. Modern scholars typically assume that humans live in societies bound by common needs and mutual service, and that work role activities therefore have direct or indirect social implications that vary in magnitude (Blustein, 2006; Dik & Duffy, 2009; Hardy, 1990).

The term “vocation” now is commonly used to refer to the contribution of work to people’s meaning and purpose in life, as well as the importance of making a valuable contribution to the greater good of one’s broad social groups (Hall & Chandler, 2005; Dik & Duffy, 2009). The term “calling” means these things as well, and includes the idea that people have been summoned to meaningful, socially valued work by a transcendent call, whether that be God, the needs of society, or a sense of spiritual connection with a type of work. The common core of these concepts thus includes both the sense that one’s work is meaningful and purposeful and that it serves a need beyond one’s self and one’s immediate concerns. Although people derive a variety of specific meanings from their work (Colby, Sippola, & Phelps, 2001), we are primarily concerned with understanding the processes that lead to people’s general sense that their work matters, makes sense, is significant, and is worth engaging in at a deep, personal level.

These concepts of vocation and calling increasingly have been viewed as important qualities of people’s work experiences, regardless of their religious heritage (e.g., Baumeister, 1991; Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; Hall & Chandler, 2005). Meaningful work that benefits local and global communities is not solely a religious concern. Dik and Duffy (2009) identified three components of calling: meaningfulness, social value, and transcendent summons. Of these three, meaningfulness may be the most generalizable; most people in most occupations might feel their work is meaningful from time to time.

In this chapter, we argue that meaningful work is relevant to a great many people, and may provide richer, more satisfying, and more productive employment for people who attain meaning in their work—whether through their own devices or through exposure to meaning-generating leadership and participation in meaning-enhancing organizational strategies. Despite the intuitive appeal of the claim that viewing work as a meaningful and socially

valuable part of one's life, there is a need for continued effort in developing a theory of work as meaning. In particular, there are few articulations of what specifically makes work meaningful and what consequences might follow from engagement in meaningful work. In the remainder of this section, we offer a theoretical model in the hopes that it might help researchers and practitioners to anticipate and to test empirically the factors that should enable work to be meaningful and the outcomes that should follow from such an approach to working.

To understand meaning in work, it may be useful to have a thorough understanding of the broader issue of meaning in life, a topic which has attracted notable theoretical attention (e.g., Baumeister, 1991; Frankl, 1963; Ryff & Singer, 1998; Wong & Fry, 1998; Yalom, 1980). Meaning in life refers to people's perceptions that their lives matter, that they make sense, and that they unfold in accordance with some over-arching purpose (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006; Steger, in press). It may or may not be necessary for someone to believe that "life, the universe, and everything" have meaning in order for that person to feel his or her life has individual, personal meaning. That is, one does not have to believe there's a Meaning of Life to believe that there is meaning in one's life. Meaning consists of two primary components: comprehension and purpose (King, Hicks, Krull, & Del Gaiso, 2006; Reker, 2000; Steger, in press; Steger, 2009).

### **Comprehension**

Comprehension refers to people's ability to make sense of their experience. Principally, this appears likely to encompass people's ability to understand who they are, how the world works, and how they fit in with and relate to the life around them (Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006; Steger, in press). In the context of work, this model resembles person-environment fit theories that predicate work satisfaction in terms of how well a worker's abilities, interests, and needs match the requirements and reinforcers of an organization (e.g., Dawis & Lofquist, 1984; Holland, 1959; Parsons, 1909) or meet particular needs in society (e.g., Muirhead, 2004). Previous reviews of meaningful work help articulate the important features of comprehension as one wellspring of meaning. Pratt and Ashforth (2003) emphasized the importance of *meaningfulness at work* and *meaningfulness in work*. The former refers to the relational needs people often meet through their workplaces, and the latter refers to the sense of meaning and purpose people get from

doing their specific work. In their model, relating to others or to the organization in the workplace contributes to meaningfulness at work, whereas developing a sense of identity inclusive of the work-related tasks and roles people prefer to fulfill contributes to meaningfulness in work. Fully meaningful work includes both components and rests on satisfying relationships within the workplace and a clearly understood sense of identity. In our model, meaningfulness at work requires one to understand one's fit within an organization, whereas meaningfulness in work requires adequate self-understanding. There is agreement with regard to both of these core features: relationships and identity. For example, it has been argued that meaning-making occurs in the social contexts that exist at work (Weick, 1995; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005; Wrzesniewski, Dutton, & Debebe, 2003). Others have argued that one's sense of identity contributes strongly to meaning across diverse, important contexts, including work (Ashforth, 2001; Pratt, 2000; Steger et al., 2006). Wrzesniewski's model of meaning in work stresses the role of people's perceptions of their work—the kind of job people do matters less than does their perspective regarding the work they do in that job (or their relationship to their work as a job, career, or calling; Wrzesniewski, 2003; Wrzesniewski et al., 2003; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997).

These models make it clear that social factors, identity factors, and social cognitive factors, such as people's appraisals of their investments, relationships, status, role, and value at work, impact its meaning to them (see Hall & Chandler, 2005, for a discussion of *subjective success* in careers). We would further argue that understanding the nature and functioning of the larger organization of which a worker is part, and the organization's role or influence in the larger society, would round out and deepen that worker's comprehension of her or his work life, leading to a more meaningful work experience. These elements of comprehension (self, organization, society, fit) are important to people's coping with adversity, efforts to navigate through the world around them, establish and cultivate close relationships, and develop the second component of meaning—purpose.

### **Purpose**

Purpose refers to people's identification of, and intention to pursue, particular highly valued, over-arching life goals (Damon, Menon, & Bronk, 2003; Reker, 2000; Steger, in press-a). Purposes have

similarities to other types of goals. Goals are motivational constructs, with specific aims marked by a desire to obtain particular objects, states, abilities, relationships, or pieces of information (e.g., Elliot, 2006). Goals generally have a relatively brief time frame. For example, someone might have a specific goal to achieve production or sales targets over a fiscal quarter. Purposes must have a longer time frame. They must unite action over several discrete periods in the service of a longer-term mission. In doing so, purposes provide structure for people's activities, linking them together via the thematic elements provided by the purpose.

The importance of purpose is rooted in the idea that purpose provides people with a bridge from where they are now to the achievement of their future aspirations and accomplishments (see also Cantor & Sanderson, 1999; Emmons, 2003). To illustrate the idea of purpose, consider the residential healthcare industry, within which employees of an organization may collectively pursue several purposes. For the sake of argument, let us assume that the primary purpose of organizations in this industry is to provide high-quality, humane, and home-like health and personal care to people who are no longer able to care for themselves. In order to achieve this purpose it is necessary to set, monitor, and ideally achieve several subsidiary goals. For example, prescription drugs must be tightly managed, structured social activities may be offered, medical facilities must be easily and quickly accessed, staff must be trained, and—in the face of low wages and demanding work—nurse's aides and other “front-line” staff must be retained. Surely few organizations would proclaim that their purpose and mission is to retain staff, but effective organizations will recognize that this is an important step along the way to their ultimate purpose. The overarching purpose of providing high-quality care links the other subsidiary activities and goals.

Our model suggests that the more harmoniously aligned the subsidiary activities and goals are with the overall purpose, the more effective they are likely to be. For instance, it is possible that staff could be retained by reducing demands on them. Perhaps requiring less training, reducing the paperwork and procedures surrounding prescription drug management, diminishing the number of social events offered, and easing the emphasis on having well-ordered and easily accessible medical facilities could reduce the demands of the job to the extent that the wages seem more than commensurate to the work required.

When, however, the residents begin to suffer and the malpractice litigation begins to pile up, it would become apparent that the means of addressing the staff retention goal are out of harmony with the broader purpose of providing high-quality healthcare. This (hopefully!) facetious example illustrates how disharmony can disable an organization's effectiveness in attaining its purpose. If the same organization focused on creating a family atmosphere for both residents and staff, helping residents and staff feel more involved through social activities, promoting initiatives to reduce strain between work and family life for staff, and emphasizing a feeling of pride in professionally administering patient medication and maintaining orderly medical facilities, we might expect that the work would become something more than just changing bedpans, distributing pills, and cleaning up messes. The work would become purposeful, helping every employee feel a sense of contribution toward the greater purpose—providing high-quality residential healthcare.

### **Working for the Greater Good**

Working toward a purpose in this manner likely helps feed people's self-understanding, their understanding of their organization, and how they fit within that organization to bring about the change they value. That is, the most effective purposes should grow from effectively realized comprehension, and achieving overarching purposes feeds back into comprehension, setting the stage for the attainment of the next, great purpose.

Providing people with a clear understanding of their unique role in fulfilling the purpose of their organization automatically connects them with the interests of something greater than themselves. Similarly, people with a clear sense of their role in helping meet a salient set of social needs will be inclined to view their organization as an instrument through which their work activity addresses those needs (e.g., Colby et al., 2001; Grant, 2007).

Allport (1961) discussed the mature personality; one which continually grows to encompass more and more people into its identity. According to Allport, as people develop, they begin to develop intimacy and attachment with others, bringing others inside their world to the extent that they create a shared experience and shared identity with others (e.g., Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991). The importance of others' identity has long been recognized (Cooley, 1902), and close, positive relationships with others may constitute a fundamental human need (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995;

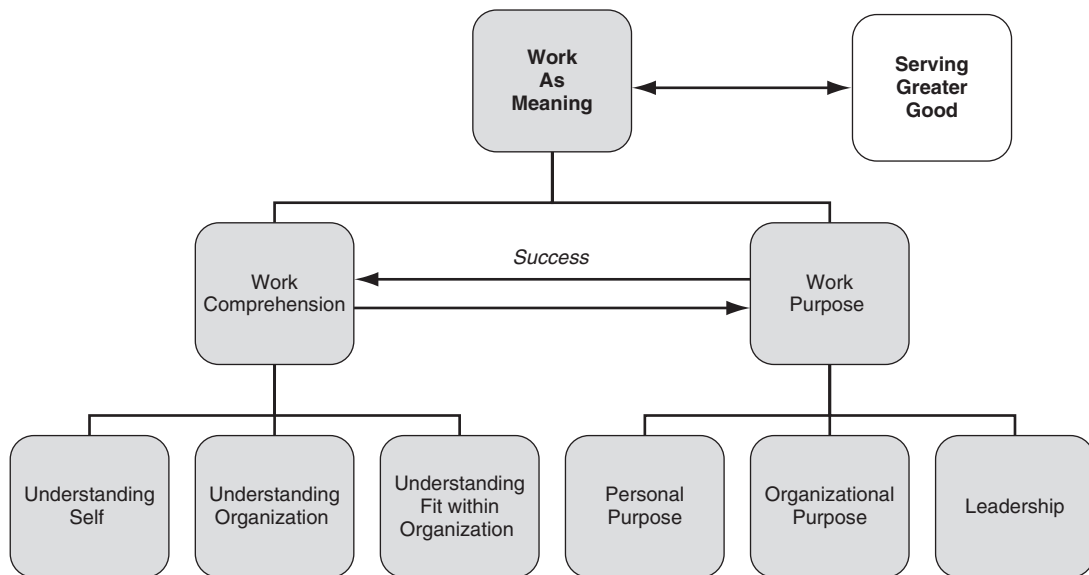
Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryff & Singer, 1998). Allport's contention was that as people continue to mature, they will begin to incorporate ever-expanding, and increasingly more abstract, circles of others into their personal identities. Thus, as people mature, they begin to fold the concerns of their neighborhood, children's schools, alma mater, city, state, and nation into their sense of self.

It is easy to call such people to mind: people dedicated to their neighborhood watch or Parent-Teacher Organizations, wearing their university colors on game day, volunteering for city clean-up events, or becoming politically involved on a state or national level. It is similarly easy to think of people who seem dedicated to *all* human life, serving in organizations such as Doctors Without Borders, the Peace Corps, or missionary organizations. Others seem to identify strongly with *life*, seeking to preserve people, species, and ecosystems around the world. Whether one accepts the idea that such people have developed more mature personalities or not, it is an attractive notion to conceive of people drawing themselves out into the world to merge their concerns with those of more and more people. This process, known as self-transcendence, is thought to deepen feelings of meaning in life (e.g., Reker, 2000).

### Comprehension, Purpose, and Organizational Connection

Our theoretical model proposes that comprehension provides the foundation for purpose, that successfully pursuing purpose deepens comprehension, and that together, comprehension and purpose provide people with a sense that their work is a source and expression of meaning in their lives (see Figure 11.1). Additionally, we would argue that there are two primary mechanisms through which purpose connects people's attitudes toward their organization with their attitudes toward their broader social context.

First, we contend that as people deepen their understanding of who they are as workers, what their organization is about, and how they uniquely fit within and contribute to their organization, they will develop a sense of comprehension about themselves as workers that will generate a purpose for their work. As they work toward a purpose in their work—whether self-generated or fostered by clear leadership from their organization—they will feel a sense of transcendence that encourages their identification with their organization and its mission (see also Haslam, Powell, & Turner, 2000). Thus, organizational purpose would seem to drive transcendence. We believe that Allport's ideas have merit,



**Figure 11.1** A model of work as meaning. Understanding one's self, one's organization, and how one fits within an organization gives rise to comprehension in work, which in turn drives a desire to pursue one or more self-congruent purposes in work. Work purpose comprises the specific purposes ascribed to by individuals and their organizations and is fostered through effective organizational leadership. Successfully achieving work purpose provides additional information about self, work, and fit, further deepening work comprehension. Together, work comprehension and work purpose lead people to view their work as an important source and expression of meaning. Work as meaning helps people transcend their own interests and work toward the greater good, and self-transcendence helps people find and pursue work as meaning.

and that as people are drawn out into their organization, they are more likely to be drawn out into their broader social contexts, increasing the chances that they will develop the desire to have their work serve the greater social good.

Second, employees driven by a sense of self-transcendence (i.e., who are working to address salient social needs) will desire to use their organization as a source of support and a facilitator of that work. Successfully working toward a greater social good will deepen comprehension about self, organization, and organizational fit, and thus transcendence would seem to deepen both comprehension and sense of purpose. Similarly, transcendence also will drive employee commitment to an organization's purpose. Organizations, therefore, can encourage employees who are not initially inclined toward considering interests beyond their own to develop increasing levels of transcendence, and also to encourage employees already attuned to transcendence to commit to the organization's purpose. Thus, viewing work as meaning is expected to benefit both employees who hold such views and the organizations they work for. In the next section, we explore the individual and organizational benefits that work as meaning should provide and weigh the empirical support for such benefits.

### ***Individual Benefits***

Theoretically, meaningful work is believed to improve work motivation and performance (Roberson, 1990). According to our model, meaningful work emerges from the pursuit of important purposes in the context of understanding one's self, one's organization, and how one fits within the purpose and operations of one's organization. If people understand their strengths and limitations, they should have a better understanding of the type of work at which they will be most effective, as well as a clearer sense of self-efficacy for the tasks required to make appropriate and satisfying career choices. If people understand their organizations, they should have more effective understanding of the procedures, culture, and purpose of their organizations. If people understand how they fit with and relate to their organization, they should be better socialized and better at working on teams, as well as to feel more identified with, and more committed to, their organization. Together these sources of comprehension would predict more accurate and efficient worker functioning. That is, more of workers' efforts at work should be spent engaged in necessary tasks at which they excel and less should be spent on

unnecessary tasks at which they are poor because workers understand their strengths and what the organization needs. Because of these characteristics of engagement in meaningful work, people engaged in meaningful work should report greater well-being and satisfaction with work, and lesser psychological distress and work-family conflict (see also Baltes, Clark, & Chakrabarti, Chapter 16, this volume).

These hypotheses outstrip the existing empirical research on meaningful work. Although extensive research has demonstrated that people with a strong sense of meaning and purpose in life experience greater happiness and fewer psychological problems (Chamberlain & Zika, 1988; Ryff & Singer, 1998; Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006; Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, & Lorentz, 2008; Steger, Kawabata, Shimai, & Otake, 2008), there is less research to support the benefits of meaningful work. People who feel their lives are full of meaning report less harmful workaholism, less work-life conflict, and better work adjustment (Bonebright, Clay, & Ankenmann, 2000), and college students high in meaning in life express greater certainty regarding their future occupation (Tryon & Razdin, 1972). People also identify work as one important, and in some cases the most important, source of meaning in their lives (Baum & Stewart, 1990; Klinger, 1977).

Although there are indications that people engaged in meaningful work report greater well-being (Arnold, Turner, Barling, Kelloway, & McKee, 2007), most research has studied the issue indirectly, through variables such as work salience or importance (Harpaz & Fu, 2002; MOW International Research Team, 1987) and work values (Nord, Brief, Atieh, & Doherty, 1990), and the loss of work (Gill, 1999) or the experience of work alienation (Brief & Nord, 1990). Working adults who approach work as a calling report greater work satisfaction and report spending more time working, regardless of whether that work is paid for or not (e.g., Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin, & Schwartz, 1997). A sense of calling also is associated with more faith in management and better work team functioning (Wrzesniewski, 2003). Among college students still preparing for their profession, a sense of calling is associated with higher career decision self-efficacy, more intrinsic motivations to work (Duffy & Sedlacek, 2007), and greater meaning in life (Dik, Sargent, & Steger, 2008). Our emerging research supports the idea that among college students, approaching one's work as a calling leads to increased feelings of meaning in

one's life as a whole, as well as greater certainty about, and intrinsic motivation to pursue, one's career choice (Steger & Dik, in press). These results suggest that one highly plausible benefit of finding meaningful work is finding an enhanced sense of the meaningfulness of one's life. Further, having a sense of calling toward one's work is related to more desirable work attitudes and greater personal well-being.

Overall, meaningful work appears to be associated with some desirable individual benefits. The most common results are that people who are engaged in, or anticipate engaging in, meaningful work report more desirable work attitudes: greater certainty and self-efficacy about career decisions, intrinsic motivation to work, feeling greater work satisfaction, and greater meaning in life as a whole.

There is, however, distance between what our model predicts as benefits of meaningful work and what the literature thus far actually supports, particularly regarding *how* people work (efficiency, accuracy, etc.). Furthermore, most extant research related to our model is correlational and thus cannot assess causality. Regardless of whether meaningful work provides these benefits to individual workers, some proportion of people appear to believe that work *should* provide meaning (Šverko & Vizek-Vidović, 1995), and many people avow that finding meaning in one's work is as important as level of pay and job security (O'Brien, 1992). Thus, there is a strong need to invest in future research that will provide answers to these questions.

### **Organizational Benefits**

Most of the research on meaningful work has focused on individual benefits, with less attention paid to organizational benefits. Many of the benefits predicted by our model hold implications for how organizations benefit by employing people who view work as meaningful or who foster a sense of meaningful work through their leadership and managerial policies. These benefits could emerge at the individual level and at the organizational level.

Workers who feel a strong sense of personal and organizational purpose should possess greater work motivation, employ more effort, spend more time working, demonstrate greater investment in motivating and mentoring others, and serve as good ambassadors for their organization. They should also perceive unity among the subsidiary and short-term goals they set and are asked to pursue, which should promote greater efficiency and performance. Purpose, therefore, should predict greater

motivation, effort, time spent at work and on task, greater efficiency, and greater overall performance. People who are engaged in meaningful work should also feel a sense of self-transcendence, applying their skills and effort in the service of the greater organizational, and perhaps societal, interests.

We would predict that the benefits to organizations theoretically derived from work meaning at the individual level (e.g., greater organizational commitment, socialization, efficiency, greater time spent at work, and more effective teamwork) would translate to organizational benefits at the organizational level, such as increased morale, lower turnover, greater productivity, increased organizational citizenship behavior, and higher performance. Existing research, however, is limited to studies indicating greater work and organizational commitment, greater time spent at work among those who approach work as a calling (e.g., Wrzesniewski et al., 1997), greater faith in management, and better teamwork (Wrzesniewski, 2003). Obtaining performance data on employees has been challenging (see Wrzesniewski, 2003), hampering development of accurate models regarding benefits to organizations of hiring people inspired by their orientation to work as meaning, and cultivating a sense of work as meaning among its employees. Therefore, in this section, we wish to articulate some testable hypotheses derived from our model of work as meaning.

### **Meaning and Leadership**

Leadership abilities benefit both individuals and organizations. When individuals develop the ability to lead, they achieve more, attain their desired goals, advance faster, and get more out of their work. Leaders set the goals and set the tone—to be a leader is to inspire others to join in bringing forth your vision. Although it is rewarding to work collectively toward a goal, that work is enriched, personalized, and endowed with special significance when it is directed toward a vision one had the opportunity to help cultivate. If meaning in life emerges from the synergy between having a positive and effective understanding of one's self and one's world, and developing purposes and missions out of those understandings, then work meaning comes from understanding who one is and how one works within a particular organization, coupled with a sense of mission and purpose regarding what one can accomplish within that organization. People who have a sense of work as meaning should therefore be more likely to also have a clear and accurate mission in their work. Such vision is fundamental to

leadership. Thus, engagement in meaningful work should be a strong potential asset for leaders (see Shamir, 1991; Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993), complementing and augmenting other characteristics of great leadership (e.g., authenticity, Goffee & Jones, 2006; judgment, Tichy & Bennis, 2007).

People who have a well-comprehended mission that they want to achieve with an organization are simply one step short of being great leaders. That step concerns the ability to inspire others to commit to that mission. Goffee and Jones (2006) make the point that leadership is executed through relationships. Effective leaders must form relationships with others, convey the importance of their mission to others, and demonstrate close links between their mission, the organization, and the followers. A leader who cannot do these things had better hope that he or she can accomplish their mission alone. A leader who draws upon a clear understanding of his or her needs and strengths and an organization's needs and strengths will be better able to discern where an organization needs to go, and what needs to be done to get there. In other words, a leader who draws on a sense of work as meaning will be able to generate prudent and needed purposes for his or her organization. Communicating a clear vision and ways to implement that vision, through, for example transformational leadership, is positively related to employee performance, well-being, and meaning derived from work (Arnold et al., 2007; Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1996; Piccolo & Colquit, 2006). At the same time, such leaders will likely enjoy setting the tone for their career and for their organization's success.

### Fostering Work as Meaning

Research has not yet illuminated the precursors of experiencing work meaning. However, given that work meaning is expected to enhance employee commitment and performance, a starting point for research is to test the possibility that managerial practices that demonstrably increase commitment and performance also create an environment in which employees experience enhanced meaningfulness. Such practices include: (1) enhancing employment security via mutual commitment between organization and employee; (2) recruiting and selecting employees on the basis of fit to the organization as well as abilities and experience; (3) investing in training employees and assisting their skill development; (4) delegating responsibility for decisions to employees, often in self-managed teams; (5) implementing a reward structure that connects employee

rewards to group and organizational performance as well as individual performance; (6) openly communicating and sharing information broadly with employees within an organization (Pfeffer, 2003). These practices have been observed in numerous industries, for example, from automotives (MacDuffie, 1995) and apparel (Bailey, 1993) to semiconductor fabrication (Sattler & Sohoni, 1999) and telephone call centers (Batt, 1999), as well as in numerous countries, including the United States but also Korea (Lee & Miller, 1999), Japan (Ichnieowski & Shaw, 1999), and the UK (Wood & de Menezes, 1998).

Of course, management practices themselves are likely not sufficient. Pfeffer (2003) cautions that regardless of the actual management practices implemented, if they "are premised on nonemployee-centered beliefs, people will see through that, and the company may not benefit from implementing the management techniques" (p. 30). For this reason, organizations that foster transcendence by clearly communicating how employee activity and organizational purpose connects to a greater social good, that create an environment that promotes psychological safety and well-being, and that implement their policies with integrity (such that words and deeds align; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003) can be expected to see a greater number of employees "buying in" to their vision. When this happens, positive results can be expected to follow for each of the employee, organization, and the broader society. All of these practices imply substantial investment in, and payoff from, effective leadership.

Our review of the literature on the meaning people derive from their work holds a number of implications that are relevant to consultants, human resource professionals, organizational leaders, and counselors. The suggestions we make below focus on perspectives and discussions that we feel would be useful in working with employees toward greater career fulfillment. Although recommendations of empirically supported and tested interventions are precluded, given the nascent state of the research in this area, we nonetheless believe that a sufficient theoretical and empirical base has accumulated to suggest initial practice guidelines. We are hopeful that the vigor of research in this area will soon extend to experimental tests of such interventions.

### Conclusion

There is an increasing appreciation for the role work plays in people's psychological health (e.g., Blustein, 2008). A positive psychological



perspective urges us to investigate rigorously how to achieve the best possible work outcomes for individuals and organizations, both on a daily basis and in terms of long-term, sustainable functioning. We would argue few other avenues offer as much promise for accomplishing this ambition than work as meaning. At the same time, empirical support lags behind the claims thus far made in the field about work as meaning. This is particularly true in the case of how people who view their work as meaning contribute to the overall performance and health of their organization. Thus, in keeping with this perspective, we call for intensified empirical inquiry into the assumptions made regarding work as meaning. Toward this end, we began developing and validating a multi-dimensional measure of the facets of meaningful work we have discussed in this chapter (Steger & Dik, 2008). It is our hope that the theoretical models we have developed will provide some reasonable starting places and testable hypotheses for further research on work as meaning.

### Directions for Research

- We need to better understand who is most likely to experience meaningful work. Research so far has uncovered some important correlates of work as meaning attitudes, but more is needed about the basic personality, cognitive, and interpersonal styles of people who approach work as meaning. For example, to what extent is viewing work as meaning a stable trait that varies little over time and across situations, as opposed to a malleable values-based characteristic that is amenable to change efforts? Likewise, we need to know more about the types of organizations that tend to either attract, or cultivate, people with work as meaning attitudes. This will require large-scale studies of many different types of people employed at many different types of organizations.

- We need to better understand where meaningful work comes from. Is it more likely among seasoned employees or among new ones? Is it more likely after someone has transitioned to a job with new challenges or after someone has mastered his or her current position? Do certain leadership styles foster meaning among followers? This will require longitudinal work following people through important transitions in their careers, including the transition from college to work.

- We need to better understand the organizational benefits of attracting and retaining employees who approach work as meaning, or of cultivating a sense of work as meaning among

existing employees. This will require long-term relationships with organizations that can convey the importance of such research to their employees and encourage their cooperation, especially around releasing performance data.

- Finally, we need to better understand how practitioners can engender an orientation toward work as meaning among their clientele. This will require adopting “randomized trial” methods from clinical disciplines and applying them to identifying what works and what does not work in helping clients see the possibilities for meaning in their work.

### Implications for Practice

- Viewing work as meaning should be seen by practitioners as a sign of healthy work engagement, and practitioners are encouraged to assess to what degree their clients and employees hold such views. Clients and employees should be encouraged to consider how they view their work, and whether a work-as-meaning approach is appealing. If so, the three basic dimensions of work as meaning should be discussed: what is the nature of the client’s self-understanding; the client’s understanding of her or his organization or field of work; and the client’s understanding of her or his unique niche within her or his organization, field of work, or broader society? Using these three dimensions as springboards to further inquiry and intervention ideally would enable practitioners to help their clients and employees to find meaningful work.

- Some employees may report that their organization or field is incongruent with their desire to engage in meaningful work. Clients and employees are unlikely to function at their best under such circumstances, and organizations are unlikely to get the most out of such employees. Such clients and employees may work to improve their level of congruence by initiating change in their work environment, but if such efforts are unsuccessful, turnover and attrition from such employees will likely result. People prosper when they are engaged in meaningful work and organizations prosper when their employees are similarly engaged. Clients and employees should be encouraged to learn about the world of work and identify industries and organizations in which they can find meaningful work.

- Organizations are encouraged to use employee work meaning as a possible selection variable in the hiring process. Assuming desirable levels of expertise, skills, and experiences are met, potential hires who are able to articulate clear connections

between their unique characteristics (e.g., abilities, interests, values, personality) with the mission of the organization in addressing particular needs in society are likely to demonstrate meaningful work engagement and promote and model the organization's purpose to other employees. They are, in short, likely to be model employees.

- Organizations also are encouraged to engage in practices that “foster transcendence,” to borrow from Pratt and Ashforth (2003). That is, organizations that clearly communicate how employee activity and organizational purpose contribute to a greater good, that create an environment supportive of psychological safety and well-being, and that implement practices using integrity (such that word aligns with deed) are likely to recruit and develop employees that engage in meaningful work.

- Finally, there is an overwhelming theoretical emphasis on the idea that one's work should be socially valued and contribute to the greater good. In all of this discussion of a person's fit and goals, and whether an organization can offer a worker the right conditions to flourish and whether it can get the most out of its employees, it can be tempting to succumb to a self-indulgent perspective. We strongly caution practitioners to guard against promoting a selfish or self-indulgent focus on “what's in it for me.” Work probably only becomes truly meaningful when it has an impact and significance. Simply adding digits to one's bank account will not bring meaning. Knowing that one's vision and efforts improve life for one's coworkers and community, and even the wider world, provides the tonic of self-transcendence and perspective. Clients and employees should be encouraged to think of how their work could engender such improvements.

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The myths we hold about meaningful work hold us back from pursuing it. What if purpose at work is within all of our grasps, regardless of our education, field, or salary desires? Let's bust some myths and make it possible.Â If this is your first time registering, please check your inbox for more information about the benefits of your Forbes account and what you can do next! I agree to receive occasional updates and announcements about Forbes products and services. You may opt out at any time. Despite the bidirectional benefits of meaningful work, companies are falling short in providing it. Our study found that people today find their work only about half as meaningful as it could be. We also found that only 1 in 20 respondents rated their current jobs as providing the most meaningful work they could imagine having. This gap presents both a challenge and an opportunity for employers.Â Because when workers experience work as knowledge work, work feels more meaningful. As such, all workers can benefit from a greater emphasis on creativity in their roles.Â The value of meaning to both individual employees, and to organizations, stands waiting, ready to be captured by organizations prepared to act.