Meaningful Work

A Summary of Workforce Research Evidence Relevant to the Child Welfare Field

What is meaningful work?

Meaningful work is defined as "work experienced as particularly significant and holding more positive meaning for individuals" (Rosso et al., 2010, p. 95). In general, meaningful work is considered to be work and work accomplishments that are viewed as valuable, worthwhile, and aligning with one's values (Allan et al., 2018). Current theory suggests that meaningful work tends to result from self-actualization or from working towards a higher purpose (Lepisto & Pratt, 2016). More specifically, meaningful work may come from feeling a sense of unity with other people, serving others, from developing oneself, or from working towards realizing one's full potential (Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012).

Importantly, meaningful work is not a continuous psychological state. As individuals participate in their workplace, they accumulate many experiences that they may perceive as meaningful or meaningless. Over time, these experiences are integrated into a bigger picture by which individuals come to believe that their work has a larger meaning or does not (Allan et al., 2018). Specific tasks are not inherently meaningful or meaningless. Rather, individuals each form subjective judgments about the value and significance of their work, and some individuals will be more apt to seek out and ascribe meaning to their lives and work tasks than others (Bailey et al., 2019).

Meaningful work is most often measured using the Work and Meaning Inventory, a 10-item scale that assesses three dimensions, including positive meaning in work (e.g., "I have discovered work that has a satisfying purpose"), meaning making through work (e.g., "My work helps me better understand myself"), and greater good motivations (e.g., "I know my work makes a positive difference in the world"; Steger et al., 2012). Scores across the three dimensions are aggregated to form a single meaningful work score.

Why is meaningful work important?

Meaningful work is important because it is associated with job attitudes, stress indicators, and behaviors. More specifically, meaningful work is strongly related to greater organizational commitment and job satisfaction and is moderately related to greater organizational citizenship behavior and job performance. Meaningful work is also moderately associated with having lower turnover intentions and exhibiting less stress, burnout, and counterproductive work behaviors (Allan et al., 2018; Hu & Hirsh, 2017).

How can organizations help facilitate meaningful work?

Although meaningful work is a subjective judgment, organizations can help lay the groundwork for employees to experience meaningfulness. One of the most commonly studied areas for enhancing meaningful work is through job design. Meta-analytic evidence indicates that job design factors like job autonomy, skill variety, task significance, and feedback from the job are strongly related to experiencing meaning at work, and factors like task identity, interdependence, and feedback from others show moderate relations (Humphrey et al., 2007).

Many other factors have been studied as antecedents of meaningful work, although we currently lack meta-analytic evidence to indicate how stable the findings are across studies. A generally recommended starting point to ensure that employees have the capacity to find greater meaning in their work is to make sure that all basic work needs are met, including adequate pay, safe conditions, time for rest, and access to healthcare (Lysova et al., 2019). Allowing employees to job craft may also help lead to greater work meaningfulness, as they will be able to tailor the job to their unique personality and goals to establish better fit (Lysova et al., 2019).

Social factors and culture could also play a role. General recommendations are that organizational culture should be supportive or innovative in order to stimulate personal initiative and feelings of belongingness among employees (Lysova et al., 2019). Additionally, positive interactions with coworkers and other individuals in the workplace may foster perceptions of meaningful work because these interactions allow for a sense of common purpose and provide opportunities to give to others within the workplace (Colbert et al., 2016; Lysova et al., 2019). Lastly, leaders can also help to facilitate meaningfulness by acknowledging employees' contributions to the organization and tying daily taskwork back to the higher purpose of the organization (Lysova et al., 2019).

QIC-WD Takeaways

- ► Meaningful work is a subjectively formed individual judgment about whether work is personally significant for the employee or serves a valuable higher purpose.
- ► Meaningful work is positively related to organizational commitment, job satisfaction, organizational citizenship behavior, and job performance.
- ► Meaningful work is associated with having lower turnover intentions and exhibiting less stress, burnout, and counterproductive work behaviors.
- ► The elements of job design are positively associated with meaning in the workplace.
- ► Researchers and practitioners seeking to measure meaningful work should consider using the Work and Meaning Inventory (Steger et al., 2012).

References

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Author(s)

Sarah Stepanek, MA, University of Nebraska at Omaha

Megan Paul, PhD, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Danielle Crawford, MA, University of Nebraska at Omaha

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