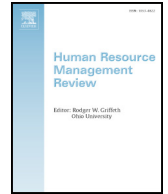




Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

## Human Resource Management Review

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/humres](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/humres)

## The mismanaged soul: Existential labor and the erosion of meaningful work

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 1 September 2015

Received in revised form 7 November 2016

Accepted 14 November 2016

Available online xxx

#### Keywords:

Existential labor  
Meaningful work  
Job design  
Values

### ABSTRACT

Meaningful work has been defined as work that is personally enriching and that makes a positive contribution. There is increasing interest in how organizations can harness the meaningfulness of work to enhance productivity and performance. We explain how organizations seek to manage the meaningfulness employees experience through strategies focused on job design, leadership, HRM and culture. Employees can respond positively to employers' strategies aimed at raising their level of experienced meaningfulness when they are felt to be authentic. However, when meaningfulness is lacking, or employees perceive that the employer is seeking to manipulate their meaningfulness for performative intent, then the response of employees can be to engage in "existential labor" strategies with the potential for harmful consequences for individuals and organizations. We develop a Model of Existential Labor, drawing out a set of propositions for future research endeavors, and outline the implications for HRM practitioners.

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### 1. Introduction

Meaningful work is something that many individuals crave, and that many organizations aspire to promote (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). Cascio (2003) notes that important and meaningful work is the single most valued feature of employment for the majority of workers. Studies have shown that the drive to find work meaningful is such that employees actively seek ways to construct meaningfulness, even in cases of repetitive drudgery (Isaksen, 2000). The so-called lottery test, where individuals are asked whether they would give up work if they won a large amount of money in a lottery, invariably shows that a majority of people would choose to continue working even without the financial need (Overell, 2008), suggesting that, for many, work brings with it significant intangible benefits and returns.

One reason the topic of meaningfulness has become so popular in recent years is due to research which has shown that the experience of meaningful work is associated with a range of beneficial outcomes for individuals and employers, including high levels of engagement, performance and creativity (Hackman & Oldham, 1980; Kahn, 1990; Ulrich & Ulrich, 2012), improved wellbeing (Clausen & Borg, 2011; Routledge et al., 2011; Soane, et al., 2013), job satisfaction (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003) and intent

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to remain (Scroggins, 2008). Overall (2008: 13) cites McDonald's UK Director of People as stating that if the company could offer more meaningfulness to its staff, 55% would be more motivated, 42% would have greater loyalty and 32% would experience more pride. Petchsawang and Duchon (2009) note that meaningfulness is one dimension of workplace spirituality, and argue that where workplaces enable the expression of individuals' full selves, then this will reduce stress and conflict and improve performance.

Some have argued that organizations have a responsibility to create and sustain meaningful work for their employees. However, it has been noted that this raises important moral and ethical questions about the legitimacy of employers seeking to control the existential domain of their employees' lives (Smithey Fulmer & Barry, 2009), something that may, in fact, not even be possible (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009). The aim of this article is to address these concerns and to contribute to our understanding of how organizations seek to manage employees' perception of their work as meaningful. Specifically, two key areas are addressed: first, how do organizations seek to manage employees' perceptions of their work as meaningful, and, second, how do employees respond to such efforts? We draw on the meaningfulness literature (e.g. Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Michaelson, 2011) to outline how organizations go about constructing a holistic approach to the management of meaningfulness and emphasize the importance of authenticity for the creation of an environment that leads to employees' genuine experience of meaningfulness (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009). We then consider what might happen when this goes wrong, for instance, when employees discern efforts to manage meaningfulness as manipulation, or when employees feel powerless to do otherwise than fit in with managerial prerogatives, whatever their real views. In examining potential employee responses to these scenarios, we argue that employees can be prompted through fear of negative outcomes including job loss, stigma, or career blocking, or in pursuit of positive outcomes such as high levels of personal regard, career advancement or increased rewards, to act "as if" their work were meaningful even if it is not experienced as such. We describe this as "existential labor", in contrast to "experienced meaningfulness". We propose that employees' propensity to engage in existential labor may be fostered by a range of factors at the individual and organizational levels. Existential labor may lead to negative outcomes for employees and organizations.

## 2. What is meaningfulness?

Studies have consistently demonstrated the central role played by work in the construction and experience of a life with meaning (England & Harpaz, 1990; Harpaz & Fu, 2002; Ruiz-Quintilla & Wilpert, 1991; Schnell, 2011). But what exactly constitutes meaningful work? It is important to consider the distinction between the "meaning of" work (MOW International Research Team, 1987) and "meaningful" work; this is rendered more complex by the fact that scholars have tended to use the two terms interchangeably (e.g. Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Rosso, Dekas and Wrzesniewski (2010: 94) suggest that "meaning" is "the output of having made sense of something" and is thus related to the process of sense-making (Weick, 1995). In other words, work may "mean" something positive to the individual such as a source of personal fulfilment or identity, or it can "mean" something negative, such as constituting a commodity or a curse (Budd, 2011). The term "meaningful work", on the other hand, contains an implicit positive bias from the individual's perspective. Our focus here is on meaningful work, rather than the meaning of work, since it is the field of meaningfulness that has been identified as most in need of further development (Rosso et al., 2010). Meaningful work has been defined in a variety of ways across disparate bodies of literature in the humanities and social sciences Bailey, Yeoman, Madden, Thompson, and Kerridge (2016), but definitions typically coalesce around the focal constructs of the "self", in terms of self-actualization and work that is satisfying and fulfilling to the individual, and the "other", in terms of work that is of service to a wider cause or gives rise to a sense of belonging to a broader group (Rosso et al., 2010). Lips-Wiersma and Morris (2009) argue that "when something is meaningful, it helps to answer the question, 'Why am I here?'" and identify four features of meaningful work: a sense of unity with others, perceiving that one's work is of service to others, expressing oneself, and developing and becoming one's self through work. In this sense, meaningful work is concerned both with undertaking work-related activities that are pleasant, enjoyable and personally enriching, as well as contributing to something beyond pure self-interest.

### 2.1. Domains of meaningful work

An examination of the literature suggests that individuals' experience of work as meaningful can arise from four different sources. These sources represent work domains in which the individual finds meaningfulness in the work that they do.

First, this can occur in the context of the *work tasks* themselves. Jobs can be described as "a set of task elements grouped together under one job title and designed to be performed by a single individual" (Ilgen & Hollenbeck, 1992: 173). In turn, tasks have been defined as "the set of prescribed work activities a person normally performs during a typical work period" (Griffin, 1987: 94). Hackman and Oldham (1980) argued that meaningfulness is one of three critical psychological states that arise from jobs perceived by the individual to offer skill variety, task significance and task identity, and that are associated, in turn, with higher levels of motivation, performance and satisfaction. These findings have been supported by later scholars (Grant, 2008; Humphrey, Nahrgang, & Morgenson, 2007). Their argument is consistent with self-efficacy theory which suggests that where individuals believe they have the agentic power to effect change, exercise control, and make a difference or impact, then they are more likely to find their work meaningful (Bandura, 1977). Grant's (2008) theory of prosocial motivation further proposes that meaningful work tasks are those that provide service to society or the community, and contribute to the sense of a "greater good" or higher purpose.

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