How to Destroy the Meaningfulness of Work in 7 Easy Steps

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Meaningful work is something we all want. The philosopher Victor Frankl famously described how the innate human quest for meaning is so strong that, even in the direst of circumstances, people seek out their purpose in life[i]. More recently, researchers have shown meaningfulness to be more important to employees than any other aspect of work, including pay and rewards, promotion or working conditions[ii]. Meaningful work can be highly motivational, leading to improved performance, commitment and satisfaction[iii]. But, so far, surprisingly little research has explored where and how people find their work meaningful, and the role that leaders can play in this process[iv].

We interviewed 135 people working in 10 very different occupations and asked them to tell us stories about incidents or times when they found their work to be meaningful and, conversely, times when they asked themselves "what's the point in doing this job?" We expected to find that meaningfulness would be similar to other work-related attitudes, such as engagement or commitment, in that it would arise purely in response to events or situations within the work environment. However we found that, unlike these other attitudes, meaningfulness tended to be something intensely personal and individual[1]; it was often revealed to employees as they reflected on their work and its wider contribution to society in ways that mattered to them as individuals. People tended to speak of their work as meaningful in relation to thoughts or memories of significant family members such as parents or children, bridging the gap between the public and the personal realms. We also expected meaningfulness to be a relatively enduring state of mind experienced by individuals towards their work; instead, our interviewees talked of the unplanned, unexpected or surprising moments during which they found their work deeply meaningful.

We were anticipating our data would show that the meaningfulness experienced by employees in relation to their work was clearly associated with the actions taken by managers, such that, for example, transformational leaders would have followers who found their work meaningful, whereas transactional leaders would not[v]. In fact, our research showed that although quality of leadership received virtually no

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[1] We have defined meaningful work as arising "when an individual perceives an authentic connection between their work and a broader transcendent life purpose beyond the self" (Bailey and Madden, 2015: 2). Meaningfulness is therefore different from engagement, which is defined as a positive work-related attitude comprising vigor, dedication and absorption. (W.B. Schaufeli, "What is Engagement?" In C. Truss et al.,eds., "Employee Engagement in Theory and Practice". (London: Routledge, 2014): 15-35.

mention at all when people described meaningful moments at work, poor management was top of the list of meaning-destroyers.

We also expected to find a clear link between the factors that drove up levels of meaningfulness and those that eroded them. Instead, we found that meaningfulness appeared to be driven up and decreased by different factors. Whereas our interviewees tended to find meaningfulness for themselves rather than it being mandated by their managers, it transpired that if employers want to destroy that sense of meaningfulness, this is far more easily achieved. The feeling of, "why am I bothering to do this?" strikes people instantly a meaningless moment arises, and it strikes people hard. If meaningfulness is a delicate flower that requires careful nurturing, think of someone trampling over that flower in a pair of steel-toed boots. Avoiding the destruction of meaning whilst nurturing an ecosystem generative of feelings of meaningfulness emerged as the key leadership challenge.

The Qualities of Meaningful Work

Our research aimed to uncover how and why people find their work meaningful. For our interviewees, meaningfulness, perhaps unsurprisingly, was often associated with a sense of pride and achievement at a job well done, whether they were professionals or manual workers. Those who could see that they had fulfilled their potential, or who found their work creative, absorbing and interesting, tended to perceive their work as more meaningful than others. Equally, receiving praise, recognition or acknowledgement from others mattered a great deal[vi]. However, these alone were not enough to render work meaningful[vii]. Our study also revealed five unexpected features of meaningful work, and it is in these that we find the clues that might explain the fragile and intangible nature of meaningfulness.

Self-transcendent. Individuals tended to experience their work as meaningful when it mattered to others more than just to themselves. In this way, meaningful work is self-transcendent. Although it is not a well-known fact, the famous motivation theorist Abraham Maslow positioned self-transcendence at the apex of his pyramid of human motivation, situating it beyond even self-actualization in its importance[viii]. People did not just talk about themselves when they talked about meaningful work, they talked about the impact or relevance their work had for other individuals, groups, or the wider environment. A garbage collector explained how he found his work meaningful at the "tipping point" at the end of the day when the refuse was sent to recycling. This was the time he could see how his work contributed to creating a clean environment for his grandchildren and for future generations. An academic described how she found her work meaningful when she saw her students graduate at the

commencement ceremony, a tangible sign of how her own hard work had helped others succeed. One of the priests talked about the uplifting and inspiring experience of bringing an entire community together around the common goal of a church restoration project.

Poignant. The experience of meaningful work can be poignant rather than purely euphoric[ix]. Oftentimes people found their work to be full of meaning at moments associated with mixed, uncomfortable or even painful thoughts and feelings, not just a sense of unalloyed joy and happiness. People often cried in our interviews when they talked about the times when they found their work meaningful. The current emphasis on positive psychology has led us to focus on trying to make employees happy, engaged and enthused throughout the working day. Barbara S. Held refers to the current pressure to "accentuate the positive" as the "tyranny of the positive attitude"[x]. Traditionally, meaningfulness has been linked with such positive attributes. Our research suggests that, contrary to what we may have thought, meaningfulness is not always a positive experience[xi]. In fact, those moments when people found their work meaningful tended to be far richer and more challenging than times when they felt simply motivated, engaged or happy. The most vivid examples of this came from the nurses who described moments of profound meaningfulness when they were able to use their professional skills and knowledge to ease the passing of patients at the end of their lives. The lawyers often talked about working hard for extended periods, sometimes years, for their clients and winning cases that led to life-changing outcomes for them. Participants in several of the occupational groups found moments of meaningfulness when they had triumphed in difficult circumstances or had solved a complex intractable problem. The experience of coping with these challenging conditions led to a sense of meaningfulness far greater than they would have experienced dealing with straight-forward everyday situations.

Episodic. A sense of meaningfulness arose in an episodic rather than a sustained way. It seemed that no-one could find their work consistently meaningful, but rather that an awareness that work was meaningful arose at peak times that were generative of strong experiences. For example, a university professor talked of the euphoric experience of feeling "like a rock star" at the end of a successful lecture when he looked back at how he had passed his learning on to an appreciative student audience. One actor we spoke to summed this feeling up well: "My god, I'm actually doing what I dreamt I could do, that's kind of amazing". Clearly, sentiments such as these are not sustainable over the course of even one single working day, let alone in the longer term, but rather come and go over one's working life, perhaps even arising very rarely. Nevertheless, these "peak experiences" had a profound effect on

individuals, were highly memorable, and became part of their life narrative, or the stories they told about themselves.

Meaningful moments such as these were not "forced" or managed, and there were very few instances of people telling us that an awareness of their work as meaningful arose directly through the actions of organizational leaders or managers. Conservation stonemasons talked of the significance of carving their "banker's mark" or mason's signature into the stone before it was placed into the cathedral structure, knowing that the stone might be uncovered hundreds of years in the future by another mason who would recognise the work as theirs. They felt they were "part of history". One soldier described how he realized how meaningful his work was when he reflected back on his quick thinking in setting off the warning sirens in a combat situation, ensuring that no-one at the camp was injured in the ensuing rocket attack. The sales assistants we interviewed talked about times when they were able to help others, such as the occasion when one customer passed out in the store and she was able to support her until she regained consciousness. Memorable moments such as these contain high levels of emotion and personal relevance and thus become redolent of the symbolic meaningfulness of work.

Reflective. In the instances cited above, it was often only when we asked the interviewees to recount a time when they found their work meaningful that they developed a conscious awareness of the significance of these experiences. Meaningfulness was rarely experienced "in the moment", but rather in retrospect and on reflection when people were able to see their completed work and make connections between their achievements and a wider sense of life meaning.

One of the entrepreneurs talked about the time when he was switching the lights out after his company's Christmas party after everyone had gone home, and paused to reflect back over the year on what they had achieved together. The garbage collectors explained how they were able to find their work meaningful when they finished cleaning a street and stopped to look back at their work. In doing this, they reflected on how the tangible work of street sweeping contributed to the cleanliness of the environment as a whole. One of the academics talked about research he had done for many years which seemed fairly meaningless at the time, but which 20 years later provided the technological solution for touch-screen technology. The experience of meaningfulness is therefore often a thoughtful, retrospective act rather than just a spontaneous emotional response in the moment, although people may be aware of a rush of good feelings at the time. You are unlikely to witness someone "feeling meaningful" or talking about how meaningful they find their job during their working day. For most of

the people we spoke to, the discussions we had about meaningful work were the first time they had ever talked about these experiences.

Personal. Other work experiences like engagement or satisfaction tend to be just that, work experiences. Work that is meaningful, on the other hand, is often understood by people not just in the context of their work, but also in the wider context of their personal life experiences. So we found that managers and even organizations actually mattered relatively little at these times. One musician described his profound sense of meaningfulness when his father attended a performance of his for the first time and finally came to appreciate and understand his work. A priest was able to find a sense of meaning in her work when she could relate the harrowing personal experiences of a member of her congregation to her own life events and used these to help and support her congregant at a time of personal tragedy. An entrepreneur's motivation to start his own business was the desire to make his grandfather proud of him. The customary dinner held to mark the end of a soldier's service became imbued with meaning for her because it was shared with family members who were there to hear the stories of her army career. One lawyer described how she found her work meaningful at times when her services were recommended by friends and family and she felt trusted and valued in both spheres of her life; a garbage collector described the time when the community's water supply became contaminated and he was asked to work on distributing water to local residents as a time of great meaningfulness as he could see how he was helping vulnerable people who lived nearby.

Moments of especially profound meaningfulness arose when these experiences coalesced together with the sense of a job completed well, that was recognized and appreciated by others. One example of many came from one of the conservation stonemasons who described how his work became most meaningful to him during the "unveiling ceremony" that took place when the restoration of a section of the cathedral he had been working on for years was uncovered from its drapes and scaffolding and the work of the craftsmen celebrated. This event involved all the masons and other trades such as carpenters and glaziers, as well as the cathedral's religious leaders, members of the public and local dignitaries. He explained, "Everyone goes, 'doesn't it look amazing?', and that's the significant event, the moment you realize you've saved something and ensured its future, you've given part of the cathedral back to the local community."

These particular features of meaningful work suggest that the organizational task of helping people find meaning in their work is complex and profound, going far beyond the relative superficialities of satisfaction or engagement.

Meaninglessness: The 7 Deadly Sins

What factors serve to destroy that fragile sense of meaningfulness that individuals find in their work? Interestingly, the factors that seem to drive a sense of meaninglessness and futility around work were very different from those associated with meaningfulness. The experiences that actively led people to ask, "why am I doing this?" were generally within the control of managers and leaders. When we asked our interviewees to describe times when they found their work meaningless, seven things that leaders did were strongly linked with these moments.

1. **Take your employees for granted.** Lack of recognition for their hard work or contribution on the part of organizational leaders was frequently cited as invoking a feeling of pointlessness. Academics talked about heads of department not acknowledging their research or teaching successes; sales assistants and priests talked of bosses who did not thank them for taking on additional work to cover absent colleagues. One of the stonemasons described the way managers would not even say "good morning" to him and lawyers described how despite being significantly overworked and putting in extremely long hours, they were still criticized by managers for not moving through their work quickly enough. Feeling unrecognised, unacknowledged and unappreciated by line or senior managers was often cited in the interviews as a major cause of people finding their work pointless.

2. **Treat people unfairly.** Unfairness and injustice emerged from our interviews as a main factor in the experience of work as meaningless. Forms of unfairness ranged from distributive injustices such as one stonemason who was told he could not have a pay raise for several years due to shortage of money but who saw his colleague being given a raise, through freelance musicians being asked to write the score for a film without payment. Procedural injustices also led to meaninglessness; these included lack of opportunities for career progression, and bullying which had led to meaninglessness for those in a very wide range of occupational groups including priests, soldiers, creative artists and garbage collectors.

3. **Give people pointless work to do.** We found that individuals had a strong sense of what their job *should* involve and how they *should* be spending their time, and that a sense of meaninglessness arose when required to do tasks that did not fit with this. Most frequently, this included bureaucratic tasks and form-filling not directly related to their core purpose; nurses, academics, creative artists, and clergy all cited this as a source of futility and pointlessness. Stonemasons and retail assistants also cited poorly planned projects where they were left to "pick up the pieces" by senior managers. Tasks that did not appear to benefit anyone or that took time away from their core

jobs were particularly lacking in meaningfulness. A good example of this came from one of the retail assistants who described the pointless task of changing the shop layout one week on instructions from Head Office, only to be told to change it back again a week later.

4. **Over-ride people's better judgement.** Quite often, a sense of meaninglessness was connected with a feeling of disempowerment or disenfranchisement over their work and how it was done. One nurse for example described how a senior colleague required her to perform a medical intervention that was not procedurally correct and how she felt obliged to complete this even against her better judgement. Lawyers talked of being forced to cut corners to finish cases quickly and stonemasons described how being obliged to "hurry up" their work by using modern tools and techniques went against their sense of historic crafts practices. One priest summed the role of the manager by saying, "it isn't about what you do, it's about what other people do, and people can feel empowered or disempowered by the way you run things." Thus, we found that where people felt they were not being listened to, that their opinions and experience did not count, or that they could not have a voice, then they were more likely to find their work meaningless.

5. **Put people at risk of physical or emotional harm.** Many jobs entail physical or even emotional risks and those taking on this kind of work generally appreciate and understand the choices they have made. However, *unnecessary* exposure to risk was associated with lost meaningfulness. Nurses cited their feelings of vulnerability when left alone with aggressive patients, garbage collectors talked of avoidable accidents they had experienced at work, and soldiers described exposure to extreme weather conditions without the appropriate kit. Those in several occupational groups talked of harsh working environments such as very cold or dirty work settings that made them wonder why they were doing their jobs as times when they found them meaningless.

6. **Disconnect people from supportive relationships.** Feelings of isolation or marginalization at work were linked with meaninglessness. This could occur through deliberate ostracism on the part of managers or through feeling disconnected from co-workers and teams. Most of our participants talked of the importance of camaraderie and relations with co-workers for their sense of meaningfulness. A good example of this was the entrepreneurs who talked about their sense of loneliness and meaninglessness during the start-up phase of their business, and the growing sense of meaningfulness that arose as the business developed and involved more people with whom they could share the successes. The creative artists spoke of times when they were unable to reach out to an audience through their art as times of profound meaninglessness for them.

7. **Disconnect people from their values.** Although individuals did not talk about value congruence that much as a promoter of meaningfulness, they often talked about a disconnect between their own personal values and those of their employer or work group as the major cause of a sense of futility and meaninglessness[xii]. In fact, this was the issue raised most frequently as a source of meaninglessness in work. A recurring theme was the tension between an organizational focus on the bottom line and the individual's focus on the quality or professionalism of work. One stonemason commented that he found the organization's focus on cost "deeply depressing". Academics spoke of the university administration only being interested in profits and the avoidance of litigation instead of intellectual integrity and the provision of the best possible education. Nurses spoke despairingly of being forced to send patients home before they were ready in order to free up bed space. Lawyers talked of firms where the focus was on profits and meeting targets rather than on doing a professional job and helping the client. Across the occupational groups, people gave instances of meaningless times in their work which were associated with feeling isolated within a group of people with clashing values and objectives.

These seven factors emerged as highly damaging to an individual's sense of their work as meaningful. Inevitably, these meaning-destroyers worked synergistically, and where many were present, then meaningfulness was considerably lower.

Cultivating an Organizational Ecosystem for Meaningfulness

Some decades ago, Frederick Herzberg showed that the factors that give rise to a sense of job satisfaction are not the same as those that lead to feelings of dissatisfaction[xiii]. It would seem that something similar is true for meaningfulness. Our research has shown that meaningfulness is largely something that individuals find for themselves in their work[xiv], but that organizations and leaders can actively destroy. Clearly, the first challenge is to avoid the seven deadly sins that drive up levels of meaninglessness.

Given meaningfulness is such an intensely personal and individual experience that is interpreted by each individual in the context of their wider lives, is there in fact anything that organizations can do to create an environment that cultivates high levels of meaningfulness?

The key to meaningful work, to take the flower analogy a stage further, is to create an ecosystem that encourages it to thrive, rather than actively seeking out opportunities to hammer home to people why they should find their work meaningful. As Lips-Wiersma and Morris[xv] argue, efforts to control and

proscribe the meaningfulness that individuals inherently find in their work can paradoxically lead to its loss.

The Four Elements of the Ecosystem

Based on our interviews and a wider reading of the literature on meaningfulness, there are four elements that organizations can address that will help foster an integrated sense of holistic meaningfulness for individual employees[xvi]. See Figure 1.

Figure 1: The Four Elements of the Meaningfulness Ecosystem

Organizational meaningfulness. It has often been said, but at the macro level, meaningfulness is more likely to thrive where employees understand the broad purpose of the organization[xvii]. This purpose should be formulated in such a way that it focuses on the positive contribution of the organization to wider society or the environment. This involves articulating:

- What the organization aims to contribute, what is its "core business"?
- How does it aspire to go about achieving this? What values underpin its way of doing business?

This needs to be done in a genuine and thoughtful way. People are highly adept at spotting hypocrisy, like the nurses who were told their hospital put patients first, but were also told to discharge people as quickly as possible. The challenge lies not only in articulating and conveying a clear message about

organizational purpose, but also in avoiding the imposition of a "strong culture" that could paradoxically undermine meaningfulness through generating a sense of artificiality and manipulation.[xviii]

Reaching employees in ways that make sense to them can be a challenge. A clue for addressing this comes from the garbage collectors. One described to us how they used to be told by management that the waste they returned to the depot would be used for recycling, but this message came across as highly abstract. Then, the company started putting pictures of the items that were made from recycled waste on the side of the garbage trucks, such as i-pods and plastic bottles. This led to a more tangible realization of what the waste was used for.[2]

Job meaningfulness. The jobs that people perform are a main source of meaningfulness. Jobs comprise a collection of individual tasks, as well as the underlying roles associated with the performance of those tasks. It is fascinating to note that the vast majority of the individuals we spoke to were able to find their work meaningful, whether they were famous musicians, sales assistants, lawyers or garbage collectors. Studies have shown that meaning is so important to people that they actively go about re-crafting their jobs to enhance their sense of meaningfulness[xix]. Often, this re-crafting involves extending the impact or significance of their role for others. One example of this was the sales assistants in a large retail store who went out of their way to spend time listening to elderly customers who they knew were feeling lonely. This was not part of their job description, but mattered a great deal to the meaningfulness they derived from their work.

Organizations can encourage people to see their work as meaningful by demonstrating how the jobs people do fit with the organization's broader purpose or serve a wider, societal benefit. The priests we spoke to often explained how their work in ministry in their local parishes contributed to the wider purpose of the church as a whole. In the same way, managers can be encouraged to show employees what their particular jobs contribute to the broader whole and how what they do will help others or create a lasting legacy. This is as much true for those in "dirty work" such as garbage collectors as it is for those in white-collar or professional occupations who can be provided with a setting that enables them to reframe, recalibrate or refocus on the purpose and contribution of their work.[xx]

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[2] Besharov (2014) highlights the challenge of managing in an organizational setting where employees have differing views over which values matter the most and points out the "dark side" of seeking to impose a unitary organizational ideology on employees. Here, based on our research, we take the view that in general terms employees welcome a broad statement of organizational purpose and values that gives them the space to interpret these in a way that is meaningful for them.
M.L. Besharov, "The relational ecology of identification: How organizational identification emerges when individuals hold divergent values", Academy of Management Journal 57 (2014): 1485-1512.

Alongside this, we need to challenge the notion that meaningfulness can only arise from positive work experiences; challenging, problematic, sad or poignant [xii] jobs have the potential to be richly generative of new insights and meaningfulness, and overlooking this risks upsetting the delicate balance of the meaningfulness ecosystem. Providing support to people at the end of their lives is a harrowing experience for nurses and clergy, yet these times were cited by them as amongst the most meaningful. The task for leaders is to acknowledge the problematic or negative side of some jobs and to provide appropriate support for employees in doing them, yet to reveal in an honest way the benefits and broader contribution they make.[xxi]

Task meaningfulness. Given that jobs typically comprise a wide range of tasks, it stands to reason that some of these tasks will constitute a greater source of meaningfulness than others[xxii]. To illustrate, a priest will have responsibility for leading acts of worship, supporting sick and vulnerable individuals, developing community relations and activities and most probably a wide range of other tasks such as raising funds, managing assistants and volunteers, ensuring the upkeep of church buildings, and so on. In fact, the priests were the most hard-working group that we spoke to, with the majority working a seven day week on a bewildering range of activities. Even much simpler jobs will involve several different tasks. One of the challenges facing organizations and one that is rarely discussed, is how to help people understand how the individual tasks they perform contribute to their job, and, further, to the organization as a whole.

When individuals described some of the sources of meaninglessness they faced in their work, they often talked about how to come to terms with the inevitably tedious, repetitive or indeed purposeless work that is part of almost every job. For example, the stonemasons described how the first few months of their training involved learning to "square the stone" or chisel a large block of stone into a perfectly formed square with just a few millimetres of tolerance on each plane. As soon as they finished one, they had to start another one, repeating this over and over until the master mason was satisfied that they had perfected the task. It was only at this point that they were allowed to work on more interesting and intricate carvings. Several described their feelings of boredom and futility; one said that he had taken 18 attempts to get the squaring of the stone correct. "It feels like you are never, ever, going to get better." Many felt like giving up at this point, fearing that stonemasonry was not for them. It was only in later years, as they looked back on this period in their working lives, that they could see the point of this detailed level of training as the first step on their path to more challenging and rewarding work.

The form-filling cited earlier is another good example. Individuals in a wide range of occupations all reported that what they perceived as "mindless bureaucracy" sapped the meaningfulness from their work. For instance, most of the academics we spoke to were highly negative about the amount of form-filling the job entailed. One said, "I was dropping spreadsheets into a huge black hole". It is an unfortunate fact of organizational life that most jobs will involve some element of record-keeping that takes people away from work they find more meaningful and fosters feelings of meaninglessness.

Where organizations successfully managed the context within which these necessary but tedious tasks were undertaken, then the tasks came to be perceived not exactly as meaningful, but equally as not meaningless. One academic said to us for instance, "I'm pretty good with tedious work as long as it's got a larger meaning". Often, organizations either cannot or do not provide a reasonable explanation to employees for the record-keeping they ask them to do. Nurses, for example, often asked us why they had to spend time at the computer filling out forms rather than spending time with patients. Reducing this type of work to the minimum, creating a good fit between the person's skills and their job content, investing in new technologies to handle the bureaucracy with the minimum of time and effort, and explaining to people how these tasks contribute to the wider whole will all help alleviate meaninglessness.

Interactional meaningfulness. There is widespread agreement that people find their work meaningful in an interactional context in two ways[xxiii]; firstly, when they are in contact with others who benefit from their work, and, secondly, in an environment of supportive interpersonal relationships.[xxiv] As we saw earlier, negative interactional experiences such as manager bullying, lack of respect or recognition, or forcing reduced contact with the beneficiaries of work all drive up a sense of meaninglessness since employees receive cues from others about the value they place on their work[xxv]. The challenge here is for leaders to create a supportive, respectful and inclusive work climate amongst colleagues, between employees and managers, and between organizational staff and work beneficiaries. It also involves recognizing the importance of creating space in the working day for meaningful interactions where employees are able to give and receive positive feedback, communicate a sense of shared values and belonging, and appreciate how their work impacts positively on others.

The most striking examples of the impact of interactional meaningfulness on people perhaps inevitably came from the caring occupations included in our study, the nurses and the clergy. Here, there was very frequent contact between the individual and the direct beneficiaries of their work, most often in the context of supporting and healing people at times of great vulnerability in their lives. Witnessing first-

hand, and hearing directly from the beneficiaries about how their work had changed these people's lives created a work environment redolent of meaningfulness. Although Grant[xxvi] has similarly talked persuasively of the importance of such direct contact for enhancing work's meaningfulness, we also found that past or future generations, or imagined future beneficiaries, could play a role. This was the case for the stonemasons who felt connected to past and future generations of masons through their bankers' marks (signatures) on the back of the stones, and for the garbage collectors who could envisage how their work contributed to the living environment for future generations.

Holistic meaningfulness. The four elements of the meaningfulness ecosystem combine to enable a state of holistic meaningfulness where the synergistic benefits of multiple sources of meaningfulness can be realized. [xxvii]

Although it is possible for someone to describe meaningful moments in terms of any one of the sub-systems, when more than one or all of these are present then meaningfulness is enriched, contributing to physical and social well-being[xxviii]. One example of holistic meaningfulness was provided by one of the sales assistants. She described how she had been working as one of a team of staff on the redevelopment and refurbishment of her store. She said, "We'd all been there until 2am working together moving stuff, everyone had contributed and stayed late and helped, it was a good time. We were exhausted but we still laughed and then the next morning we were all bright in our uniforms, it was a lovely feeling, just like a little family coming together. The day it opened it did bring tears to my eyes, we had a little gathering and a speech, the managers said 'thank you' to everybody because everyone had contributed." Although it had been hard, physical work at unsocial hours, the sense of community, achievement and recognition marked the day of the opening as deeply meaningful for her.

Conclusions

Finding your work meaningful is an experience that reaches beyond the workplace and into the realms of the individual's wider personal life. It can be a very profound, moving and even uncomfortable experience. It arises rarely and often in unexpected ways; it gives people pause for thought not just concerning work, but what life itself is all about. In experiencing our work as meaningful, we cease to be workers or employees and become human beings, reaching out in a bond of common humanity to others. For organizations seeking to "manage meaningfulness" the ethical and moral responsibility is very great, since in trying to manage individuals' experiences of meaningfulness, we are stepping over the boundary between work and personal life.

Yet the benefits for individuals and organizations that accrue from meaningful workplaces can be immense. Building an ecosystem that is conducive to meaningfulness makes sense in the post-crash era with its focus on values beyond the profit motive. Organizations that succeed in this are more likely to attract, retain and motivate the employees they need to build sustainably for the future, and to create the kind of workplaces where human beings can thrive.

About the Research

Meaningful work is a topic that is receiving increased attention in light of recent economic and social circumstances. However, relatively little empirical research has been conducted that investigates in depth what meaningful work actually means to individuals in employment. To address this, we undertook an extensive review of the literature on meaningful work from various fields, including psychology, management studies, sociology and ethics. Drawing on the findings of this review, we defined meaningful work as arising "when an individual perceives an authentic connection between their work and a broader transcendent life purpose beyond the self"[xxix]. This draws attention to the fact that meaningfulness is associated with the experience of work in a broader framework.

To conduct our research, we wanted to garner insights from people in a very wide range of work situations as we felt that breaking through the traditional bounds of many organizational studies would yield crucial information about the manifestation of meaningful and meaningless moments. We consequently interviewed 135 individuals in 10 very different occupations and asked them about times when they found their work meaningful or meaningless. The occupational groups were: retail assistants, priests from various denominations, artists (including musicians, writers and actors), lawyers, academics from science disciplines, entrepreneurs who had started their own business, nurses in an acute hospital, soldiers, conservation stonemasons who were working on the preservation of an ancient cathedral, and garbage collectors. All data were collected in the UK. We transcribed the interviews and coded them by theme to uncover patterns in how people view their work.

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