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CULTIVATING MEANING THROUGH WORK

AUTHOR

Andrew Abeyta, PhD

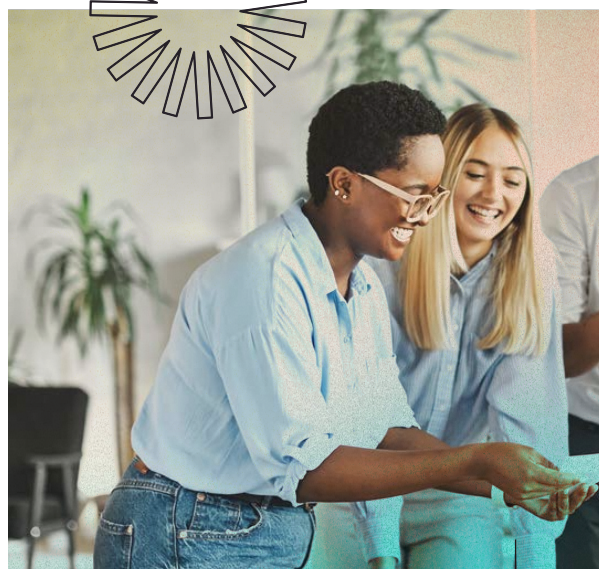
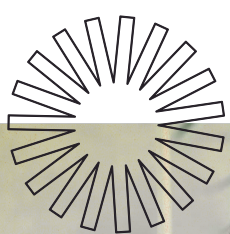
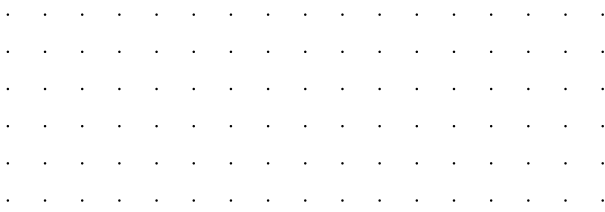
Associate Professor of Psychology RUTGERS UNIVERSITY

Social Psychology Fellow ARCHBRIDGE INSTITUTE

INTRODUCTION

Meaning in life plays a central role in human flourishing.¹ Meaning refers to a person's sense that their existence is important, coherent, and purposeful.² A strong sense of meaning supports mental health and recovery from mental illness.³ Beyond mental health, people with a strong sense of meaning tend to live longer, engage in more healthful behaviors, are at lower risk for stress-related diseases like cardiovascular disease, and cope more effectively with medical challenges.⁴ Finally, people with a strong sense of meaning tend to be more productive because meaning enhances motivation and self-regulation. When people feel that their actions matter and their lives have direction, they feel free, energized, and empowered to pursue their goals, and they are more likely to persist through loss, challenges, and setbacks.⁵

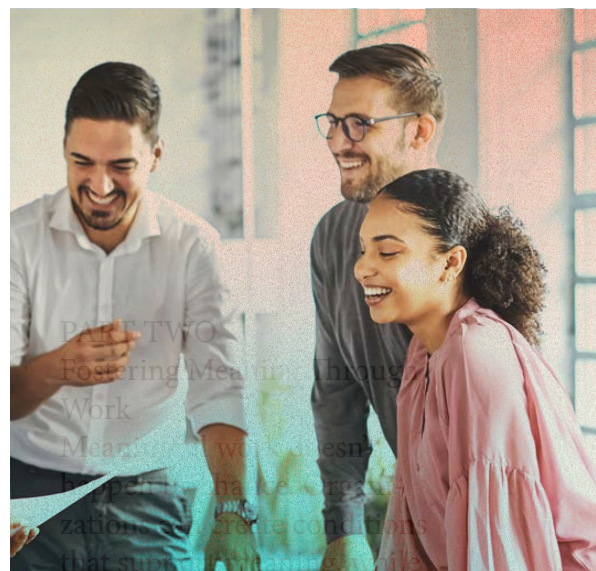
Given the importance of meaning to human flourishing, it is useful to understand how common it is and which types of life experiences foster it. Survey research using numeric rating scales shows that people from a variety of cultures, nationalities, and socioeconomic groups consistently report moderate to high levels of meaning.⁶ These findings suggest that meaning is a widespread human experience. People draw meaning from many everyday experiences and aspects of modern life, including relationships and community, as well as beliefs, hobbies, and daily routines. Yet a job stands out as especially influential, since people invest so much in preparing for careers and devote much of their time to working. This report provides a review of the scientific research on the psychological determinants of meaning and argues that a job/career is a powerful contributor to it. It also offers recommendations for how organizations and individuals can cultivate workplaces that foster meaning.



PART ONE

HOW WORK CONTRIBUTES TO A MEANINGFUL LIFE

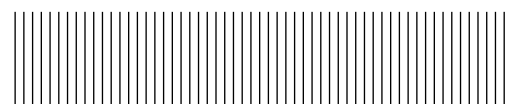
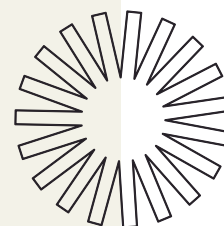
Meaning is shaped by a range of psychological and social experiences. This section explores five interconnected pathways—happiness, social connection, coherence, self-actualization, and self-transcendence—and how work can contribute to each.



PART TWO

FOSTERING MEANING IN THE WORKPLACE

Meaningful work doesn't happen by chance. Organizations can create conditions that support meaning, while individuals can shape their relationships, choices, and approach to work in ways that strengthen meaning and flourishing.



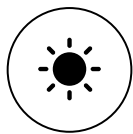
HOW WORK CONTRIBUTES TO A MEANINGFUL LIFE

This section explores the key pathways through which work can strengthen meaning and contribute to a more fulfilling life.



WORK STRENGTHENS MEANING THROUGH FIVE PATHWAYS

Each pathway is made up of key elements that together foster a more meaningful work life.



Happiness

Positive emotions that energize and give life meaning.

😊 Work satisfaction

📅 Organizational commitment

💡 Creativity

🚩 Motivation

📈 Performance



Social Connection

Relationships and belonging that support and strengthen us.

👥 Belonging

🤝 Support

🏆 Competence



Coherence

Stability, clarity, and alignment that help us make sense of our work.

📅 Routines

💰 Financial security

🏠 Values



Self-Actualization

Growth, confidence, and the ability to become our best selves.

📖 Personal narratives

💖 Self-esteem

🎯 Goals

👤 Autonomy

🌀 Authenticity



Self-Transcendence

Purpose and impact that extend beyond the self.

🤝 Helping others

👥 Generativity

✨ Calling

🌌 Cosmic connection



Positive emotions at work can strengthen our sense
that life is meaningful.

Happiness is often an important consideration when embarking on a career path. As the famous adage often attributed to Mark Twain goes, “Find a job you enjoy doing, and you’ll never work a day in your life.” Indeed, happiness at work and positive emotions in the workplace more generally are tied to work satisfaction, organizational commitment, creativity, motivation, and performance.⁷ A number of studies show that happiness and positive mood are associated with a strong sense of meaning in life. Not only does a positive disposition predict meaning concurrently, but it also predicts future meaning, with one study showing that research participants who were happier at an initial time period report a stronger sense of meaning two years later than less-happy participants.⁸ Moreover, studies that have people report their moods, emotions, and attitudes in real time or at the end of each day suggest that people have a stronger sense of meaning on days when they are happy and/or experience a wide array of positive emotions.⁹ People view their lives as meaningful when they experience happiness more frequently.

Experimental research provides causal evidence that happiness and positive emotions increase meaning. Specifically, simple positive mood inductions, such as reading an uplifting story of heroism, seeing a funny comic strip, listening to happy music, and imagining a happy event, are found to

put people in a happy mood and, critically, boost a sense of meaning.¹⁰ Perhaps even more striking, happiness and other positive emotions are so strongly linked to meaning that, in one study, merely exposing research participants to words such as “happy,” “joy,” and “exciting” temporarily bolstered their sense of meaning.¹¹ Finally, the impact of positive emotional experiences on meaning appears to strengthen with age. As people grow older and become increasingly aware of their limited time horizon, they prioritize feeling good in the moment over expansive future goals and aspirations, thereby amplifying the impact of positive emotional experiences on a sense of meaning.¹²

Happiness tends to correspond with meaning because positive emotions provide people with evidence that their lives are fulfilling.¹³ Research indicates that when people are generally happy, they are better able to come to terms with setbacks, such as a painful loss by their favorite college football team or the aftermath of a natural disaster.¹⁴ Although people often cite stressful endeavors, such as parenting and attending college, as deeply meaningful, this research suggests that frequent positive emotions help people recognize that stress is often temporary and can ultimately lead to desirable outcomes, enabling them to derive meaning from emotionally challenging events.¹⁵



Belonging, support, and competence help turn workplace relationships into sources of meaning.

Although happiness and positive emotions play an important role in fostering a sense of meaning, they are not the only source of meaning. Studies that ask people to reflect on and discuss aspects of their lives that give them a sense of meaning and purpose find that people often cite social connections, such as family, friends, and community, as their primary sources of meaning.¹⁶ This tendency appears to be culturally universal. In one study spanning eight countries across four continents, interpersonal relationships consistently emerged as a top source of meaning.¹⁷ Social sources of meaning are especially salient in the workplace, where relationships are commonplace and consequential, since friendships and positive interpersonal interactions contribute to job satisfaction, motivation, and performance.¹⁸ Based on research on the science of meaning, work can become a source of meaning when employees have a general sense of belonging, feel supported by others, and are valued and respected for their contributions.¹⁹

Social belonging

Social belonging refers to a positive sense of acceptance and connection with others. People feel like they belong when they can have frequent, positive interactions with others and maintain stable, satisfying social bonds.²⁰ Psychologists have focused on belonging as a broad psychological need, emphasizing that flourishing depends on feeling a general sense of belonging across various domains of life. Indeed, research finds that people who feel a strong sense of social belonging report a strong sense of meaning and find it easier to articulate why their lives feel meaningful. Moreover, the research finds that even brief visualizations of people with whom research participants feel a sense of belonging strengthens their sense of meaning.²¹ Social belonging reminds people that they matter to others, helping them make sense of their own existence and giving them purpose and direction.²² Unsurprisingly, failing to meet people's need for social belonging undermines meaning. For example, loneliness and social exclusion decrease meaning.²³ Given the strong connection between belonging and meaning in life, workplaces that foster acceptance and connection may serve as important sources of meaning.

Social support

Social support refers to the feeling or experience of being loved, cared for, and supported by others. Beyond fostering a sense of social belonging, social connections also contribute meaning by providing social support. It reflects the sense that one is part of relationships or social networks that are willing to provide mutual assistance.²⁴ Social support is found to predict meaning in life.²⁵ Specifically, when social connections provide emotional support, information, or practical resources, they reassure people that they matter. Social support also signals the strength and quality of relationships. When people feel they can rely on others for support, they experience their bonds as secure and satisfying.²⁶ Social support also contributes to meaning by buffering stress and anxiety.²⁷ Persistent psychological stress and anxiety can erode a sense of meaning and increase risk for mental illness and poor physical health.²⁸ Moreover, a sudden traumatic experience can undermine a person's sense of meaning by shattering their expectations of safety, predictability, and fairness, leaving them psychologically vulnerable and at greater risk for conditions such as complicated grief and post-traumatic stress disorder.²⁹

Research shows that strong social support weakens the link between ongoing stress and anxiety and a lower sense of meaning, and it also lessens the negative effects of traumatic experiences on a person's sense of meaning.³⁰ Given the important role of social support in promoting meaning and buffering psychological distress, supportive workplace relationships may be a key pathway through which work contributes to a meaningful life.

Competence

Competence is another psychological need through which social connections enhance meaning. Competence refers to feeling skilled, capable, and effective in executing actions to accomplish life goals. It is viewed as a psychological need because it is essential for motivation, engagement, and flourishing.³¹ In the workplace, coworkers foster feelings

of competence by showing respect, and managers/supervisors support competence by providing clear, constructive, and encouraging feedback that helps employees feel capable and successful.³² When people feel competent in the workplace, they are more motivated, successful, and less impacted by work-related stress/anxiety.³³ Fulfilling the need for competence contributes to a meaningful life. Several studies show that competence is positively associated with meaning in life even after accounting for social belonging, indicating that both play distinct roles.³⁴ Further, research shows that feelings of competence that develop through everyday experiences and social interactions enhance meaning.³⁵ Social relationships at work contribute to meaning not only by fostering a sense of belonging and support but also by helping employees feel competent.

MEANING + WORK



COHERENCE

Work creates structure and stability through routines, financial security, and shared values.

Coherence is a core aspect of meaning. It refers to the sense that one's experiences are understandable, structured, and predictable. When people feel that their experiences are coherent, they can understand and reflect on their lives as a connected story that makes sense.³⁶ Coherence not only helps people feel their experiences are meaningful but also encourages them to pursue personally meaningful goals.³⁷ Work can play a central role in maintaining coherence by providing routine, financial security, and opportunities to express and affirm personal values.

Routines

Routines structure daily life, helping people balance family and professional demands while supporting preparation, motivation, and performance at work. Research further suggests that such routines foster a sense of meaning. For example, people who naturally prefer more routine in their daily lives report a stronger sense of meaning. In a follow-up study, people report stronger feelings of meaning when engaged in routine behaviors.³⁸ Routines can be relatively mundane, like eating meals at the same time

each day, or more meaningful, such as a nightly prayer to meet spiritual needs. Researchers have examined whether the link between routines and meaning depends on the purpose the routine serves, finding that people report feeling a stronger sense of meaning when engaged in routine behavior, irrespective of whether the routine was important or more mundane.³⁹ Finally, research suggests that routines help restore feelings of control and help people successfully cope with unforeseen challenges and tragedy.⁴⁰

Financial security

One of the main reasons people work and pursue career advancement is to earn money. Income contributes to a sense of meaning, but research suggests that meaningful lives may not be reserved for the wealthiest. Indeed, large-scale international studies find some of the highest levels of meaning in some of the world's poorest countries.⁴¹ Moreover, in the United States, income appears to contribute to meaning primarily insofar as it supports a stable, predictable, and satisfying financial life, with its impact weakening beyond the upper-middle class.⁴² Consistent with the idea that financial security supports meaning, one study shows that threats to financial security reduce participants' sense of life's meaning.⁴³

Beyond meeting basic needs, higher pay allows people to pursue personally meaningful activities outside of work, such as travel, hobbies, and family experiences. Research shows that, when given a choice, people often prefer a high-paying job with low social impact over a lower-paying job with greater impact, largely because they believe higher pay allows them to afford a more satisfying life outside of work.⁴⁴ When people view their economic lives as predictable and sufficient to meet their basic needs, support loved ones, and pursue valued activities, life feels more meaningful.

Values

In addition to giving people a routine to make sense of their daily lives and the opportunity for financial stability, work supports coherence by providing a powerful arena for people to express and affirm their beliefs. Existential perspectives on culture suggest people develop values, standards, and ethics that help them understand their experiences and feel connected to something larger than themselves.⁴⁵ These beliefs give structure to daily life, support a sense of purpose, and help people pursue important goals without becoming overburdened by existential concerns.⁴⁶ Simple acts, such as recounting times when they acted with integrity or lived up to their personal standards, can strengthen a person's sense that their life is meaningful.⁴⁷

Because workplace cultures often reflect society's values, standards, and ethics, workplaces offer opportunities to express and reinforce what matters to people.⁴⁸ When people feel their work aligns with their values, they are more likely to thrive in their jobs and to feel that their lives as a whole are meaningful.⁴⁹

MEANING + WORK



SELF-ACTUALIZATION

Work can help people grow, pursue meaningful goals, and become more fully themselves.

Since importance and purpose are central features of a meaningful life, it should come as no surprise that how one views the self profoundly impacts one's sense of meaning. Simply put, a meaningful life is one in which a person feels they have come close to actualizing the best version of themselves. Work can be a powerful avenue for individuals to develop a stronger sense of meaning by offering opportunities to craft meaningful personal narratives, build self-esteem, and achieve important goals. Work can also foster autonomy and authenticity, two psychological needs critical for flourishing.

Personal narratives

Autobiographical memories play a primary role in constructing personal narratives that help people understand the self and ascertain the meaningfulness of life. For example, research indicates that nostalgic reminiscence of momentous life experiences not only helps people feel good about themselves but also promotes a sense of self-continuity and increases perceptions of meaning.⁵⁰ Nostalgia can also be leveraged in the workplace, as research indicates that recalling workplace-based nostalgic memories promotes a sense of meaningful work, which, in turn, predicts desirable work outcomes such as organizational commitment.⁵¹ More generally, thinking of life experiences as a coherent, connected life story promotes the sense that one's life has meaning and purpose.⁵² The practice of thinking about one's experiences as a connected story helps people make meaning from negative life experiences; an intervention focused on integrating negative life experiences into their life stories increases perceptions of meaning among depressed individuals.⁵³ Work can contribute to meaning when it is integrated into a broader personal narrative.

Self-esteem

Self-esteem is a socially desirable trait and a crucial aspect of psychological health and wellbeing.⁵⁴ Self-esteem is strongly associated with meaning because it reflects a positive attitude toward oneself, a sense that one matters to others, confidence in one's abilities, and belief that one meets one's own internal standards for what it means to be good or successful.⁵⁵ People can cultivate self-esteem in the workplace by living up to their personal standards and achieving positive performance reviews.⁵⁶ When stable, self-esteem helps sustain meaning in the face of adversity. For example, one study finds that contemplating mortality reduces meaning, but only among those with low self-esteem. Those with high self-esteem were relatively unaffected.⁵⁷

Existential threats can also arise in the workplace. For instance, a study of pediatric physicians and nurses who regularly treat terminally ill patients finds that, despite frequent exposure to death, those with high professional self-esteem report a stronger sense of meaning than those with low professional self-esteem. By fostering self-esteem, work can help individuals sustain a sense of meaning even in the face of significant challenges.⁵⁸

Goals

A powerful way people build and sustain self-esteem is by pursuing and achieving meaningful goals. Goals give life a sense of purpose and direction, and achieving them promotes a sense of importance and mattering.⁵⁹ Having a purpose, in turn, stimulates goal-related efforts.⁶⁰ In the workplace, people feel like their jobs are meaningful when they can pursue valued goals, such as personal growth.⁶¹ Of course, obtaining a career and succeeding in it is also an important goal for many. People are psychologically prepared to succeed at goals when they believe in themselves and their ability to achieve them, and when they can envision flexible pathways to attain them. This combination of confidence and adaptive pathway thinking forms the basis of hope, and decades of research show that hopeful people are more likely to persist and ultimately reach their career and life goals.⁶² Moreover, hope is strongly tied to meaning; people view their lives as meaningful when they have hope of achieving their goals and aspirations.⁶³ In this way, pursuing important personal goals serves as a central pathway to experiencing meaning. Work contributes to a meaningful life when people feel their jobs support their personally important career and life goals.

Autonomy

Importantly, goal pursuit is most meaningful when it is experienced as autonomous.⁶⁴ Autonomy is a sense of self-ownership in which a person feels in control of their decisions, actions, and aims, rather than being controlled or strongly influenced by external demands. When a person feels in control, they can more easily make sense of the circumstances and direction of their day-to-day lives, so their actions and outcomes feel coherent and purposeful.⁶⁵ Indeed, research indicates that feeling autonomous across various domains of life is associated with a stronger sense of meaning.⁶⁶ Research tracking feelings of autonomy and meaning over time suggests a reciprocal relationship: autonomy increases meaning, and meaning, in turn, fosters autonomy.⁶⁷ Finally, research finds that employees who feel like they have autonomy in their work are more likely to view their work as meaningful.⁶⁸ Thus, work can contribute to a meaningful life if it generally promotes a sense of autonomy, and feelings of autonomy in the workplace can help people derive meaning from their jobs/careers.

Authenticity

Autonomy may also enhance meaning by allowing people to engage in activities and pursue goals that feel personally authentic. When people feel self-determined, they are more likely to pursue goals that align with their sense of self.⁶⁹ Authenticity refers to the experience of acting and feeling consistent with one's true self, including one's core values, beliefs, and identity. When people can be their true selves at work and behave authentically, they are more likely to feel satisfied and engaged and less likely to experience boredom and burnout.⁷⁰ Moreover, people who generally experience authenticity report a stronger sense of meaning. Increasing awareness

of one's true self and encouraging reflection on core values, beliefs, and identity is found to enhance meaning.⁷¹ Critically, these effects are independent of self-esteem and autonomy.⁷²

Employees can feel more authentic at work when workplace culture aligns with their values, beliefs, and identities. This sense of authenticity, in turn, is found to encourage active efforts to achieve goals; whereas poor alignment can feel less authentic, contributing to feelings of alienation and meaninglessness.⁷³ Workplaces that allow people to express core aspects of who they are foster a greater sense of authenticity and can promote the sense that one's work and life, more broadly, are meaningful.

MEANING + WORK



SELF-TRANSCENDENCE

Work becomes meaningful when it connects our efforts to people, purposes, and causes beyond ourselves.

In addition to self-related benefits that contribute to a sense of meaning, work often provides opportunities to transcend self-interest by pursuing goals that extend beyond personal interests or by feeling connected to something greater than the self. Psychological research suggests that meaning arises not only from self-actualization but also from self-transcendence.⁷⁴ Through self-transcendence, people connect their experiences to broader values, causes, and communities, helping them feel that their efforts and contributions are important, that their actions serve a more enduring purpose, and that their life story can be understood within broader moral, religious, or philosophical frameworks. Work can offer self-transcendent experiences through opportunities to help others and experience generativity, or when employees recognize their job as a calling or a way to connect with a broader, more transcendent reality.

Helping others

Helping others without expecting reciprocity or direct benefit is a common mode of self-transcendence in the workplace. Helping others gives employees a sense of being valued and, in turn, contributes to job satisfaction and productivity.⁷⁵ Research on the science of meaning, however, suggests that an additional psychological benefit of helping is that even small acts of kindness, charity, or volunteerism enhance a sense of meaning. Specifically, survey research finds that people who spend

more time volunteering, donating to charity, and helping others report a stronger sense of meaning, and this association persists even after accounting for communal personality traits like extraversion and agreeableness.⁷⁶ Follow-up experimental research demonstrates that small acts of kindness, such as spending money to help others rather than for self-benefit, bolsters momentary perceptions of life's meaning.⁷⁷ Finally, research indicates that the relationship between helping and meaning is reciprocal. People with a strong need for mean-

ing are more interested in community service and charitable giving, and people are motivated to help others when life feels more meaningful.⁷⁸ Helping coworkers may therefore create an upward spiral in which helping strengthens employees' sense of meaning, which in turn encourages further helping. In this way, helping coworkers is not only beneficial for organizations but also an important way work can support a meaningful life.

Generativity

Generativity is a specific type of help that is common in the workplace through mentoring relationships. Generativity refers to the motivation to care for and promote the next generation, expressed through commitment and actions aimed at benefiting others and society more generally. Building on Erik Erikson's foundational theory of psychosocial development, psychologists have considered generativity a primary concern and key component of flourishing in middle and later adulthood.⁷⁹ Generativity is associated with strong perceptions of meaning among older adults.⁸⁰ However, other research suggests that, even though it becomes a more pressing concern with age, generativity is a potent contributor to a strong sense of meaning throughout adulthood.⁸¹

Organizational research suggests that generativity is an important factor in job choice, job satisfaction, work engagement, and work meaning among middle- and late-career employees.⁸² Opportunities for generativity help employees feel that they can contribute to the greater good by passing on their knowledge and skills. Generativity not only promotes a meaningful career but also provides a pathway to meaning beyond work. Retired professors who invest more in mentoring and form more satisfying mentoring relationships during their careers report greater meaning in retirement.⁸³ Taken together, these findings suggest that generativity fosters meaning and that workplace mentoring can be a powerful source of generativity, encouraging meaning both during work and in later life.

Work as a calling

People may also transcend the self through experiences that connect them to broader communities, ideals, or realities larger than the self. Religion and spirituality are powerful examples, helping people feel part of a broader spiritual or cosmic order that can deepen one's sense of purpose, importance, and understanding.⁸⁴

Similarly, work may promote self-transcendence when employees see their efforts as fulfilling a calling. Employees experience work as a calling when they view their efforts as serving a purpose or mission that contributes to the greater good. Although the concept of work as a calling is most closely associated with Christian traditions, particularly Protestantism, other religious and spiritual traditions, including Islam and Buddhism, similarly emphasize expressing sacred values and ethical responsibilities through one's work.⁸⁵ However, a growing body of research suggests that experiencing work as a calling is common among both religious and nonreligious individuals, with one study finding that more than half of American working adults report having a calling.⁸⁶ Accordingly, researchers now define a calling more broadly as an approach to work in which a person is inspired by an internal yearning or an external summons to pursue a deeper purpose by helping others or contributing to the common good.

Regardless of a person's religious or spiritual orientation, endorsing work as a calling is associated with job satisfaction and a general sense of meaning.⁸⁷ These benefits are especially strong when employees feel like their organization supports their ability to live out their calling.⁸⁸ Consequently, work may foster a meaningful life not only by helping employees perceive a calling but also by creating conditions that allow them to actualize that calling in service of others and/or the common good.

Connection to transcendent realities

A final form of self-transcendence arises when people experience wonder upon realizing their connection to a broader or unseen reality. Research on spiritual yearning captures this phenomenon as a desire to find a deeper purpose through connections to something beyond the self, such as community, humanity, nature, or a moral framework.⁸⁹

Religious people rely on their beliefs to quench this need for connection to something greater, but spiritual yearning is also found among nonreligious people, who look to secular sources, including work, to satisfy it.⁹⁰ For example, natural scientists across

the United States, the United Kingdom, India, and Italy report seeking meaning through connection to something greater than themselves, with their work as integral to that pursuit, regardless of religious belief. Many also describe feelings of awe and wonder at how their profession connects them to the natural world and enables them to explore mysteries of the universe.⁹¹ These findings suggest that experiences of wonder and a sense of connection to something greater than the self can be important sources of meaning, and that work may serve as one avenue through which people pursue this form of self-transcendence.



WHAT MAKES WORK MEANINGFUL?

Work can contribute to a meaningful life in many ways—consider how these sources of meaning show up in your own work and where there may be room to strengthen them.

- ☒ Notice the positive emotions and satisfaction that work brings to your life.
- ☒ Build supportive relationships that create a strong sense of connection and belonging.
- ☒ Look for routines, stability, and values that bring coherence to your work.
- ☒ Seek opportunities to grow, build confidence, and pursue goals that matter to you.
- ☒ Look for autonomy and opportunities to bring your authentic self to work.
- ☒ Find ways to help others and contribute to something larger than yourself.



FOSTERING MEANING IN THE WORKPLACE

This section explores how organizations and individuals can take steps to foster greater meaning and flourishing through work.



MEANING THROUGH WORK IS INTENTIONALLY CULTIVATED

Organizations and individuals both play a role in creating the conditions for greater meaning and flourishing.



Recommendations for Organizations

Organizations can create conditions that support meaning and help employees thrive.



Support emotional wellbeing of employees



Foster a supportive work culture



Train supportive leaders



Recommendations for Individuals

Individuals can create meaning through their choices, relationships, and approach to work.



Prioritize person-environment fit



Build supportive professional relationships



Develop a resilient meaning-making mindset

Organizations can cultivate meaning by creating conditions that support wellbeing, connection, and growth.

Even though meaning is ultimately a personal experience, there are things organizations can do to create workplace conditions that facilitate the psychological and social resources that help individuals experience meaning. The following recommendations highlight evidence-based organizational practices that can promote employee wellbeing, strengthen workplace social connections, and create coherent pathways for achievement and advancement that support meaning and energize the pursuit of meaningful goals.

Support emotional wellbeing of employees

Given the strong connection between positive emotions and meaning, organizations should invest in policies and programs that support employees' emotional wellbeing. Simply put, a happy workplace should support a meaningful life, whereas a stressful or emotionally exhausting one could detract from it. Although a significant body of research has examined strategies to promote workplace happiness and its impacts on job productivity and performance, a comprehensive review is beyond the scope of this report. Instead, a few policies and programs that have received empirical support are highlighted.

Flexible work arrangements have gained popularity and interest in recent decades, and especially since the COVID-19 pandemic, as an organizational strategy to support employee health and wellbeing. These arrangements may include location flexibility (e.g., remote work), schedule flexibility (e.g., a compressed workweek), and flexible leave. Research suggests that flexible work arrangements can increase job satisfaction, reduce job-related anxiety, and enhance autonomy, but findings are mixed, with some studies reporting minimal, short-lived, or unintended negative consequences for wellbeing.⁹² To explain these inconsistencies, researchers compared formal and informal flexibility, finding that informal flexibility was more strongly associated with employee emotional wellbeing than formal flexibility, likely because informal

arrangements are more accessible and adaptable to individual needs. However, organizations should closely monitor informal arrangements and train managers to implement them ethically and effectively. Organizations with formal policies in place could consider allowing flexibility for informal flexible work arrangements. Doing so should maximize the positive impact of flexible work arrangements.⁹³ By fostering employee happiness and feelings of autonomy, flexible work arrangements should also enhance employees' sense of meaning.

Another way organizations can support employees' emotional wellbeing is through employer-sponsored mental and emotional wellness programs that promote wellbeing and foster psychological strengths. Research demonstrates the effectiveness of simple positive psychology interventions for enhancing workplace wellbeing by promoting mindfulness, positive emotions, the development of personal strengths, and a sense of purpose.⁹⁴ For example, a study of high-demand employees at a biopharmaceutical company finds that a five-month employee-driven wellness program, which included sessions on meditation, music therapy, and exercise/nutrition, was effective in improving happiness and job satisfaction.⁹⁵ Another study finds that employees who complete computer-based positive psychology exercises, such as meditation, gratitude, kindness reflection, and personal strengths identification, report greater happiness, motivation, and energy.⁹⁶

Finally, organizations may consider workshops based on Hope Therapy that teach individuals effective goal planning and guide them through exercises designed to strengthen their confidence in accomplishing their goals and their ability to find flexible pathways to attain them. These activities have proven to be effective in strengthening a sense of meaning and helping people achieve personally important goals.⁹⁷ The findings suggest that by fostering positive emotions, resilience, and goal-directed thinking, employer-sponsored wellness programs can help employees not only have satisfying work lives but also live more meaningful lives.

Foster a supportive work culture

Organizations could help employees cultivate meaning by fostering a work environment that promotes social relationships through both formal and informal bonding. Opportunities for bonding could include work meetings, shared workspaces, shared breaks, lunches, social gatherings/retreats, and opportunities to collaborate on work projects. Birmingham and colleagues emphasize that creating a “connection culture” in the workplace requires attention to employees’ unique needs and work situations while preserving their sense of autonomy.⁹⁸ For example, organizations can create virtual spaces for bonding and collaborating to accommodate remote workers. To maintain autonomy, participation in social activities and collaborative initiatives should remain voluntary and unrelated to employees’ standing or advancement within the organization.

When employees feel free to choose how and when they connect, they are more likely to develop authentic and supportive professional relationships. By creating opportunities for bonding while respecting individual choice, organizations can foster meaningful social connections and encourage autonomy, thereby supporting meaning at work and beyond.

Train supportive leaders

Organizational leaders, managers, and supervisors substantially shape workplace culture. Therefore, efforts to train supportive managers and supervisors could be a strategy for organizations to create a culture that fosters meaning.

For example, the mental health-supportive supervisor behavior (MHSSB) framework is an approach to supervisor training that equips leaders to foster emotionally and practically supportive work environments that prioritize social connection and care for self and others.⁹⁹ Several studies show that this kind of supervisor training promotes feelings of social support and belonging.¹⁰⁰ A sense of community and belonging at work contributes to employees’ happiness.¹⁰¹ Thus, by fostering supportive relationships and a sense of community at work, such leadership practices should strengthen employees’ sense of meaning and purpose directly through social belonging/connectedness, and indirectly through workplace happiness.

Supportive leader training may also equip leaders with practical strategies to help their employees balance professional and personal demands. Research suggests that leadership approaches that are responsive to employees’ needs, while maintaining clear performance expectations and constructive feedback, can foster autonomy, clarify work roles and responsibilities, and facilitate the achievement of work-related goals.¹⁰² These conditions, combined with opportunities for personal growth, foster a sense that one’s work is meaningful and purposeful.¹⁰³

Moreover, transformational and servant leadership styles can encourage employees to view their work as contributing to the greater good by helping them understand how it supports a shared vision or serves a larger community.¹⁰⁴ Thus, organizations seeking to create a workplace that fosters meaning should aim to attract and develop supportive, empowering, and transformational leaders to promote autonomy, provide coherence and clarity about work demands, deliver practical assistance and growth opportunities, and inspire a shared vision of how work contributes to the greater good.

Individuals can find greater meaning through their choices, relationships, and approach to work.

Having discussed strategies that organizations can take to shape workplace conditions that support meaning in life, it is important to remember that employees are not passive recipients of those conditions. Meaning is ultimately subjective, reflecting how individuals interpret and make sense of their emotions and life experiences.¹⁰⁵ Thus, individuals can influence the extent to which their work contributes to a meaningful life through the choices they make, the relationships they develop, and the way they approach and interpret their work experiences. The following recommendations highlight evidence-based strategies that employees can use to strengthen the psychological and social resources that allow work to contribute to a meaningful life.

Prioritize person-environment fit

A person's approach to their career can profoundly affect whether their work life contributes to their sense of meaning. This approach can start with the job hunt itself. Job hunters who have clarity about their values and professional goals, and who work to identify organizations and positions that fit them, tend to be more satisfied with their later job choices.¹⁰⁶ Moreover, research finds that person-organization fit is associated with greater job satisfaction.¹⁰⁷ Thus, employees who feel their organization/workplace environment aligns with their values and goals are more likely to have happy, emotionally satisfying work lives, and these positive feelings should, in turn, support broader perceptions of meaning.

Person-environment fit can also contribute to meaning by fostering coherence, autonomy, and authenticity, and, in turn, energizing the pursuit of personally and professionally important goals. When a person feels that their organization and work role align with their values and goals, they are better able to integrate their profession into their life story, allowing work to become a calling and a source of purpose rather than a peripheral or antagonistic force.¹⁰⁸

Person-environment fit also promotes self-determined motivation, which is associated with more persistence and greater success in goal pursuits.¹⁰⁹ Consistent with this finding, applied research shows

that internally motivated employees exhibit greater performance, persistence, productivity, and well-being, while experiencing lower levels of stress and burnout than externally motivated employees.¹¹⁰

Finally, person-environment fit impacts day-to-day feelings of authenticity. Specifically, research finds that when a person feels that their institution aligns with their personal values/goals, they are more likely to experience feelings of authenticity, which in turn predicts greater working memory capacity and lower distress when working on challenging tasks.¹¹¹

Thus, job hunters should look for organizations, roles, and workplace environments that align with their values and goals, because this alignment supports meaning by fostering coherence, autonomy, and authenticity, and, in doing so, motivates the pursuit of meaningful goals.

Find and maintain supportive professional relationships

Most workplaces are social environments, and, as discussed earlier, satisfying social bonds foster a sense of purpose, importance, and coherence, so an employee's approach to workplace relationships matters for cultivating meaning through work. Employees could start fostering positive workplace relationships by seeking out a mentor soon after hire, particularly for early-career employees. Thus far, we have discussed mentorship relationships from the mentor's perspective and how they derive

self-transcendent meaning from working to benefit others and pass on skills and knowledge to the next generation. So mid- and late-career employees looking to infuse meaning into their work life ought to consider taking an active role in mentoring new hires and early-career coworkers.

Employees who receive mentorship (i.e., mentees) should also derive meaning from mentorship relationships. First, research suggests that, compared with non-mentored employees, mentees receive stronger performance evaluations, greater career advancement, higher pay, and greater job satisfaction. As a result, they tend to be more committed to their organization and less likely to quit. Mentors foster a sense of competence and self-esteem, provide practical guidance, promote accountability, and help mentees navigate stress and workplace challenges.¹¹² Thus, new hires and early-career employees should pursue mentorship relationships with older or more experienced coworkers, as these relationships can contribute to meaning not only by providing a positive social connection but also by helping them feel competent, strengthen self-esteem, and identify coherent, realistic pathways to achieve their work-related goals.

Of course, mentor relationships are not the only meaningful social connections available in the workplace. Peer friendships can also contribute to meaning by fostering a sense of belonging, productivity, achievement, and job satisfaction. Workplace friends can help one another become the best versions of themselves by sharing knowledge and skills and fostering greater innovation and productivity.¹¹³ Even seemingly minor positive social interactions, such as offering compliments or expressing appreciation through gifts, can promote more effective collaboration and conflict resolution, leading to more productive and supportive work relationships.¹¹⁴

Positive workplace relationships and experiences can also help employees adapt to organizational change. Research on organizational nostalgia suggests that revisiting memories of meaningful workplace events and valued friendships helps employees cope with changing work conditions, sustain motivation, and avoid emotional burnout.¹¹⁵

However, workplace relationships can also have drawbacks. Friendships may blur professional boundaries, create perceptions of favoritism,

exclude employees with weaker social ties, and make constructive feedback more difficult. Excessive socializing can also undermine productivity.¹¹⁶

Thus, while workplace friendships can present challenges, they often play a central role in determining whether or not work becomes a source of satisfaction, resilience, and meaning. Working to establish and maintain positive, supportive professional relationships should make work feel satisfying and contribute to a meaningful life.

Develop a resilient meaning-making mindset

Another way individuals can derive meaning from work is by developing a resilient mindset for meaning-making. A resilient meaning-making mindset is an agentic, self-determined way of thinking about meaning that involves clarity about one's true self, as well as the values, beliefs, goals, routines, and roles that promote a sense of purpose, importance, and coherence in one's life. Further, a resilient meaning-making mindset involves a strong belief in one's ability to find, maintain, and restore meaning, as well as the capability to identify flexible pathways to do so.¹¹⁷

A first strategy for developing a resilient meaning-making mindset is self-reflection. Self-reflection could include recalling and writing about important values, personal strengths, characteristics of the true self, and past experiences that have shaped one's identity or sense of purpose. Research suggests that relatively simple activities, such as journaling and group discussions, can temporarily enhance meaning by bringing these core aspects of the self into conscious awareness. Meaning serves as an important self-regulatory function by energizing people to take responsibility for their actions and pursue goals that are both personally fulfilling and purposeful.¹¹⁸ For example, one study finds that reflecting on the characteristics of the true self not only strengthens a sense of meaning but also motivates college students to choose careers that better align with their values, interests, and long-term goals.¹¹⁹ Similarly, writing exercises that affirm core personal values by encouraging reflection on cherished memories are shown to strengthen meaning and promote the pursuit of personally meaningful goals.¹²⁰

In organizational settings, structured self-reflection interventions, such as guided reflection on

personal strengths or envisioning one's best possible future self, are linked to greater wellbeing, a stronger sense of calling, and increased motivation to achieve career goals.¹²¹ Ultimately, self-reflection can foster a resilient approach to meaning in the workplace by affirming the significance of employees' identities, values, and goals and encouraging them to view their work as a pathway to cultivating and sustaining a sense of meaning.

Another way employees can develop a resilient meaning-making mindset is by actively changing how they view and approach their work. It is difficult for work to contribute to meaning if an employee views their work tasks as boring or senseless.¹²² Moreover, if employees feel they lack control over how they perform their work tasks, then work can undermine their autonomy.¹²³

Employees can maintain challenge and interest in their work and enhance their sense of autonomy through job crafting. Job crafting refers to employees' active efforts to modify how they perform, experience, and think about their work.¹²⁴ Job crafters may expand the physical boundaries of their work by seeking new responsibilities, skills, and challenges, making work more engaging while fostering competence, autonomy, hope, and resilience.¹²⁵ Taking on new responsibilities and challenges, and developing new skills, can help identify flexible pathways to achieving meaningful goals. Flexible goal strategies are particularly important to ensure success in situations where resources change or when employees encounter unforeseen challenges.¹²⁶

Individuals with a resilient meaning-making mindset will adjust, formulate new plans, or seek new resources to get the job done, ensuring success and building psychological strengths such as self-esteem, competence, autonomy, and hope, which contribute to a sense of meaning.

Job crafters can also change how they think about their work. For example, reframing tedious or repetitive tasks as a game, competition, or personal challenge can make them more engaging and enjoyable.¹²⁷

Employees may also benefit from reflecting on the broader significance of their work. Viewing one's job as contributing to something larger than the self can foster self-transcendent meaning and motivate resilient efforts to find meaning and purpose in daily work and routines. Research with college students shows that getting students to consider how college contributes to their sense of meaning strengthens positive beliefs about success and increases persistence on difficult academic tasks.¹²⁸ Follow-up research finds that not all students derive a self-transcendent sense of purpose from college. Some instead view college as meaningful because it offers opportunities for intellectual growth or the prospect of a comfortable financial future.¹²⁹ By extension, recognizing the meaningfulness of one's work, whether through contributing to the greater good, fostering personal growth and achievement, or providing financial security, may enhance confidence, strengthen agency, promote resilience, improve performance, and ultimately help employees view their work as a resource for meaning-making.



CREATING MORE MEANINGFUL WORK

By working together, organizations and individuals can create conditions that help people find greater meaning and flourish through work.





CONCLUSION

Meaning in life is a critical component of flourishing because it is associated with mental and physical health and enhances motivation and self-regulation. Although meaning is a common experience derived from many sources, work is especially important because people invest considerable time and energy in preparing for careers and spend much of their adult lives working. Beyond providing the economic resources necessary for survival, work can be a major contributor to a meaningful life.

This report outlines several major pathways through which work promotes meaning. Work contributes to meaning through positive emotional experiences such as happiness, satisfaction, and fulfillment. As an inherently social activity, work helps meet the need for belonging and fosters supportive relationships that provide both instrumental support and a sense of value and competence. Work also provides a meaningful routine that gives life direction, financial stability, and opportunities to live in line with one's values and standards. Further, work fosters self-actualization by helping people construct meaningful life narratives, build self-esteem, pursue important goals, exercise autonomy, and express their authentic selves. Finally, work can be a source of self-transcendent meaning through helping others, experiencing generativity, finding and

living a calling, and connecting to something larger than the self. Rather than viewing these routes as distinct, these pathways often operate together to make work one of the most powerful avenues for experiencing significance, purpose, and coherence.

Given the many ways it is implicated in people's pursuit of meaning, individuals and organizations should view work as an existential enterprise. Viewing work as an existential enterprise starts with understanding that work structures one's routines, shapes relationships, and, for many, is part of a developing a meaningful identity and is an avenue for self-improvement, achievement, and the opportunity to make a positive impact on the greater good. With this understanding, organizations can intentionally prioritize and strategize to



foster meaning in the workplace and encourage individuals to approach their work as a route to a more meaningful life. Such efforts are likely to develop employees who are more fulfilled, cooperative, resilient, and motivated, benefiting employee wellbeing and organizational performance.

Beyond these gains, an existential perspective on organizations encourages leaders to think more deeply about their organization's purpose and impact on the communities they serve/inhabit, and on societal flourishing more generally. Further, if existential flourishing is a priority for organizations, they will need to articulate their purpose and impact clearly to employees and community stakeholders, which should lead to better relations and more effective collaborations.

This report offers several evidence-based suggestions for organizations and individuals to help them cultivate existential institutions that prioritize meaning and promote flourishing. For organizations, the recommendations include policies and programs that support wellbeing, foster supportive professional relationships, and develop leaders who promote autonomy, growth, and connection. Individuals should 1) seek work that aligns with their values, 2) invest in supportive professional relationships, and 3) proactively shape their jobs to reflect what matters most to them. Doing so can strengthen their sense of agency, purpose, growth, and long-term success.

It is important to remember that no single policy, program, or personal approach can stand alone in creating a workplace that strengthens meaning. Instead, organizations and individuals should be guided by the psychological determinants of meaning discussed in this report to identify and invest in strategies that strengthen multiple pathways to a more meaningful life at work and beyond.

Future workplace challenges, such as uncertain and rapidly changing economic forecasts, the rise of artificial intelligence, demographic shifts, and remote/hybrid work, make questions of meaning increasingly important. Based on these challenges, it is easy for organizations and employees to view work only in terms of its extrinsic value, discounting or ignoring work's capacity to contribute to a meaningful and productive life. The need for meaning is a fundamental psychological need and a core component of human flourishing. Given that much adult life is spent working, organizations and individuals who recognize the importance of meaning and treat work as part of a pathway to a more meaningful life will be better positioned to flourish. The evidence reviewed in this report suggests that not only does work contribute to a meaningful life, but organizations and individuals can be proactive in creating existential enterprises that foster meaning and promote individual and societal flourishing.



ENDNOTES

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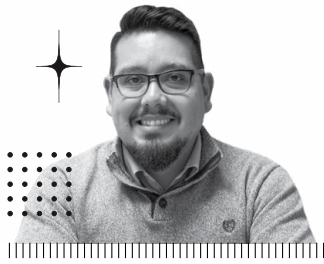
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



ANDREW ABEYTA, PHD, is a social psychology fellow at the Archbridge Institute. He is an associate professor of psychology and director of the Social and Existential Motives Lab at Rutgers University in Camden, New Jersey. As a social psychologist, he studies how people satisfy the psychological needs for meaning in life and social belonging. His research focuses on psychological factors—such as the experience of nostalgia, religion, and supernatural beliefs—that promote social belonging and meaning. Additionally, his research is interested in the implications of the need for meaning in life and social belonging for human flourishing, psychological resilience, and human agency. His work has been published in many of the top journals in personality and social psychology, including *The Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *Emotion*, *Social Psychology and Personality Science*, and *Current Opinion in Psychology*. Moreover, his expert opinions have been featured in media outlets such as *USA Today*, *The Atlantic*, *CNN*, *The Guardian*, *Science Friday*, *NBC News LX*, and more. Dr. Abeyta earned his Ph.D. in social and health psychology from North Dakota State University.



The Human Flourishing Lab explores the personal foundations and attitudes that shape wellbeing and provides practical resources to help individuals improve their lives and create positive change in the world. The Lab is a project of the Archbridge Institute, a non-partisan, independent, 501(c)(3) public policy think tank dedicated to lifting barriers to human flourishing.