

# MEANING OF WORK: CHALLENGES FOR THE XXI CENTURY

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## THE MEANING OF WORK AS AN ISSUE

The search for meaning is one of the most challenging human deeds. Camus (2010) gives us the work *The Myth of Sisyphus* to think about the absurdity of existence and, especially, of work. In the last chapter, the Algerian author compares repetitive, dull and alienated labors' work with

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the torment of Sisyphus, character of the Greek mythology who was cursed by the gods with the punishment of endlessly carrying a gigantic heavy rock uphill, every day; when he gets near the top of the hill, the rock rolls down fast, revealing how useless the effort was and making him repeat the action, non-stop, without reason, without purpose. The only revenge Sisyphus can have is to give meaning to his inglorious job, which he will never abandon.

Although Rosso, Dekas & Wrzesniewski, (2010) have said that literature about the meaning of work is still in its early days, the fact is that we can, briefly and only for contextualization, verify the development of studies under such terminology in the late 1970s. In this way, a milestone in the emergence of the field of study on the meaning of work stems from the research conducted by a group of scholars known as Meaning of Work Research Team, or simply MOW (1987). These researchers defined the meaning of work as “(...) significance, beliefs, definitions and values that individuals and groups give to work as a fundamental dimension of human activity (...)” (p. 13). The model was conceived in order to develop and measure both prior variables (family situation, current job, and career records, and macro social and economic environment) and consequences regarding this meaning (expectations on future work conditions and objective work results), individually, occupationally and socially.

In Brazil, MOW's study has influenced many researchers in the most different fields of knowledge, including management (i.e., Bastos, Pinho & Costa, 1995; Borges, 1999; Bendassolli, Alves and Torres, 2014). According to Bendassolli, Coelho-Lima, Pinheiro and Gê (2015), this perspective of study is, in general, considered “cognitivist” (e.g., Tolfo, Coutinho, Baasch and Cugnier, 2011), operating the meaning of work in the form of dependent or independent variables (as something relatively stable, intraindividual), and measured by drawings of quantitative research.

Since the divulgation of MOW's results, however, we have been watching a fruitful development in this area of study. Recently, for instance, with the incorporation of references conceived in approaches of positive psychology, which, in its turn, recover influences from existentialism and phenomenology, studies on the meaning have been developed based on the idea that work, as a central human activity, must, more than merely having a ‘definition’ (representations, ideas socially widespread in culture, among others), also have ‘meaning’, this latter understood as an experience in which the ‘self’ finds possibilities of revealing itself, expressing itself and developing itself in what is done (e.g., Dik, Byrne & Steger, 2013; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Rosso et al., 2010).



In other words, the meaning is understood as a resource for human development (Batthyany & Russo-Netzer, 2014), from which there comes an important distinction, nowadays made in the area, between the meaning of work and meaningful work. According to Steger, Dik & Duffy (2012), the meaning is defined “(...) not simply as anything that work means for people (meaning), but also as a work which value is positive and significant (meaningfulness)” (p. 2).

In Management, especially when we consider more recent publications, the perspective of studies guided by positive psychology seems to be in focus (i.e., Steger, Pickering, Shin, & Dik, 2010). In the field of Psychology, the approaches of one or another perspective seem more nuanced, at least when we consider the national context (i.e., Bendassolli, Coelho-Lima, Pinheiro & Gê, 2016). Spread among the great landmarks of researches guided by psychometric measurement, in the wake of MOW (i.e., Morin & Cherré, 1999; Morin, 2003, 2008; Gagné et al., 2010; Lips-Wiersma and Wright, 2012; Rodrigues et al. 2017; Rodrigues, Barrichello & Morin, 2016; Bendassolli, Borges-Andrade, Alves and Torres, 2015), and by many comprehensive perspectives (qualitative – i.e., Bendassolli & Tateo, 2017), the focus of the literature is to contribute to the understanding of person-work-organization relationships and the extrapolation of its consequences over management.

Studies inspired by positive psychology/existentialism are inclined to emphasize the meaning as a “property” of individuals, besides diminishing contradictions and tensions of such meaning in concrete conditions of work performance. Furthermore, in the Brazilian case, these studies seem to inspire prominently qualitative works, with emphasis on biographic perspectives, often without proper concern about contextual aspects that essentially intervene with processes of meaning construction (Bendassolli & Gondim, 2014).

Consequently, despite the incredible tensions, paradoxes, and transformations through which work has passed in the last decades, particularly in peripheral countries such as Brazil, there are few studies, be them theoretical or empirical, that focus on the analysis of consequences of suffering and misery in the relationship between people and their works, and, as a result, about its meaning (or lack of it) (Ardichvili & Kuchinke, 2009; Rosso et al., 2010). In other words, “Sisyphus’ work” does not seem to call the attention of researchers as do the viably managing ways of optimizing, improving and promoting the meaning of work in order to increase workers’ motivation, satisfaction, and performance, as a result.





## THE FORUM

This special issue was conceived in order to provide space for a meeting and divulgation of researches conducted by Brazilian researchers about meanings and definitions of work. The original proposal was intentionally broad, stimulating the submission of both theoretical and empirical studies about the most different aspects such as changes in the meaning of work regarding the new labor configurations; the relationships between the meanings of work and important organizational outputs such as motivation, engagement, commitment and performance; the relationship between the meaning of work and suffering, especially among more vulnerable groups or categories; and other topics in the call. The first aspect that called our attention was the positive acceptance of the call on the part of our academic community, which, among other indicators, can be observed by the significant number of submissions. A total of 50 manuscripts were evaluated. They were divided into theoretical, empirical and experience reports. Altogether, a second aspect that we noticed was the variety of themes, which differed from the mainstream model of investigation with a public composed of workers of “traditional” organizations. It will be possible to see within the selected manuscripts in this edition that there are studies with professors, artists, and workers from the minorities universe like drag queens and migrant workers. The formulation of these articles is a sample of a range of manuscripts that tended to emphasize the misfortunes of work conditions and situations experienced by Brazilian workers in the most different sectors and activities.

From the 50 original manuscripts, after the desk review process made by invited editors and the blind review made by ad hoc reviewers, 13 were approved, from which six were chosen to compose this edition that the reader will have access in the sequence. The choice was made due to both criteria regarding theme composition of the edition and maximum space allowed by RAM for a special edition. As mentioned before, a common axis between the chosen articles is related to their concern with discussing the meaning in contexts that differ from the straight organizational ones.

In the article, *The meaning of work as a predictor of the intention to remain/leave among teachers*, the authors use the theoretical model of the descriptive and evaluating attributes of the work. With this, they conclude that professors acting, specifically in the area of people management, tend to show an intention to leave work when they perceive fragilities in the



processes of valorization of human dignity and in the possibility of self-expression at work, which, in this case, seems to be seen as a provisional activity.

In the article, identification and the meaning of work as a Drag Queen, the authors are based on a theoretical approach not common in the studies on the meaning of work: the psychoanalysis. The choice of this reference also has an impact on the way in which they chose to conduct their research methodologically: a case study. Thus, following the life trajectory of a drag queen, the authors show us the existence of a tangle among identity traits, singular, and social dimensions of work, culminating in meaningful compositions that reveal affections and desires.

The article *Between Juggling, Stunts, And Antics: the meaning of work for Circus Artists* returns to the investigation of the category of circus artists, a class that, in the field of the management, has been investigated within the so-called creative industries. The authors use Morin's model, which counts with relative dissemination in Brazil, and with it they highlight the characteristics of this artistic activity that promote the experiences of meaning in work, especially the pleasure associated with the idea of "circus", and the perception results associated with the performance of the tasks involved in the composition of the performances.

In *The meaning of work saga: A collective job crafting experience*, the reader can find an empirical research report on the relationship between the career model known as "job crafting" and the meaning of work, however they make it differently, when we consider studies in the area of career management, because they focus the analysis at the collective level. Among the results, the collective sense is produced when workers are engaged in transforming, in an innovative way, the working conditions, as well as in the choice of tasks or roles that are more coherent with their expectations, in the context of interpersonal relations and bonds.

The article, *Revisiting the mainstream: the meaning of work for people with acquired disabilities*, brings to the core of the analysis the issue of work for people with labor restrictions. This is an important research to the extent that, as previously mentioned, it sheds light on facets of the work-meaning relationship not explored in the so-called mainstream literature. The authors discuss how the meaning of the work is reworked from efforts to overcome both materials and, above all, symbolic obstacles brought about by the new condition of disability, and how meaning seems to emerge from these same efforts.

Finally, in the article *The meaning of work, organizational socialization and work context: the perspective of migrant workers*, the authors choose as



object of study the case of workers in mobility, an increasingly common feature with the continuous consolidation of the process of economic globalization, but also as a result of wars or deprivation in various countries. This is the case of this research, which addresses Senegalese, Bengalese and Haitian workers recently installed in Brazil. Among the results, the importance of socialization processes is emphasized, after all, in the crossing of cultural frontiers, there come the dynamics, sometimes conflicting, of values, ways of assigning meaning to experiences and, in this case, work itself.

As organizers of this special issue, we would like to thank all the researchers who accepted our invitation to think about the research situation on the meanings of work in Brazil, to contribute to the visibility of local or regional studies, and also to rescue urgent issues that affect the work experience of many Brazilians nowadays. We hope that the edition published here will serve as a stimulus for similar new initiatives of our community. Finally, we thank the opening of RAM, in the figure of its Editor-in-Chief, Professor Silvio Popadiuk, and the diligent and efficient work carried out by the Assistant of the magazine, Vitória Batista Santos Silva. We wish you all an excellent reading.

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