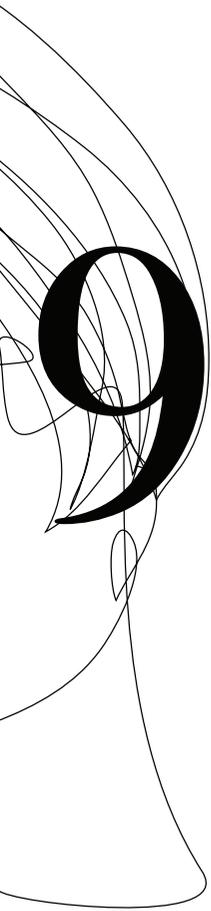




The meanings of work, people's health and companies performance

BY *ESTELLE MORIN, FRANCISCO ARANHA, RICARDO CARVALHO, SÔNIA DIEGUES AND ANDERSON SANT'ANNA*



Work is a theme that has been quite well studied and commented upon due to the importance it bears on people's lives and on the development of societies. First and foremost, work is an activity that has an objective, one that aims to produce something useful. Work can be either pleasant or unpleasant, and it can be either associated with compensations or not. It can also be performed, or not, in a workplace, with a work schedule, within an economically organized system and marked by institutionalized change relations.

There may be negative consequences, both personal as well as organizational ones, if we give work the strict sense of a job. Furthermore, it can restrict the contractual relations between individuals and the organizations that employ them, overvaluing the importance of salaries and social advantages at the expense of the value and usefulness generated as a product of work. Such limitations to the meanings of work can also lessen the value of non-remunerated activities such as volunteer work or household work.

Work is an activity through which people insert themselves into the world, exercise their talents, define themselves, update their potential and create value. In return, they bring to it a feeling of personal performance and effectiveness. As it allows individuals to produce original results, and such production is useful, it allows people to prove their existence, to recognize themselves and to be recognized. Due to its routine and its day-to-day activities, work is also a formidable way to manage the anguish of emptiness. It is only necessary to note just how distressed people become when they suddenly become unemployed or take early retirement.

It was only recently (for the past 20 years) that we have taken into account how important work is at preserving and stimulating people's health. Moreover, it has only been more recently that managers have recognized the impact work exerts on health. Nevertheless, in some organizational contexts work is still managed to produce the expected financial results but not necessarily

THE MEANING THAT INDIVIDUALS ATTRIBUTE TO WORK IS INFLUENCED BY THEIR PERCEPTION AS REGARDS THE ENVIRONMENT WHERE WORK IS CARRIED OUT

aiming at the organization's reason for being, which legitimizes its activities, and neither aiming at developing people and society. This raises important ethical issues associated to the meanings of work in organizations.

BUT WHAT IS A MEANINGFUL WORK? Meaningfulness is essential for a human being's mental health. Recently, we have even found out that it played a significant role in stimulating employees' affective commitment to their job (Morin, 2010). But what is a meaningful work? To answer this question, it is useful to uncover the roots of this subjective experience.

Meaningfulness is the experience of making sense of something or an experience. The word "sense" has two roots. From the Latin, *sensus*, it means the capacity to receive impressions, to get to know, to see and to judge. It also means the idea or image that represents a sign, an experience. From its German root, *sumo*, it means direction, the orientation given to something. In psychology, the

word sense, or meaningfulness, refers, essentially, to the experience of coherence, cohesion, balance and fulfillment. Hence, the work meaningfulness has three components: its significance for the individual, its functions in the individual's life and its coherence with the individual's values and expectations.

Besides taking these components into account, the meaning that individuals attribute to work is influenced by their perception as regards the environment where work is carried out. That is, work makes sense to people when they perceive a correspondence between their own identity, their work, and the context within which they carry it out.

Thus, in our studies the meaning of work is defined as the result of coherence between the characteristics people seek in their work and those that they perceive in the work they perform within a certain environment.

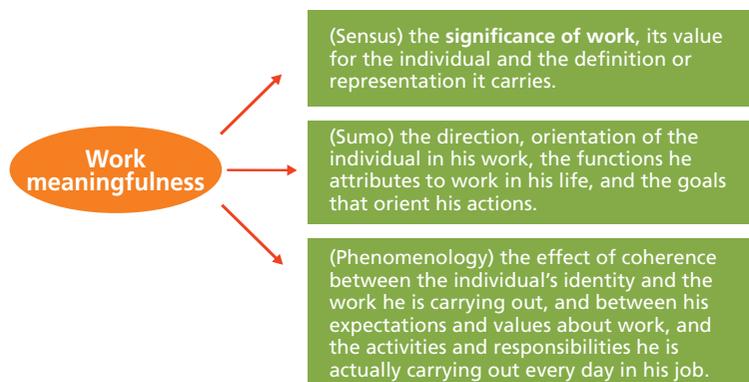
THE CHARACTERISTICS OF A MEANINGFUL WORK.

Several research projects have been carried out since 1960 into the characteristics of stimulating and motivating work, and they have given rise to a new field of knowledge that is known as job design. According to Ketchum and Trist, job design consists of combining the activities and conditions within which they must be carried out according to the characteristics that give them meaning. In these studies, job design leads to establishing conditions for quality-of-life at work. By definition, it is an overall state of well-being that people feel when they are in their work environment. Generally, we describe it with the help of the following indicators: psychological wellbeing, work engagement, work meaningfulness and work-life balance.

Isaksen states that the meanings of work are perceived as a state of satisfaction produced by the perception of coherence between people and the work they carry out. This researcher has identified eight characteristics that contribute to make work meaningful:

1. Identification with work and with the work environment;
2. Good relations with others and interest in their well-being;

FIGURE 1 | THREE COMPONENTS OF A MEANINGFUL WORK (MORIN, 1995)



3. A feeling of being useful and of contributing to an important project;
4. A feeling of being important and of benefiting others;
5. Learning and pleasure in carrying out work;
6. Participating in improving the effectiveness of processes and of working conditions;
7. A feeling of autonomy and freedom to carry out work;
8. A feeling of responsibility and pride in the work carried out.

Since 1993, we are carrying out researches in different environments to determine the characteristics of meaningful work. We have managed to determine six main characteristics: social purpose of work, autonomy, learning and development opportunities, moral correctness, cooperation and recognition.



Table 1 | Six characteristics of a meaningful work (Morin, 2010).

Characteristics of a meaningful work	Definition
Social purpose of work	Doing something that is useful to others, that contributes to society
Autonomy	Being able to use one's skills, talents and judgment to solve problems and make decisions as regards to one's work
Learning and development opportunities	Carrying out tasks that correspond to one's interests and skills, that give opportunities to learn and develop one's potential and to achieve one's objectives
Moral correctness	Carrying out morally justifiable work, both as regards performing it and its results
Cooperation	Performing work that fosters interesting contacts as well as positive, supportive relations with others
Recognition	Getting the respect and esteem of one's superiors and colleagues as well as fair and equal treatments as regards to pay, benefits and career development

EMPLOYEES WHO FIND MEANING IN THEIR WORK REPORT BETTER MOOD AND ENGAGEMENT FOR THEIR EMPLOYER THAN THOSE WHO DO NOT

THE MEANINGS OF WORK AND HEALTH

Nelson and Simmons (2003) point out five sets of stress factors: role demands, interpersonal demands, physical demands, workplace policies, and job conditions. As the phenomenon of stress is a complex one, such factors can generate either “eustress” (positive stress) or “distress” (negative stress), depending on the perception an individual has of his job. This is to explain why different people performing the same job in the same workplace can have opposite reactions: they do not give the same meaning to their job.

In his studies, Isaksen observed that people who give meaning to work will withstand stress better. Such studies have led us to formulate hypotheses as regards the protective or even beneficial effects of meaningful work on people's health.

The factors that are associated with job burnout, psychological distress and bad job performance are clearly described by workplace stress studies. Those that are widely acknowledged are: the heavy workload and the intensity of work; the long working hours, the irregular shift works and the night shifts; the job insecurity (eg. temporary positions with an undetermined termination date); lack of recognition and organizational support; lack of autonomy and lack of competencies to perform the job effectively. When they are inadequate, such factors are likely to generate stress which could lead to (mental) health problems, emotional exhaustion which in turn, will certainly impair employees' job performance. Thus, they are the target when managers seek to prevent illnesses and psychological suffering within the work environment and by doing so, maintaining employees' performance at an acceptable level. However, if one wishes to stimulate employees' motivation to go beyond expected levels, it is

advisable to invest in their quality of working life, in order to promote work meaningfulness and psychological wellbeing.

The factors that are associated with psychological wellbeing are less known however, partly because researchers were more busy studying distress, job burnout and work problems than happiness, engagement and work performance. Our investigations about quality of life at work have allowed us to determine the following: learning and development opportunities; social purpose of work; cooperation (positive connections) and moral correctness. When someone is aware that one's work is useful for others, finds opportunities to learn new skills or to improve one's competencies while doing it, enjoys the organization of his colleagues and superiors and feels proud of his job, then it is highly probable that this person would feel good and engaged toward his job and willing to give the best of himself.

Individual differences such as locus of control, self-efficacy, self-management and optimism, come into play between the characteristics of the job and the psychological state of the employees. For example, if someone believes that he has an influence on what is happening to him (that is an internal locus of control), then if something negative happens in his job, he would try something to improve the situation. Another example, if someone is confident in his ability to achieve his goals despite the difficulties he might encounter (high self-efficacy), then he is likely to persevere during stressful situations at work in order to achieve the performance it is expected of him.

Employees who find meaning in their work report better mood and engagement for their employer than those who do not. In fact, they feel good and ready for giving a good performance at work. They show at work on time, they are involved in their work, they cooperate with their colleagues and they feel empowered.

Employees who do not find meaning in their work report psychological symptoms of distress such as irritability, anxiety and exhaustion. They go to work, because they have to – if they could stay home, they would. It is the phenomenon of presenteeism. Because of their feelings of irritability (impatience, sensitivity, susceptibility, etc. – all forms of anger) and of exhaustion, they tend to have attitudinal and





PEOPLE WHO WORK IN A HIGH QUALITY ENVIRONMENT WILL HAVE LESS MENTAL OR PHYSICAL HEALTH RELATED PROBLEMS

behavioral problems, from difficult to disturbed. When suffering is involved, people mobilize their defense systems in order to maintain their daily activities and continue working despite everything. Defensive strategies will eventually run out and the performance will deteriorate: absenteeism, alienation, accidents, errors, and conflicts, counterproductive and toxic behaviors.

In our Criteos studies we have examined the two sides of mental health: psychological well-being and psychological distress. More precisely, we have raised the hypothesis that work meaningfulness bears a positive effect on psychological well-being and a negative one on psychological distress. Our results indicated clearly that six characteristics or factors determined the meaningfulness of work: social purpose, autonomy, learning and development opportunities, moral correctness, cooperation and recognition (Morin, 2008). They also indicated that work meaningfulness is a mediator between these characteristics and the individual's psychological states. In other words, if an individual perceives that his work has these characteristics, he will find his work meaningful and consequently, he will tend to report signs of psychological well-being. If he does not find his work meaningful, he will then to report symptoms of psychological distress.

Moreover, we found that the social purpose of work and development opportunities are especially good predictors of psychological wellbeing and affective commitment to the organization (this is the willingness to keep one's job because one wants it). Also, the lack of moral correctness factor is significantly associated with psychological distress and continuance commitment (this is the willingness to keep one's job because one has no better choice).

QUALITY OF LIFE AT WORK AND ORGANIZATIONAL PERFORMANCE

May, Lau and Johnson examined 146 American companies for five years and discovered that companies with high quality of work life – QWL - managed to achieve higher profits and stronger growth than the others. From such a perspective, QWT companies tend to attract more talented employees, thus improving their competitiveness and ensuring their perennity. The authors conclude that financial performance can only be sustained in the long term if senior management offers employees good quality of work life. Gard, Lindstroem and Dallner interviewed 640 professionals from the real estate industry and found similar results.

Shoaf, Genaidy, Karwowski and Huang have shown that the quest for high financial objectives

is not incompatible with preventing the problems of work related health or promoting employees' health and well-being; actually, the opposite is true. They show how senior management can benefit themselves by organizing work to promote employee health, as such will bring about beneficial effects on organizational perennity and profitability.

We know that an organization's financial performance stems from a series of variables, among them the quality of its board, the decisions taken by senior management, the economic and political context, the competence of its people and the effectiveness of its technology, etc. There are more and more empirical evidence that people who work in a high quality environment will have less mental or physical health related problems, will be more engaged in what they do and will perform better. In a QWL context, employees tend to take initiatives and responsibilities, to make improvements in the work process, to address critical issues and exercise their creativity when they face unusual situations, thus adding real value to their work.

Some implications for managing health at work in organizations can be highlighted from our studies on quality of work life. To prevent psychological distress, senior management should emphasize actions to:

- Set clear guidelines for their staff, as well as objectives that are coherent with their organization's strategy;
- Give autonomy to employees, which means to ensure they have the required skills to perform their tasks effectively, the information about the expected results, the necessary resources and the support of their manager;
- Adjust the workload to each person's capability and resources;
- Reinforce moral correctness by setting the example, being a role model and managing conflicts.
- Value and recognize the results people achieve as well as their staff's competence;
- Effectively support the team.

Such management practices can decrease the negative effects of stress and increase the

workers' capability to adapt and enhance their engagement as regards to their work. To promote psychological wellbeing and job performance, senior management should also:

- Make the social purpose of work explicit;
- Enrich the job of employees in order to give them opportunities to learn and develop their potential;
- Foster positive relations between individuals and teams.

The 21st century offers unique opportunities to develop workplace wellbeing. It points to new paradigms whose central axis is the human element and to the emergence of new social, economic, political and cultural values that bring positive consequences to job design. We hope it can lead to a new collective awareness and so reposition the importance of human dignity and democracy within our societies.

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A new concept of quality of work life

Some time ago, the Organizational Development Management Department at Samarco Mineração began to enhance the concept of quality of work life, which was more specifically aimed at its workers' physical integrity and at safety and health issues, according to manager Rubria Coutinho. The new concept presupposes clearer and more transparent relations among people and between those people and the organization.

According to the manager, it is also important to create organizational spaces that will make it possible to carry out more meaningful and productive work through which individuals can perceive that they can contribute to different and positive results not only for the organization but also for their own lives.

"This is a recent undertaking that is linked to the deeper perception the company has of the need to encourage people to be more aware that quality at work is very closely associated to each person's quality of life.", Rubria says. She does not see a way of measuring the impact of this work on Samarco's financial results, inasmuch as these are long-term actions. At a mining company such as Samarco, which exports all it produces, there are a series of internal and external factors that influence financial results, argues the Organizational Development manager. "But I am sure that people's performance is a fundamental factor, and that stimulating quality of work life also bears an impact on financial results", she adds. Rubria Coutinho has been with the company for 13 years, seven of them in management positions - the last two years at her current job.