Meaningful work literature meta-review

Valentyna Lozovetska* | Yuri Pavlov | Liubov Fedorenko

*Department of Technological Education, Faculty of Technologies and Design, Mykhailo Dragomanov State University of Ukraine, Kyiv, Ukraine.

Abstract This paper delves into the complex terrain of meaningful work, a concept at the heart of contemporary career development and organizational behavior discourse. By synthesizing the foundational perspectives, we explore the dual dimensions of meaningful work: the individual-oriented perspective, which emphasizes self-actualization, and the socially-oriented perspective, which situates the meaning of work within broader social, cultural, and institutional contexts. We propose a novel conceptualization of "deeply meaningful work" that harmonizes these perspectives, integrating personal fulfillment with societal contribution to unveil a more nuanced understanding of what makes work meaningful. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks, our review navigates the intersection of personal identity, societal value, and the quest for purpose in professional endeavors. Through an extensive literature review, we seek to refine the definition of meaningful work, addressing gaps in the current understanding and offering insights into fostering environments that promote deeply meaningful work. This study contributes to the academic discussion on meaningful work and provides practical implications for individuals seeking fulfillment in their careers and organizations aiming to cultivate a motivated, engaged workforce.

Keywords: meaningful work, meta-review, vocational behavior, professional identity, personal meaning, employee engagement

1. Introduction

The quest for meaningful work is a fundamental pursuit for individuals across various professional landscapes, reflecting a deep-seated desire to align one's career with personal values, aspirations, and contributions to society. Meaningful work transcends mere occupational satisfaction, touching on existential questions of identity, purpose, and societal value. The seminal works of Lepisto and Pratt (2017), Becker and Carper (1956), and Weber (1958) have laid the groundwork for understanding the dual perspectives that frame meaningful work: the individual-oriented view that equates meaningfulness with self-actualization and the socially-oriented view that situates the meaning of work within social, cultural, and institutional norms.

The individual-oriented view probes the extent to which work reflects. It fulfills one's sense of self, suggesting that work is perceived as meaningful when it resonates with one's identity and personal goals. Conversely, the socially oriented perspective posits that work gains meaning through its value to others, underscored by societal acknowledgment and the capacity for self-transcendence. This dichotomy raises pivotal questions regarding the essence of meaningful work and its impact on individual and collective well-being.

Despite the rich tapestry of research on meaningful work and related concepts such as "callings," a gap remains in fully articulating a comprehensive definition that encompasses both self-actualization and self-transcendence without necessitating a preordained destiny or external summons. This paper seeks to bridge this gap by proposing "deeply meaningful work," a synthesis of self-actualization and self-transcendence that reflects a more nuanced understanding of meaningful work. Drawing upon the foundational theories of Bunderson and Thompson (2009), Bailey and Madden (2017), and Bailey et al. (2017), this review explores the synergies between personal fulfillment and societal contribution, positing that the intersection of these domains fosters the most profound sense of meaningfulness in work.

By examining the existing literature on meaningful work, this study aims to refine and expand the conceptual framework within which work is deemed meaningful. It contributes to the broader discourse on work satisfaction, motivation, and ethics, offering new insights into how individuals and organizations can foster environments that support deeply meaningful work. Through a meticulous analysis of theoretical and empirical studies, this paper articulates a more holistic definition of meaningful work that captures the essence of human aspiration and social responsibility.

2. Method

This study employs a systematic literature review to explore empirical research on meaningful work. The methodology is structured around the framework proposed by Briner and Denyer (2010), which encompasses five distinct stages: planning
and scoping, undertaking a structured search, evaluating search results, extracting evidence, and developing analysis and synthesis findings for dissemination.

Planning and Scoping. Initially, we defined our research objectives and formulated five research questions. A preliminary search was conducted using the terms “meaningful work” and related variations to assess the scope of existing literature. This exploratory phase utilized databases such as Business Source Complete, International Bibliography for the Social Sciences, PsycINFO, PsycARTICLES, and Scopus, yielding a broad array of results that guided the refinement of our search strategy.

Structured Search. The search strategy was refined to use a more focused string of keywords in the selected databases, which now included Proquest, PubMed, and Zetoc, to capture a wide range of peer-reviewed literature across the social sciences. The search, limited to English-language studies published between 1930 and 2024, aimed to include empirical data reflecting individuals in employment contexts. Manual searches through key journals and citation tracking complemented the database searches, ensuring a comprehensive collection of relevant studies.

Database Selection. Our comprehensive literature search was executed across an extensive range of databases to ensure the inclusion of diverse disciplinary perspectives on meaningful work. The databases selected for this search included Humanities International Complete, Academic Search Premier, Military and Government Collection, Business and Society for the Advancement of Management Studies Abstracts with Full Text, Business Source Complete, CINAHL, Corporate ResourceNet, EconLit, Education Full Text, Educational Administration Abstracts, ERIC, Family & Society Studies Worldwide, Family Studies Abstracts, PsycARTICLES, PsycCRITIQUES, PsycINFO, Social Sciences, Women’s Studies International, Health Business, Vocational and Career Collection, Entrepreneurial Studies Source, Humanities and Social Sciences Index Retrospective, Vocational Studies Premier, and MEDLINE. This selection aimed to capture a broad spectrum of empirical studies across various fields related to meaningful work.

Search Terms and Strategy. We employed a comprehensive set of search terms to capture the multifaceted nature of meaningful work. These terms were chosen to encompass a wide array of concepts associated with the meaning of work, including “work meaning,” “meaningful work,” “work meaningfulness,” “meaningfulness of work,” “job meaningfulness,” “meaning of work,” “meaningfulness at work,” “meaning of working,” “psychological meaningfulness,” “experienced meaningfulness” and other related concepts. This approach ensured that our search was broad enough to include various conceptualizations and dimensions of meaningful work as discussed in the literature.

Screening and Selection Process. The initial search yielded 328 unique articles. We conducted an initial screening based on the articles’ titles, keywords, and abstracts to ascertain their relevance to our research questions. This step was crucial in determining whether the articles specifically addressed meaningful work in the context conceptualized within our study. After this screening, 289 articles were deemed relevant for our review. The primary reason for excluding articles was their lack of focus on meaningful work as defined and conceptualized for this paper. This meticulous selection process ensured that only articles with a direct emphasis on meaningful work, as relevant to our research objectives, were included for further analysis.

Inclusion Criteria. For an article to be included in our meta-analysis, it had to meet the following five criteria:

1. Measurement of Meaningful Work: The article must empirically measure meaningful work using recognized scales. Acceptable scales included, but were not limited to, WAMI, Psychological Meaningfulness Scale (PMS), Psychological Meaningfulness subscale, Comprehensive Meaningful Work Scale (CMWS), Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire, Engagement in Meaningful Work Scale, Meaningful Work Scale, Meaningful Work Inventory, Workplace Spirituality scale, Work Meaningfulness Scale, and any newly created scales based on these established measures.

2. Inclusion of a Typical Outcome Variable: Articles needed to explore variables commonly associated with outcomes of meaningful work, allowing for meta-analytic effect computation. This review identified ten constructs as typical outcomes: commitment, self-rated performance, organizational citizenship behaviors, withdrawal intentions, work engagement, job satisfaction, life satisfaction, general health, negative affect, and life meaning.

3. Provision of Correlation Coefficients: Studies must provide a correlation coefficient between meaningful work and at least one outcome variable or data convertible into a correlation coefficient. Authors were contacted for articles meeting all criteria except providing a correlation coefficient, with a majority responding with the required information.

4. Adherence to the Independent Samples Assumption: Articles could not violate the principle of independent samples.

5. Language and Accessibility: Studies needed to be in English or have an English counterpart, ensuring broad accessibility and understanding.

Exclusion Criteria. Following the application of these criteria, we excluded articles for several reasons: absence of a defined measure of meaningful work as per our study (n = 61), lack of inclusion of an outcome variable (n = 18), absence of quantitative data necessary for computing effect size (n = 211), and violation of the independent samples assumption (n = 3). We did not exclude studies based on geographical location, publication year, or publication type.

Extracting Evidence. Data extraction was conducted systematically, with a standardized pro forma for each research question. This stage facilitated the detailed examination of each study, enabling the extraction of pertinent data while ensuring consistency across the review process.

Analysis and Synthesis. The final stage involved the analysis and synthesis of extracted data. Team members led the analysis per research question, utilizing summary tables to organize findings comprehensively. These tables were the
foundation for team discussions, contributing to a shared narrative and identifying subthemes within the broader topic of meaningful work. This collaborative effort aimed to articulate the interconnectedness of themes, assess the evidence’s quality and volume, and trace the field’s evolution over time.

By adhering to this structured methodology, the review aims to provide a thorough and reliable synthesis of empirical research on meaningful work, contributing valuable insights into its characteristics, determinants, and outcomes.

3. Literature review

3.1. Overview of Included Studies

Our comprehensive literature review on meaningful work incorporated various methodological approaches and geographical contexts. Among the included studies, a predominant number (n=51) employed cross-sectional self-report surveys, highlighting the prevalent use of this methodological approach in the exploration of meaningful work. Additionally, eight studies adopted longitudinal, time-lagged, or diary methods, providing insights into the dynamic nature of meaningful work over time. Notably, five studies utilized surveys distributed to dyads, such as managers and employees, to examine meaningful work from multiple perspectives within the same organizational context. Furthermore, five studies combined survey data with outcome or performance data sourced externally, such as manager performance ratings, with one study also integrating qualitative methods to enrich the quantitative findings. The use of mixed methods was evident in three studies, blending qualitative and quantitative approaches to offer a more nuanced understanding of meaningful work. Much of the reviewed literature (n=17) employed purely qualitative methods, including interviews, observations, focus groups, documentary analysis, and action research, underscoring the importance of in-depth, contextualized explorations of meaningful work.

Geographically, most of the studies were conducted in North America, reflecting a strong research interest in this region. However, the scope of research on meaningful work extends beyond North America, with studies also being conducted in Europe, Australasia, the Far East, Israel, India, South Africa, and the Philippines. This geographical diversity indicates the global relevance of meaningful work as a research topic and its significance across different cultural contexts.

3.2. Definitions of meaningful work

The concept of meaningful work has been explored extensively within the scholarly literature, with various definitions and operationalizations reflecting this construct’s complexity and multifaceted nature. A fundamental distinction is drawn between the terms ‘meaning’—which pertains to the significance attributed to work—and ‘meaningfulness,’ which denotes the positive valuation of work’s significance (Lips-Wiersma et al., 2016). Initial approaches to meaningful work were primarily unidimensional, focusing on workers’ perceptions of their work as worthwhile, important, or valuable (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). This perspective has been maintained by some researchers (May et al., 2004; Spreitzer, 1995), while others have proposed more comprehensive, multidimensional frameworks that integrate aspects of self-fulfillment, such as self-actualization and personal growth, with the orientation towards contributing to the welfare of others and the greater good (Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012; Rosso et al., 2010).

These broader conceptualizations recognize experiences of expressing full potential and aiding others as intrinsically meaningful, positioning them as processes that contribute to meaningful work rather than defining meaningful work per se (Lepisto & Pratt, 2017; Martela & Pessi, 2018). It is posited that meaningful work transcends continuous psychological states, with individuals experiencing episodic moments of meaningfulness or meaninglessness that coalesce into an overarching belief system regarding their work’s significance (Bailey & Madden, 2017; Kahneman & Krueger, 2006).

3.3. Measures of Meaningful Work

Unidimensional vs. Multidimensional Conceptualizations. The scholarly discourse on meaningful work has led to the development of unidimensional and multidimensional measures to capture the essence of meaningful work. Unidimensional measures, often called significance scales, are designed to assess meaningful work directly, allowing respondents to articulate the processes that render their work meaningful based on their perceptions (Martela & Pessi, 2018). These scales align with the Job Characteristics Theory (JCT) by focusing on the intrinsic significance of work without delving into the specific experiences that contribute to this sense of meaning.

Multidimensional Measures and Their Implications. In contrast, multidimensional scales aim to measure the variety of meaningful experiences individuals encounter in their work (Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012; Martela & Pessi, 2018). An exemplar of this approach is the Work as Meaning Inventory (WAMI), developed by Steger et al. (2012), which includes subscales for assessing positive meaning, meaning-making through work, and contributions to the greater good. These multidimensional scales are comprehensive, capturing a broad spectrum of experiences that contribute to the perception of work as meaningful.

Different approaches to meaningfulness
1. Existential Meaningfulness

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Existential meaningfulness draws from the work of existential philosophers and psychologists, emphasizing the individual's search for purpose and the intrinsic value of work. This perspective is rooted in the belief that meaningful work allows individuals to connect with their core values and existential goals. Key authors in this area include Frankl (1959), who emphasized the search for life's meaning through work; Yalom (1980), who discussed existential concerns in the context of meaningful living; and May et al. (2004), who explored the intersection of creativity, courage, and personal commitment in achieving existential significance.

2. Psychological Meaningfulness

Psychological meaningfulness focuses on the individual’s perception of their work's significance and the fulfillment it brings. Psychological theories of motivation, identity, and well-being inform this approach. Deci & Ryan (2000) provide a foundational framework with their Self-Determination Theory, emphasizing the role of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in psychological well-being. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) introduces the concept of flow, a state of deep engagement and satisfaction in activities that match one's skills. Wrzesniewski, Dutton, and Debebe (2003) explore how job crafting can transform work into a more meaningful activity by altering tasks, relationships, and perceptions of work.

3. Socio-Cultural Meaningfulness

Socio-cultural meaningfulness highlights the role of cultural, social, and institutional contexts in shaping the meaning of work. This approach suggests that work is meaningful when it aligns with broader social values and contributes to the community or society. Bourdieu (1990) discusses the role of habitus and social fields in determining the value and meaning of work. Putnam (2001) examines the decline of social capital and its impact on communal and an individual sense of purpose. Hofstede (1980) provides insights into how cultural dimensions influence workplace values and behaviors, thereby impacting meaningfulness.

4. Functional Meaningfulness

Functional meaningfulness refers to work's practical and utility-based aspects contributing to its perceived value and significance. This perspective considers how work meets economic needs, provides security, and enables individuals to fulfill their societal roles. Becker (1994) introduces the concept of human capital, highlighting the importance of work for personal development and economic productivity. Maslow (1943), with his hierarchy of needs, places employment and financial security as foundational to achieving higher levels of self-actualization and fulfillment.

5. Eudaimonic Meaningfulness

Eudaimonic meaningfulness is based on the concept of eudaimonia, a state of flourishing that arises from living in accordance with one's true self and virtues. This approach to meaningfulness emphasizes self-realization, personal growth, and the intrinsic rewards of work. Ryan & Deci (2001) expand on the Self-Determination Theory to discuss how work can contribute to eudaimonic well-being. Waterman (1993) specifically investigates the role of personal expressiveness and eudaimonia in the workplace, suggesting that alignment between personal values and work tasks leads to higher levels of meaningfulness.

6. Narrative Meaningfulness

Narrative meaningfulness focuses on individuals' stories about their work and how these narratives construct a sense of identity and purpose. This perspective is influenced by narrative psychology and the understanding that humans make sense of their lives through stories. McAdams (1993) discusses the role of life stories in identity formation, emphasizing how individuals create coherence and meaning through narrative. Bruner (1990) explores how narratives shape our understanding of the world and ourselves, suggesting that meaningful work often prominently in personal narratives reflecting growth, achievement, and contribution.

3.4. Theories of meaningful work

Theories of Meaningful Work in the scientific literature span a broad range of perspectives, reflecting the multifaceted nature of meaningful work. This comprehensive review highlights the diversity and depth of theoretical foundations underpinning the study of meaningful work, drawing from various academic disciplines, including psychology, philosophy, and organizational studies. Below, we integrate additional authors and years to further enrich the context of each theory discussed.

Moral and Institutional Imperatives

Philosophers and political theorists argue that meaningful work should provide autonomy, dignity, and freedom, underlining the moral duty of organizations and policymakers to facilitate access to such work. Yeoman (2014) emphasizes the harm of lacking meaningful work, arguing it's essential for a flourishing life. This perspective broadens the understanding of meaningfulness beyond subjective assessments, suggesting a 'bipartite value of meaningfulness' that includes subjective and objective dimensions.

Social Constructivist Views

In the social constructivist framework, meaningfulness is situated within a broader societal and cultural milieu, questioning the basis of personal judgments on the meaningfulness of work. Lepisto and Pratt (2017) propose that individuals perceive their work as meaningful based on its perceived value beyond personal gain, highlighting the challenge modernity poses in finding moral significance in work amid prevailing uncertainty and ambiguity (Sennett, 2007).
Critical scholars and labor process theorists question the dynamics of power in determining the meaningfulness of work, suggesting that organizational leadership often imposes meanings on workers (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009). They critique the assumption that meaning is crafted top-down within organizations, highlighting potential conflicts between organizational cultures and individual values (Kunda, 1992; Carton, 2018; Willmott, 1993; Tourish, 2019).

Job Characteristics Theory (JCT)

The JCT by Hackman and Oldham (1976) is foundational, identifying job design features that lead to meaningful work and, consequently, positive work outcomes. This theory has been supported and extended in various studies (Fried & Ferris, 1987; Humphrey et al., 2007; Renn & Vandenbergh, 1995), with meaningful work emerging as a crucial mediator between job characteristics and outcomes.

Work Engagement and Personal Role Engagement

Building on the JCT, Kahn (1990) explored conditions fostering work engagement, linking meaningful work to the expression of one’s values and personal identity. This line of inquiry has been enriched by research integrating personal role engagement theory (Kahn, 1990; Lips-Wiersma, 2002; Duffy et al., 2011) and demonstrating the strong relationship between meaningful work and engagement.

Spiritual and Humanistic Perspectives

Research within the domain of workplace spirituality and callings considers meaningful work as part of a broader spiritual fulfillment, encompassing elements like inner life, belonging, and purpose (Dirkx, 2001, 2013). This perspective aligns with humanistic and holistic approaches to development and underscores the ontological significance of meaningful work.

3.5. The outcomes of meaningful work

The outcomes of meaningful work, as detailed in the "Meaningful Work Literature Review," are categorized into four main areas: work-related attitudinal and behavioral outcomes, performance-related outcomes, individual outcomes, and both proximal and distal work-related outcomes. Below is a summary of these findings:

Work-Related Attitudinal and Behavioral Outcomes. Meaningful work is positively associated with a range of attitudinal and behavioral outcomes, such as work or personal engagement (Geldenhuyse et al., 2014), job satisfaction (Duffy et al., 2013), organizational commitment (Leiter & Harvie, 1997) and behavioral involvement (Fairlie, 2011). Additional positive outcomes include affective commitment, job enjoyment, and feelings of accomplishment (Britt et al., 2001; Chen & Li, 2013). However, a few studies found no significant link between meaningful work and some positive attitudinal outcomes, such as environmental mastery and extrinsic motivation (Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012). Meaningful work has also been linked to lower intentions to quit and absenteeism, although findings related to turnover cognitions varied by gender (Miller & Wheeler, 1992).

Performance-Related Outcomes. Studies on performance-related outcomes of meaningful work have shown mixed results. For example, Albuquerque et al. (2014) did not find a direct link between meaningful work and organizational performance but did find associations with perceived patient satisfaction and perceived just-in-time management. Other performance outcomes positively associated with meaningful work include organizational reputation, knowledge sharing, and creativity (Leiter & Harvie, 1997; Cohen-Meitar et al., 2009).

Individual Outcomes. Research into existential outcomes of meaningful work has found positive associations with life meaning, life satisfaction, work as a calling, and work-life enrichment (Allan, 2017; Johnson & Jiang, 2017). Some studies, however, did not find associations between meaningful work and self-acceptance or purpose in life, suggesting the need for further research in this area (Bassi et al., 2013; Steger et al., 2012).

Proximal Outcomes of Meaningful Work. Meaningful work has strong proximal relationships with work engagement, job satisfaction, and commitment (Jacobs 2014; Duffy et al., 2014; Steger et al., 2012). These relationships suggest that meaningful work directly influences these outcomes due to its inherent motivational and affective properties.

Distal Work-Related Outcomes of Meaningful Work. Other work-related variables, such as self-rated job performance, organizational citizenship behaviors, and withdrawal intentions, demonstrate smaller relations with meaningful work than do work engagement, commitment, and job satisfaction (Allan et al., 2016; Lam et al., 2016; Steger et al., 2012; Arnoux-Nicolas et al., 2016; Clausen and Borg, 2010). These relationships may be indirect, mediated through the proximal outcomes of meaningful work.

In summary, meaningful work is significantly associated with a wide range of positive work-related, performance-related, and individual outcomes. While most associations are positive, indicating the beneficial impact of meaningful work, the research suggests that the strength and nature of these relationships can vary, highlighting the complexity of meaningful work's influence in the workplace.

3.6. Antecedents Associated With Meaningful Work

The antecedents associated with meaningful work are critical in understanding how individuals and organizations can foster environments conducive to experiencing work as meaningful. This part of the "Meaningful Work Literature Review"
categorizes these antecedents into distinct areas, providing a comprehensive overview of the factors contributing to the perception of meaningful work.

**Job Design.** A considerable amount of research highlights job design as a pivotal antecedent of meaningful work. Utilizing Hackman and Oldham’s (1975) job characteristics model, studies have found that skill variety, task significance, and task identity positively correlate with meaningful work (Schnell et al., 2013). Additionally, work-role fit, self-concept fit, and job enrichment are significant factors contributing to meaningful work (May et al., 2004; Kahn, 1990). However, some studies present ambiguous findings regarding the relationship between specific job design aspects and meaningfulness, indicating areas for further exploration (Chen et al., 2011; Fletcher & Schofield, 2021).

**Leadership and Management.** Leadership styles and management practices are also found to have a positive association with meaningful work. Transformational leadership, leader sense-giving, strong leader–member exchange, spiritual leadership, and supervisor support are among the leadership qualities linked with higher levels of meaningful work (Arnold et al., 2007; Ghadi et al., 2013; Timmers & Knies, 2013). Conversely, negative leadership behaviors, such as abusive or divisive supervision, are associated with reduced levels of meaningfulness (Bailey & Madden, 2016; Pavlish & Hunt, 2012).

**Organizational-level Factors.** Certain organizational factors, such as a spiritual or learning-focused work climate, have been shown to correlate with meaningful work (Duchon & Plowman, 2005; Pavlish & Hunt, 2012). The sociomoral organizational climate and an organization’s self-transcendent orientation are also linked with levels of meaningful work (Schnell et al., 2013). Autonomy, self-selected teams, and community orientation within healthcare settings, for instance, have been identified as organizational characteristics that enhance meaningful work, although more research is needed to measure these factors directly (Albuquerque et al., 2014).

**Workplace Relationships.** Positive workplace relationships are fundamental in creating an environment where employees find their work meaningful. Manager recognition, coworker recognition, and supportive work-life cultures are crucial in fostering meaningful work (Bailey & Madden, 2016). The importance of unity with others and serving others as dimensions of meaningful work underscores the role of interpersonal relationships in the workplace (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009).

**Individual Characteristics.** While less research has focused on individual-level antecedents, studies indicate that personal attributes and circumstances play a role in perceiving work as meaningful. Hardiness, personal character strengths, living a calling, and subjective social status are among the individual characteristics associated with meaningful work (Britt et al., 2001; Allan, Autin, & Duffy, 2016). Moreover, occupation type and individual abilities to construct meaning are highlighted as significant factors (Albuquerque et al., 2014; Isaksen, 2000).

**Moderators and Mediators.** The relationship between job characteristics and meaningful work outcomes is mediated by experienced meaningfulness and moderated by individual growth need strength (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). Other studies have found that well-being levels, positive emotions, and individual prosocial motivations act as moderators and mediators in the relationship between job factors and meaningful work (Soane et al., 2013; Gloria & Steinhardt, 2016; H.-C. Chen et al., 2016).

The development of work meaningfulness is a multifaceted process, as illustrated in Figure 1, encompassing various stages that contribute to an individual’s perception and realization of meaningful work. The process begins with interpersonal communications, where interactions with colleagues, mentors, and supervisors play a pivotal role in shaping one’s understanding of job significance and value. This stage is crucial for setting the groundwork for meaningfulness through social influence and support. Subsequently, self-appraisal and motivation serve as introspective phases where individuals evaluate their personal and professional goals, aspirations, and the alignment of their work with these objectives. This self-reflection is critical for fostering intrinsic motivation towards engaging in meaningful activities. Person-environment interactions then emphasize the dynamic relationship between individuals and their work context, highlighting how workplace culture, job design, and organizational values influence the perception of meaningfulness. This stage underscores the importance of a conducive work environment in facilitating meaningful work experiences. Career engagement and career-self-management are subsequent stages where individuals proactively engage with their work roles and take charge of their career development, respectively. These stages are instrumental in enhancing job satisfaction, commitment, and a sense of purpose. Finally, career adaptability and a return to person-environment interactions mark the iterative nature of this process. Career adaptability reflects the ability to navigate work-related challenges and changes, fostering resilience and continuous alignment between personal values and work roles. The repeated focus on person-environment interactions reiterates the ongoing negotiation between individual aspirations and work context, ensuring sustained meaningfulness in one’s career.

Overall, this model delineates a comprehensive pathway through which individuals can cultivate and sustain meaningfulness in their work, emphasizing the interplay between personal agency, social influences, and organizational context.

4. Discussion and implications

The empirical investigation into meaningful work has unearthed a complex, evolving field enriched by interdisciplinary contributions from psychology, workplace spirituality, and humanities. Despite a broad search strategy, the stringent criteria
led to a surprisingly limited number of empirical studies that met our inclusion criteria, signaling a nascent stage in the empirical examination of meaningful work. The literature is characterized by diverse definitions and measures, reflecting its interdisciplinary roots and the subjective nature of meaningful work as perceived by individuals. Notably, studies have variously defined meaningful work as subjectively meaningful (Nair & Vohra, 2010; Renard & Snelgar, 2016), purposeful (Arnold et al., 2007), or congruent with personal beliefs (Li et al., 2008), among others. This diversity points to an ongoing debate around the conceptualization of meaningful work, with contemporary scholars (Duchon & Plowman, 2005; Lips-Wiersma, 2002; May et al., 2004; Steger et al., 2012) advocating for a multidimensional understanding that encompasses both self-oriented and other-oriented experiences of meaningfulness.

**Figure 1** Main stages of work meaningfulness development process.

The field’s complexity is further evidenced by using 28 different measurement scales in quantitative studies, indicating a lack of consensus on operationalizing the construct (Both-Nwabuwe et al., 2017; Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012). Moreover, the treatment of meaningfulness as a positive attribute, sometimes conceptualized as the opposite of alienation (Tummers & Knies, 2013), underscores the varied perspectives on meaningful work. This variability suggests a need for a more nuanced understanding of meaningfulness that acknowledges the potential for dynamic interplays between different sources of meaning (Rosso et al., 2010; Schnell et al., 2013).

The evidence reviewed suggests that meaningful work is best understood as a multifaceted experience, where individuals derive meaningfulness from various sources rather than a single dimension (Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012). Yet, questions remain about the salience of different dimensions of meaningfulness, their integrative effects, and the potential for tensions within the search for meaning (Bailey & Madden, 2016; Chen et al., 2011; Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017). These questions indicate meaningful work as an “essentially contested concept” (Gallie, 1956), ripe for further scholarly exploration.

Significantly, the review focuses on the subjective experience of meaningful work, with less attention to its objective dimensions or the broader societal and political context in which work becomes meaningful (Yeoman, 2014; Ciulla, 2012). This gap suggests an avenue for future research to explore the interplay between individual experiences of meaningfulness and the structural conditions of work.

Emerging constructivist approaches to studying meaningful work (Schnell et al., 2013) offer promising insights into how individuals construct a sense of meaningfulness in their work. However, this literature remains underdeveloped, indicating a need for further empirical exploration.

The trajectory of empirical research on meaningful work, from early studies on job design (Hackman & Oldham, 1976) through to recent investigations within positive psychology (May et al., 2004; Tims et al., 2016), underscores a growing but still incomplete understanding of the phenomenon. Studies linking meaningful work to positive outcomes like engagement, satisfaction, and commitment (Albuquerque et al., 2014; Kahn, 1990) provide evidence of its significance. However, the relationship between meaningful work and its antecedents and outcomes remains an area ripe for further investigation.

Our comprehensive review of the meaningful work literature reveals several promising areas for future research that can significantly advance our understanding of how meaningful work impacts individuals and organizations. One critical area is the deeper integration of Job Characteristics Theory (JCT) with contemporary workplace dynamics. Specifically, future studies...
should examine how meaningful work influences changes in employee attitudes and behaviors within modern organizational structures characterized by decentralization, increased contract work, and the fading permanence of job roles (Hall & Moss, 1998). This approach necessitates a nuanced understanding of how the evolving nature of work affects individuals’ perceptions of job meaningfulness.

Additionally, the adaptation of JCT to incorporate factors relevant to today’s work environments—such as information processing, specialization, the role of personality, and the pervasive use of technology (Barrick et al., 2013; Gibson et al., 2019)—underscores the importance of exploring conditions that enhance meaningful work. Given that meaningful work has been linked to positive outcomes like engagement, satisfaction, and commitment, future research should focus on identifying and fostering the conditions that promote these benefits.

The concept of job crafting and the significance of the social context of work represent another vital research direction. The literature suggests that individuals are not merely passive recipients of job characteristics but actively engage in shaping their work to make it more meaningful (Wrzeniewski & Dutton, 2001). Therefore, investigating how job crafting practices and the social environment contribute to creating a sense of meaningful work could provide valuable insights. This line of inquiry extends the original JCT framework by incorporating the role of social and contextual factors in the meaning-making process (Oldham & Hackman, 2010; Wrzesniewski et al., 2003).

Moreover, understanding the social and contextual nature of meaning-making in the workplace highlights the need for research on the impact of workplace relationships and the visibility of work outcomes on perceived meaningfulness. These aspects may be significant moderators in the relationship between meaningful work and its positive outcomes (Grant, 2007; Kahn, 1990).

Finally, the variability in how meaningful work is experienced and its consequences for individuals and organizations suggests the presence of moderating factors. Future research should thus aim to identify individual differences—such as personal values and personality traits—and contextual factors that may influence the impact of meaningful work (Chalofsky, 2003). By focusing on these moderators, researchers can better understand the conditions under which meaningful work leads to the most positive outcomes, thereby contributing to developing more effective strategies for enhancing job satisfaction, engagement, and commitment in the workplace.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, our review of the meaningful work literature underscores the significance of meaningful work in enhancing employee well-being, engagement, and organizational commitment. Integrating Job Characteristics Theory (JCT) with the changing landscape of modern work environments reveals a complex interplay between job design, individual perceptions of meaningfulness, and their outcomes. This synthesis highlights the importance of adapting traditional theories to the realities of contemporary work settings, including the rise of gig economies and the shift towards more autonomous and decentralized work structures. Our analysis suggests that future research should focus on the mechanisms through which meaningful work influences employee attitudes and behaviors, the role of job crafting and the social context of work, and identifying moderating variables that can impact the relationship between meaningful work and its outcomes. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing strategies that foster meaningful work experiences, contributing to more fulfilling careers and effective organizations.

Ethical considerations

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Conflict of Interest

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