

8 Ways to Find More Meaning At Work by Morten Hansen, Dacher Keltner

Does your job seem dull and meaningless? Morten Hansen and Dacher Keltner point the way out.

Do you experience meaning at work—or just emptiness?

In the United States people spend on average 35-40 hours working every week. That's some 80,000 hours during a career—more time than you will spend with your kids, probably.

Beyond the paycheck, what does work give you? Few questions could be more important. It is sad to walk through life and experience work as empty, dreadful, a chore—sapping energy out of your body and soul. Yet many employees do, as evidenced by one large-scale study showing that only 31 percent of employees felt engaged with their work.

Of course, different people look for different types of meanings—and, moreover, different workplaces provide different meanings. The phrase “meaning at work” refers to a person’s experience of something meaningful—something of value—that work provides. That is not the same as “meaningful work,” which refers to the task itself. Work is a social arena that provides a variety of meaningful experiences; even if an employee doesn’t find her tasks to be especially fulfilling, she might derive meaning from other aspects of her job, such as friendships with colleagues.

So, what are the sources of meaningful experiences at work? We have compiled a list of ways that work can become more meaningful, based on our reading of literature in organization behavior and psychology.

Purpose

1. Contributions beyond yourself. The people at the nonprofit Kiva channel micro-loans to poor people who can use the money to get a small business going and improve their lives. Their work clearly has a greater purpose—that of helping people in need. This taps into a longing to have a meaningful life defined as making contributions beyond oneself.

The problem, however, is that most work doesn’t have such a higher purpose, either because work is basically mundane or because—let’s face it—the company doesn’t really have a social mission. Critics like Umair Haque argue that work that involves selling yet more burgers, sugar water, fashion clothes, and the like has no broader purpose

whatsoever. In this view, Coke's "Open Happiness" is just a slogan devoid of meaning.

However, as Teresa Amabile and Steve Kramer argue, much work can be infused with some level of purpose. Companies that make real efforts in social responsibilities do this; for example, Danone, the \$25-billion large and highly successful consumer goods company selling yogurt, has defined their business as providing healthy foods (which led them to sell off their biscuit business). The litmus test here is whether employees experience that their work makes positive contributions to others. Then they experience meaning at work.

Self-realization

2. Learning. Many MBA graduates flock to McKinsey, BCG, and other consultancies so that they can rapidly acquire valuable skills. General Electric is renowned for developing general managers; people who want to become marketers crave to learn that trade at Procter & Gamble. Work offers opportunities to learn, expand the horizon, and improve self-awareness. This kind of personal growth is meaningful.

3. Accomplishment. Work is a place to accomplish things and be recognized, which leads to greater satisfaction, confidence, and self-worth. In the documentary *Jiro Dreams of Sushi*, we see Japan's greatest sushi chef devote his life to making perfect sushi. Well, some critics like Lucy Kellaway at the Financial Times say there isn't a real social mission here. But, from watching the movie, his quest for perfection—to make better sushi, all the time—gives his life a deep sense of meaning. And for Jiro, the work itself gives him a deep intrinsic satisfaction.

Prestige

4. Status. At cocktail parties, a frequent question is, "Where do you work?" The ability to rattle off a name like "Oh, I am a doctor at Harvard Medical School" oozes status. For some, that moment is worth all the grueling nightshifts. A high-status organization confers respect, recognition, and a sense of worth on employees, and that provides meaning at work for some.

5. Power. As Paul Lawrence and Nitin Nohria wrote about in their book *Driven*, for those drawn to power, work provides an arena for acquiring and exercising power. You may not be one of those, but if you are, you experience work as meaningful because you have and can use power.

Social

6. Belonging to a community. Companies like Southwest Airlines go out of their way to create a company atmosphere where people feel they belong. In a society where people increasingly are bowling alone, people crave a place where they can forge friendships and experience a sense of community. The workplace can complement or even be a substitute for other communities (family, the neighborhood, clubs etc.). Workplaces that provide a sense of community give people meaning.

7. Agency. Employees experience meaning at work when what they do actually matters for the organization—when their ideas are listened to and when they see that their contributions has an impact on how the place performs. A sense of real involvement gives people meaning.

8. Autonomy. As Dan Pink shows in his book *Drive*, autonomy is a great intrinsic motivator. Some people are drawn to certain kinds of work that provides a great deal of autonomy—the absence of others who tell you what to do, and the freedom to do your own work and master your task. For example, entrepreneurs frequently go into business by themselves so that they can be their own boss. This kind of freedom gives work meaning.

There are no doubt other sources as well, but the research suggests these eight seem to be especially important. Even so, the more of these is not necessarily better: Experiencing one deeply may just be enough. But if you don't experience any of these, you may want to start by picking one to develop, in collaboration with your boss or colleagues.

Which of these are important to you? And which does your current workplace give you?