



What does work meaning to hospitality employees? The effects of meaningful work on employees' organizational commitment: The mediating role of job engagement

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 11 July 2014

Received in revised form 8 October 2015

Accepted 7 December 2015

Available online 19 December 2015

Keywords:

Meaning of work

Job engagement

Organizational commitment

Hospitality employee

ABSTRACT

What is work? Why is it important? People frequently say that they work to make a living, but many who have enough money on which to live feel unhappy when they have no work to do. Humans can find personal significance through work, and in this respect, work can be said to be the foundation and center of human life. Motivated by these questions, this study was aimed at considering the meaning of work held by hospitality employees and its multiple dimensions in order to determine which dimension employees feel makes their work's meaning and encourages them to be engaged in their jobs and to commit to the organization. Data were collected from a questionnaire distributed to employees of family-style restaurants and 5-star hotels in South Korea. A total of 352 hospitality employees participated. The empirical results indicate that employees' meaning of work positively influences their job engagement and organizational commitment. In more detail, work centrality, interpersonal relations, economic orientation, and obligation norms significantly affect employees' job engagement whereas entitlement norms and expressive orientation did not. Also, work centrality, obligation norms, economic orientation, interpersonal relations, and expressive orientation—among meaning of work—significantly influence employees' commitment. Additionally, employees' engagement positively affects organizational commitment.

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1. Introduction

What does work mean to hospitality employees? Do they perceive a special meaning in their work as they perform emotional labor daily when they are in close contact with customers and provide front-line customer service? Do their perceived meanings of work affect their job engagement and organizational commitment? This study begins by asking these questions. The meaning of work has been studied by industrial psychologists as a variable that contributes to organizational performance (England and Harpaz, 1990). Work has been regarded as the foundation of self-realization. Therefore, whether an individual can find meaning in work has been considered an extremely important determinant in achieving self-realization (Jang, 2001). These previous studies have presumed that those who find their work to be highly meaningful perform it more enthusiastically than those who do not (Britt et al., 2001; Harpaz and Fu, 2002). In addition, because the more meaning that work has for employees, the more they are motivated to work

(Guion and Landy, 1972). The meaning of work should be highly regarded because it satisfies a human's internal motives (Chalofsky and Krishna, 2009).

In particular, the nature of the work performed by hospitality employees obliges them to provide excellent service to their customers. For example, the mission of cooks is to provide delicious meals to their customers. Arguably, cooks place the highest importance on the meaning of their work (Pizam, 2012; King et al., 2013; Robinson et al., 2014). In addition, employees in a representative service job are the closest to their customers. Thus, the job of service representatives has the unique characteristic of requiring that they show favorable emotions to their customers at all times (Lam and Chen, 2012). Hence, many work situations for these service representatives require emotional labor (Jung and Yoon, 2014; Lee and Ok, 2014). Moreover, customer satisfaction has a strong connection to how appropriate employees are for their job and how much meaning they attach to their job (Chen et al., 2014). Although hotel employees play an important part in customer service, they have poor working conditions, such as low income (Pizam, 2015) and long hours, including weekends (Karatepe et al., 2014), compared to those in other jobs. Therefore, in order to overcome such poor conditions, it is very important that employees attach meaning to

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their job and consider that their job is appropriate for them. However, no research has examined the meaning that employees in the hospitality industry attach to their jobs. Given that the meaning of work for employees also determines their social position in terms of self-realization, it is very important in increasing work performance (Kim et al., 2011). Compared to traditional management, management in modern hospitality industries respects employees' autonomy and improves work performance by empowering individuals (Ismail, 2013). Through such psychological support, employees with meaningful work showed much better job performance than those without this support. Employees who place a high value and meaning on their work have much higher psychological adaptability than those who do not attach value and meaning to their work. These employees are also more satisfied with their organization and exhibit more desirable qualifications than do employees who do not value their work (Geldenhuis et al., 2014).

Chalofsky (2003) noted that the meaning of work in terms of value, purposes, and support for individual competition were most closely related to employees' internal motives. According to traditional theory, the perceived meaning of work positively affects job performance in terms of internal rewards (Hertzberg, 1966). The job characteristics model (Hackman and Oldham, 1976) and the work environment theory (Warr, 1987) are examples. In addition to companies' ethical and moral obligations to help their employees find meaning in performing their work, such meaning remains important to companies because it is clearly related to organizational performance (Harpaz and Meshoulam, 2010). Therefore, many people want work to be more than just a means to earn money or put in time (Steger et al., 2012). They want their work to be meaningful to them (Sverko and Vizek-Vidovic, 1995). Furthermore, Juhdi et al. (2010) observed that the meaning employees placed on their job positively affected internal motive, satisfaction, and work effectiveness. Akanbi and Itiola (2013) observed that the meaning of work as part of job satisfaction was an important element in increasing engagement. Burger et al. (2013) reported that the meaning that employees attached to their work was essential for an organization's successful changes. Soane et al. (2013) suggested that those who tried to learn something were inspired by having meaning in their work. They gained faster recovery speed, more energy, and passion. Thus, the meaning of work perceived by employees in organizations is indeed highly important (Kamdron, 2005; Steger and Dik, 2009; Pratt and Ashforth, 2003; Rosso et al., 2010). Harpaz and Fu (2002) further noted that the more importance that employees place on the meaning of their work, the more they valued their jobs. Chang and Shim (2005) observed that although personal improvement in job performance and achieving outcomes are important from the viewpoint of organizations, focusing on internal elements, such as the meaning of work is also important because limitations clearly exist in improving external outcomes.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is as follows: (1) verify the influence of the meaning of work for employees on job engagement; (2) examine the influence of the meaning of work for employees on organizational commitment; (3) investigate the partially mediating effect of job engagement on the meaning of work and organizational commitment.

2. Literature review and conceptual model

2.1. Definition and previous research on employees' meaning of work

Kabanoff (1980) defines work as a set of tasks that individuals must perform while committed to a position in an organization. The "meaning of work may help deepen [individuals'] understanding

of their selves and the world around them, facilitating their personal growth" (Steger et al., 2012). Steer and Porter (1991) identify four dimensions of the meaning of work: reciprocity or exchange, social functions, a source of status or class, and personal meaning. Cartwright and Holmes (2006) suggest that employees' meaning of work consists of three factors: work itself, a sense of self, and a sense of balance. Based on Harpaz and Fu (2002)'s study, the current study divided traits of employees' meaning of work into work centrality, entitlement norms, economic orientation, interpersonal relations, expressive orientation, and obligation norms:

- (1) Work centrality is the degree of general importance that working has in a person's life at any given time (Dubin et al., 1975).
- (2) Entitlement norms are a set of normative assumptions developed about what one should expect from work and working (Harpaz and Fu, 2002).
- (3) Economic orientation refers to the economic benefits obtained through work.
- (4) Interpersonal relations focus on the human relations formed with colleagues or supervisors through work.
- (5) Expressive orientation is the degree of fun, interest, or satisfaction which makes work attractive.
- (6) Obligation norms are the contributions expected from working (Harpaz and Fu, 2002).

As mentioned, the meaning of work perceived by employees is important to organizations, but no study has comprehensively examined the meaning of work perceived by hospitality employees. As an early study on the topic, Harpaz (1985) measured the meaning of work with the same six factors, examined the discriminative degree of perception about the meaning of work in ten occupational groups, and noted that work centrality had the greatest meaning for employees. In research on American soldiers, Britt et al. (2001) examined the mediating role of engagement between the meaning of work and acts of courage and found that soldiers who thought that their work was meaning displayed high engagement and conducted acts of courage, further showing that this state became stronger over time. Harpaz et al. (2002) divided the meaning of work into three factors: societal norms, work centrality, and work goal. They then examined differences in respondents according to their nationality, and observed that nations with low disposition of uncertainty avoidance had high work centrality. Wrzesniewski et al. (2003) also divided the meaning of work into job, role, and self, and reported that all positively affected job attitudes. Also, Cartwright and Holmes (2006) reported that, when employees perceived that their work was meaning, their engagement increased, their cynical behaviors or burnout decreased, and their job attitudes were positively affected. Maharaj and Schlechter (2007) observed that trainees exhibited higher their satisfaction, commitment, and organizational citizenship behaviors when they had a higher perception of the meaning of their work. Rosso et al. (2010) suggested that the meaning of work plays an important role in increasing employees' certainty, sense of self-efficacy, and self-esteem, encouraging them to regard their work as important. In a study involving university officials, Steger et al. (2012) stated that the meaning of work perceived served as an important factor in determining officials' job-related attitudes and psychological wellbeing. As mentioned, studies investigating the meaning of work perceived by organizational employees have been limited to the exploratory level or examined simple influential relationships, such as whether those who perceive their work as meaning have greater satisfaction or more positive life attitudes. Beukes and Botha (2013) who used similar concepts to those of the present study divided nurses' meaning of work into three

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