



Am I empowered through meaningful work? The moderating role of perceived flexibility in connecting meaningful work and psychological empowerment

Lalatendu Kesari Jena^{a,*}, Pratishtha Bhattacharyya^b,
Sajeet Pradhan^c

^a Xavier School of Human Resource Management, Xavier University, Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India

^b Department of Humanities and Social Science, Indian Institute of Technology Kharagpur, Kharagpur, West Bengal, India

^c International Management Institute New Delhi, New Delhi, India

Received 10 October 2016; revised form 30 June 2017; accepted 27 March 2019; Available online 2 April 2019

KEYWORDS

Meaningful work;
Perceived flexibility;
Psychological
empowerment;
Manufacturing
professionals;
India

Abstract The study investigates the role of meaningful work in shaping psychological empowerment of employees. In today's scenario, it is imperative to understand how flexibility affects employee psyche in the conceptualisation for empowerment. Therefore, the present study takes into consideration perceived flexibility as a possible moderator between meaningful work and psychological empowerment. A sample of 288 executives was taken from a manufacturing unit in eastern India. Confirmatory factor analysis was carried out through LISREL 8.8 to assess the distinctness of the constructs in the study. Hierarchical regression analysis revealed a significant moderating role of perceived flexibility in the association between meaningful work and psychological empowerment. Implications of the study are discussed in light of the findings.

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Introduction

For several decades, the question of what triggers employees to perform beyond their job description and the drive of their regular payroll has been a source of interest to organisational researchers. Previous empirical work has indicated that

engaging in work was of distinct intrinsic value to people in the form of meaning derived from work, going beyond the mere extrinsic appeal of paychecks (Šverko & Vizek-Vidović, 1995). However, a recent study attributed the escalating interest among contemporary researchers in studying the meaningfulness of work to availability of better job opportunities, increased level of education among employees and enhanced sense of curiosity to better understand one's existence in terms of personal and professional contexts (Geldenhuis, Łaba & Venter, 2014; Jena & Pradhan, 2017).

* Corresponding author. Tel.: 9800172570.

E-mail address: lkjena@xub.edu.in (L.K. Jena).

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iimb.2019.03.010>

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Classical theoreticians have always emphasised the significance of work in a person's life. Interestingly, work has been considered an integral part of meaningfulness in life (Steger & Dik, 2010). Previous research on meaningfulness of work illustrated that work which provided meaning made a significant contribution in helping people appreciate and recognise the intricacies of their self, thereby providing opportunities for growth (Steger & Dik, 2010). Furthermore, meaningfulness of life has been discussed in terms of two aspects namely, meaningful work and psychological meaningfulness (Geldenhuys, Laba, & Venter, 2014), in which the former has been discussed prominently in organisational literature.

The concept of meaningful work is deeply entrenched in the philosophical treatises related to the meaning of life (Overell, 2008), and refers to a holistic sense of self in relation to one's professional existence (Rosso, Dekas & Wrzesniewski, 2010). Meaningful work is considered "not as simply whatever work means to people (meaning), but as work that is both significant and positive in valence (meaningfulness)" (Steger, Dik & Duffy, 2012, p. 2). In contemporary works, the concept of meaningful work has been redefined and made more comprehensible through theoretical models. Steger, Dik, and Duffy (2012) provided a concise model to conceptualise meaningful work as a combination of three domains. The first domain, "personal meaningfulness", conveys the extent of one's sense of meaningfulness with respect to one's activity related to work. "Meaning making", the second domain, conveys the degree of one's sense of association between the meaningfulness of one's work and the meaningfulness of one's life. The third domain, the "greater good motivations" conveys one's consideration of meaningfulness at work in reference to the extent it influences others.

Meaningful work has been reported to foster benefits to the employees and to the organisation as an entity (Rosso et al., 2010). Related studies report that employees tend to prefer meaningful work as it ensures a healthy feeling of interest with the work, professional achievement, and positive contribution to others' lives (Bibby, 2001). Aligned with this view, meaningful work has been reported to produce several positive organisational outcomes such as reduction of absenteeism, motivation for work, amiable work behaviour, employee engagement, job satisfaction, reduced stress, organisational identification, career development, individual performance, personal fulfilment, and sense of empowerment (Harpaz & Fu, 2002; May, Gilson & Harter, 2004; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Rosso et al., 2010). Spreitzer (1995) suggested that meaningfulness at work is responsible for fostering a sense of empowerment among employees. Meaning at work or meaningful work and psychological empowerment share a close relationship, where meaning related to one's work has been emphasised as a significant facet of empowerment (Seibert, Wang & Courtright, 2011). Epitropaki and Martin (2005) suggested that the sense of meaningful work gets enhanced when organisational leaders empower their employees to be a part of organisational decision making processes.

In addition, the authors suggest, this sense of meaning fosters empowerment among employees. In a recent investigation, Steger et al. (2012) prominently focussed on the possibility of an association between meaningful work and psychological empowerment.

In this paper we do not wish to establish or reiterate the effects of work meaning on productivity or performance, but we attempt to understand the aspects of *employee feelings* that lead to a long standing relationship with the organisation and in their creation as empowered employees. We propose that as employees find meaning in work and are able to understand their role in fulfilling the strategic goals of the organisation, they feel a sense of empowerment and therefore approach their work with a close sense of identification with their organisation. It is presumed that this kind of attitude will lead the employees to go beyond their call of duty, take ownership and run the extra mile, not only to achieve their individual objectives, but to contribute towards the larger organisational well-being. These are the kind of employees who, in a real sense, become assets by helping their organisations maintain a competitive edge in the dynamic business scenario.

Extant literature on work meaning and empowerment has studied several of its dimensions (Kark, Shamir & Chen, 2003) and from several points of view (Ongori, 2009). However, there has been a gap in addressing some missing links (Steger & Dik, 2009, 2010), especially the role of potential moderators between work meaning and psychological empowerment of employees. Therefore, this paper intends to propose the role of perceived flexibility as an interacting mechanism to comprehend the relationship between work meaning and psychological empowerment of employees. One of the dominant discussions about today's workplace prescription for success is flexibility, that is frequently observed in the form of flexible work culture, and workplace flexibility. In our discussion about the role of flexibility in employment relationship, we have tried to tackle two perspectives - how flexibility influences employee psyche in practice; and secondly, its conceptualisation to supplement empowerment with the intention to extend the existing theoretical base. The paper hence aims to understand the relationship between work meaning and psychological empowerment of employees by understanding the role of perceived flexibility.

Meaningful work and psychological empowerment

The concept of empowerment has permeated organisational literature and has engaged researchers and practitioners as a result of the paradigmatic shift in the way employees are perceived by their organisations today. Psychological empowerment is perceived as an instrument that enables employees to move past laid out job requirements (Kraimer, Seibert & Liden, 1999; Liden, Wayne & Sparrowe, 2000) and apply their own insight to work (Kirkman & Rosen, 1997, 1999; Thorlakson & Murray, 1996). Moreover, psychological empowerment is considered an essential ingredient for organisational success (Jose & Mampilly, 2015).

The ambiguity in the definitions and dimensions of empowerment has resulted in extensive efforts in organisational theory and research to clarify the dimensions of psychological empowerment. Various methods and approaches have been used by academicians and researchers to explain the concept of empowerment (Liden et al., 2000; Spreitzer, 2008). The differentiation between the structural and psychological perspectives of empowerment is critical in that it

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