



# Work and the good life: How work contributes to meaning in life



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## ABSTRACT

Many people expect their work to provide meaning to their lives, yet the specific organizational factors that can promote meaning in life are not clearly delineated. Drawing on the basic science of meaning in life, in this paper we propose that work entails a host of experiences that foster meaning in life. We begin by defining meaning in life, noting its placement within the broader well-being literature and dispelling common myths about its rarity in people's lives. After highlighting the myriad benefits of meaning for individuals and organizations, we describe several established sources of meaning in life and their relevance to work. We then examine how work orientations and social demographic factors influence the propensity to seek meaning through work. We conclude with a discussion of future research directions that can better illuminate the predictors and functions of meaningfulness at work.

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"All goods are disguised by the vulgarity of their concomitants, in this work-a-day world; but woe to him who can only recognize them when he thinks them in their pure and abstract form!" (James, 1890, p. 125)

For many people the "work-day-world" noted by William James includes work. The trappings of work life involve a host of quotidian experiences that are rarely considered central aspects of the good life. Indeed, fantasies of the ideal existence are likely to reflect something more like a long vacation (Scollon & King, 2004). The work-a-day world may include early morning alarm clocks, daily commutes, sharing coffee and complaints with coworkers, meeting demands, and dealing with e-mails and voicemails. Leaving these commitments for a weekend or holiday is often met with joy. Nevertheless, work occupies a central role in most people's lives. The experiences people encounter at work have the potential to greatly improve or thwart their well-being. Many people expect their work to provide not only financial rewards but feelings of happiness and satisfaction with life. Indeed, many people hope that work will provide life with a sense of purpose or meaning. Yet, whereas factors related to life and job satisfaction have been probed extensively (e.g., Duffy & Sedlacek, 2010; Judge & Watanabe, 1993; Tenney, Poole, & Diener, 2016; Wright & Bonett, 2007), the specific organizational factors that can promote meaning in life are largely uncharted.

In this article, drawing on the basic science of meaning in life, we argue that work entails a number of experiences that likely foster a sense that life is meaningful. Research has begun to show that rather than being rare or challenging to accomplish, meaning in life is supported by affective, social, and environmental factors that are surprisingly ubiquitous (e.g., King, Heintzelman, & Ward, 2016). Meaning in life is not only a product of profound, life-altering experiences but is part of the work-a-day world. Grounding meaning in life in the everyday experiences of people, we consider the specific ways that work can encourage meaningfulness and the benefits of meaning for organizations.

In this review, we focus on how work contributes to the broader meaning people ascribe to their lives, rather than on specific interpretations of the *meaning of work*, defined

as "employees' understanding of *what* they do at work as well as the *significance* of what they do" (Wrzesniewski, Dutton, & Debebe, 2003, p. 99). Certainly, the meaningfulness of people's lives is related to the meaningfulness they attribute to their work (Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012; Steger, Dik, & Duffy, 2012), so we draw connections to the meaningfulness of work and to work orientations when relevant throughout this review (for reviews of the meaning of work literature, see Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski, 2010; Wrzesniewski, 2003). Although meaning in life is sometimes considered a rarified experience (see King, 2012), something above the common and ordinary, we hope to show that this experience, though "disguised in the vulgarity of its concomitants," likely springs from many largely unnoticed aspects of work life.

We begin by defining meaning in life, describing its measurement, and placing it in the larger context of the science of well-being. We also briefly sketch the properties and broader correlates of this construct. Then, we review the literature on the meaning of work. Next, we describe the role of six factors in enhancing meaning in life, ranging from the potentially trivial (e.g., positive mood) to the more profound (e.g., religion). Then, we seek to link meaning in life to work attitudes. Finally, we offer ideas for future research and some closing remarks. To begin, we take on a lingering challenge in the well-being literature, defining meaning in life.

## Meaning in life

### *Delineating meaning and its components*

The meaning of life is an age old human preoccupation that is unlikely to have a settled resolution. However, within the science of well-being, meaning *in* life is treated as subjective state or judgment regarding how people feel about their lives, rather than the broader existential purpose people attribute to the world or to human life more generally (i.e., the meaning *of* life). Here, we present a definition of meaning in life, review its measurement, and seek to place it in the larger well-being literature.

Meaning in life is often presented as an enigma: At once a cornerstone of well-being and simultaneously ineffable (Halusic & King, 2013). This definitional ambiguity has

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