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Meaningful work and artistic interventions in organizations: Conceptual development and empirical exploration

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ABSTRACT

This article explores whether artistic interventions in organizations offer employees the possibility of fulfilling the human need to give meaning to work. It draws on several distinct bodies of theories relating to the non-instrumental management of work to identify dimensions of meaningful work, and builds on previous empirical research to specify analytical categories. The qualitative data consists of responses from 67 employees who experienced artistic interventions. The analysis shows that artistic interventions can enable employees to experience meaningful work. It enriches theory-building by offering an expanded integrated framework to conceptualize meaningful work with several categories that had not yet been identified in the literature. The implications for management in taking the learning forward in the organization are discussed, and suggestions for future research to address the study's limitations are identified.

1. Introduction

The human need to experience work as meaningful is not new (Maslow, 1964), but the question of how to fulfil that need arises anew in every generation. Scholars observing social trends note that “people are more interested than ever in having the time they spend working matter” (Steger, Dik, & Duffy, 2012, p. 322). However, at the same time that people aspire to finding “good work” which allows them to “live up to the demands of our job and the expectations of society without denying the needs of our personal identities” (Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi, & Damon, 2001, p. ix), their workplaces are subject to mounting pressures from global and local competitiveness and from organizational procedures such as the multiplication of indicators and assessments, time constraints, and meetings.

So is it due to fortuitous serendipity or to managerial Machiavellianism that the past decade has seen a remarkable growth in attention to the arts in business in many countries (Darsø, 2004, 2016; Schiuma, 2011)? Our research curiosity is piqued by this puzzling phenomenon, leading us to ask: *Might bringing the arts into organizations help create conditions for experiencing meaningful work?* It is an important question to ask at a time when managers, with the help of consultants and sometimes also academics, are seeking ever more tools for exerting pressure on employees, seducing them to give their all, passionately, to the employer (Schiuma & Carlucci, 2016). We postulate that the answer might depend largely on the capacity of management to conceive of

new, non-instrumental ways of managing people and work, rooted in the Kantian categorical imperative that “one should always treat the humanity in a person as an end and never as a means merely” (Bowie, 1998: 1083). The literature relating to meaningful work has not yet examined how the organization can contribute to the process whereby individuals find meaning in their work. Scholars tend to treat this as an individual responsibility, rather than a managerial task (Chalofsky & Krishna, 2009; Michaelson, 2005; Michaelson, 2015; Michaelson, Pratt, Grant, & Dunn, 2014). They warn of the danger of instrumentalizing meaningful work, yet the solution cannot lie in a complete absence of orientation at the workplace.

This article addresses the dilemma that results from this double-edged danger by developing a conceptual framework that draws together hitherto unrelated bodies of literature relating to meaningful work and artistic interventions in organizations. We use it to explore empirical data from thirty three artistic interventions in Spain to see (a) whether there is evidence that these activities have the potential for contributing to an experience of meaningful work, and if so (b) which dimensions of meaningful work they can influence.

Five sections follow this introduction. The first section constructs our theoretical framework by connecting elements from three distinct strands of literature that we consider relevant for conceptualizing and specifying key dimensions of meaningful work. We then discuss the literature on artistic interventions and relate it to the theoretical framework on meaningful work. The second section describes our research

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method and database. In the third section we present the results of our analysis, showing the frequency with which certain dimensions of meaningful work appear and illustrating them with respondents' formulations. In the fourth section we show how our findings both document the relevance of the existing categories and also enrich them with additional elements not yet included in the debate of meaningful work. In the fifth section, we conclude by discussing the implications for theory building about meaningful work and artistic interventions, identifying the limitations of our study that future research should address, and suggesting possible implications for a non-instrumental approach to management and meaningful work.

2. Theoretical framework

To address our research question, we offer a framework for understanding meaningful work that draws together several bodies of literature, namely strands of thought and empirical research relating to non-instrumental management. We then connect the framework to insights from recent studies on artistic interventions.

2.1. Conceptualizing meaningful work

Although there is no consensus on a definition of meaningful work, it is generally conceived as an outcome of alignment between an individual's aspirations and their perceived realization, in other words a match between the features valued at work and the features present at the workplace (Frankl, 1969; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003: 313). The subjective dimension (employee's perceptions) of meaningful work is complemented by “an ‘objective’ dimension (working conditions)” and “these dimensions mutually influence each other” (Michaelson et al., 2014: 85). However, there is a growing tension between the objective and subjective dimensions of meaningful work. The objective conditions have become increasingly demanding while at the same time, people increasingly expect work to provide more opportunities for self-realization (Michaelson, 2005).

To develop our understanding of meaningful work, we draw from literature on gratuitous gift theory, spirituality at work, and meaningful work. Common to these approaches is the attention they draw to three kinds of needs: 1) personal development, 2) relationships with others, and 3) benefit for society. After linking these heretofore usually separate bodies of literature that relate to meaningful work we present findings from one of the most comprehensive empirical studies in this area as a basis for specifying sub-categories with which to analyze our own data.

Maslow's (1964) hierarchy of needs starts with physiological needs and moves up to the need for meaning and self-realization (intellectual, emotional and spiritual). He identifies the search for meaning as a human need. Work, when defined broadly as a purposeful activity, can respond to this human need for meaning (Brief & Nord, 1990; Frankl, 1969). Meaningful work goes beyond meeting a human need (Grant, 2007; Yeoman, 2014). It also refers both to the employee's ideals and to job characteristics (Steger et al., 2012). Some definitions highlight the employee's experience in conjunction with ideals or norms. In this vein, meaningful work is conceived as “the value of a work goal or purpose, judged in relation to an individual's own ideals or standards” (May, Gilson, & Harter, 2004:14; May, Li, Mencl, & Huang, 2014). Other definitions relate the expected with the perceived characteristics of work. Meaningful work is then the result of a match between the aspirations and objectives that an individual hopes to realize at work (features desired at work) and the perception the individual has of the extent those objectives are realized in the real work context (features actually present at work) (Frankl, 1969; Isaksen, 2000; Morin, 2008; Ros, Schwartz, & Surkiss, 1999).

Giving meaning to work is a deep source of intrinsic motivation (Chalofsky & Krishna, 2009; Michaelson, 2005). Meaning-making is an expression of human liberty: management cannot impose meaningful

work; it is something that only each individual can choose to pursue for him- or herself. It would even be counterproductive to impinge upon each individual's freedom to give meaning to his or her work (Ashforth & Vaidyanath, 2002; Bowie, 1998). As Bowie points out, “meaningful work is not paternalistic in the sense of interfering with the worker's conception of how she wishes to obtain happiness” (1998: 1083). Instead, it is more fruitful to reflect on the conditions required at work for it to meet the human need for meaning. A step in this direction is to identify the dimensions of work that people usually find meaningful.

Undertaking to analyse dimensions of meaningful work implies rejecting the hegemonic approach which positions work only as a means for obtaining a result and conceives of instrumentality as the primary reference point in corporate life (Frémeaux & Michelson, 2011). Work cannot be treated in an exclusively instrumental way; it is not just a means of meeting material expectations (salary, job security). Two other dimensions are essential: the social dimension of human relations at work and the symbolic dimension of personal development, self-realization, and self-expression through work. The social and symbolic dimensions are often called intrinsic as opposed to the extrinsic or materialist orientations (Maslow, 1964). The possibility of pursuing a non-instrumental relation to work is present in three bodies of literature: the existential gift, spirituality at work, and meaningful work. We present each of these briefly to show how they share common dimensions of meaning given to work.

- (1) The logic of the gift that Mauss (1923) developed from his studies of archaic societies has a non-instrumental underpinning because it specifies the taboo of expecting a counter-gift (Caillé, 2001; Caillé & Godbout, 1992; Godbout, 2000). However, the management literature, particularly in human resource management and marketing, has generally presented the logic of the gift and counter-gift in an instrumental manner by emphasizing the existence of a calculation (Balkin & Richebé, 2007; Dodlova & Yudkevich, 2009; Falk, 2007; Sherry, 1983). While the theory is helpful in explaining frustrated expectations of employees when employment conditions change, it does not suffice to explain the experience of meaningful work. Other management scholars have therefore supplemented the theory by introducing the notion of the gratuitous or existential gift in organizations (Frémeaux & Michelson, 2011). This concept makes it possible to recognize the human need to give. Although reciprocity may often occur, it is not the primary objective of the act of freely giving. The concept of the existential gift offers four dimensions relating to meaningful work: personal development (the gift as expression and source of liberty), relation to others (the gift as a source of relationship), service to others (the gift as a response to needs), and a humanistic vision (the human being as an end rather than as a means to an end).
- (2) Another body of literature that contains relevant elements for understanding features of meaningful work relates to spirituality at work (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000; Mitroff & Denton, 1999). Recent comprehensive studies (Lips-Wiersma, 2002, 2003; Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009) highlight four sources of meaningful work: developing and becoming self, expressing self, unity with others and serving others. Developing, becoming and expressing self imply a moral development, a personal growth, the ability to stay true to oneself, and to create, achieve and influence. Unity with others relates to sharing values, belonging, and working together. Serving others means the ability to contribute to them and the ability to see a connection between work and a transcendent cause which meets the needs of humanity (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009:501).
- (3) Psychological literature on meaningful work also offers insights into the different ways that individuals can discover (Frankl, 1969) and give meaning to their work (Brief & Nord, 1990). Scholars in this area (Fox, 1980; Morin, 2008; Ros et al., 1999) and specifically

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