WHAT MAKES WORK MEANINGFUL

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Abstract:

Most organizations nowadays have the required resources and should offer an appropriate culture to provide each employee with the opportunity and context to develop the feeling of meaningful work. The managers and organizational leaders should be the first to recognize and perceive the work they do as being important. In this article, we examine the current development of the study of the nature, causes, and consequences of meaningful work, and we offer ideas of research opportunities regarding the interface of organizational perspectives on performing and providing meaningful work.

Key words: meaningful work, convincing, productive, dedicated, work motivation, job satisfaction.

1. Introduction

Meaningful work refers to the perception that the job role and responsibilities are noteworthy, valuable and serve some purpose; it is basically the evaluation of the individual about the work, its purposefulness and importance (Ahmed et. al. 2016, Rosso, Dekas & Wrzesniewski, 2010). Rosso et al. (2010) posit "the fact that work has a particular meaning does not necessarily determine that it is meaningful", elaborating on this observation by noting "meaningfulness refers to the amount of significance something holds for an individual.'' This is because they should be the first to implement the necessary changes before expecting change from the rest of the organization and the staff (Chalofsky & Krishna, 2009). The aim of this change is developing a deep-seated interest for the activity at the work place, based on the satisfaction of the person for the work itself and their perception of how well they can do the job. All these lead to devoting oneself to higher levels of motivation and to perceiving work as meaningful. The research on the concept of meaningful work is

accelerating due to the fact that organizational scientists have realized that meaningful work can potentially induce more convincing, productive and dedicated workforce (Setger & Dik, 2009).

2. Overview of the concept

Meaningful work is generally defined as the value of work goals seen in relation to an individual's own ideals and passions, and, specifically, as work that "gives essence to what we do and brings fulfillment to our lives" (Chalofsky, 2003, p. 74).

Bailey & Madden (2015) defined the meaningful work as arising " when an individual perceives an authentic connection between their work and a broader transcendent life purpose beyond the self".

Moreover, meaningful work represents the clear understanding and grasp of the purpose, sense, value, direction, logic and justification of the work performed by an individual (Chalofsky & Krishna, 2009). The literature on the construct has underlined its importance in predicting critical employee outcomes such as work motivation, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment (Chalofsky & Krishna, 2009; Littman-Ovadia & Steger, 2010; Arnold et al., 2007; Steger, Dik & Duffy, 2012). Moreover, a wide range of studies have analyzed the concept in relation to the general well-being factors such as intrinsic motivation, organizational citizenship behavior, satisfaction with life (Steger, Dik, & Duffy, 2012; Littman-Ovadia & Steger, 2010), and organizational ethics (Michaelson et al., 2014).

The concept of meaningful work has been of significance for organizational scientists since the mid 20th century, when numerous studies were aimed at exploring the significance of work for people. Moreover, research on work motivation (Gagné & Deci, 2005) has also outlined that when people view the work to be meaningful, it enhances their value and contribution respectively. People who feel their work is meaningful report greater well-being (Arnold et al., 2007), view their work as more central and important (Harpaz & Fu, 2002), and report greater job satisfaction (e.g., Kamdron, 2005). People who feel their work serves a higher purpose also report greater job satisfaction and work unit cohesion (Sparks & Schenk, 2001).

Asik-Dizdar and Esen (2016) have critically considered outlining how sense-making is important and have shown that when individuals make sense of their work and see their work to be meaningful, it enhances their work well-being and performance. (Ahmed et al. 2016). Michaelson et al., 2014, has examined job crafting and attempts to build a community via the management or creation of specific types of organizational cultures, ideologies, or identities.

The factors required for developing the feeling of meaningful work could be described as perceiving the self as a whole, which means that the person feels complete, has a self awareness on an emotional and spiritual level and recognizes and

develops their potential. Moreover, the work itself must be perceived in a certain manner – including attributes such as the ability to perform the work, creativity, learning, continuous development, performance, autonomy and control over own work (Chalofsky & Krishna, 2009). In addition to these, the feeling of balance is, nonetheless, required; this implies stability, harmony between work and personal life, between the working self and the personal self. None of these factors can exist by itself and none is more important than the others. The concept of meaningful work requires the synergy between all the elements above (Chalofsky & Krishna, 2009).

The most comprehensive model of meaningful work stemmed from the business and management fields. Lips-Wiersma (2002) developed her initial model based on findings from a qualitative research study exploring work meanings of 16 spiritually oriented people. The model was subsequently refined through additional research including a large-scale action-research project spanning six years across five Western countries (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009). Their holistic model of meaningful work proposes four sources of meaningful work: 1) Self-developing and becoming, 2) Unity with others, 3) Expressing full potential, and 4) Serving others. Meaningful work arises from a combination of these four sources and also requires a balance or harmony among them. For example, if an individual serves the others to the point of damaging his or her own well-being, the sense of meaningfulness declines. Moreover, participants experienced the strongest sense of coherence of their meaningfulness experience when they could see all four sources of meaning in a full, comprehensive picture.

Figure 1: The Four Elements of the Meaningfulness Ecosystem (Apud Bailey&Madden, 2016)

Based on our interviews and a wider reading of the literature on meaningfulness, Bailey&Madden, 2016, present (fig.1) the four elements that organizations can address that will help foster an integrated sense of holistic meaningfulness for individual employees. Building an ecosystem that is conductive to meaningfulness makes sense in the post-crash era with is focus on values beyond the profit motive. Organizations that succeed in this are more likely to attract retain and motivate the employees and to create workplaces where human beings can thrive (Bailey&Madden, 2016).

The study of Arnod and his collaborators (2007) is a typical example of the fact that the perception of an individual is important in declaring that one's work is meaningful and valuable. The study shows that the effects that a transformational leader has over the well-being and satisfacton of the employees are indirect, because the influence that is exerted over the employees stems from the concept of meaninful work from both social and personal perspective. A manner of conceptualization and practical illustration of meaninful work is, actually, the finding of significance and reason in the work performed by the individual. This may lead to considering that the typically humanistic values have a significant influence over the probability of finding meaning in the activity on the job, in the day-to-day work. In the same context, it seems that most of the understandings and conceptualizations of meaninful work stem from the physical and pshychological well-being and are emotions that can be more transitory than the level of wellbeing, and, unfortunately, there are too many potential influences that have a positive or negative effect on them.

This theme has received a great focus especially in the past decade, as many of the current articles aim to study transformational leadership, which clearly demonstrates the positive effects over motivation and performance. Arnold et al. (2007) have shown in the two studies that investigated the relationship between this type of leadership and the psychological well-being, that the effects of the influence of the transformational leader over the employees take place, at least in this case, through a psychological mechanism. In a nutshell, the employees of an organization that work under the coordination of a transformational leader will benefit from the feeling and experience of meaninful work, with great personal, social and professional significance – this is, in itself, the mechanism that leads to the effect of this type of leadership, which is psychological well-being. Arnold et al.(2007), have focused their interest on a study that measured well-being with reference to experiencing positive emotions, and, in the general context of the concept, the general well-being and mental health of the employees. Their conclusion was that the perception of the employees that their work is significant on a professional and personal level ("meaningful work") is one of the reasons for the manner in which the subordinates of a transformational leader reach a psychological state of well-being and satisfaction in life.

Therefore, the perception according to which work is meaningful plays an important role in the full understanding of this positive relationship between transformational leadership and psychological well-being. The results of the Keller study (2006) underline the connection between the charismatic leadership and team

performance. All these lead to the conclusion that the main charactersitic of a transformational leader, which is charisma, is a character trait with a substantial effect on group performance; work teams are highly influenced by this characteristic and can rise beyond the personal level of professional expectancy. In a study by Steger & Co (2012), the individuals that scored average and high on the survey measuring meaningful work have also reached high scores in other evaluations that measured concepts such as: well-being, personal satisfaction, intent of leaving the organization, personal motivation, absenteeism and organizational involvement. The perception of an individual according to which own work is meaningful and valuable form a social and personal point of view leads to an increased satisfaction at the workplace and a strong engagement in the organization.

Steger et al., (2012) examined the employees working in a university in the United States. The study found that individuals that perceived work to be meaningful scored significantly high in work engagement; the study concluded that employees sensing meaningfulness with work is of critical nature especially when it comes to fostering their well-being at work. Fairlie (2011a) in his study on employees from a company in North America has highlighted that meaningful work predicted work engagement more than any other employee outcomes. Ahmed (2016) refers to Oliver and Rothmann (2007), who examined employees working in a MNC in South Africa. The study found that meaningful work is an important job resource in accordance to the resource theory (Hobfoll, 2001) and a significant indicator of work engagement. The authors suggested that meaningful work can have a varied impact on employees` well-being at work, through which they can maintain high work connectivity. Moreover, Stringer and Broverie (2007) have also reported similar findings. Rothmann and Buys (2011) have also reached the conclusion that meaningful work can influence work engagement. The authors reported significant work engagement amongst the employees who reported higher meaningfulness in their work. A current study by Ahmed et. al. proposes that meaningful work can be of acute importance particularly for predicting work engagement (Ahmed et. al. 2016). More importantly, the study of Ahmed, 2016, considers the recommendations of past researchers and encourages further research regarding the relation between meaningful work and work engagement.

Lips-Wiersma et.al. 2016, analyzed the importance of meaningful work and determined the frequency by which it is experienced in blue-, pink-, and white-collar occupations. The authors' data suggests that white-collar workers placed more importance than blue-collar workers on expressing full potential and serving others. The frequency of experiencing meaningful work differed across the three groups with white-collar workers experiencing higher levels of unity with others, expressing full potential, and serving others; however no significant differences were found for developing the inner self.

3. Conclusions

We can, therefore, conclude that meaningful work defines the way in which a person balances their activity at the workplace and their personal life and not the importance of work for which an individual receives a salary. Balance, harmony and synergy of purposes, values, relationships and activities that we perform daily, as well as the things that we perform with responsibility and involvement matter the most and are the only ones that can develop and define what is called meaningful work. Thus, meaningful work refers to the degree in which a person sees their own work as being significant, important for themselves and the society; meaningful work is a fundamental human need. Moreover, it represents the clear knowledge and understanding of the purpose, intention, value, direction and logic behind the work of the individual (Chalofsky & Krishna, 2009). Recently and as a result of the more recent focus on the subjective aspects of meaningful work, effort has been made to more carefully focus on measuring the experience of meaningful work per se, as opposed to the conditions from which meaningful work arise (Lips-Wiersma et.al. 2016).

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