

# Meaningful Work

Most of us have been led to believe that companies are in business expressly to make a profit. As Collins and Porres point out in *Built to Last*, businesses need profit like humans need air. But the missions of most successful organizations are about the quality of their products or services, their value to customers, and their employee-friendly workplaces. Profit is what they need to function in an economic system, but it's not usually described as a *goal*.

If you ask people why they work, many will say it's for the money. But money is to individuals what profit is to businesses: They need it to function in the economic system, but it's not what motivates us to work. In survey after survey and study after study when the questions push beneath the surface, people list money behind values such as satisfaction, close work relationships, autonomy, work-life balance, and learning.

By Neal Chalofsky

This part 1 in a three-part series focuses on the classic theories and new studies on why people need meaningful work and the implications for organizations. Subsequent articles will discuss meaningful learning and humane workplaces.

With the need for knowledge workers increasing in the continued volatility of the economy and projected labor pool shortage in the next 10 years, the demand for employee loyalty and commitment have come back into vogue. Work-life policies and programs are the current organizational responses to the need to attract and retain the best and brightest workers. One study reports that balancing their work and personal lives is the number 1 priority for 78 percent of workers; 70 percent of males in the same study said they were willing to give up pay, power, and prestige for more time with their families. College students' top consideration for selecting their first employer is the ability to achieve work-life balance, but that's not just about on-site day-care centers, flexible work hours, and tuition assistance.

Herzberg's famous motivation-hygiene theory is still relevant. The truly great places to work, such as *Fortune's* 100 Best Places to Work, aren't great because of their perks and benefits, but because of their organizational cultures and policies that promote meaningful work and a nurturing, supportive workplace.

### Common ground, different choices

In June 2001, the Research to Practice Committee of ASTD sponsored a future search conference, "Shaping the Future: Workplace Learning and Performance in the New Millennium." Included in the 10 common ground areas that participants arrived at were striking a healthy balance between work life and personal life, striving to create humane workplaces, and developing a sense of social responsibility. For quite some time, baby boomers have been questioning meaning and purpose in their work. A recent study of executives who had lost their jobs but were financially comfortable found that they still valued meaningful work over independence. Another study that has been examining job

satisfaction for more than 30 years found that "in the past, job satisfaction increased as people moved from their twenties into their thirties." In 1973, nearly half of workers between age 30 and 40 claimed to be "very satisfied" with their jobs. Now, job satisfaction among 30- to 49-year-olds is no higher than among the 18 to 29 group. These same surveys have traditionally found the lowest levels of job satisfaction among the youngest segment of the population. Ironically, the young adults of this generation typically aren't reacting to the same problems that have plagued past young workers: inexperience, lack of credentials, and unhappiness with entry-level positions. Like their parents, Generations X and Y are questioning the meaning and purpose of work. But their questions concern whether they even want to start down the career paths their parents took, and their decisions are resulting in making different choices about the role of work in their lives. What we keep hearing over and over is that people want more control over their work, they want more work-life balance, and they want more personal growth and meaning in their work.

Even though we now work in a knowledge economy, we often still manage with a manufacturing, assembly-line mentality. We try to motivate knowledge workers with an industrial era mindset. The worldview and value system that lie at the basis of the industrial era mindset were formulated in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. The metaphor was the world as a machine, which was brought about by the revolutionary changes in physics and astronomy. That mechanistic science was based on a new method of inquiry, which involved the mathematical description of nature and the analytic method of reasoning. The physical and social sciences of the 20<sup>th</sup> century evolved under that paradigm, which has dominated work, education, and every other aspect of American society for the past 300 years. In that mechanical era, we believed we knew (or could deter-

mine) the outcome for every course of action—the cause-effect principle.

In the past several years, there has been increasing recognition for the need for a new paradigm for organizations to meet the turbulent demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Peter Vaill, noted management academic, consultant and philosopher, has talked about the metaphor of continuous white water. Our machine paradigm is based on the notion that change is abnormal; most of the time, things should be calm and steady. But as a person in one of Vaill's management workshops put it, "You never get out of the rapids! No sooner do you begin to digest one change than another one comes along to keep things unstuck.... The feeling is one of continuous upset and chaos."

The implications are that in complex systems, such as organizations, possibilities can be known, but precise outcomes cannot be predicted. That means there are not only multiple ways of knowing, of viewing reality, but also we'll never know all there is to know. We need to accept divergence, multiple perspectives, and incomplete truths—and stop looking for the "right answer."

### Caught in a dilemma

There's a lot of turmoil, confusion, and pain in the business world. Managers and HR people attend workshops and call in consultants, embracing each new tool as a way to create the new workplace only to see their hopes dashed. They say, "If only we could find the right technique. Surely, there must be a way to make best management practices stick." Yet, after a short application, it's back to business as usual. John Nirenberg, in his 1995 essay "Why Aren't We Doing Better?" analyzed more than 6000 articles and books on management tools and techniques to determine the basic principles that seemed to lead to successful applications. His findings:

1 Each tool and technique was originally a custom-made solution for a specific or-

organizational or individual problem that often was later packaged and sold as the “answer.”

1 The individuals and teams involved had the courage to explore new ways of doing things.

1 The developers of these new tools and techniques had the commitment and patience to do what was necessary to make them work.

1 There was nothing inherent in the tool or technique that guaranteed success or failure; success was having the appropriate tool for the given problem or circumstance and involving the appropriate people who had the appropriate skills.

Nirenberg also found that, paradoxically, if the conditions were appropriate and the people were open to using a given tool, the tool itself often wasn't needed. Conversely, many organizations block the introduction of new ideas so that no tool or technique is going to work, then use the tool or technique as the scapegoat. In the end, it's the people who suggested the tool or technique in the first place who are blamed for it not being the panacea. As one consultant has sized up the dilemma, “Organizations don't change. People change. And then people change organizations.” Organizations can and should provide the culture for meaningful work to flourish. But first, individuals, including managers, need to realize the value of meaningful work—which means they need to change their mindsets before they can expect the organization to change.

### Roots of individual change

How do we help people change in order to reach the goal of meaningful work? By sticking to the roots of individual change. There are two aspects of organizational behavior that the three legendary content motivation theorists—Maslow, Herzberg, and Alderfer—advocated that are even more critical now than when they were first proposed: intrinsic motivation and growth (learning). But, somehow, in our

desire to assist our organizations to become more productive, we've forgotten our roots. Somehow, in our rush to get to performance (the end goal), we keep neglecting the importance of the means to the end. Just as the traditional paradigms around such issues as organizational structure, management style, and employee benefits are no longer valid, neither are the traditional paradigms around motivation and learning. Nevertheless, we still apply them in a mechanistic manner; we haven't changed our approaches to motivation and learning even though the work we do and the environment in which we work has changed dramatically.

Since the mid-1970s, new theories have emerged that focus on intrinsic motivational processes and on self-systems that determine an individual's behavior. Intrinsic motivation is an internal preference for a task that gives us satisfaction and meaning. Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi, author of *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, conducted research about intrinsically motivated behavior by studying people's actual work behavior. He included people in a wide range of occupations and activities and discovered a particular kind of experience in which people's performance seemed effortless. They described the feeling of being able to continue forever in their task and wanting to learn additional skills to master more demanding challenges. The fun, sense of mastery, and potential for growth of self was what he labeled *flow*. One of the research subjects reported in Csikszentmihalyi's studies was a welder named Joe. Joe had a fourth-grade education, worked in a dark and dank environment, and lived in a shoddy, run-down neighborhood. Yet, he taught himself how to fix the plant's machinery, ranging from huge mechanical cranes to tiny electric motors. The researchers were baffled as to how Joe learned to fix such complex equipment without formal education. Joe described how he started to fix kitchen

appliances when he was a child by placing himself in the appliance's predicament. He thoroughly enjoyed learning to fix machinery by that empathic problem-solving approach. His interest in creating a meaningful workspace extended to his home life. His house, on a street that was deteriorating, was surrounded by a carefully manicured yard.

Albert Bandura's studies on self-systems add support to Csikszentmihalyi's findings. His social cognitive theory describes how our selves, our way of being, motivates us towards certain goals and behaviors, based on our view of our level of competence and our need to bolster our self-esteem. His concept of self-efficacy is based on the idea that when people set goals at the top level of their perceived capability, they're more likely to perform at that level. When people perceive themselves as having limited abilities, they tend to pursue performance-oriented goals to receive favorable feedback on their competence. A performance-goal orientation stems from an extrinsic motivational interest. On the other hand, people who see themselves as having greater abilities will pursue learning goals that reflect their need for self-enhancement. That intrinsic interest in one's work is based on a preference for challenging work, a view of oneself as being curious, and a search for opportunities that permit independent attempts to master material. That creates an orientation that can lead to higher levels of motivation and meaningful work.

In one study, 190 salespeople from eight firms were given a questionnaire to determine whether they engaged in one of two orientations: working smart (learning orientation) and working hard (performance orientation). The results demonstrated that those who had a learning orientation worked both smart and hard, whereas those who had a performance orientation just worked hard.

Most sales motivation programs focus on setting sales targets and offering sales-

## Those who had a learning orientation worked both *smart and hard*. Those who had a performance orientation *just worked hard*.

people incentives for achieving or surpassing those targets. That seemingly positive environment is actually a coercive approach. The negative implication of not reaching the target is stronger than the incentives. In fact, it has been found that salespeople with low self-efficacy and a performance orientation are actually demotivated and feel like “losers.” The truly positive environment of the learning orientation increases salespeople’s interest in learning and improving their ability. They enjoy their work, welcome challenges, consider mistakes part of the learning process, and are more effective than salespeople with a performance orientation.

### New thinking

A deeper and more comprehensive understanding of intrinsic motivation has emerged. There’s a renewed interest in Maslow’s theories based on Csikszentmihalyi’s and others’ research and writings. Numerous studies have been conducted recently around the topic of meaningful work. Based on a review of those theories and studies, I developed a construct (a preliminary theory) that reflects “work as the expression of our inner being,” quoting Mathew Fox in *The Reinvention of Work* (1994). The construct consists of

- | the sense of self
- | bringing one’s whole self (mind, body, emotion, spirit) to the work and the workplace
- | recognizing and developing one’s potential (learning)
- | knowing one’s purpose in life and how work fits into that purpose
- | having a positive belief system about

achieving one’s purpose

- | the work itself
- | mastering one’s performance
- | seeking challenge, creativity, learning, and continuous growth
- | pursuing the opportunity to carry out one’s purpose through the work
- | having autonomy, empowerment, and a sense of control over one’s environment
- | the sense of balance
- | the balance of work self and personal self, of work with family and other relationships, of spiritual self and work self, and of giving to oneself and giving to others.

No single factor in each of the three themes—self, work, balance—can stand alone or is more important than the others. Meaningful work requires the interplay of all of those elements. Yet, we can examine each of the themes separately while acknowledging their interdependence. Of real significance is that the three themes and factors within them represent a deeper level of motivation than the traditional intrinsic values of a sense of accomplishment, pride, satisfaction of finishing a task, and praise from a supervisor.

**Sense of self.** People need to bring their whole selves (mind, body, emotion, and spirit) to their work. The sense of the whole self is critical to finding meaning in work. People often fail to bring their whole selves to work out of fear of rejection, prejudice, or misunderstanding. Dick Richards, in his book *Artful Work: Awakening Joy, Meaning, and Commitment in the Workplace*, writes that “we work hard to create physical safety in our workplaces. Can’t we also create mental,

emotional, and spiritual safety—safety for the whole person?”

A significant finding of a recent study on spirituality and work is the number of respondents who felt they couldn’t be themselves at work. Before one can bring his or her whole self to work, one has first to be aware of one’s own values, beliefs, and purpose in life. The sense of self includes constantly striving to attain one’s potential and believing in one’s ability to do that—and to realize the criticality of continual lifelong learning. The sense of self includes having significant control over one’s personal and work spaces. Joe the welder created space at work by mastering skills that were considered valuable. That gave him the ability to have a measure of control over his work environment. That carried over to his personal space, his home. He didn’t let the condition of his neighborhood pull him down; he created his own personal space to give him meaning.

**The work itself.** “Real joy comes not from ease or riches or from the praise of men, but from doing something worthwhile.” Wilfred Grenfell’s statement personifies the essence of what really motivates people, the work itself. In the not-so-distant past, managers made decisions about the structure and process of work activities in the name of efficiency. Jobs were broken down into tasks, which involved certain competencies and specific, measurable objectives. People were hired to perform tightly defined jobs.

Work has changed dramatically. Organizations have realized they need to rely more on workers to make decisions about how the work should be accomplished. Knowledge workers are hired to bring their skills and abilities to bear on multiple projects. That requires more worker autonomy, flexibility, empowerment, continuous learning, risk taking, and creativity. Joe the welder loved to tinker, and the organization valued his ability to fix machines. So, Joe did what he

was good at and what he found worthwhile. His tinkering let him learn, take risks, do tasks other than welding, and improve his proficiency.

**Sense of balance.** To paraphrase a Zen Buddhist saying, work and pleasure should be so aligned that it is impossible to distinguish one from the other. The sense of balance at its ideal is that life is so integrated that it doesn't matter whether what one is doing so long as it's meaningful. But given that most of us don't live in an ideal world, a sense of balance concerns the choices we make between the time spend at paid work, unpaid work (work at home, with family, as a volunteer), and at pleasurable pursuits. No one area of our lives should be so dominant that we cease to value the other areas. All work and no play are stressful and overwhelming, and usually results in our health, family, and social lives suffering—even when the work is meaningful. All play and no work quickly becomes boring and meaningless.

We need to balance the nourishing of our different selves (mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual) because we don't have the luxury of meeting all of our needs through one major activity. We need to take the time to learn, keep fit, reflect, meditate or pray, and give to and be with others. Because we usually worry most about doing our paid work, we don't take the time to care for ourselves. The statistics on work-related stress, people being overweight and not physically fit, depression, divorce, and workplace violence speak for themselves. Joe loved his paid work, but he also loved to “work” on his house and yard.

Meaningful work isn't just about the meaning of the paid work we perform; it's about the way we live our lives. It's the alignment of purpose, values, relationships, and activities that we pursue in life. **TD**

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