Searching for meaning and purpose in human action. Work and working context

Call for Paper – Special Issue

Editors:

Rita Bissola, Enrico Cori, Lorenzo Mizzau, Teresina Torre

The XXII WOA 2021 – (Workshop of Italian organizational scholars), organized in Genova in September 2021 – aims to gather together the community of organizational scholars by raising the issue of meaning and purpose in human action, guided by the question: "organizing for what?". Such question deals with a central issue in organization design and behavior, but it also gets to the core of organization studies, characterized by a strong disciplinary pluralism that comprises many possible perspectives and levels of analysis (Podolny et al. 2004).

Within this large field, a particular attention has been devoted to the attitudes workers have toward their organizational contexts in contemporary work settings. On the one side, organizations look for motivated and positive employees, who deliver better performance, display collaborative behaviors, and ultimately improve team and organizational climate; on the other, people strive to find jobs that offers them a meaningful endeavor, from which they derive positive effects both on and off work. In fact, both the valence (e.g., positive, negative or neutral) and amount (i.e., intensity) of *meaning* that people find in their work shape their feelings, thoughts, and behaviors related to both work and life (Rosso, Dekas, and Wrezesniewski, 2010). Importantly, meaning may stem from objective characteristics of jobs and organizational contexts, but it is also subjectively construed by people in the process of making sense of their working experiences. Work meaningfulness and meaningful work are thus related to work that is considered personally valuable, thus being related to a positive personal experience (Lysova et al., 2019).

Antecedents or sources of meaning at work may be related to the self (e.g., personal values, motivation, and beliefs such as different work orientations and callings), others (e.g., coworkers, leaders, groups and communities, and family), work contexts (e.g., job tasks, organizational missions, national culture and non-work domains) and spiritual life (e.g., sacred callings) (Rosso et al., 2010). Parallel to that, research has investigated the mechanisms through which meaning is constructed. Among them, authenticity, self-efficacy (e.g., autonomy, competence and perceived impact), purpose (i.e., a sense of directedness and intentionality in life), belongingness and transcendence (which provide individuals with meaningfulness by helping them experience a positive sense of shared common identity, fate, or

humanity with others), and the cultural and interpersonal sensemaking mechanisms have been highlighted. Particularly prominent constructs in recent research are identity and identity affirmation through work, as well as personal engagement in work, "where meaningfulness is derived from feeling personally immersed and alive in the experience of working" (Rosso et al., 2010: 109). However, key mechanisms such as the ones involving finding purpose in life and at work, in an interrelated fashion, and the social and cultural ways in which meaning and meaningfulness are constructed – i.e., the social and cultural side of the coin as opposed to psychological one – have been less explored so far. Similarly, at the macro level, organizational culture and organizational identity, the influence of contexts outside the organization, and the relationship between personal values and higher-level constructs, such as purpose, remain less explored aspects of this fascinating research domain.

The theoretical models that have been considered central in the meaningful work literature include the job characteristics model (Hackman & Oldham, 1980), relational job design (Grant, 2007), and job crafting (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). What these perspectives have in common is a focus on enriching work as one solution, whereas what varies across them is the ''agent'' that enhances work enrichment, either in a relatively top-down fashion (e.g., job design and relational job design) or a bottom-up fashion (e.g., job crafting). A number of questions remain unanswered in this area. For example, how should the job characteristics and relational job design models evolve considering the growing relevance of remote working that is profoundly modifying the traditional time and space working frames? Similarly, how will workers craft their job in the "new normal"? And what about the impact of Artificial Intelligence, robotics and Industry 5.0 at large on the meaning of work and work meaningfulness (specifically, is robotization detracting to the human capacity to find meaning in work? Or, if this is not the case, what is robotization adding to the possibility of finding meaning in work?)? With regard to job crafting, what kind of behaviors and routines workers will have to carry out to shape work, when collaboration and control in the work setting is performed through smart technologies instead of humans?

As to the consequences of meaningful work, studies have highlighted the important performance-related outcomes (Bailey et al., 2019), both at the individual and organizational levels. For example, meaningful work has been found to positively impact personal engagement, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, organizational identification, positive self-concept, career commitment, and motivation. At the organizational level, meaningful work has been associated with perceived organizational reputation, organizational citizenship behavior, and creativity. Besides the effect on work-related individual and organizational outcomes, meaningful work has been associated with "existential outcomes" impacting life as a whole, such as life meaning, life satisfaction, (Allan, Autin, & Duffy, 2016; Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012) and with those at the work-life interface, e.g., work-life enrichment and reduced levels of interference, or well-being (Johnson & Jiang, 2017).

Besides the 'classic' approach that assumes meaning depends on the characteristics of the work activities, there is a second one that focuses on the person

who performs the work, how she/he perceives her/himself and her/his identity. In this case, meaningfulness relates to the interpretation of what work represents for the employee and what it provides to her/him (Michaelson et al., 2014). Such a research stream, which postulates the centrality of individuals in evaluating work meaningfulness, speculates that an individual's identity, as defined by their beliefs, needs, values, but also by their social relationships, influences their understanding of the meaning of a job and what its meaningful tasks are (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Rosso et al., 2010; Michaelson et al., 2014). To this end, the dynamics of construction of organizational identities, as well as sense-making and sense-giving processes occurring within organizations can help to decipher the behavior of organizational members, their feelings about the organizational context, and the texture of the interpersonal relationships that they build over time.

Considering the several developments that the discourse can take up, submissions can include, but are not restricted to, following topics:

- Flexible work and implications for the meaning of work
- Remote working and work meaningfulness
- Job crafting in the time of remote working
- Creative work, work meaningfulness and creativity at work
- Leadership styles and managing meaning
- Multiple identities and the meaning of work
- Work meaningfulness and the self-identity construction process
- Drawbacks and risks related to the meaning of work
- Job social impact and the meaning of work
- Personal values and the meaning of work

Rigorous theoretical and empirical research, both qualitative and quantitative, that are relevant to organizational settings is called for. The aim is to deepen and expand the scientific conversation on the topic. The Call for paper is open to both papers accepted for presentation at WOA 2021 and contributions not previously submitted to the conference.

The deadline for the full paper submission is **October 20th, 2021.** The review process will be performed according to the journal rules. Expected publication date is December 2021.

Useful information on how to submit contributions according to the journal guidelines can be found at the following link:

https://www.impresaprogetto.it/sites/impresaprogetto.it/files/a/ipejm_-_guidelines_2019.pdf)

References

Albert, S., & Whetten, D. A. (1985). Organizational identity. *Research in organizational behavior,* 7, 263–295.

Allan, B. A., Autin, K. L., & Duffy, R. D. (2016). Self-determination and meaningful work: Exploring socioeconomic constraints. *Frontiers in Psychology*,*7*, 71, 1-9.

Bailey, C., Yeoman, R., Madden, A., Thompson, M., & Kerridge, G. (2019). A review of the empirical literature on meaningful work: Progress and research agenda. *Human Resource Development Review*, *18*(1), 83-113.

Diamond, M. A. (1988). Organizational identity: A psychoanalytic exploration of organizational meaning. *Administration & Society*, *20*(2), 166-190.

Foreman, P., & Whetten, D. A. (2002). Members' identification with multiple-identity organizations. *Organization science*, *13*(6), 618-635.

Gioia, D. A., Schultz, M., & Corley, K. G. (2000). Organizational identity, image, and adaptive instability. *Academy of management Review*, *25*(1), 63-81.

Gioia, D. A., & Hamilton, A. L. (2016). Great debates in organizational identity study. *The Oxford handbook of organizational identity*, 21-38.

Grant, A. M. (2007). Relational job design and the motivation to make a prosocial difference. *Academy of Management Review*, 32(2), 393–417.

Hackman J. R. & Oldham G. R. (1980). *Work redesign*. Reading MA: Addison-Wesley.

Hatch, M. J., & Schultz, M. (2002). The dynamics of organizational identity. *Human relations*, *55*(8), 989-1018.

Johnson, M. J., & Jiang, L. (2017). Reaping the benefits of meaningful work: The mediating versus moderating role of work engagement. *Stress & Health*, *33*, 288-297.

Lepisto, D. A., & Pratt, M. G. (2017). Meaningful work as realization and justification: Toward a dual conceptualization. *Organizational Psychology Review*, *7*(2), 99-121.

Lips-Wiersma, M., & Wright, S. (2012). Measuring the meaning of meaningful work: Development and validation of the Comprehensive Meaningful Work Scale (CMWS). *Group & Organization Management*, *37*, 665-685.

Lysova, E. I., Allan, B. A., Dik, B. J., Duffy, R. D., & Steger, M. F. (2019). Fostering meaningful work in organizations: A multi-level review and integration. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, *110*, 374-389.

Michaelson, C., Pratt, M. G., Grant, A. M., & Dunn, C. P. (2014). Meaningful work: Connecting business ethics and organization studies. *Journal of Business Ethics*, *121*(1), 77-90.

Podolny, J. M., Khurana, R., & Hill-Popper, M. (2004). Revisiting the meaning of leadership. *Research in organizational behavior*, *26*, 1-36.

Pratt, M. G. & Ashforth, B. E. (2003). Fostering meaningfulness in working and at work. 309-327. In K. S. Cameron, J. E. Dutton and R. E. Quinn (Eds.), *Positive organisational scholarship: foundations of a new discipline*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

Rosso, B. D., Dekas, K. H., & Wrzesniewski, A. (2010). On the meaning of work: A theoretical integration and review. *Research in organizational behavior*, *30*, 91-127.

Wrzesniewski, A., & Dutton, J. E. (2001). Crafting a job: Revisioning employees as active crafters of their work. *Academy of Management Review*, 26(2), 179–201.