



## The Loss of the Meaning of Work Affects Workers' Psychological Component. A Study by the Statistical Studies Department of the French Ministry of Labour in collaboration with Sorbonne University

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**Tag:** #work #health&safety #France #SorbonneUniversity

The debate on the meaning of work has gained new momentum in recent years, as new processes of work standardization make it more difficult for workers to attribute meaning to their tasks.

In this sense, **Thomas Coutrot (DARES) and Coralie Perez (Centre d'économie de la Sorbonne - Université de Paris 1)** conducted an interesting study on this topic. The purpose was to identify a definition of 'meaning of work' and to assess whether it can be used to better investigate employee behavior. The researchers seek to understand whether the lack of meaning affects workers' choices in terms of job mobility, propensity to join unions and absenteeism.

The research (**T. Coutrot, C. Perez, *Quand le travail perd son sens. L'influence du sens du travail sur la mobilité professionnelle, la prise de parole et l'absentéisme pour maladie: Une analyse longitudinale avec l'enquête Conditions de travail 2013-2016, (2021), DARES, Document d' études, aout, no. 249***) reviewed the literature on the topic, including the reference to psychodynamic theory – which was adopted by the authors – also analyzing the survey results. With regard to the economic literature, the researchers believe that there is still no satisfactory theoretical framework for addressing the question of the meaning of work.

**Standard economic theory holds that labor supply is determined by a trade-off between income and leisure.** According to this approach, work has no intrinsic meaning, but takes on meaning only through remuneration, i.e., a reward for effort that enables the worker to satisfy consumption needs. Therefore, all worker decisions would be based solely on calculations of economic convenience.

**This approach began to lose ground in the 2000s and 2010s, when some of the literature sought to account for the intrinsic motivation of workers, without however initially using the term "meaning of work".** This shift was probably due to the growing concern over new ways of organizing work, which gave less importance to the human dimension.

Among the more recent studies, the authors refer to M. Bruyère, L. Lizè, *Impact des contextes économique et organisationnel des entreprises sur le sens du travail chez les salariés, in Relations Industrielles/Industrial Relations, 2020, 75/2, pp.225-248*), which outline the meaning of work through four "conditions of possibility": autonomy, utility, time and the collective dimension of work, without clarifying the theoretical basis for the choice of these four dimensions. The examination then continues with a review of research on managerial science. Unlike economics, the meaning of work in managerial sciences, psychology, and sociology is a recurring theme, and there are many studies on the link between the meaning of work and workers' behavior.

Research in social and management psychology concludes that most workers tend to give meaning to their work beyond mere pay, thus refuting Taylor's arguments that pay is sufficient to motivate performance even when workers find no meaning in their work. In management literature, there are two alternative methods for investigating the meaning of work.

The first **approach** – termed "**nominalist**" – is based on the employee's significance of his or her work; the second approach – termed "essentialist" – establishes conditions that a work situation must meet in order to be meaningful.

**The nominalist approach** is the most widely used in the literature: job meaningfulness is defined as "the extent to which an employee believes that his/her work has value and importance" (J.R. Hackman, G.R. Oldham, Motivation through the design of work: Test of a theory, in *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance*, 1976, 16, pp. 250-279). This is a "**psychological state**" that can be measured by a score based on direct questions. There are indexes designed for measuring the meaning of work, such as the COPSOQ (Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire) or the WAMI (Work as Meaning Inventory).

The (less widely used) "essentialist" approach distinguishes between two types of motivating factors: extrinsic or "hygienic" factors (such as pay and working conditions), which cause dissatisfaction if they do not reach a minimum level, but have no stimulating effect beyond that level; and intrinsic or "motivational" factors, such as autonomy, prospects for development, and recognition of the work done.

The authors go on to explain that in order to narrow down the notion of "meaning of work" – taking into account the specificity of work activity – they adopted the psychodynamic theory of work. Starting from a definition of work as a productive effort organized to fulfill a goal, it is believed that the worker ascribes an intrinsic meaning to his/her activity, to the extent that it produces an impact on the external world and the worker himself. Consequently, "meaning of work" differs from "meaning at work," which is given by material rewards (such as salary and career) or psychological rewards (such as recognition and sociability). Three dimensions of the intrinsic meaning of work can be distinguished:

- the meaning in relation to a goal to be achieved in the objective world (**social utility of goods and services**);
- the meaning of the activity in relation to values in the social world (**ethical consistency**);
- the meaning in relation to self-fulfillment in the subjective world (**capacity for development**).

The worker feels that work is meaningful when he or she sees that the product of his or her labor enables the needs of its recipients to be met. However, this may not be sufficient if the concrete work causes undesirable side effects, that is, if it raises ethical conflicts.

Finally, in order to perform his tasks the worker must bring his subjectivity and intelligence into play: the opportunity to develop his skills, to acquire new ones through work and to express himself helps determine the quality and meaningfulness of work. Using this approach to analyze the surveys on working conditions conducted by DARES (the Department of Statistical Studies of the French Ministry of Labor) in 2013 and 2016, the authors found that a significant meaning deficit is associated with a greater likelihood of **job mobility**, but also with a **greater propensity to join unions and longer sick leave**.

This contribution is particularly interesting because of the originality of the approach to the topic of psychological distress. Unlike the traditional approach, individual psychosocial risk factors are not used, but the focus is on the subjective perception of the meaning of work (in its dimensions of social utility, ethical consistency and developmental capacity). This approach can pave the way for innovative and wide-ranging thinking about workers' psychological distress and possible countermeasures to be taken.