

A Word with Knut Laaser: The Framework of Meaningful Work: Autonomy, Agency and Low-Skilled Positions

An interview by G. Martini to Knut Laaser, Professor of University of Stirling and of Brandenburgische Technische Universität Cottbus-Senftenberg.

The interview took place during the 13th Edition of the International Conference by ADAPT, «[Towards a Workless Society? An Interdisciplinary Reflection on the Changing Concept of Work and its Rules in Contemporary Economies](#)», held in Bergamo from 30 November to 2 December 2023. Knut Laaser participated in the event, delivering a presentation titled *Why we need the idea(l) of meaningful work to understand what is wrong with contemporary waged work and how to fix it* in the context of the [Plenary Session #4](#).

Formal autonomy and core autonomy in defining the framework of meaningful work: in your opinion, how do these two forms of autonomy relate to the necessary condition of workers' dependence on their job as the sole source of livelihood in an economic system that does not include basic income measures?

It's an interesting question, especially since we focus on waged work, which is dependent work. Most of us have to work, and therefore, it's difficult to talk about autonomy as freedom from constraints in relation to waged work. That is why we discuss autonomy at work, in the sense that it's more about the opportunity to enjoy job discretion and decide how you approach your work, what tasks you do, how you do them, and with whom you work. When you have that discretion, even though I wouldn't call it freedom, I would say there is space to express your own agency. I think, in the best cases, we can talk about bounded autonomy.

Since in any case the condition on necessity belongs to human nature itself, even in the wage work the point should be how to create spaces for

action that allow individuals to exercise their own agency?

Yes, it is more about what can be done within the realm of necessity. We have to work due to economic needs, but under the guidance or control of the employer, there might be space and opportunities to apply your knowledge and act in a way you feel is right, to create something that is hopefully independent of what the employer prescribes. This possibility is compromised, especially in low-skilled work, which is our principal focus, as it is often tightly controlled and offers very little space for autonomy.

Regarding low-skilled work, in your opinion, to what extent could it be impacted from basic income in case it could be sufficient for a decent life?

All research on that and the debate in general are very polarized. Some argue that if you implement universal basic income, many people in low-skilled jobs wouldn't continue working and would quit. Other scholars would counter that they wouldn't. In our view, employers would need to improve job

conditions because, fundamentally, people like to work. They just don't like to do work that lacks respect and dignity, where they feel the tasks they are doing do not match their skills or qualifications.

Can we state that, as far as you know, basic income would not be an incentive to quit work, but an incentive for employers to make more comfortable and respectful the ambient of work?

Yes, I think so. Because, according to our studies, the coupling of low-skilled work with meaningless work is wrong. What we consider low skilled work, it is not considered in the same way from most of the people that do those works. Often the public discourse classifies works such as drivers or cleaners as low-skilled and automatically meaningless. But some research shows that in many cases people that do this sort of jobs are happy with that. This is what in the social sciences we call the job satisfaction paradox. What we can say, it's often not so much the matter of what qualification you have or whether it's skilled or what we consider low skilled, but it's more about the job itself. For example, bus drivers often consider their job to be purposeful, because it offers a crucial service to the public.

In your opinion, to what extent do the creation of a collective narrative through communicative skills and discursive practice matter in defining occupational identities within the framework of meaningful work?

I believe narration is important, but it can't be mere rhetoric. If you tell a cleaner, for example, that their work is important, but you don't treat them in a way that backs this up and reinforces it on a daily basis, it won't work. Rhetoric alone doesn't make work meaningful. You need to align the narrative with good job conditions, fair pay, and job security. Communication is fundamental to convey the narrative that they are important and should be respected for what they do and have done in the past. Additionally, I want to emphasize another element: career paths. In many occupations, there's often no way to progress. If you're a bus driver, it is likely that you remain in this job until you leave or retire. If someone wishes to remain in that profession, they might find limited opportunities for job changes or promotions within the same role. This is a common issue faced by many jobs—either you stay in the same position, or you have to leave and

pursue an entirely different career. Establishing a form of vertical mobility within the occupation is crucial and could serve also as a solid foundation for building a new edifying and shared narrative.

Could the construction of shared and intersubjective knowledge of reality contribute to overcoming the dichotomous attitude toward the concept of meaningful work, either as a product of managerial practices or as an entirely individual experience?

Our approach differs from many other approaches to meaningful work. Most meaningful work research asserts that once job conditions are good, the work is interesting and challenging, and employees possess the necessary skills, then the work becomes meaningful. In this perspective, meaningful work is merely a product of effective management and good job design. However, we argue that employees are essentially co-creators of the meaning of meaningfulness. Take investment bankers, for instance: they receive substantial compensation, operate under significant pressure, and their work is considered highly skilled. Yet, it's highly individualized because, as an investment banker, you are essentially working on your own. You face pressure and work overtime as an individual. While the job conditions may be good, the work is not inherently meaningful. For us, meaningful work becomes robust when workers co-create the meaning, appropriating and attaching their own understanding to the work. This isn't achievable as a single person. You can attempt it, but fundamentally, you are vulnerable as an individual. Our point is that a worker collective is necessary.

What do you mean specifically by worker collective?

A worker collective is a community, a group of people in the workplace—employees, co-workers—coming together and supporting each other. Establishing relationships between colleagues is one of the first steps of what we refer to as co-creation. As a worker collective, the power asymmetry between employees and the employer is challenged, and dignity and autonomy are more likely to be established.

Do you consider the building of a meaningful work framework mainly as a bottom-up process?

I believe it is, but not exclusively. The job and the primary conditions need to be in place, and they need to be good—what we refer to as objective conditions. This includes factors such as pay, training, job security, a role that allows you to engage in varied tasks, work in teams or independently, and apply the skills you have acquired. However, this alone is not sufficient. You need to be part of a worker collective, creating meaning in their own way, as you mentioned, from the bottom up. Only then do you have meaningful work. What I don't believe is as crucial is leadership. Rarely, during interviews, do people express that they find their work meaningful because leaders in their organization shape actions to enhance the meaning of work. I believe people can discern whether work is meaningful or not without leaders telling them. Surveys and research often indicate that management or supervisors can be constraining or may compromise meaningful work due to close supervision or excessively high expectations. In conclusion, it's a combination of objective job conditions and worker collective action coming together to create a meaningful work framework.

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