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Title of paper: "I don't feel like it's the be-all and end-all anymore": How do employees lose work meaningfulness?

Abstract

Over the past three decades, research has provided significant insight into how employees' experience work meaningfulness and how organizations cultivate it (e.g., Lysova et al., 2019; Allan et al., 2019; Lepisto & Pratt, 2017). Meaningfulness refers to "employees' beliefs that their work has at least one distinct purpose that they also consider personally significant" (Robertson et al., 2020). In addition, research suggests that work meaningfulness is a key factor contributing to organizational effectiveness as it leads to higher job satisfaction, performance, and lower turnover (Lysova et al., 2019).

However, the contemporary workplace and the inevitableness of future crises challenge employees striving for work meaningfulness (Robertson et al., 2020; Weick, 1995; Rerup, 2009). As such, significant and under-examined issues remain. First, how do employees lose work meaningfulness? Further, what happens when employees lose work meaningfulness? These are important questions because they may change how employees view their job, disrupting their performance, motivation, and commitment at work.

Since existing theories offer a limited account of how people lose meaningfulness, we focused on building theory by exploring the processes of how people lose work meaningfulness. We interviewed 50 employees working from home because of the lockdown in the autumn of 2020 to understand how the lockdowns challenged their meaningfulness. To explore these processes and build theory, we engaged in thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and case comparison methods (Kaarbo & Beasley, 1999) to unveil the similarities, differences, and patterns across the participants' experiences during the lockdown.

To better understand how employees lose work meaningfulness, we draw on the meaning maintenance model (MMM) (Heine et al., 2006). Specifically, we focus on the premise that employees have a "need for meaning" (p.88). According to the model, an individual's sense of meaning can be threatened when they, for example, "feel uncertain

about relations between elements of the world around them, making them feel unable to predict future events” (p. 106). When their sense of meaning is threatened, humans have an innate drive to compensate for this (Heine et al., 2006), known as the “fluid compensation” principle. Therefore, we explored how disruptions to work meaningfulness via several distinct pathways resulted in a re-appraisal of meaningfulness to other life domains (Heine et al., 2006).

Our findings support the “fluid compensation” principle (Heine et al., 2006). We found that the COVID-19 lockdowns disrupted employees’ work meaningfulness, that is, one or more disruptions to (a) unity with others (i.e., a sense of belonging); (b) serving others (i.e., a sense of contributing to others); (c) expressing full potential (i.e., experience a sense of achievement); and (d) developing and becoming self (i.e., a sense of being true to one’s self) (Lips-Wiersma et al., 2009). The lockdowns disrupted employees work meaningfulness and as a result, they shifted work meaningfulness to other life domains. For example, when employees were unable to achieve future career accomplishments due to the changing nature of their work, they shifted their meaningfulness to other life domains such as friends or family. Our study highlights employees' need for meaningfulness and applies fluid compensation to make up for this loss.

Furthermore, we extend the MMM by introducing reflection as a key characteristic of how employees lose meaningfulness and shift meaningfulness to other life domains. We found that reflection offered employees “moments of realization” (Rummel et al., 2019) that prompted individuals to take stock of their lives and reassess work meaningfulness. First, we found that when employees experienced disruptions to their source of work meaningfulness, it prompted negative backward-looking work reflection. For example, employees questioned their commitment to their work or why they focused on their careers at the expense of other

areas of their lives. This negative backward reflection initiated the loss of work meaningfulness.

Thus, the loss of work meaningfulness highlighted employees' "need for meaning" and instigated positive forward-life reflection (looking forward to future life aspirations). We found that employees cognitively assessed or reflected on new life aspirations, and employees affirmed meaning in other life domains. Reflection aligns with research on cognitive appraisal theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) because a cognitive appraisal process may be necessary for an experience to exert its impact on individuals. In other words, reflecting on one's job and future life aspirations served as a cognitive re-appraisal of work meaningfulness (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The cognitive re-appraisal resulted in a reprioritization of values and beliefs around meaningfulness.

Understanding how employees lose work meaningfulness is theoretically important and has practical implications as work changes in the coming decades.

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