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Meaningfulness, Commitment, and Engagement: The Intersection of a Deeper Level of Intrinsic Motivation

Neal Chalofsky
Vijay Krishna

The problem and the solution. The work motivation literature suggests the existence of a level of motivation that goes beyond the commonly known typologies of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. The purpose of this article is to explore that deeper level of intrinsic motivation, *meaningfulness*, and to discuss the connections between meaning *of* work and meaning *at* work, represented by the concepts of employee commitment and engagement. This multidimensional approach combines the individual and psychological aspects of work motivation with the contextual and cultural factors that influence employee motivation.

Keywords: *meaningful work; employee commitment; engagement*

The managerial and popular literature has been increasingly referring to the “baby boomers” in America (the disproportionately large generation born just after World War II) nearing retirement age and questioning the meaning and purpose of their work and their lives. At the same time, their children, Generations X and Y, have started their careers asking the same questions.

The classic motivation theorists and humanistic psychologists clearly supported the notion that individuals have an inherent need for a work life that they believe is meaningful (Alderfer, 1972; Herzberg, Mausner, & Snyderman, 1959; Maslow, 1943, 1954, 1971; McClelland, 1965; McGregor, 1960; Rogers, 1959, 1961). Maslow (1971) wrote that individuals who do not perceive the workplace as meaningful and purposeful will not work up to their professional capacity. There is a long history of research and discourse about what motivates employees and the relationship between job satisfaction and performance/productivity. The need or content theories of the 1960s and 1970s and their emphasis on the individual gave way to the reinforcement and person–environment

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interaction theories of the 1970s through the 1990s and their emphasis on performance, organizational systems, and productivity. Most of the research, therefore, has been in relation to these theories. The resurgence of interest of intrinsic factors such as meaning, purpose, spirituality, and commitment and the recent introduction of engagement has resulted in an increase in both the popular and scholarly literature concerning the role of work as a motivator in the organization (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Fox, 1994; Lockwood, 2007; Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001).

Employee commitment and engagement have emerged as very important constructs in organizational research on account of their favorable relationship with employee behaviors that promote organizational retention and performance. According to Porter (1968), commitment involves the willingness of employees to exert higher efforts on behalf of the organization, a strong desire to stay in the organization, and accept major goals and values of the organization (as cited in Porters, Steers, Mowday, & Boulin, 1974). A number of studies have shown a positive correlation between employee commitment and job performance (Hunter & Thatcher, 2007; Pool & Pool, 2007). Angle and Perry (1981) showed in their research that organizational commitment correlates positively with employees' and organization's ability to adapt to unforeseeable events.

Studies also suggest that organizational commitment supports organizational citizenship behaviors that are central to flatter organizations, effective teams, and empowerment (Dessler, 1999). Kanter (1968) in her study of the 19th century American utopian societies, such as the Shakers, showed that the commitment-producing strategies distinguished successful from unsuccessful societies: "commitment is central to the understanding of both human motivation and system maintenance" (p. 499). According to Senge (1993), personnel commitment is one of the key requirements to become a learning organization. Be it a utopian society or a learning organization, commitment is seen as one of the key factors for organizational survival and growth. Despite the tremendous interest that organizational commitment research generates (Beck & Wilson, 2000), questions about the process and determinants of organizational commitment remain unanswered (Cohen, 2003; Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001).

One of the possible reasons for this lack of a clear understanding of the motivational processes is because of the separation of the intrinsic aspects of motivation from the organizational and contextual factors that affect its development. Although there has been some research that suggests that employee engagement is related to workforce efficiency and productivity, very little empirical research exists that explains the processes through which engagement develops. Engagement has been defined as "the extent to which employees commit to something or someone in their organization, [and] how hard they work and how long they stay as a result of that commitment" (Corporate Leadership Council, 2004).

The purpose of this article is to explore a deeper level of intrinsic motivation, *meaningfulness*, and to discuss the connections between meaning *of* work and meaning *at* work, represented by the concepts of employee commitment and engagement as organizational and contextual factors. A holistic approach to workplace motivation that combines the intrinsic aspects of work motivation with the contextual and organizational factors has not been developed in the literature. This approach is important because although motivation is an individual and personal process, it is also significantly influenced and shaped by the contextual and organizational factors. Hence, while studying motivational factors, it is necessary to consider both the individual and the organizational factors that affect its development.

This article attempts to fill this gap by generating a conceptual frame of a deeper level of motivation, namely, meaningfulness or meaningful work, and outlines the connection between meaning *of* work and meaning *at* work that is expressed in terms of employee commitment and engagement. This article seeks to contribute to the organizational behavior field by linking these streams of research and conceptual development that have not been connected previously. The integrative approach adopted in this article provides a new perspective on the connections between workplace motivation, employee commitment, and employee engagement.

Conceptual Background

In preindustrial society, work was performed in the same community setting where people lived. Consequently, people knew one another closely and saw the connection between their work and how that work benefited the rest of the community. The work of an individual was intricately tied to the well-being of the self and the community. There was no separation of work from self, community, and life. The twin forces of reduction in agricultural work and rise of mechanical work meant more people becoming wage earners who were working for others (Brisken, 1996). In 1860, half the working population was self-employed; by 1900, two thirds were wage earners. Work became governed by the clock, by uniform standards, and by supervisors. "Reason demanded that workers subordinate their own experience of natural rhythms to the logic of efficiency" (Brisken, 1996, p. 100).

The industrial era separated work from the community and created the bureaucracy to house, organize, and control work. There was little or no contact between the organization where employees worked and the community where they lived. Work was no longer an integral part of community life; it was detached, separated, and contained within specific buildings and times. In bureaucracies, hierarchies separated executives from workers, and internal competition forced workers against workers as they fought to move up the increasingly narrow upper levels of the organization. Wall Street further separated the owners from the employees.

Now there are people who commute from New York or Boston to Washington and beyond, as well as people all over the globe who work in virtual teams and even virtual organizations. Consequently, people are not only moving work further away but are further away from the rest of their lives. As work has become separated from the community and life, it has lost its original sense of meaning as an integral aspect of human existence. One hypothesis is that motivation only became an issue because meaning disappeared when the work became separated from the rest of life and community. "As a consequence motivation theories have become surrogates for the search for meaning" (Sievers, 1984, p. 3). There is very little research based on the premise that meaningful work is lost when work becomes separated from being a natural and integral part of the community.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the classic motivation theorists and humanistic psychologists clearly supported the notion that individuals have an inherent need for a work life that they believe is meaningful (Alderfer, 1972; Herzberg et al., 1959; Maslow, 1943, 1971; McGregor, 1960; Rogers, 1959, 1961). Maslow (1971) wrote that individuals who do not perceive the workplace as meaningful and purposeful will not work up to their professional capacity. They theorized that individuals are motivated to take certain actions based on fulfilling needs believed to be inherent in all humans. These theorists all proposed that as these needs move from the basic survival needs to higher-order needs, they become more intrinsic and reflective in nature. The higher-order needs reflect life values: working toward a higher cause, meaningfulness, and life purpose. Maslow (1971) expressed these values as *being* values, referred to as *B-values*. B-values included truth, transcendence, goodness, uniqueness, aliveness, justice, richness, and meaningfulness. Maslow believed that individuals have the potential to reach what he called self-actualization, which is the process of developing one's potential, of expressing oneself to the fullest possible extent in a manner that is personally fulfilling. It is not an end-state but an ongoing process of becoming. Near the end of his life, Maslow wrote of people who seemed to transcend self-actualization. He labeled this phenomenon "Theory Z" after McGregor's (1960) "Theories X and Y." In this state, people are devoted to a task, vocation, or calling that transcends the dichotomies of work and play. Maslow (1971) viewed this as a dynamic process of expanding the capabilities of the self to virtually unlimited potential. Also noteworthy were the thoughtful concepts from Rogers (1961), Locke (1975), and Ackoff (1981). Rogers believed that people find purpose when they experience freedom to be exactly who they are in a fluid and changing manner. Locke (1975) wrote that people strive to attain goals to satisfy their emotions and desires. Ackoff (1981) described purpose and meaning as progress toward an ideal that converts mere existence into significant living by making choice meaningful.

Meaning of Work

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, spirituality and meaning at work emerged as a reaction to the loss of job security, as well as other factors (Darling & Chalofsky, 2004). One set of events was the environmental disasters of Chernobyl, the chemical pollution at Bhopal, and the big oil spills off the coasts of Canada and Europe. These sparked an increase in the collective consciousness about corporate social responsibility. The second set of events was the ethics scandals by Enron, Worldcom, and others. There have been a host of books, articles, and other media questioning our misuse of this planet, the role of work in capitalist societies, and our moral, ethical, and spiritual stance around life's meaning and purpose (Holbecke & Springnett, 2004).

In the past several years, organizations had been attempting to attract and retain highly qualified workers in advance of a projected labor shortage and amid increasing global competition. More recently, the economic downturn that began in 2007/2008 has been causing tremendous turmoil in employment. Yet new young professionals are still expressing a preference to work for socially responsible, ethically driven organizations that allow the "whole self" to be brought to work. And the "baby boomers" in America have been going through midlife and early retirement questioning the meaning and purpose of work in their lives, especially those who went through the downsizings of the 1990s (both the ones who lost their jobs and the survivors). When you ask these people about how they feel about work, according to one consulting group, they talk about a sense of loss; a lack of purpose, trust, and commitment; a loosening of emotional ties to the workplace; and a questioning of whether their work is worthwhile (Holbecke & Springnett, 2004).

According to the Society for Human Resource Management's (2008b) workplace forecast report, 4 of the 10 key themes identified were the following:

- The implications of increased global competitiveness, *especially the need for an educated and skilled workforce*
- Demographic changes, especially the aging of the workforce, the impending retirement of the baby boom generation, and *the greater demand for work/life balance*
- Growing need to develop *retention strategies* for current and future workforce
- Demographic shifts leading to a *shortage of high-skill workers*

Other findings from their survey that were relevant include the following:

- Growth in the number of *employees with caring responsibilities* (elder care, child care, and both elder care and child care at the same time)
- Generational issues—recognizing and *catering to groups such as Generation Y* (born 1980-2000), *Generation X* (born 1965-1980), and so on

As mentioned earlier, the United States and the rest of the world were going through a chaotic economic decline, and even before the economic turmoil fully emerged, employees identified job security as their top concern (Society for Human Resource Management, 2008a). The Society for Human Resource Management study identified contributors to employee job satisfaction, and the rest of the top four were the following: benefits, compensation, and feeling safe in the work environment. The top four contributors to job satisfaction were actually *not satisfiers*, based on Herzburg, but basic hygiene factors, or lower-order Maslow's hierarchy levels. And they were rated high, at least in part, because of the dismal economic situation. So to call them contributors to satisfaction, or motivational factors, is a misnomer.

But five out of the top 10 contributors to job satisfaction are motivational:

- Opportunities to use skills and abilities
- Relationship with immediate supervisor
- The work itself
- Meaningfulness of job
- Flexibility to balance life and work issues

What all these findings point to is the American workforce's desire to be part of an organization that is going to take care of them and help them take care of their families, support their growth through skill and knowledge development, understand their need to have some work-life balance, and use their skills and abilities in a way that is meaningful.

Motivation and Meaning

The literature refers to values as intrinsic motivators to performing a task and deriving satisfaction from the accomplishment of that task (or job). Although the emphasis may be on the congruence of the task with our beliefs, objectives, and anticipated rewards, motivation is seen as focused on the accomplishment of the task. The common assumption is that we are motivated by values based on result or outcome. Meaning, on the other hand, is more deeply intrinsic than values, suggesting three levels of satisfaction: extrinsic, intrinsic, and something even deeper. This level of intrinsic motivation is about the meaning *of* the work itself to the individual.

Csikszentmihalyi (1990), in his attempt to define meaning, readily acknowledged the difficulty the task presents by suggesting that any definition of the term would undoubtedly be circular. However, he pointed to three ways in which the word may be defined, two of which are (a) having a purpose or the significance of something and (b) the intentions one holds. Similarly, Dirks (1995) subscribed to the theory that work is one of the ways that a mature adult cares for oneself and others. This was expressed by respondents in the Schaefer and Darling (1996) study, who defined work as an opportunity

for service to others and not distinct from the rest of life. The term may also be definitive of one's uniqueness and a way of expressing one's self in the world.

The significance of Csikszentmihalyi's research was how intrinsically motivated people are driven by the work itself rather than by the accomplishment of the task. He included people in a wide range of occupations and activities and discovered a particular kind of experience where 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 the potential for growth of self was what he labeled *flow*. In addition, they were disappointed when the work was finished because they were no longer in the flow state. This flow state was very similar to Maslow's peak experiences at the self-actualization level.

The work itself is but one aspect of Chalofsky's (2003) construct of meaningful work. Chalofsky identified three themes: *sense of self*, *the work itself*, and *the sense of balance*. These themes 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. This emerging new paradigm links back to some of the work of the content theorists but takes their thinking and the concept of intrinsic motivation to a deeper evolutionary level.

Sense of Self

The idea of people needing to bring their whole selves (mind, body, emotion, and spirit) to their work 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. "We work hard to create physical safety in our workplaces. Can we also create mental, emotional, and spiritual safety—safety for the whole person?" (Richards, 1995, p. 87). Mitroff and Denton (1999), in their groundbreaking study of spirituality in the workplace, found that the word that best described what people were feeling was a loss of interconnectedness, and what upset them the most was not being able to bring their complete selves into the workplace. For those people who felt adrift spiritually, their work and the workplace ceased to be a source to find deeper meaning, satisfaction, and connection.

Helping individuals integrate their work and spiritual lives might mean that the time people spend working in their lifetime are more joyful, balanced, and meaningful and spiritually nourishing (Gibbons, 2007). These more fulfilled individuals might then return to their families, friends, and communities contented, refreshed, and ready to contribute. Because of this integration, one might expect that these people might be more ethical and more productive workers—which would benefit their employers. Moreover, a values-based

organization culture might help businesses to become humane, socially active, and environmentally responsible.

Before one can bring the whole self to work, one has to first be aware of one's own values, beliefs, and purpose in life. The sense of self also includes constantly striving to reach one's potential and believing in one's ability to reach that potential. And it includes an alignment between one's purpose in life and the purpose for the work. Fulfillment, in part, comes from feeling that what we do on this earth makes a difference to other people. In fact, Maslow's (1971) views expressed in the *Farther Reaches of Human Nature* would warrant the term *selfless-actualization* rather than self-actualization (Greene & Burke, 2007). His last work espoused human development beyond the self in self-actualization. Maslow's (1971) message was that people must ultimately move from a focus on self to a focus and concern for other people to achieve the highest level of human nature. People who move beyond self-actualization "are, without a single exception, involved in a cause outside of their skin: in something outside of themselves, some calling or vocation" (p. 42). Meeting the self-actualization needs focuses on achieving a personal identity and complete acceptance of self and then moving beyond to a higher connection with others.

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 (Thomas, 2000). Jobs were broken down into tasks, which involved certain competencies, and specific and measurable objectives. But work has now changed dramatically. Organizations have realized that they need to rely more and more on workers to make decisions about how the work should get accomplished. This requires more worker autonomy, flexibility, empowerment, continuous learning, risk taking, and creativity. Thomas captures what the research has demonstrated with his list of the four most critical intrinsic rewards: sense of meaning and purpose, sense of choice, sense of competence, and sense of progress. Although the work itself relates back to both Maslow's self-actualization and Alderfer's growth levels, and to an extent Herzberg's motivators, the focus is on carrying out one's life purpose through the work itself. "This is what I was meant to do." It is not about productivity or other end state. It is about working and growing as a never-ending process.

Professionalism is a related concept about taking pride in your work, a commitment to quality, a dedication to the interests of the client (be they internal or external), and a sincere desire to help. The premise of *Good Work* (Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi, & Damon, 2001) also speaks to professionalism but expands the concept to include ethics and social responsibility. They define

good work as “work of expert quality that benefits the broader society” (p. ix). And people know that they are doing good work because it feels good. This may sound too simple, but people know when the work they are doing is good and meaningful. It is about trusting both one’s judgment and one’s intuition. The more we know ourselves, the more we can evaluate and change our professional behavior, our moral and ethical judgment, and how our performance affects those around us.

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 does not matter whether what one is doing so long as it is meaningful. But given that most of us do not live in an ideal world, a sense of balance concerns the choices we make between the time spent at paid work, unpaid work (work at home, with family, as a volunteer), and at pleasurable pursuits, such that no one area of our lives is so dominant that we cease to value the other areas. All work and no play is stressful, 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 also need to balance the nourishing of our different selves (mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual) because, in the less than ideal world, we do not have the luxury of meeting all our needs through one major activity. So we need to take the time to learn, to keep fit, to reflect, to meditate or pray, and to give to others. Again, because we usually worry most about doing our paid work, we do not take the time to care for ourselves. And when we do not take care of ourselves, we usually cannot be there for others. So we end up running on the proverbial treadmill until we finally realize we are not meeting our own or anyone else’s needs. The statistics we read in the media on work-related stress, people being overweight and less than physically fit, depression, divorce, and even workplace violence speak for themselves.

Employees today are defining success on their own terms and some are opting out of the corporate rat race. Instead of living to work, people are working to live. They are tired of the inflexibility of standard work hours and the lack of concern for work–family balance and are leaving corporate positions in favor of more flexible career options.

Meaningful work is not just about the meaning of the paid work we perform; it is about the way we live our lives. It is the alignment of purpose, values, and the relationships and activities we pursue in life. It is about living our lives and performing our work with integrity. It is about integrated wholeness.

Meaning at Work

Meaning *at work* implies a relationship between the person and the organization or the workplace, in terms of commitment and engagement. Richards (1995) talked about the situation that when there is meaning at work, “[only then] will our work become more joyful [and] our organizations will flourish with commitment, passion, imagination, spirit, and soul” (p. 94). As noted earlier, commitment involves the willingness of employees to exert higher efforts on behalf of the organization, a strong desire to stay in the organization, and accept major goals and values of the organization (as cited in Porters et al., 1974).

Commitment

The primary drivers of commitment are identification with the organization’s goals and values, congruence between individual and organizational goals, and internalization of organizational values and mission. The term *work commitment* refers to a broader concept than organizational commitment and includes the different forms commitment can take in the workplace. According to Morrow (1993), there are five universal forms of work commitment, namely, (a) work ethic endorsement, (b) career commitment, (c) affective organizational commitment, (d) continuance organizational commitment, and (e) job involvement. The third form refers to an affective or psychological bonding that binds an employee to his/her organization. The primary drivers of this form of commitment are *identification* with the organizations goals and values, *congruence* between individual and organizational goals, and *internalization* of organizational values and mission. Of all the forms of commitment, affective commitment has been found to have the strongest positive relationship with desirable outcomes (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986). Organizations that want to foster affective commitment must in turn show their commitment to the employees by providing supportive work environments. The research that has examined the relationship between perception of organizational support and organizational commitment has found a consistent positive relationship between them. Perception of organizational support states that “employees form a global belief concerning the extent to which the organization cares about them and values their contribution to the organization” (Aselage & Eisenberger, 2003, p. 492). Employees will be loyal to their organization if their organization values and appreciates them (Tyler, 1999, as cited in Fuller, Barnett, Hester, & Relyea, 2003). Organizations that are committed to employee development, their well being, and their need for actualization tend to have employees with high commitment (Dessler, 1999). Paul and Anantharaman (2004), in their research study, found that of all the human resource management variables that correlate with commitment, the human resource development variables of (a) career

development, (b) development-oriented appraisal, (c) comprehensive training, and (4) employee-friendly work environment have the strongest correlation.

In a study on culture and employee-friendly/humane organizations, Chalofsky (2008) found that there was an interdependent relationship based on the values of the organizational culture. Although no organization can be all things to all people, the organizations that were studied work hard to recognize and support employees' work, family, leisure, personal, and community needs. They knew that if work-life balance is provided, then more of the whole employee will be able to focus (and wants to focus) on their work. Employees of the organizations are not there just because they have great benefits. The benefits are a result of the culture, because the culture values employees. In turn, employees have an overwhelming commitment to their organizations. It is all intertwined and synergistic. This was evident by the overwhelming alignment between the organizations' missions and their commitment to their employees, customers, suppliers, and community. The organization supports the whole person, and the whole person is engaged in the organization.

Engagement

Employee engagement has emerged as the most recent "business driver" of organizational success (Lockwood, 2007). A number of consulting companies (e.g., Gallup, Blessing-White) have surveyed their clients and have found a concern that the majority of employees are not engaged in their work and their organizations. One survey (Blessing-White, Inc., 2005) found that some of those employees who are not engaged may care about the organization and their work, but did not feel there is a good fit between their capabilities and their tasks. Others were not dissatisfied enough to leave the organization but were biding their time and not committed to either their work or the organization. The rest are actively looking to leave the organization.

Engaged employees, on the other hand, work harder, are more committed, and are more likely to go "above and beyond" the requirements and expectations of their work (Lockwood, 2007). Engaged employees tend to feel that their work actually positively affects their physical health and their psychological well-being (Crabtree, 2005). The findings of Blessing-White, Inc. (2006) were similar: Engaged employees were proud to work in their organizations and trusted their immediate managers. Overall, their emotional connections were positive. Emotionally based commitment to the work and the organization results in higher levels of engagement and commitment based on developmental, financial, or professional rewards (Corporate Leadership Council, 2004).

Conclusion: Meaningfulness, Commitment, and Engagement

One of the primary challenges organizations are facing today concerns motivating employees to carry out broader and more proactive roles. The

current workforce is becoming more emergent and less traditional. An emergent workforce is driven by opportunity as against a traditional work force that believes that tenure dictates growth (Campbell, 2002). Hence, organizations will need to develop novel approaches to motivation to retain an emergent workforce. Given the current state of the economy, it may seem that hiring and retention are not as important as they were thought to be several years ago. But organizations that want to be sustainable and successful over the long term need to still consider how to attract and grow high performing and committed employees.

In view of the ineffectiveness of extrinsic motivational factors in fostering employee commitment and engagement, and the limited impact of traditional intrinsic factors in isolation, this article develops a conceptual framework of the relationship between commitment and engagement and a deeper level of intrinsic motivation, namely, meaningful work. This article builds on the premise that people with the highest levels of productivity and fulfillment view themselves as inseparable from their work (Mohrman & Cohen, 1995), are intrinsically motivated by the work itself (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), and are professionally committed to and engaged with the organization. This approach combines the individual aspect of motivation emanating from a psychological perspective to a contextual dimension of motivation that highlights the importance of workplace environment and culture. Although the commitment construct has been researched for more than four decades, the research pertaining to engagement is of recent origin. Most of the engagement literature at this time is primarily based on survey results generated by consulting companies rather than empirical research. More research needs to be conducted concerning engagement as a viable construct and the relationship between engagement, commitment, and meaningfulness.

The connections of the concepts of meaningful work, employee commitment, and engagement can give human resource development practitioners and managers powerful tools to develop workplace strategies that can greatly improve employee satisfaction, fulfillment, and loyalty. Organizational productivity, retention, and sustainability will be enhanced, and individuals will feel good about their work and how it affects the rest of their lives.

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