

# Final Report for Project Grant RBT 1509

Enhancing everyday working life through  
meaningfulness initiatives in the workplace

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## 1. Background and Rationale for the Study

Given that many working people in the UK are feeling increasingly under pressure to “work harder and longer with no additional reward” (Thomas et al, 2013, p.3), there is a need to identify ways in which organisations can enable their staff to feel engaged with, and empowered by, their work. Drawing on existing research by the Principal Investigator that shows that meaningfulness is strongly associated with higher levels of engagement (Fletcher, 2014; 2016), the present study aimed to examine how organisations can facilitate engagement and personal agency through meaningfulness interventions. Considering that meaningfulness is a ‘fundamental’ psychological need that strengthens an individual’s self-worth and life experience (Yeoman, 2014), designing initiatives that facilitate meaningfulness within the workplace could be particularly effective at bolstering the engagement of staff, which in turn could help improve personal agency at work (Saks, 2011). Moreover, recent systematic evidence syntheses (Bailey et al., 2015; 2016) reveal that interventions and experimental studies aimed at increasing meaningfulness and/or engagement are woefully lacking. Therefore, research that designs and pilots practically useful interventions aimed at fostering positive psychological states such as meaningfulness and engagement would advance and innovate the field. The funded project sought to address this gap by conducting an experimental field study, which piloted a personal development intervention focused on meaningfulness within two organisational settings. The main objectives of the study were to:

1. design and pilot a small scale intervention that aims to facilitate the experience of meaningfulness within the workplace
2. evaluate the success and effectiveness of the intervention in terms of impact on employees (i.e. wellbeing), on the organisation (i.e. employee performance), and on existing work practices (i.e. can it be easily embedded).
3. identify how the intervention could be further improved and developed.

## 2. Research Methods

### Research sites and sampling strategy

#### Public Co

Public Co is a non-ministerial department of the UK Government that offers services primarily to other UK Government departments, and is based in Central London. It employs nearly 2,000 people, with nearly 60 per cent employed as specialists. The recruitment of participants focused on work units that had been highlighted by the Human Resources department as being significantly less engaged than other work units and as experiencing threats to their meaningfulness and identity with the organisation. Therefore, the sampling strategy focused on recruiting support function staff, e.g. administrative assistants, who had undergone restructuring to their division over the past year, and on a particular division of public-facing staff, whose jobs had become increasingly de-skilled and administrative over the last few years due to private sector outsourcing of some of their services.

#### Engineering Co

Engineering Co is a large multinational company within the defence and security sector, specialising in aerospace and transportation. Its UK division employs over 6,000 people across 12 sites, with the majority of these employed as specialists. The main UK site is based in the South of England and is focused on engineering and software as well as central organisational functions such as human resources and finance. Similarly to Public Co, the recruitment of participants focused on work units that had been highlighted by the Human Resources department as being significantly less engaged than other work units and as experiencing threats to their meaningfulness and identity with the organisation. Therefore, the sampling strategy focused on recruiting engineers and project support staff from two particular divisions. One division had a high proportion of long serving staff whose products and customer profiles had changed significantly over the last few years due to changes in the global socio-political environment: the other division had a high proportion of technically detailed and highly skilled roles, which had become increasingly routinized and procedural.

## Intervention design and procedure

The three conditions undertook the three online questionnaires at the same time: T1 at week 1, T2 at weeks 8 to 10, T3 at weeks 12 to 14. The baseline (T1) questionnaire captured core self-evaluations, job, and demographic details; as well as the before study levels of the dependent variables. The end survey 1 (T2) questionnaire captured after study levels of the dependent variables, except personal initiative. The end survey 2 (T3) questionnaire captured after study levels of personal initiative, which was assessed a few weeks after T2 as changes in behaviour will likely occur after changes in psychological states. The next sections will describe the particular activities of the three different conditions.

### Control group

The control group received no training and development activities during the study period. They were asked to complete the baseline (T1) and end (T2 and T3) online questionnaires only. To ensure fairness, these participants were offered the opportunity to participate in the training and development activities of the other two groups after the study was completed.

### Meaningfulness intervention

The meaningfulness intervention group received a two-hour training session followed by weekly personal development activities for a total of four weeks. The training session began by giving participants an overview of the concept of meaningfulness and why it is important within the workplace. Participants then undertook a series of group discussions, facilitated by the researchers, on the different sources of meaningfulness; and the final part of the training session focused on explaining the weekly personal development activities. Each week the participants were asked to complete three discrete activities, using a prepared Microsoft Word document; with each activity lasting 10 to 15 minutes: a) a reflective activity where participants were asked to identify, describe, and reflect upon a relatively meaningful event/situation that happened at work over the last week or so; b) a self-evaluation activity where participants were asked to focus a different broader source of meaningfulness to them personally (personal and professional

values/family and non-work life/societal, community, and environmental) and discuss how this could be utilised/strengthened within the workplace; and c) a goal setting activity where participants were asked to reflect upon a meaningful goal they set themselves the previous week (in the training session they set their first goal), and then set themselves a new behavioural goal, and a plan to achieve it, that they feel would have a meaningful impact to themselves and in their workplace.

#### Stress management intervention

The stress management intervention group received a two hour training session followed by weekly personal development activities for a total of four weeks. The training session began by giving participants an overview of what stress management was and why it was important to the workplace. The training session focused on task-related techniques for coping with work stress/demands; a number of group discussions were conducted to share ideas and experiences. The final part of the training session focused on explaining the weekly personal development activities. Each week the participants were asked to complete three discrete activities, using a prepared Microsoft Word document, each lasting 10 to 15 minutes: a) a task sorting and evaluation exercise where participants were asked to categorise, using a structured grid, and plan their current and upcoming tasks, duties, and responsibilities according to how important (low to high) and how urgent (low to high) each of them were; b) a reflective activity where participants were asked to reflect upon different elements of performance evaluation and monitoring, and how these could be utilised to facilitate their own sense of wellbeing at work; and c) a coping activity where participants were asked to identify and reflect upon a difficult and demanding work task they undertook over the previous working week, and how they could better cope with the stress of that task.

#### Allocation of condition and participant characteristics

A total of 70 completed all study activities (30 from Public Co, 40 from Engineering Co); representing a participation rate of 84%. Participants were randomly allocated to one of the conditions; however, this was not the case for four participants due to clashes with their work schedules/personal preferences. There were no significant differences between job/demographic characteristics across the study conditions.

### 3. Summary of the Findings

#### Initial tests

Overall, these initial results of dependent t-tests indicate that those not undertaking an intervention experienced a gradual decline in positive psychological states and behaviour over the study period, whereas those in meaningfulness intervention specifically showed a consistent increase in experienced positive states and behaviour, albeit not necessarily reaching a statistically significant level for all.

#### Meaningfulness intervention versus control condition

ANCOVA tests (controlling for organisation and individual differences in core self-evaluations) found that the interaction between time (before/after study) and condition (meaningfulness vs control group) was significant for meaningfulness *in* and *at* work, psychological safety, personal initiative; and marginally significant for job engagement. As expected, the interaction was not significant for psychological availability. Overall the results indicate that the meaningfulness intervention had a significantly positive impact, relative to not undertaking any intervention, on key psychological states associated with high wellbeing and on personal initiative.

#### Stress management intervention versus control condition

ANCOVA tests (controlling for organisation and individual differences in core self-evaluations) found that the interaction between time (before/after study) and condition (stress management vs control group) was not statistically significant all any of the dependent variables. Therefore, the stress management intervention did not have a significant impact, relative to not undertaking any intervention, on key psychological states associated with high wellbeing nor on personal initiative.

#### Summary

Taken together, the study indicates that personal development interventions focused on meaningfulness help to facilitate positive psychological experiences and behaviour within the workplace, whereas those focused on stress management may not.

## 4. Implications for Theory and Future Research

The study shows the power of meaningfulness as a critical psychological experience for engagement and personal agency at work, as well as further advancing a multidimensional conceptual view of meaningfulness that encompasses not just meaningfulness *in* work, i.e., the work itself is personally meaningful, but also meaningfulness *at* work, i.e. the work contributes to something bigger that is deemed valuable by others (Pratt and Ashforth, 2003; Saks, 2011). Additionally, the study provides support for the broaden-and-build process of meaningfulness (Soane et al., 2013) such that the meaningfulness intervention broadened thought-action repertoires that enabled engagement to occur and promoted personal initiative, and built upon existing personal resources through reflection and action. However, feedback from participants indicates that the weekly meaningfulness activities were challenging and could often be emotionally demanding. Thus, the broaden-and-build process may not involve a universally positive affective process, and could instead involve other, more temporally and socially situated, processes. Lastly, the study advances the rigour and practical application of meaningful work research. Given recent evidence syntheses have revealed that little or no experimental studies have been conducted on meaningfulness or engagement (Bailey et al., 2015; 2016), this signifies a valuable methodological and empirical contribution to the field.

There are a few limitations that should be considered for future research. First, a relatively short timeframe was used, thus limiting the scope of the findings. Therefore, future intervention studies should consider how best to maximise the longitudinal component. Second, the voluntary nature of the recruitment strategy meant there may have been sampling selection biases despite the fact that there was some level of random allocation of condition. Future research should consider how best to recruit, sample, and randomly allocate participants given the pragmatic reality of conducting field research. Lastly, the study was conducted with small subsamples within two organisations. Therefore, additional research needs to be conducted across a wider range of settings. Moreover, given that the EU Referendum may have influenced participants in different ways, it is important that the impact of salient contextual factors is mitigated or assessed in some way.

## 5. Implications for Practice

The study demonstrates how a relatively low cost personal development initiative focused on meaningfulness could be fairly easily implemented without a lot of technological assistance. However, participants gave feedback that utilising existing technologies such as intranet and online training modules could enhance the experience and enable it to be integrated within the organisation. Moreover, it could be adapted to fit within a broader HRD approach (Shuck and Rocco, 2014). For example, meaningfulness and how to facilitate it could form an essential part of management development and employee-manager conversations around learning and career development. Additionally, meaningfulness initiatives could be used to 'soften' traditionally harder forms of HRM and promote a more holistic approach to engagement (Jenkins and Delbridge, 2013). For example, it could be utilised within a performance management system to discuss how performance could further be rewarded through goals that create meaningful impact. However, it is important that the organisation and line managers give enough time and resources in order to implement a meaningfulness initiative effectively as many participants found reflecting on their meaningfulness and coming up with ideas on how to facilitate this through goals and behaviours initially challenging and difficult. Related to this, buy-in from both employees and management is crucial. Participants discussed the importance of using a voluntary, rather than mandatory, approach, and explained how this could involve a snowballing technique to facilitate buy-in, for example using staff champions to 'quietly evangelise' the initiative and to help adapt it to fit best within their local context.

## 6. Planned Dissemination Activities

**Deliverable 1** will be a practitioner report. Current progress: Dilys Robinson at the Institute for Employment Studies (IES) is starting to write up the findings of the study for a practitioner report, which will be ready for publication and distribution by IES for our December dissemination event. We will focus on IES and Aston Business School's existing networks in the first instance. We are also aware that RBT has plans to publish a book, which we have expressed interest in contributing to.

**Deliverable 2** will be academic articles in internationally recognised conferences/journals. Current progress: Dr Fletcher has had a conference paper accepted for a special symposium on meaningful work being hosted by Prof Lips-Wiersma at Auckland University of Technology in December 2016. This will also lead onto a submission for a special issue for the *Journal of Management Studies* (4\* ranked and is a leading management journal) in March 2017, which the hosts of the symposium are guest editing. A review of the study and what else it could yield in terms of quality data will take place after this to see if another high quality journal article is possible.

**Deliverable 3** is an event to launch the report, and present results primarily to practitioners. Current progress: We are currently finalising the programme for our half day dissemination workshop which is being hosted by IES primarily for IES network members on the 13<sup>th</sup> December 2016 in London. We will invite the trustees of RBT to this workshop in due course. We expect to have approximately 20 delegates representing various organisations and HR practitioner groups.

**Deliverable 4** is the submission of a larger research grant 1 to 3 years following this research. Current progress: This is too soon to discuss, but it is still planned that a submission to a larger grant will occur between 2017 and 2019.

## 7. Acknowledgements

I would like to personally thank Richard Benjamin Trust for the opportunity to carry out this research project. In leading this project, I have developed my research leadership and project management skills, and have learnt a great deal about field experimental research and the pragmatic realities of conducting such studies. It has also ignited my passion for meaningful work research, which will hopefully translate into further research projects and into developing relevant teaching materials/resources.

Many thanks also go to Dilys Robinson, Principal Associate for the Institute for Employment Studies, who has given a lot of support and guidance, and has helped to develop the training materials as well as the dissemination event/practitioner report.

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