



The human connection

Why meaning is so important to work



Executive summary

Meaning increases motivation drives productivity and enhances employee engagement. But what can a business do to make work meaningful for its people?

Today, people spend nearly one-third of their time at work. Our careers form one of the main focal points for bringing meaning and identity to our lives.

While work is significant for almost everyone who is economically active, a 2015 YouGov poll in the UK discovered that only 50% of people with a full-time job were entirely sure their role made any sort of meaningful contribution to the world. Concerningly, 37% were certain that their job had no meaning at all. This is not a UK-specific problem. A similar study in the Netherlands by Schouten & Nelissen found 40% of people felt their job had no societal value.

Taking these figures into account, it leaves approximately 12 to 13 million working people in the UK, 48 to 52 million full-time workers in the US, and 91 to 98 million economically active adults in the EU believing their work makes no difference - with a substantial number suspecting this may well be the case.

Investigating the results of both studies, Professor David Graeber of The London School of Economics (LSE) published his 2018 study exploring the concept of 'bullsh*t jobs'. For Graeber, 'bullsh*t jobs' are those that, if lost, would not make any tangible difference to society. The by-product? If employees understand their jobs to be essentially pointless, their day-to-day work fundamentally lacks *meaning*.

While Graeber's theory is certainly thought-provoking, the real-world situation is likely more nuanced. In most cases, jobs aren't 100% 'bullsh*t'. There's always some value. But it's difficult to argue against the case that certain elements of work are increasingly without intrinsic value.

According to the annual 'The State of Enterprise Work' survey conducted by workfront, the amount of time American office workers devote to core duties declined from 44% in 2017-18 to 40% in 2018-19. The reduction of core activity work, unsurprisingly, was attributed to an increase in time responding to emails and administrative tasks.

Two things are clear: firstly, only 16 hours of the 40-hour full-time working week are spent on core activity work, and secondly, the situation is getting worse.



Pay is not the principal driver behind meaningful work

The classical economic theory *homo economicus* (economic man) underpins almost all contemporary conversations about work.

The theory asserts that humans are consistently rational and motivated by an intuitive cost-benefit analysis - left to our own devices, people will always choose the option that provides the maximum personal benefit for the least expenditure of effort. This is often interpreted by managers to mean that pay is the most significant motivation for people at work.

These assumptions are worryingly widespread, especially when almost all the available evidence indicates the 'economic man' model is inaccurate. Human beings are innately more complex and irrational than the theory implies.

Our motivation at work directly relates to childhood experiences

In 1901, the German psychologist Karl Groos discovered that infants express delight when they figure out they can cause predictable effects in the world. This often starts with an act as simple as shaking a rattle.

Through similar acts, a child learns they exist as an individual. A child can choose to shake a rattle repeatedly. Likewise, they can choose not to. Groos labels this decision-making process as "the pleasure at being the cause," citing personal agency (the capacity of individuals to act independently and to make their own free choices) as the basis of all play.

The opposite is also true. Experiments have shown that allowing a child to discover and experience the delight of agency and then abruptly taking that agency away leads to rage, a refusal to engage, and withdrawal from the world. The psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Francis Broucek calls this the "trauma of failed influence."

But how does this relate to work? Put simply, work without a sense of agency has a debilitating effect on wellbeing. 'Bullsh*t' work isn't just an attack on a person's sense of *self-worth*, but it also has a direct effect on selfhood. As Graeber rather glibly states: "a human being unable to have a meaningful impact on the world ceases to exist."



Pay does not motivate people in and of itself

In the research paper 'The relationship between pay and job satisfaction', the authors calculated the correlation between pay level, pay satisfaction and job satisfaction. The results state that pay is correlated 0.15 with job satisfaction and 0.23 with pay satisfaction on a scale of zero to one - a negligible association at best.

Another challenge for businesses is that pay is increasingly no longer available as a motivating factor. For decades, the fundamental assumption has been that pay motivates people. The reality is different. Few people today expect to receive an annual pay increase. Even in the best-case scenario of an employee gaining an inflation-matching 2.48% uplift on a £29,009 average UK salary, that only equates to a £719 a year, or £13.82 a week before tax.

With this in mind, it's easy to see why younger generations are far more motivated by being part of something bigger than themselves and ultimately working in roles that provide meaning to their lives. With £50,000+ worth of student debt, an unattainable private housing market and the chances of retiring with sufficient money looking increasingly slim, young people want their job to *mean* something. They want to make a tangible impact on the world around them.

Work, to a large degree, defines our identity. Some would even go as far as saying it defines us as human beings. It's not surprising that we have a yearning for meaningful work, and that employees who find meaningful work are happier, more productive, hardworking, and take less sick days. Meaning matters.

Creating meaning for our people is a fundamental component of our 'People-Lead-Growth' business strategy. Without high levels of engagement across every business function, our organisation simply would not be able to drive the change we are making in the staffing industry.

Through investment in our strategic People Services function, our individual promises to each other, and our commitment to the OpenBlend method (in which managers and their team can openly discuss how they feel about work and their life inside and outside of work), we are able to better understand what drives and motivates our people.

With greater insight into our people, we are better placed to make positive changes to our business in order to enhance meaning. Over 80% of our people now work flexibly, demonstrating our commitment to listening to our people and making the appropriate changes to maximise engagement.

Our faith in a common, shared purpose to drive real, positive change - to both our industry and our business - is what I believe ultimately gives Guidant Global its competitive edge.

Simon Blockley,
CEO Guidant Global



The benefits of meaningful work

|| Meaning is the new money. ||

Tammy Erickson,
Harvard Business Review (HBR)

According to a recent Harvard Business Review report, nine out of ten people are willing to earn less money to do more meaningful work. Across all age and salary groups, people are willing to pay a significant amount to find meaning.

In response to the question, "if you could find a job that offered you consistent meaning, how much of your salary would you be willing to forego to do it?" workers in the US said they'd be willing to forego 23% of their entire future lifetime earnings in order to have a job that was always meaningful. 23%. Almost a quarter.

This is not a statistical outlier. In a study undertaken by author and TED speaker Shawn Achor, nearly 80% of respondents would rather have a boss who cared about them finding meaning and success in work than receive a 20% pay increase.

Similarly, in the paper 'Accepting Lower Salaries for Meaningful Work', the authors noted that:

- On average, participants reported minimum acceptable salaries that were 32% lower for personally meaningful jobs compared to jobs that were perceived as personally meaningless

- The enhancement of a job's apparent meaningfulness lowered the minimum acceptable salary that participants required for the position
- Participants who experienced more meaningful work lives were more likely to turn down higher-paying jobs elsewhere. Furthermore, this relationship was stronger among employees in 2015 compared to 2005
- Participants who reported having more meaningful work were less willing to leave their current jobs and organisations for higher-paying opportunities

All of these statistics remained stable even when controlling for demographic factors and differences in job characteristics. Regardless of job type, meaning matters - not only for employees but for businesses, too.

Businesses benefit by providing employees with work that has meaning

Employees who say they have 'very meaningful' work spend an additional hour a week working - equivalent to a 2.5% increase in productivity. They also take, on average, two fewer days paid leave each year - a further productivity boost of 1%.

Based on established job satisfaction-to-productivity ratios, HBR report that 'highly meaningful work will generate an additional \$9,078 (£7,500) per worker, per year versus workers who experience an average degree of meaning'. The average salary in the UK is £29,009. Not only are employees willing to take a 23% pay cut to find meaningful work, but the resultant productivity gains are equivalent to a 26% pay rise for every single worker.

Additional business value comes in the form of increased retention rates. Employees who find work highly meaningful are 69% less likely to plan on quitting their jobs within the next six months and have job tenures that are 7.4 months longer on average than employees who find work lacking in meaning.

Likewise, research by Penna echoed these findings, summarising that: 'organisations that devote resources towards creating meaning at work can anticipate increased motivation (55%), loyalty (42%), pride (32%) and productivity (20%).

Though the benefits of meaningful work are significant for both workers and businesses, organisations are falling short in providing it. Strangely, business executives know this. When asked how much more productive they are at their peak versus 'on-average', the most common answer from executives is a fivefold increase. However, most executives report they are 'in the zone' less than 10% of the time. What's more, when those same executives detail the bottlenecks in achieving peak performance, more than 90% point to aspects centred on meaning.

This gap presents both a challenge and opportunity for businesses. In today's hyper-competitive talent market, candidates can choose where they want to work and demand what they want from work - including meaning. If talented workers aren't offered roles with meaning, it's easy (and often preferable) for them to jump ship.

For businesses to attract and retain talent and improve productivity, they need to build greater meaning. Meaning can no longer be a minor consideration - it needs to be a business imperative.

At Guidant Global, our business strategy is 'People Lead Growth' and the success of our business depends upon and revolves around the welfare and motivation of our people.

We know from the Taylor Report (a review of working practices in the modern economy) that pay alone does not motivate people - underscoring the importance of 'good work for all.'

With productivity in the UK below average for the rest of the G7 advanced economies, employers have a real opportunity to drive improvement by providing their workforce with a sense of inclusion, purpose, fulfilment and meaning.

Charlotte Woodward,
People Service Director, Guidant Global

What businesses can do to create meaningful work

1. Tell five stories at once

When communicating business strategy, organisations typically tell one of two stories to inspire their teams:

The turnaround story

|| *We're performing below industry standard and must change dramatically to survive - incremental change is not sufficient to attract investors to our underperforming business.* ||

The good-to-great story

|| *Given our assets, market position, skills and loyal staff, we're capable of far more. We can become the undisputed leader in our industry for the foreseeable future.* ||

The problem with these visions is that they tell stories centred on the company. While these visions may inspire a fifth of the workforce, that still leaves 80% of workers without a central vision that brings meaning to their daily function. In addition to one of the stories above, research shows that there are four further narratives (totalling five stories altogether) that need to be communicated to give *all people* a sense of meaning.

- **The wider society** - making a better society, building the community or stewarding resources
- **The customer** - making life easier and providing a superior service or product for the end-user
- **The team** - creating a sense of belonging, a caring environment, or working together efficiently and effectively
- **The individual** - personal development, a higher paycheck or bonus, and a sense of personal empowerment

Surveys of hundreds of thousands of employees show that the split in which story motivates us is roughly equal. Across most businesses - regardless of management level, industry or geography - it appears that these motivations are a universal human phenomenon.

The way to create meaning for your entire workforce is to tell all five stories at once. When communicating a business' vision, it's important to not only talk about business growth and profit margins, but also to articulate the four elements just discussed. To create meaning for all, businesses need to communicate all five stories simultaneously.



2. Allow your people to write their own ticket

In the famous lottery experiment by Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahneman, half the participants were randomly assigned a lottery ticket while the other half were given a blank piece of paper and asked to write down their own number.

Before drawing the winning number, the researchers offered to buy back lottery tickets from the participants. Researchers found that they had to pay at least five times more for tickets when participants chose their own number, regardless of demographics.

Of course, this makes no sense. A lottery is a game of pure chance and every number has equal odds of success. Yet those who wrote their own number valued their ticket considerably more than those who didn't.

In the context of meaningful work, the experiment reveals that we are more committed to the outcome when we have agency. The task at hand becomes more meaningful. Simple acts like asking people to write their own job descriptions, to define where and how they can add value, or to define the output they deliver in return for a bonus, can have the same effect as people writing their own lottery ticket in Kahneman's experiment.

3. Notice, recognise and reward good work

Nothing else can quite substitute for a few well-chosen, well-timed, sincere words of praise. They're absolutely free - and worth a fortune.

Sam Walton, founder of Wal-Mart

Work becomes more meaningful when people know their actions are noticed and appreciated. Recognition and reward do not always have to be substantial, monetary or public in order to build an employee's meaning, however.

In their seminal work, *Mean Genes: From Sex To Money To Food: Taming Our Primal Instincts*, Jay Phelan and Terry Burnham describe an experiment in which half a group of people using a photocopier found a dime (equivalent to 10p in the UK) in the coin slot. When users were asked to rate their satisfaction level, those who got a dime scored on average 6.5 on a 1-to-7 scale, whereas those who didn't get a dime scored just 5.6. When we aren't expecting a reward, even the most insignificant prize can have a disproportionate effect on our state of mind.

Words of small praise, recognition, thanks and acknowledgement delivered at unexpected times boost motivation. Disney Florida, the largest single-site employer in North America, found that when they surveyed their staff, the number one way they want to be recognised is by "a sincere thank-you" from their supervisor.

4. Be clear about what people's roles are

As previously discussed, workers state that only 40% of their time is spent on core activities. Presumably, managers do not think the remaining 60% is wasted effort - in most cases, these activities have an influence on business success. Perhaps this is a reflection of the way we define core activities in job descriptions?

Indeed, it has been suggested that over 40% of job descriptions contain a lie. With this in mind, is it such a surprise that employees are often not prepared, do not expect to perform tasks not specified in their job description, and do not, therefore, find it meaningful when doing the work we employ them to do? In many cases, job descriptions create a mismatch in expectations. To create more meaningful work for people, job descriptions need to be more upfront. Here's how to do it:

Explain why the job is important to the business

Logic makes us think, but emotions inspire action. If we are to create real meaning for employees, we need to explain why their work is important to the wider business.

Define the output, not the activity

Most job descriptions list day-to-day activities, but an employee's success is measured on results, rather than individual tasks. Job descriptions need to adapt to meet this reality. Rather than list activities, businesses should outline the four or five things that if done well, would be considered a success.

Take this job if... do not take this job if....

Every job has positive and negative characteristics. The perfect person for a particular job is someone who *loves* the good and *doesn't mind* the bad elements. If you are honest in your job specifications by clearly defining the positives and negatives, it's much easier to measure the suitability of a candidate.

Get a third party to read your job descriptions

Getting a third party to read your job descriptions can give you valuable insight into how successful it's likely to land with your target audience. If an independent person can tell you what the prospective employee will do, what success looks like and what impact they will have on the wider organisation, you'll be on the right track.

If can't find the right person, restructure the job

If you've taken the above steps, and you still can't find the right person, you may need to restructure the role. Assuming that 60% of people's time is spent doing non-core activities, perhaps the job description isn't appealing because there's too much non-core work in it.

Take, for example, a web developer. If 60% of the tasks are unrelated to the role, then maybe it's not a web developer you're looking for in the first place.

5. Remove anonymity - make it personal

Individuals tended to experience their work as meaningful when it mattered to others more than just themselves.

MIT Sloan

If you look at the experiences of people who report a higher degree of meaning at work, it becomes clear that relationships with colleagues are more important than the actual work they are doing. Michael Steger, the creator of The Work and Meaning Inventory, states that "relationships are the ocean in which we find meaning." As humans, we are not only social creatures - we're natural collaborators.

In the work context, we all serve someone. As David Brooks asserts, "if your attitude is about the service, you just have a happier job and a more meaningful job."

However, modern work is often conducted in isolation, with siloed functions, siloed workplaces and digitised processes that can often foster separation and anonymity.

To create meaningful work for our people, businesses need to remove this anonymity. We need to encourage people to engage with the people we serve, and the people who serve us. If people work together to understand why work is requested, how it can be improved, and what impact the work has, everyone will likely find a better, more valuable way of giving and receiving what they want.

Disney, again, is a master at this. They link housekeeping (one silo) with the laundry function (another silo) to show the room cleaners the impact of bundling a remote control within bedding has on washing machines. At the same time, they show the laundry team the impact on housekeeping if a sheet of dubious quality makes it out on the rounds. Through connection, everyone understands the importance of their work in relation to the wider ecosystem - building connections within the business, and ultimately creating an understanding of the wider impact for the customer.





6. Understand the impact a person's role has on your customers

To create meaning, we have to give employees a clear sense of how their work directly affects the end-user or customer.

In his book *Give and Take: Why Helping Others Drives Our Success*, University of Wharton professor Adam Grant explores the power of purpose in improving both happiness and productivity.

Grant studied paid employees in the university's fundraising call centre whose role is to call donors and ask for money. This is certainly a tough job, as most people do not appreciate cold calls. A typical fundraiser has to make a significant number of calls before receiving a pledge. It's monotonous, taxing, unproductive work. In many cases, such work can lead to low morale.

Grant conducted two experiments. In one, he arranged for fundraisers to hear a senior executive and a board member of the university to speak about the significance of education in society and the importance of fundraisers work to scholarship recipients. In the second, Grant arranged for fundraisers to meet students who received the scholarships.

The result? In the first experiment, productivity did not improve at all. In the second, fundraisers made more calls and secured larger donations per call. Seeing the real-world impact on the end customer (the students) made their conversations more engaging, convincing and successful.

In the two months after meeting the students, fundraisers raised 295% more than they had in the two months prior - an average of \$9,704.58, versus \$2,459.44. Knowing the end-user, and making a positive change for society increased meaning and productivity.

This effect persists in all jobs. Lifeguards who read stories about saving drowning swimmers were 21% more active when watching over their swimmers. Students editing papers written by other students spend 20% more time on them if they have first met the authors.

Helping people understand the impact of their work does not have to be complicated, but it should always be personal. These first-hand interactions should be systematically built into an organisation, regardless of whether you are a B2B, B2C or public sector organisation.

7. Be transparent

|| *If you are comfortable with the amount of information you are sharing with your staff... you're not sharing enough.* **||**

Laszlo Bock, ex-Vice President of People Operations at Google, *Work Rules!*

Employees want to be heard and leaders need to listen. It's not downward communication that employees want more of. It's genuine communication. Businesses are very good at talking down to employees about what's happening in the business, but often, very bad at talking *with* employees to understand their experiences.

Difficult business problems frequently go unsolved, simply because they don't speak to their people. Often, employees know answers to questions that managers have not thought to ask. Staff are at the coal face; they understand what they do better than anyone else. If you're not utilising that experience and expertise, you're not only missing out, you're also increasing the risk of decreasing morale.

The second aspect of transparency is clarity. Too often decisions are made behind a shroud of secrecy, with little information presented as to how or why that decision was arrived at.

The major challenge in this respect is that if you do not explain things transparently, you create discontent - especially if employees believe a decision is set against organisational values. If you do not share the whole story, then how can an employee feel anything other than apathy to the organisation? Equally, if you cannot trust your employees with the full story, why are they still employed?



8. Connect roles to a bigger purpose

We all want to be a part of something bigger than ourselves. For work to be meaningful, it needs to tie into a higher meaning, a purpose, a grand plan. People are not inspired solely by what they do, but are inspired when they know why what they do matters.

The famous example of the janitor at NASA is a prime example of this. When asked by President Kennedy "what are you doing?," the janitor replied: "I am helping put a man on the moon." The janitor's contribution may have been minimal, but the meaning and the purpose of his role was tied to the biggest of all grand plans. Even the most menial role can be linked to an organisation's values.

Of course, not every business has such lofty ambitions. Many businesses' products or services seem mundane on the surface. But that doesn't mean it's impossible to create meaning through organisational values, ambitions and a grand plan. Take hospital cleaners, for example. Without their contribution, doctors and surgeons wouldn't be able to work in safe, sanitary conditions. In their own small way, hospital cleaners are helping to save people's lives. And what's more meaningful than that?

So how do you help stimulate employees to make the connection from the work they do, and a wider, inspirational mission? Ask why.

Take, for example, this hypothetical scenario for a common task managers do at least once a year: performance reviews.

Why are you filling out a performance review? The initial answer is likely to be something along the lines of "to give my team members feedback about their performance and to help them improve." Why? "So that we can build better software." Why? "To help our customers become more efficient." Why? "So they are free to be creative and productive, so they can go home early to see their family."

Through this simple process of answering the "so what," it's easy to see how any role or task can relate to a much grander goal. It becomes inspirational, it creates meaning.

|| *As Socrates puts it best "The unexamined life is not worth living". In parallel, a job without meaning is not worth having.*

While the US is experiencing record low unemployment rates and it's a buyer's market, it is critical for employers to not only focus on engagement but also to provide employees with a sense of purpose - clarifying how their job impacts the company's overall mission and affirming that their ideas matter. If we are to create meaning at work, all of these factors need to be addressed.

At Guidant Global, our people-centric culture not only focuses on the success of our business but also the betterment of our people. We do this not just compete in the market, but in the words of our CEO, Simon Blockley, "because it is the right thing to do." **||**

Rebecca Blakenship,
VP Talent Solutions, Guidant Global



Conclusion

As we have already seen, the average employee believes that 60% of their time at work is wasted. 37% think that their job is meaningless. For businesses, this comes at a cost. It results in reduced productivity, higher attrition and more sick days.

Meaningless work also comes at a personal cost. Being employed to do something that people know to be meaningless crushes our sense of self. It's not surprising that mental health issues are on the rise when so many people believe their work to be unnecessary.

Work should have a purpose. Having to do work without one is an affront to our sense of being and belonging.

As humans, we crave meaning. Meaning is not predicted by having a college degree or an MBA, nor is it predicted by having an above or below average income. People are just as likely to love what they do if they earn \$30,000 or \$300,000 - take, for example, the NASA janitor or hospital cleaners.

Money and prestige have very little impact on meaningfulness. Meaning comes from our deep-seated desire to be needed, to have an impact, to create genuine change.

The situation is, however, not hopeless. Some businesses, like Disney, are getting it right, and there's much to be learnt from what they do.

Other businesses, however, still need to better understand people's desire for meaning and take positive steps to improve the way they interact with their workers. The likely outcome is that businesses will reap significant rewards. By creating more meaningful work, we'll not only make businesses better, but we'll make our working world better for everyone.

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Everything we do is about doing things better. We listen, understand and advise. We partner. Our belief in a collaborative, people-centric approach builds relationships based on trust. Our workforce strategies enable you to source, assess and implement complex talent solutions that truly fit your business.

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