



The Meaning of Work

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Perhaps you have heard the following old parable:

One day while wondering, I came across three bricklayers. I asked the first bricklayer what he was doing.

"Laying bricks," he told me.

I asked the second what he was doing.

"Making a brick wall," he told me.

I asked the third.

"Building a cathedral," he explained.



This parable highlights that, often, the meaning we get from our work has as much to do with how we look at our work than the actual tasks we are performing. Although some jobs may be considered more meaningful overall (surgeon, fire-fighters, teachers), all jobs have the potential to be meaningful. In the film *It's a Beautiful Life*, in a moment of despair, George Bailey is visited by his guardian angel who provides him with a dismal picture of what the world would be without his contribution to society through his work as a banker. Although we may not have the luxury of such a visit from our guardian angel, it may just be a worthy exercise for us to consider just the same.

There are some health-related reasons to spend some time thinking about what we do at work and the purpose it serves. Individuals who find their work to be meaningful tend to have better general physical and mental health and well-being as well as enjoy their work more and are more committed to their organizations.

Although we might always think of it as such, Estelle Morin points out "*work is primarily an activity whereby a person inserts himself into the world, exercises his talents, defines himself, actualizes his potential and creates value, which in return gives him a sense of accomplishment and personal effectiveness, and possibly even a meaning to life.*"

Are you looking for a little more from your work? Here are some questions for reflection to help you think about meaning you may get from work. They are based on six components of meaning at work.

- **Social purpose:** How does my work contribute to the mission of the organization? Do I think about the bigger picture? How does it contribute to making someone else's life better, easier, or more fun? How does my work contribute or my organization contribute to my family, my community, or others in need?
- **Moral correctness:** Am I doing work that is morally justifiable in both processes and results? Do I take pride in the principled way in which I complete my job? Am I proud of the moral stance of my workplace? Do my personal values match the values of my workplace?
- **Achievement-related pleasure:** Do I enjoy some or all of the tasks that are part of my job? If not, how what changes can I make to enjoy it more? How can I make use of opportunities to grow and develop myself through the work I do or the programs available through my organization?

- **Autonomy** – How am I able to use my skills and judgments to solve problems and make decisions at work? How can I make use of my strengths or be creative in my work? If I'm in a management position, how do I allow others to use their strengths and creativity? Do I listen to their ideas?
- **Recognition** – Do I receive feedback and recognition about the work I do? Do I ask for feedback? Do I take advantage of opportunities to praise others for the good work they do?
- **Positive relationships** – Do I make interesting contacts or develop good relationships with others through my work? Could I work on the relationships I have with the people I work with? Do I try to connect with people I come across in my work (customers, clients, suppliers, co-workers) in meaningful ways? Have I actually talked to them on a personal level?

If your answers were not as positive as you would like, perhaps there may be some opportunities to look for meaning in your work. All the best as you build your cathedrals! Remember it is built brick by brick!

Morin, E. (2008). The meaning of work, mental health and organizational commitment. IRSST <http://www.irsst.qc.ca/-projet-sens-du-travail-sante-mentale-au-work-and-engagement-organizational-0099-1930.html>