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Pleasure and Meaning: Mapping Profiles of Job-Related Well-Being in the UK

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Abstract

This paper develops a typology of job-related well-being that integrates hedonic and eudaimonic conceptions of a good working life. Drawing on data from the 2024 UK Skills and Employment Survey, we identify four profiles: flourishers (34%), who experience both high levels of pleasure and meaning at work; languishers (10%), who experience neither; hedonists (31%), who report high pleasure but low meaning; and stoics (25%), who report high meaning but low pleasure. We find that languishers fare worst in terms of both job quality and personal outcomes, while the other three profiles exhibit distinct strengths and weaknesses. Hedonists tend to report lower intrinsic job quality but more manageable work demands, whereas stoics report higher levels of skill use and task discretion alongside greater work intensity and job stress. These trade-offs are less evident among flourishers, although they tend to face a significant income penalty after accounting for their skills and task discretion. Taken together, our findings suggest that no single profile enjoys advantages across all dimensions of job quality.

Introduction

Subjective well-being is generally considered as encompassing two key dimensions: hedonic well-being and eudaimonic well-being. This distinction is rooted in a long-standing philosophical debate about what constitutes a good life. A simple way of summarising the distinction between the two paradigms is whether a good life is about *feeling good* or *being good*. This philosophical divide has led to heated debates because the opposing views of well-

being carry different implications for the goals that individuals set for themselves, the type of activities they pursue, and the criteria they use to judge whether a life is well lived.

Over the last few decades, researchers have increasingly moved towards the view that hedonic and eudaimonic well-being should not be viewed as mutually exclusive (Wolf, 1997; Huppert & So, 2013; Dolan, 2014). A good life requires the experience of *both* pleasure and meaning. If either element is missing, a life is not in its best possible form. The integration of hedonic and eudaimonic well-being represents an ideal state in which individuals both *feel good* and *do good*. This optimal condition has sometimes been referred to as "flourishing" in the literature (Dolan, 2014; Keyes, 2002, Seligman, 2011; Huppert & So, 2013).

Although the conceptual distinction between hedonic and eudaimonic well-being is well established, empirical research has predominantly focused on the hedonic perspective. This imbalance can be understood as reflecting mutually reinforcing conceptual, measurement, and data constraints. Measures of hedonic well-being are routinely included in large-scale labour market and social surveys, whereas information on eudaimonic well-being is rarely collected. To develop a comprehensive understanding of the determinants and implications of well-being, it is essential to develop an indicator that captures both perspectives on what constitutes a good life.

This paper develops a typology of well-being that integrates hedonic and eudaimonic components and examines its association with different aspects of job quality among a nationally representative sample of UK workers. The analysis focuses on *job-related well-being*, a construct narrower than general well-being which is typically measured by indicators such as life satisfaction. While general well-being is influenced by a wide range of factors such as family, work, health, and leisure, job-related well-being is, in theory, primarily shaped by factors embedded within the work context. While a small number of studies have explored

experiences of pleasure and meaning jointly in the general well-being literature, such integrated approaches remain scarce in research on *job-related well-being*. Accordingly, this study aims to understand individuals' joint experiences of pleasure and meaning at work.

Hedonic and eudaimonic well-being

Both hedonic and eudaimonic perspectives of well-being have a long historical lineage. The hedonic view advocated by philosophers such as Aristippus, Epicurus and Hobbes argues that a good life is one characterised by predominance of pleasurable over painful experiences. This approach was later developed by utilitarian philosophers such as Jeremy Bentham, who employed hedonic principles to assess the utility of actions, laws and social arrangements (Bentham, 1996). In contemporary psychology, the hedonic perspective is closely associated with the positive psychology movement. For example, Kahneman, Diener and Schwarz (1999) defined hedonic psychology as the study of "what makes experiences and life pleasant or unpleasant". Similarly, other influential researchers have also conceptualised well-being in terms of the balance between positive affect and negative affect along with overall life satisfaction (Bradburn, 1969, Cantril, 1965, Diener, 1984, Lucas, Diener and Suh, 1996).

In contrast, the eudaimonic perspective considers well-being as extending beyond hedonism. In the Aristotelian tradition, human flourishing is not reducible to the satisfaction of desires or the accumulation of pleasurable experiences, but involves living and acting well in ways that realise human capacities, purpose, and virtues. This conception of well-being emphasises meaning, purpose, and engagement in intrinsically worthwhile activities. Fromm (1981) expanded on this perspective by distinguishing between subjective desires, the satisfaction of which yields only transient pleasure and objective needs, the fulfilment of which leads to skill development and self-realization. From a eudaimonic perspective, well-being derives not

simply from the experience of pleasure but from pursuing meaningful goals, realising one's potential, and experiencing personal growth through such pursuits (Waterman, 1993; Wolf, 1997; Ryff and Singer, 1998; Ryan and Deci, 2000).

Although the two theoretical perspectives on subjective well-being originated in philosophical debates about what constitutes a good life in general, these arguments have since been applied to various domains of life, an example of which is work and employment. Instead of relying on global, context-free indicators of well-being such as life satisfaction and happiness, this stream of research has focused on well-being within the work setting. The majority of these studies were focused on the hedonic perspective. For example, Warr (1987, 1990) developed an influential framework for measuring hedonic well-being at work (the job Anxiety–Contentment scale and Depression–Enthusiasm scale) based on a circumplex model of pleasure and arousal to capture the frequency with which individuals experience a range of positive or negative emotions at work. Building on this approach, social and management scientists have employed measures of job-related affect alongside job satisfaction to investigate how employee well-being is influenced by job quality (Gallie et al., 2017, Green, 2025; Green et al., 2024; Zou, Zhou and Williams, 2024), human resource practices (Guest, 2017; Parker, Bindl & Strauss, 2010; Wood & Menezes, 2011), career transitions (Chadi & Hetschko, 2018; Longhi et al., 2025; Zhou et al., 2024), and the broader institutional contexts in which work is embedded (Gallie, 2007, Russell, McGinnity, & McManus, 2020).

Compared with hedonic well-being, eudaimonic well-being has received considerably less empirical attention. Over the past two decades, however, there has been a marked expansion of research on the meaningfulness of work across multiple disciplines in social sciences (Nikolova, 2026; Yeoman et al., 2019). The literature can be seen as a revival of the eudaimonic tradition as well as part of a longer sociological concern with alienation: the idea that work and its outcomes may become detached from workers' capacities, purpose, and sense of agency. More

recently, public debates around the alleged growth of 'bullshit jobs' has renewed interest in whether work is experienced as meaningful (Graeber, 2019). Although eudaimonic well-being is a broader construct than meaning and purpose (as it also encompasses elements such as virtue, autonomy, and personal growth), there is a broad consensus that a sense of meaning and purpose is central to the eudaimonic conception. According to Wolf, a sense of meaningfulness which results from active engagement in projects of worth is "a nonderivative aspect of a good life" (Wolf, 1997: p208).

Research on the antecedents of meaningful work suggests that the perceived meaningfulness of work is influenced by job quality and human resource practices. For instance, jobs characterised by greater task discretion and opportunities for learning are more likely to foster a sense of meaning and purpose than routine, repetitive jobs (Zhou et al., 2025; Nikolova and Cnossen, 2020; Williams et al., 2022; Soffia, Wood & Burchell, 2022). Organisational restructuring and downsizing can diminish workers' sense of meaning at work, while algorithmic management systems characterised by continuous performance monitoring can heighten feelings of alienation and undermine employee health (Coutrot and Perez, 2022). In addition to task characteristics and human resource practices, management studies also highlight the importance of leadership style, showing that managers who inspire, support, and develop employees are more likely to cultivate a sense of meaning than those who rely primarily on financial incentives to drive performance (Bono and Judge, 2003; Saks, 2006; Arnold et al., 2007; Schaufeli, 2021).

Notably, research on meaningful work has developed largely independently of the hedonic well-being literature, with few studies examining both dimensions of well-being in a unified framework. A happy, fulfilling working life requires the experience of both pleasure and meaning. While pleasure allows individuals to savour the present moment, a sense of meaning provides a guiding force that supports long-term skill development and personal growth (Ben-

Shahar, 2007). Yet little is known about the extent to which pleasure and meaning coincide, or the working conditions that foster such an ideal state of well-being.

The lack of integration of empirical research may be partly attributable to data constraints. Given the relatively recent ascendence of meaningful work on research and policy agenda, empirical investigation in this area continues to lag behind the hedonic tradition. Moreover, the bulk of the existing evidence on meaningful work relies on occupation- or industry-specific samples, which limits the generalisability of findings to the broader working population (see Bailey et al., 2019). The slow adoption of measures of meaningful work in large-scale employment surveys remains a significant barrier to assessing pleasure and meaning jointly within a single sample of the employed population. As noted by Ryff and Keyes (2021), "Although extensive research exists, there is a paucity of studies that have jointly examined both types of well-being." (p. 92). To our knowledge, there is no existing evidence from nationally representative labour market surveys on the prevalence of flourishing that arises from work experiences that are both pleasurable and meaningful.

Job quality, pleasure and meaning

Job quality refers to the objective characteristics of jobs that shape the extent to which individuals' needs are met through their work (Green, 2006). It encompasses both extrinsic aspects of employment, such as pay and job security, and intrinsic features of work, such as skill use, task variety, developmental opportunities, and the social context in which work is performed. Jobs vary not only in the remuneration they provide but also in the combinations of characteristics that shape the work experience. For example, some jobs may provide high pay, intellectually stimulating tasks, and decision latitude, but at the same time demand long hours, high intensity and significant sacrifices of family time. Conversely, other jobs may offer

manageable workloads and employment security while providing limited opportunities for personal growth. Such configurations involve different combinations of demands and rewards, which may have distinct implications for how individuals experience their work.

The multidimensional nature of job quality is particularly relevant when distinguishing between pleasure and meaning as two related yet conceptually distinct dimensions of job-related well-being. Pleasure captures the positive affect associated with everyday work experiences, whereas meaning concerns the extent to which individuals perceive their work as useful, significant and worthwhile. Although these two dimensions may reinforce one another, they need not necessarily coincide. For instance, job characteristics that make work comfortable (such as good physical environment and flexible working time) may enhance pleasure without necessarily generating a strong sense of meaning or purpose. On the other hand, highly demanding jobs that provide opportunities for exercising initiative and developing skills may be intrinsically rewarding and meaningful, but the associated exhaustion and stress can undermine positive affect.

As no established theoretical framework directly explains how job quality shapes the interplay between pleasure and meaning, we develop a set of tentative propositions to guide our subsequent analysis. First, higher overall job quality is expected to be positively associated with the simultaneous experience of high pleasure and high meaning (flourishing). Favourable working conditions, adequate rewards, manageable workloads, and opportunities for task discretion and skill development can enhance positive affect while also enabling individuals to perceive their jobs as meaningful. Although individual dimensions of job quality may differ in the strength of their associations with the two outcomes, jobs that offer a more favourable overall combination of characteristics should, on average, provide a stronger basis for both dimensions of well-being.

Second, intrinsic dimensions of job quality are expected to be more strongly associated with meaning than pleasure. Intrinsic rewards derive from the content and experience of work itself, including opportunities to apply one's skills, take initiative, exercise independent judgement, and make a valued contribution. These job characteristics enable workers to derive a sense of meaning and purpose from their work through opportunities for personal growth or broader societal contributions. Their relevance to meaning lies not simply in whether work is enjoyable, but in whether individuals perceive it as significant and worthwhile.

Third, extrinsic dimensions of job quality, such as a comfortable physical working environment, good working-time quality and lower work intensity, are expected to be more strongly associated with pleasure than with meaning. These characteristics can enhance the immediate experience of working life by reducing stress, facilitating work family balance and allowing individuals greater scope to pursue personal interests outside work. Favourable working conditions may thus make everyday working life enjoyable without necessarily enhancing the intrinsic rewards of work or the sense of meaning derived from it.

Taken together, these hypotheses provide a framework for examining how job quality relates to pleasure and meaning, both separately and jointly. Previous research has consistently shown that higher-quality jobs are associated with better employee well-being, most commonly measured through job satisfaction (Williams, Zhou and Zou, 2020; Krekel, Ward and De Neve, 2019) and work-related affect (Gallie et al., 2017; Green et al., 2016). However, there is a strong case for moving beyond the general conclusion that better jobs produce happier workers. Jobs comprise different bundles of work tasks with different characteristics, and these configurations may have distinct implications for different dimensions of well-being. Examining well-being profiles offers a complementary perspective by capturing the proportion of workers who experience pleasure and meaning simultaneously, and whether different dimensions of job-quality characteristics are associated with distinct experiences of working

life. In doing so, our analysis moves beyond the assumption that pleasure and meaning necessarily go hand in hand and explores how different job characteristics shape the extent to which these two dimensions of well-being converge or diverge.

Data, Measurement and Methods

This paper draws on the 2024 UK Skills and Employment Survey (SES2024), the eighth wave in the SES series. Previous waves were conducted in 1986, 1992, 1997, 2001, 2006, 2012 and 2017, comprising a total of 29,132 respondents. SES2024 includes 1) a face-to-face survey of 2,824 respondents selected based on random probability principles and interviewed in their homes, and 2) an online survey of 2,996 workers recruited from NatCen's online panel along with a fresh push to web sample of eligible workers living in Northern Ireland. The present study uses the combined face-to-face and online samples, which yields a total of 5,820 respondents aged 20-65 in paid work across the UK. Survey weights were constructed to adjust for unequal selection probabilities, the over-sampling of certain areas, and differential response rates across groups (including sex, age, occupation and qualification level)[i]. All analyses reported below are weighted accordingly.

The variables of key interest are pleasure and meaning at work. Pleasure was measured using Warr's (1990) Job Affect Scale, which evaluates an individual's psychological state across two dimensions: arousal and pleasantness. The question reads "Thinking of the past few weeks, how much of the time has your job made you feel each of the following?" The responses included calm, tense, contented, relaxed, uneasy, worried, enthusiastic, cheerful, depressed, gloomy, miserable, and optimistic, with a five-point scale ranging from "never" to "most of the time." The indicator of pleasure was constructed as the mean response across these items (with negative affect items reverse-coded).

A key innovation of the SES2024 is the introduction of a short-form measure of meaningful work grounded in prior scholarship (e.g., Lips-Wiersma and Wright, 2012; Dur and Lent, 2019; Steger et al., 2012). Research on meaningful work typically distinguishes between three principal conceptual perspectives. The self-realisation perspective highlights the role of work in fulfilling fundamental human needs, such as autonomy, competence, and personal growth. In contrast, the social justification perspective emphasises the objective value of work, particularly its contribution to the broader society (Lepisto and Pratt, 2017). A third perspective stresses the importance of social connectedness in shaping experiences of meaningful work (Ryan and Deci, 2000; Ryff, 2013). Integrating these strands, our measure captures meaningful work through three items asking respondents how often their job provides: (1) a feeling of a job well done, (2) a sense of doing useful work, and (3) a sense of belonging. Response options include "always," "most of the time," "sometimes," "rarely," and "never." The three items were averaged to construct a composite index of perceived meaningfulness of work, ranging from 1 to 5.

The analysis proceeds in four steps. First, we use hierarchical cluster analysis to classify workers into groups based on their reported levels of job-related pleasure and meaning. Second, we examine how different well-being profiles are distributed in the employed workforce by key demographic characteristics that include age, gender, type of contract, employment status, sector, occupation, and industry. Third, we validate the well-being profiles by comparing them across a range of outcomes valued by both employers (organisational commitment, discretionary effort, and intention to stay) and employees (job satisfaction, job stress, life satisfaction, and health). Finally, we assess how well-being profiles are associated with multiple dimensions of job quality. including pay, prospects, skills, task discretion, work intensity, working time quality, physical environment, and social environment, following the framework developed by Eurofound (2012). The first two steps analyse the full sample

(including employees and self-employed workers), while the third and fourth steps focus exclusively on employees, as some measures such as organisational commitment and intention to stay are less relevant for self-employed workers.

Results

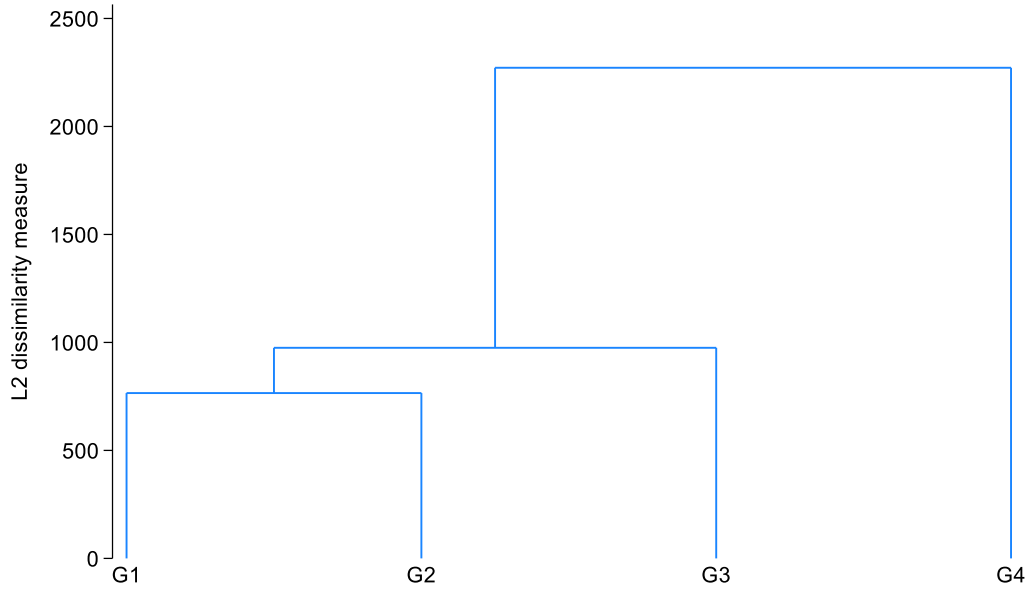
Hierarchical Cluster Analysis is an exploratory statistical technique used widely in the social sciences to identify relatively homogeneous groups with shared characteristics. It uncovers the nested structure of data by building a hierarchy of clusters. The agglomerative process starts by treating each observation as its own cluster and then calculates the dissimilarity between points based on Euclidean distance. Clusters are merged sequentially using the Ward's linkage method, which minimises within-cluster variance to ensure the cohesiveness of the resulting groups. This process continues until all observations are placed into one of several clusters.

To test the statistical validity of the clustering solutions, the Calinski–Harabasz Index (Variance Ratio Criterion) was computed for solutions ranging from two to six clusters. This metric assesses cluster quality by comparing between-cluster dispersion with within-cluster dispersion, with higher values indicating more compact and well-separated clusters. The resulting indices for the two-, three-, four-, five-, and six-cluster solutions were 3800.61, 3262.49, 3751.43, 3282.39, and 3085.07, respectively. Although the statistical evidence suggested that the two- and four-cluster solutions provided the strongest fit, the final decision was informed by the structural patterns observed in the hierarchical dendrogram (Figure 1) and the foregoing theoretical discussion.

Figure 1 revealed a pronounced increase in dissimilarity (shown on the y-axis) at the point where four clusters were merged into fewer groups. This pattern suggests that the four-cluster solution preserves meaningful distinctions among cases, whereas the two-cluster solution

combines profiles that remain relatively dissimilar. More importantly, the four-cluster solution was retained because it provides a more differentiated representation of pleasure and meaning, capturing both areas of convergence and divergence between the dimensions. In contrast, solutions with fewer clusters merged substantively distinct profiles, whereas solutions with five or more clusters produced increasingly fragmented and less interpretable groupings.

Figure 1. Hierarchical Cluster Analysis Dendrogram



The characteristics of four job-related well-being profiles are as illustrated in Figure 2. The first group exhibited high levels of both pleasure and meaning, consistent with the profile often characterised as "flourishing" in the well-being literature. At the opposite end, the second group reported that their jobs gave them low levels of pleasure and meaning. Following the conventional terminology, we label them "languishers". The remaining two groups show mixed profiles, scoring high on one dimension but low on the other. We labelled those with high pleasure but low meaning "hedonists," and those with high meaning but low pleasure "stoics." It can be seen in the last column of Table 1 that these groups are unevenly distributed in the sample: 34% of workers are flourishers, 31% hedonists, 25% stoics, and 10% languishers. It is

important to emphasise that these categories characterise workers experienced well-being through work rather than innate personal characteristics, given that our measures were focused on pleasure and meaning experienced directly in relation to work.

Figure 2. Typology of Job-related Well-being by Levels of Pleasure and Meaning

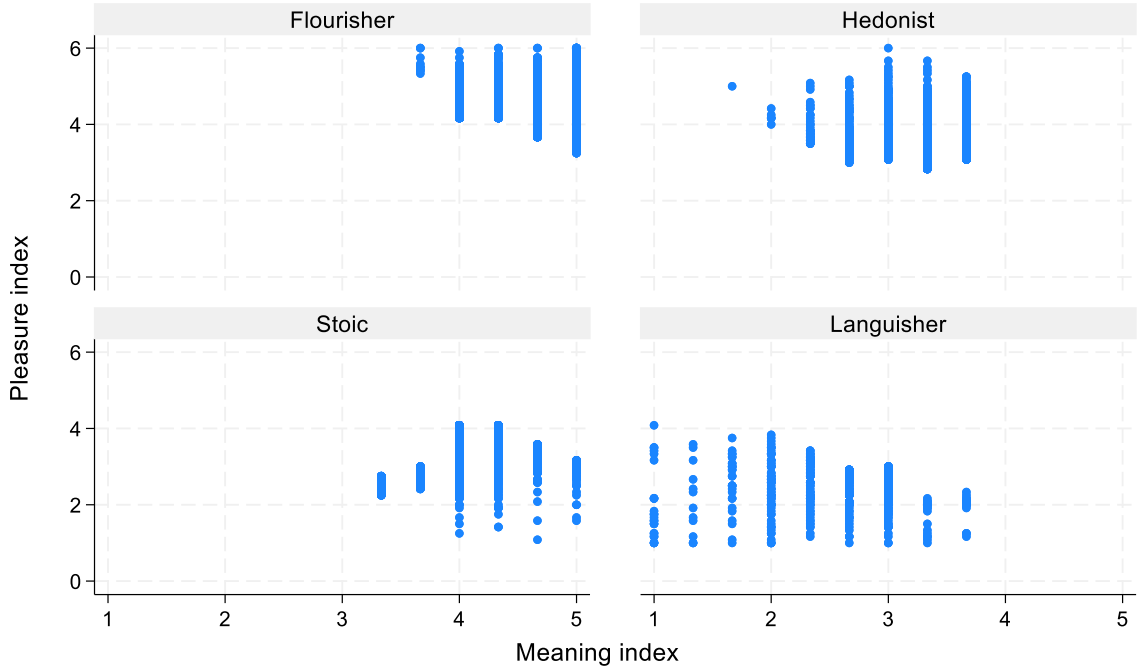


Table 1 Means and standard deviations of pleasure and meaning by well-being profile among employees and self-employed workers

	Pleasure	Meaning	% of the sample
Flourisher	4.61 (0.53)	4.54 (0.40)	34.3
Hedonist	3.79 (0.52)	3.28 (0.38)	31.0
Stoic	3.41 (0.52)	4.11 (0.31)	25.1
Languisher	2.42 (0.61)	2.52 (0.61)	9.7
Total	3.84 (0.85)	3.85 (0.78)	100

Note: Pleasure index: 1–6; Meaning index: 1–5. Standard deviations shown in parentheses.

The relationship between demographic characteristics and different well-being profiles is presented in Table 2. The first column shows that flourishers are more prevalent among older workers. Among those aged 55–65, 40% are classified as flourishers, compared with 25%

hedonists, 27% stoics, and 8% languishers. In contrast, among younger workers aged 20–24, the corresponding proportions are 28%, 39%, 21%, and 12%. The likelihood of flourishing therefore increases with age. Pronounced gender differences are also evident. Women are more likely than men to be flourishers (37% versus 32%) and stoics (28% versus 22%), whereas men are more likely to be hedonists (35% versus 27%). The proportion of languishers is broadly similar across genders (around 10%).

Beyond age and gender, flourishers are more commonly found among self-employed workers (43%) than among employees (33%), while the reverse pattern is observed for languishers (4% versus 10%). Differences by ownership sector are small for flourishers and languishers. However, hedonists are more likely to be employed in the private sector, whereas stoics are more prevalent in the public sector.

Table 2. Well-being profile by demographic characteristics among employees and self-employed workers

	Flourisher (%)	Hedonist (%)	Stoic (%)	Languisher (%)
Age				
20-34	27.5	39.2	21.3	12.1
35-44	34.9	30.5	25.7	9.0
45-54	38.0	25.5	27.9	8.7
55-65	40.0	24.8	27.4	7.7
Gender				
Male	32.2	34.9	22.4	10.4
Female	36.5	26.9	27.7	8.8
Type of contract				
temporary	31.4	36.7	20.1	11.9
permanent	33.7	30.4	25.8	10.1
Employment status				
Self-employed	43.1	29.6	23.5	3.9
Employee	33.2	31.1	25.3	10.4
Sector				
Public sector	34.2	27.1	29.3	9.4
Private sector	33.1	33.2	22.9	10.8

The distribution of well-being profiles across occupational major groups and industry sector is shown in Table 3. With regard to occupation, flourishers are most commonly found in skilled trades as well as care and leisure occupations. Nearly half of all workers in these occupations are flourishers. In contrast, languishers are more prevalent in low-skilled occupations such as sales and customer service, machine operatives, and elementary roles (around 13%). Notably, hedonists are also over-represented in lower occupational groups, whereas stoics are most prevalent in professional and managerial occupations. Together, these findings indicate that pleasure and meaning often do not coincide. Instead, they capture distinct dimensions of job-related well-being that are differentially shaped by features of the work environment.

Table 3. Well-being profile by occupation and industry among employees and self-employed workers

	Flourisher (%)	Hedonist (%)	Stoic (%)	Languisher (%)	N
Occupation					
Managers	32.8	28.3	28.4	10.6	597
Professionals	31.1	32.1	29.8	6.9	1491
Associate professionals	30.7	32.5	26.6	10.3	845
Administrative	37.2	32.5	21.0	9.3	510
Skilled Trades	46.4	24.6	22.0	7.1	464
Caring, leisure	48.9	13.7	26.6	10.8	456
Sales and customer services	29.1	40.1	18.0	12.8	310
Process, plant,	28.9	38.2	20.3	12.7	299
Elementary	31.1	38.3	17.5	13.1	450
Industry					
Manufacturing	31.9	33.9	22.8	11.5	443
Construction	39.4	28.3	26.7	5.7	278
Wholesale and Retail Trade	31.2	37.5	20.7	10.6	494
Transportation and Storage	25.8	37.0	20.5	16.8	294
Accommodation and Food Services	28.1	41.7	19.2	11.0	238
Information and Communication	32.4	36.9	22.0	8.7	299
Financial and Insurance	29.7	37.3	19.8	13.2	284
Professional, Scientific and Technical Activities	31.3	32.2	27.5	9.0	449
Administrative and Support Service	35.5	30.4	22.0	12.1	240
Public Administration and Defence	31.3	33.7	26.4	8.5	429
Education	40.7	20.2	31.8	7.4	621
Human Health and Social Work	39.9	21.7	31.3	7.0	855
Arts, Entertainment and recreation	32.4	35.5	21.8	10.3	100
Other Services	47.1	23.5	17.9	11.5	109

Total	34.6	30.6	25.2	9.6	5328

Next, we apply the job-related well-being typology to examine its associations with valued individual and organizational outcomes. This analysis both validates the proposed typology and offers insight into the potential consequences associated with different well-being profiles. If the typology captures substantively distinct groups, these groups should differ in meaningful ways across relevant outcomes. Table 4 presents descriptive statistics on the relationship between well-being type and a range of such outcomes. The first section of the table focuses on outcomes that are particularly valued by employing organizations: organizational commitment, discretionary effort, and intention to stay. The second section examines outcomes reflecting employees' personal well-being, including job satisfaction, job stress, life satisfaction, and (self-rated) health.

It should be noted that life satisfaction and job satisfaction are often treated as measures of subjective well-being (Küstermann, 2025). However, these indicators reflect individuals' overall evaluations of their lives (or working lives) without specifying the sources of those evaluations. Popularised in the mid-twentieth century, these indicators were developed as pragmatic tools for assessing perceived quality of (working) life rather than as direct responses to the theoretical debates about hedonia and eudaimonia (Ryff, Boylan and Kirsch, 2021). Conceptually, high levels of satisfaction may arise from experiences of both pleasure and meaning, yet little is known about the relative contribution of each component to these global evaluations. In this paper, we explicitly examine how these evaluative measures of well-being are differentially associated with pleasure and meaning.

The results shown in Table 4 suggest that flourishers exhibit the most favourable outcomes. They score highest on most of the seven indicators, including organizational commitment, intention to stay, job satisfaction, job stress, life satisfaction, and health. By contrast,

languishers fare worst across all seven outcomes. Differences between the two intermediate groups reveal a more nuanced pattern. Stoics report higher levels of organizational commitment, discretionary effort, intention to stay, and job satisfaction, while hedonists experience lower job stress and better health. Overall life satisfaction does not differ substantially between hedonists and stoics.

Table 4. Employee outcomes by well-being profile (descriptives)

	Flourisher	Hedonist	Stoic	Languisher
Work motivation				
Org commitment	0.44	-0.27	0.06	-0.89
Discretionary effort	3.56	3.22	3.59	3.18
Intention to stay	4.37	3.79	3.88	2.86
Personal well-being				
Job satisfaction	6.11	5.07	5.19	3.27
Job stress	-0.42	-0.12	0.33	0.80
Life satisfaction	5.77	5.24	5.25	4.37
Health	3.81	3.68	3.42	3.16

The initial comparison across the four groups suggests the typology appears to capture substantively meaningful differences between employees. We next conducted a series of multivariate regression analyses to account for potential confounding effects of individual and job-related characteristics. The gross differences reported in Table 4 may partly reflect underlying heterogeneity among employees, for example, in terms of demographic attributes, personality traits, or the nature of the work they perform. To address these confounding factors, we controlled for an extensive set of variables, including age, gender, personality (measured by the Big Five Inventory), marital status, the presence of dependent children, occupation, industry, contract type, part-time status, union membership, workplace size, and survey mode. It should be noted that even with this comprehensive set of controls, we cannot rule out that unobserved variables continue to influence worker-reported well-being on both sides of the

equation. Therefore, coefficient should be interpreted as conditional associations, not causal estimates.

Given that the independent variable is categorical, we treated hedonists as the reference category and compared each of the remaining three groups to this baseline across all outcomes. The results are reported in Table 5. The findings indicate that flourishers outperform hedonists on all outcome measures with the exception of health, where both groups report similarly positive outcomes. By contrast, languishers perform significantly worse than hedonists on all measures with the exception of discretionary effort, for which the two groups do not differ significantly. Stoics perform better than hedonists on organisational commitment and discretionary effort, but they also experience higher job stress, lower job satisfaction, and poorer health. Overall, the results suggest that flourishers and languishers occupy opposite ends of the outcome spectrum, whereas the pattern for stoics and hedonists is mixed. Stoics appear to be highly dedicated yet unhappy workers, whereas hedonists are less motivated but generally more content and healthier.

Table 5. Regression of employee outcomes on well-being profile (using hedonists as reference)

	Commitment	Effort	Intention to stay	Job sat	Stress	Life sat	Health
Flourisher	0.53***	0.17***	0.28***	0.53***	-0.08*	0.18***	-0.04
	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.06)	(0.05)	(0.04)	(0.05)	(0.05)
Stoic	0.22***	0.26***	-0.09	-0.16***	0.37***	-0.08	-0.20***
	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.07)	(0.06)	(0.04)	(0.05)	(0.05)
Languisher	-0.35***	-0.04	-0.56***	-1.15***	0.51***	-0.47***	-0.29***
	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.06)	(0.05)	(0.04)	(0.05)	(0.05)
R^2	0.34	0.13	0.13	0.37	0.26	0.25	0.13
N	4481	4481	4479	4481	4482	4482	4481

Controls: age, gender, personality, marital status, children, occupation, industry, permanent contract, part-time work, union, workplace size, survey mode. Standard errors in parentheses * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

In the final step, we analysed how well-being profiles are associated with job quality. As above, we estimated conditional association rather than causal relationship; when used the term effect

is understood purely statistical. A key strength of the SES lies in the rich information it has collected on multiple facets of job quality that are central to meeting employees' material, psychological, and social needs from their work. Job Quality variables were derived following the procedures given in Eurofound (2012) for all domains: Pay, Prospects, Skills, Task Discretion, Work Intensity, Working Time Quality, Physical Environment, and Social Environment[ii].

The descriptive statistics presented in Table 6 suggest that flourishers occupy the leading position in most facets of job quality, reporting the highest levels for prospects, working time quality, task discretion, physical work environment, and social work environment on average. Stoics rank second overall, with particularly high scores on pay and skills. In fact, in the sample, their scores on these dimensions of job quality even exceeded those of flourishers. However, they also reported the highest levels of work intensity among the four groups. Hedonists generally score lower than stoics across most dimensions of job quality, with the exceptions of working time quality, work intensity, and physical work environment. Languishers rank lowest across nearly all aspects of job quality. The only exception is that they reported lower work intensity than stoics.

Table 6 Job quality indices by employee well-being profile (descriptives)

	Flourisher	Hedonist	Stoic	Languisher
Log weekly pay	6.32	6.35	6.44	6.30
Prospects	0.21	-0.01	0.04	-0.44
Job skill	0.08	-0.27	0.18	-0.48
Task discretion	0.33	-0.25	-0.02	-0.60
Work intensity	-0.10	-0.15	0.29	0.08
Working time quality	0.15	0.06	-0.17	-0.26
Physical environment	0.86	0.79	0.74	0.51
Social environment	0.45	-0.17	-0.01	-0.82

Note: A detailed description of the measurement of each job quality dimension is provided in the endnote.

The results of multinomial regression models with controls for relevant individual and job characteristics are presented in Table 7. Job quality facets were treated as independent variables and well-being profiles as dependent variables. Hedonists again served as the reference category. The findings confirm that higher job quality across most dimensions is associated with a lower likelihood of being a languisher rather than a hedonist. The only exception is working time quality, which does not differ significantly between the two groups.

Compared with hedonists, the probability of being classified as a stoic is higher among those reporting greater skill use, higher task discretion, a more favourable social work environment, poorer working time quality, and higher work intensity. As expected, higher job quality is also associated with a greater likelihood of being a flourisher rather than a hedonist across almost all dimensions. The exceptions are work intensity and working time quality, for which no statistically significant differences are observed between the two groups.

Table 7 also revealed a pattern of interest: higher pay reduces the chance of flourishing. While this difference was not apparent in the descriptive statistics reported in Table 6, it became statistically significant once individual and job characteristics are controlled for. These effects persist regardless of whether gross hourly or gross weekly pay is used as the dependent variable, and they remain statistically significant even when languishers are used as the reference category in the multinomial regressions. In short, once accounting for the confounding effects of relevant individual and job characteristics, flourishers are the lowest-paid group among all employees across the four well-being profiles.

Table 7 Multinomial regression of employee well-being profile on job quality (using hedonists as reference)

	Languisher	Stoic	Flourisher
Log weekly pay	0.29**	0.01	-0.35***
	(0.14)	(0.10)	(0.10)
Prospects	-0.28***	0.05	0.24***

	(0.06)	(0.05)	(0.06)
Job skill	-0.20**	0.29***	0.37***
	(0.09)	(0.07)	(0.07)
Task discretion	-0.28***	0.27***	0.58***
	(0.09)	(0.06)	(0.06)
Work intensity	0.24***	0.39***	0.04
	(0.07)	(0.05)	(0.05)
Working time quality	-0.10	-0.14***	-0.01
	(0.07)	(0.05)	(0.06)
Physical environment	-0.72***	-0.06	0.46***
	(0.14)	(0.11)	(0.13)
Social environment	-0.43***	0.20***	0.86***
	(0.06)	(0.05)	(0.06)

Controls: age, gender, personality, marital status, children, occupation, industry, permanent contract, part-time work, union, workplace size, survey mode.

Standard errors in parentheses * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

Intrigued by this unexpected pattern, we carried out a series of additional analyses focusing on pay to better understand the reasons for the relative disadvantage of flourishers. One possible explanation is composition effect. Our previous analysis has shown that flourishers are disproportionately concentrated in occupations that offer modest financial compensation, such as skilled trades, care and leisure occupations. To assess this possibility, we first regressed well-being profiles on pay without including any controls. The first row of Table 8 shows that there are no statistically significant differences in pay between hedonists and flourishers in these models. Stoics emerge as the highest-paid group, while languishers earn the least. In the second step, we introduced controls for industry and occupation, followed by adding demographic and other work-related factors in the third model. The coefficients for flourishers remained non-significant. The results from these models suggest that compositional effects cannot account for the pay disadvantage observed among flourishers.

Another potential explanation draws on the theory of compensating differentials, which suggests that there are potential trade-offs between wages and other valued aspects of job quality (Rosen, 1986). According to this perspective, individuals may accept lower pay in exchange for other valued job features, such as autonomy, developmental opportunities, and supportive social environment. In this case, flourishers may benefit from higher intrinsic job quality at the expense of lower income. To explore this possibility, we included the full set of job quality indicators in the regression model to examine whether flourishers earn less than hedonists after controlling for the other facets of job quality. The results reported in Model 4 are consistent with this proposition. Once all job quality indicators are controlled for, the pay coefficient for flourishers turned significantly negative. Interestingly, the coefficient also turned positive for languishers, and non-significant for stoics.

To identify which dimensions of job quality underlie this pattern, we introduced the job quality indicators sequentially into the model. The results in Model 5 show that controlling for job skills and task discretion accounts for most of the change in the earnings differential. Whereas flourishers do not initially differ significantly from hedonists in their earnings, they earn significantly less once these two aspects of job quality are taken into account. Conversely, languishers earn significantly more than hedonists after these controls are introduced. Controlling for the remaining job quality indicators makes little further difference. These findings suggest that differences in skill requirements and task discretion mask an underlying negative earnings differential between flourishers and hedonists. In other words, for comparable levels of job skills and task discretion, flourishers earn less than hedonists. This points to a potential trade-off whereby the intrinsic rewards of work that is both pleasurable and meaningful may come at the expense of financial compensation. However, our analysis provides only indirect evidence consistent with a compensating differentials explanation, and further research is needed to establish the causal mechanisms underlying these patterns.

Table 8 Stepwise analysis of pay differentials among employees with different well-being profiles

Hedonist	Languisher	Stoic	Flourisher
Log weekly pay			
Model 1 (without controls)			
ref	-0.15*	0.24***	-0.08
	(0.08)	(0.06)	(0.06)
Model 2 (controls for industry and occupation)			
ref	-0.01	0.30***	0.04
	(0.11)	(0.08)	(0.08)
Model 3 (controls for industry, occupation, demographic and work characteristics)			
ref	0.12	0.35***	0.00
	(0.12)	(0.09)	(0.09)
Model 4 (controls for industry, occupation, demographic and work characteristics plus all job quality indicators)			
ref	0.29**	0.01	-0.35***
	(0.14)	(0.10)	(0.10)
Model 5 (controls for industry, occupation, demographics and work characteristics plus job skills and task discretion)			
ref	0.32**	0.07	-0.36***
	(0.13)	(0.09)	(0.09)

Notes: Model 1 does not include any controls. Model 2 controls for industry and occupation. Model 3 controls for industry, occupation, age, gender, personality, marital status, children, permanent contract, part-time work, union membership, workplace size, and survey mode. Model 4 includes all variables from Model 3, with the addition of seven job quality indicators: prospects, job skills, task discretion, work intensity, working time quality, physical work environment, and social work environment. Model 5 controls for the same variables as Model 3, plus two job quality indicators: job skills and task discretion.

Discussion

This paper reveals four distinct well-being profiles based on reported levels of pleasure and meaning at work. We found that the most common profile is *flourishers*, who constitute approximately one third of the workforce. Flourishers are more likely to be older, female, and self-employed, and concentrated in education, healthcare, and construction. The second most prevalent profile is *hedonists* (31%), who tend to be younger, male, employed on temporary contracts, and working in sales, customer service, operative, or elementary roles. *Stoics* comprise around a quarter of the workforce and are most commonly found in managerial and professional roles. The least common profile is *languishers*, who are disproportionately represented in lower-skilled occupations, with particularly high concentrations in the transport and storage sectors.

We conducted a series of multivariate regressions to examine the associations between well-being profiles, job quality, and a broad range of valued individual outcomes. The results suggest that *languishers* are systematically disadvantaged across the board. We analysed seven outcome variables that capture both work motivation and personal well-being, alongside eight indicators of extrinsic and intrinsic job quality. Across these measures, languishers consistently reported the poorest scores, leaving little evidence of offsetting benefits. Their experiences closely resemble those described by David Graeber (2019) in his discourse on "bullshit jobs." These experiences are, nevertheless, confined to a relatively small minority of the sample (10%).

In contrast, employees in the remaining three groups each exhibit distinct strengths and weaknesses. *Stoics*, for example, benefit from high intrinsic job quality, particularly in terms of skills and task discretion. However, these advantages are accompanied by greater work intensity, elevated job stress, and poorer health. *Hedonists* reported lower intrinsic job quality and weaker work motivation, but better working time quality and lower work intensity, which appear to translate into better health and higher life satisfaction. *Flourishers* achieved the most favourable outcomes overall, reporting both high levels of work motivation and personal well-being. They also reported the highest scores on all dimensions of job quality. These findings are generally consistent with our initial propositions. However, a surprising finding emerged with respect to pay: after accounting for the full range of individual and job characteristics, flourishers were found to be the lowest-paid group among the four profiles.

Further analysis indicates that the pay disadvantage did not arise from the over-representation of flourishers in jobs that provide modest financial compensation. Instead, the effect could be accounted by the intrinsic job quality associated with these roles, particularly with respect to skills and task discretion. This evidence is consistent with the theory of compensating differentials which highlights the trade-offs individuals may face between different facets of

job quality when selecting into jobs and career paths. Opportunities for skill development and autonomy, rather than higher pay raise the odds of belonging to the flourishing cluster relative to the hedonist group, indicating well-being trade-offs around the profile of intrinsic job rewards.

This paper argues that pleasure and meaning constitute distinct dimensions of job-related well-being and presents supporting empirical evidence. Both well-being dimensions combine in different ways across labour market groups and are associated with systematically different patterns of individual outcomes. Notably, the fact that more than half of the workforce (56%) is classified as either hedonists or stoics implies that pleasure and meaning often do not go hand in hand. The distinct strengths and weaknesses of different well-being profiles shed light on the philosophical and socio-economic debate over what constitutes a good working life. Our findings suggest that pleasure-oriented and meaning-oriented experiences of work are associated with different patterns of job quality and personal outcomes. Those who experience pleasure without a strong sense of meaning tend to report lower intrinsic job quality, whereas those who find their work meaningful but derive less pleasure from it tend to face higher work intensity and report poorer health. These trade-offs are less evident among those who experience both pleasure and meaning in their work, although this group is characterised by a significant income penalty after taking into account their skills and task discretion. Taken together, these findings suggest that no single profile enjoys advantages across all dimensions of job quality and well-being. These findings provide support for Ryff and Keyes' (2021) call to integrate hedonic and eudaimonic perspectives in the study of well-being, offering a more nuanced understanding of the experience of working than can be captured by the one-dimensional 'happy worker' discourse.

Beyond the conceptual contribution of the paper in terms of bringing two well-being perspectives together in a work context and developing measurement tools for use in a

nationally representative survey, this paper has important practical implications. The uneven distribution of well-being profiles across the labour force highlights the need for targeted interventions in vulnerable sectors. Industries and occupations with a high concentration of languishers (such as transport and storage) warrant particular attention, with policies focused on improving job quality. Moreover, the high work intensity experienced by stoics is also a cause for concern. Although these workers are dedicated and high-achieving, sustained exposure to pressure increases their risk of burnout. Interventions should prioritise improving working-time quality and reducing excessive workloads to safeguard employees' health and sustain their long-term productivity. Finally, the over-representation of flourishers in sectors such as education, education, and construction highlights the potential of these sectors to offer work that is both pleasurable and meaningful. Addressing the pay disadvantages associated with these sectors could make them more attractive prospective employees, thereby supporting recruitment and retention while potentially expanding the proportion of workers who flourish at work.

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[i] The technical report of SES2024 can be found at https://wiserd.ac.uk/publication/ses-2024-natcan-technical-report/.

[ii] Indicators of job quality (standardised scores)

Pay: the log of gross weekly pay

Prospects: job security, future career chances, and the nature of the contract

Working Time Quality: the duration, timing, and flexibility of working hours

Task Discretion: Individuals' influence over four aspects of their work: how hard they work, deciding what tasks they do, how tasks are carried out, and the quality standards to which they work

Job skill: training, learning, opportunities to utilize skills, and deploy higher-level skills in complex jobs

Work Intensity: the extent to which the work is highly pressured, with intensive tasks having to be done at high speed or to meet pressing deadlines

Physical Environment: the extent to which individuals can avoid health risks at work, including environmental hazards and posture-related vulnerabilities

Social Environment: support from coworkers and line managers and an absence of abusive experiences, such as verbal maltreatment, threats, humiliating behaviour, physical violence, bullying, or sexual harassment