Research Square

Preprints are preliminary reports that have not undergone peer review.
They should not be considered conclusive, used to inform clinical practice,
or referenced by the media as validated information.

When Does Valuing Meaningful Work Go Together with Job Satisfaction? Work Values, Job Characteristics and the Quality of Working Life in 47 Countries (ISSP 1989–2015)

Jan van Zwieten
Netherlands Business Academy: Breda, NL
Liliia Mykhailyshyn
liliia.mykhailyshyn@cnu.edu.ua

Vasyl Stefanyk Carpathian National University

Research Article

Keywords: meaningful work, work values, job satisfaction, quality of working life, prosocial motivation, value–job congruence

Posted Date: November 25th, 2026

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-11761635/v1

License: This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.
Read Full License

Additional Declarations: Competing interest reported. Yes, the authors have competing interests to declare. The authors use the four-axis model of human potential (van Zwieten, Legemate, Goudsmet, & Gonnissen, 2015) in their talent-management consulting and training practice. The model is mentioned in this study solely as the motivation for the research question and is not tested or validated here. The analyses use publicly available secondary data (ISSP) and were conducted independently of any commercial engagement. The authors have no other financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

Abstract

Whether valuing meaningful work (work that is interesting, autonomous, helpful to others and useful to society) is good for workers' quality of working life is contested. Need-based accounts expect higher satisfaction; value–reward accounts warn of disappointment when work does not deliver; critical accounts see meaning as a privilege or a lever for exploitation. Using four waves of the ISSP Work Orientations module (1989–2015; 75,280 workers in 47 countries) and country × wave fixed effects, we find that workers who value meaningful work more are more satisfied with their jobs (β = 0.115 SD per SD), with both intrinsic–autonomy and prosocial components contributing.

The association is specific to meaning-related values: the importance of security, income and advancement is not associated with satisfaction. And it runs through the job itself: once the perceived presence of interesting, independent and useful work is taken into account, valuing meaningful work is no longer associated with higher satisfaction, and where such work is lacking it even goes with somewhat lower satisfaction, the disappointment the value–reward account points to.

The association does not differ measurably by education, power distance or long-term orientation; in the same countries it was stronger in 2015 than in 1997 and 2005. The three accounts thus describe complementary mechanisms rather than rival predictions. For quality-of-working-life research and practice, what matters is less whether people value meaningful work than whether their jobs provide it; meaning is no substitute for fair conditions.

1. Introduction

Consider two engineers in the same company, with the same position, pay and manager. A year later one still comes to work with energy; the other is quietly looking for another job, or has stayed but disengaged. A standard HR report sees no difference between them: both receive market pay, flexible hours and leadership training. What differs is what each of them looks for in work—one wants to solve hard problems independently, the other wants to see that her project helps someone—and whether the job offers it.

The example points to a question that is central for quality-of-life research on work. Job satisfaction is one of the most studied domain evaluations of life (Locke, 1976; Sirgy et al., 2001), and the content of work has long been recognized as a source of it (Herzberg et al., 1959; Hackman & Oldham, 1976). Yet what workers *value* in work is not the same as what their work *offers* (Kalleberg, 1977). People who place great weight on interesting, autonomous or socially useful work may be more satisfied, because they seek and shape such work and judge their jobs by it; or they may be more easily disappointed, because their standards are higher. Which of these holds—and under which conditions—matters for whether organizations and policy makers should encourage people to look for meaning in work.

The literature offers three broad answers. The first is the need-based tradition, from humanistic psychology to self-determination theory: meaningful work as a basic human need (Maslow, 1943; Frankl,

1946/2006; Deci & Ryan, 2000). The second is the value–reward account: satisfaction depends on the match between what people want and what they get, weighted by how much they want it (Locke, 1976; Kalleberg, 1977). The third answer is less comfortable: a critical tradition sees the pursuit of meaning either as a privilege of the economically secure (Inglehart, 1997) or as a double-edged sword that binds workers to poor conditions (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009). These three traditions are usually presented as rivals. We read them differently—as descriptions of different mechanisms and different boundary conditions—and show that cross-national data measuring both work values and perceived job characteristics allow each of them to be assessed empirically.

Cross-national evidence on the role of work values is limited. Sousa-Poza and Sousa-Poza (2000) showed with ISSP 1997 data that having an interesting job is among the strongest correlates of job satisfaction in 21 countries, but they studied what jobs provide rather than what workers seek. Joshanloo (2026), using Gallup World Poll data from 116 countries, found that people with higher eudaimonic well-being perceive their jobs as of higher quality and are more satisfied with life. Our question is narrower: we study the importance workers attach to specific features of work and how this relates to their evaluation of the job, across four survey waves spanning 26 years.

We ask four questions.

First: is valuing meaningful work associated with higher job satisfaction among workers in the same country and year—and does this hold for both its components, intrinsic–autonomy and prosocial?

Second: is the association specific to meaning-related values, rather than a reflection of a general tendency to rate all job features as important?

Third: does the association depend on whether the job actually provides the features a person values—that is, does valuing meaningful work turn into disappointment when such work is missing?

And fourth, descriptively: does the association differ by education, by two cultural dimensions and over time? The design is observational, and we do not claim that work values cause satisfaction.

The research question grew out of applied work with a four-axis model of human potential used in talent management [Authors, 2015], in which a "sense" axis (SQ) represents the alignment of work with a person's values. We use the model only as a motivation for the question; the study does not test it.

2. Concepts

"Meaning" is used in at least five senses in research on work, and much of the debate is between people who mean different things. We therefore start with definitions (Table 1).

Meaning and meaningfulness of work. Rosso et al. (2010) distinguish the *meaning* of work—what work signifies to a person, which can be anything, including a mere source of income—from the *meaningfulness* of work—the degree to which work is experienced as significant and positive. Their

typology of sources of meaningfulness crosses a self–other dimension with an agency–communion dimension; two of the resulting pathways, individuation (acting and becoming oneself) and contribution (acting for others), correspond closely to the two orientations we measure. Pratt and Ashforth (2003) separate meaningfulness *in* working, arising from the tasks, from meaningfulness *at* work, arising from membership; Steger et al. (2012) operationalize meaningful work as positive meaning, meaning-making through work, and greater-good motivation. In the job characteristics model, experienced meaningfulness is the first of the critical psychological states through which task variety, identity and significance affect motivation and satisfaction (Hackman & Oldham, 1976).

Work values. Values are trans-situational goals that serve as guiding principles (Schwartz, 1992); work values are their expression in the domain of work—beliefs about desirable end-states to be attained through working (Ros et al., 1999). Ros et al. (1999) distinguish intrinsic, extrinsic, social and prestige work values. Kalleberg (1977) introduced the distinction that is crucial here: work values (what a person wants from a job) are different from job rewards (what the job provides), and satisfaction arises from their combination.

Work-meaning orientation (WMO). Our working concept is the degree to which a person values those features of work that make it meaningful. It has two components: an *intrinsic–autonomy* orientation (wanting work that is interesting and allows independent work) and a *prosocial* orientation (wanting work that helps other people and is useful to society). Grant (2007) argues that the desire to make a positive difference in others' lives is a distinct motivational force rather than a form of intrinsic motivation. WMO is a value, not an experience: it describes what a person looks for in work, not whether he or she finds it.

Calling. Wrzesniewski et al. (1997) distinguish orientations to work as a job, a career or a calling; people with a calling orientation report higher job and life satisfaction. The notion has deep roots in Weber's (1930) account of the Protestant *Beruf*, and, as discussed below, it has a darker side.

Job satisfaction. Following Locke (1976), job satisfaction is a pleasurable or positive emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one's job. Because appraisal is made against what one values, the definition already implies that values and satisfaction are linked. In quality-of-life research, job satisfaction is a domain satisfaction and one component of the quality of working life (Sirgy et al., 2001); it is distinct from engagement and from overall psychological well-being. In the terms of Ryan and Deci (2001), our question connects a eudaimonic orientation toward work (valuing meaningful work) with a hedonic evaluation of it (satisfaction).

Table 1
Key concepts

Concept	Definition	Main sources	Role in this study
Meaning of work	What work signifies to a person	Rosso et al. (2010)	Background
Meaningfulness of work	Experience of work as significant and positive	Rosso et al. (2010); Pratt & Ashforth (2003); Steger et al. (2012); Hackman & Oldham (1976)	Not measured
Work values	Desirable end-states sought through work	Schwartz (1992); Ros et al. (1999); Kalleberg (1977)	Basis of WMO and of the extrinsic-value comparison
Work-meaning orientation (WMO)	How much a person values interesting, independent, helpful and socially useful work	This study	**Main explanatory variable; two components**
Perceived job characteristics	Whether the job is interesting, independent, helpful, useful (and secure, well paid, with advancement)	Kalleberg (1977); Hackman & Oldham (1976)	Moderator in the value × job tests
Calling	Work as an intrinsically valuable activity that matters for the world	Weber (1930); Wrzesniewski et al. (1997)	Background; critical debate
Job satisfaction	Positive emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one's job; a domain of quality of working life	Locke (1976); Sirgy et al. (2001)	Outcome

3. Three Accounts as Mechanisms and Boundary Conditions

What should we expect to see if a person who values meaningful work is compared with an otherwise similar worker in the same country and year? Each tradition points to a mechanism and to a boundary condition rather than to a single sign of association (Table 2).

3.1 Meaning as a need

In humanistic psychology, self-actualisation (Maslow, 1943) and the will to meaning (Frankl, 1946/2006) are central human motives; Herzberg et al. (1959) located genuine satisfaction in the content of work rather than in its conditions. Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017) proposes universal needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness whose satisfaction fosters motivation and well-being. Strictly speaking, these theories concern the *satisfaction* of needs, not the importance people attach to job features. They imply a positive association between valuing meaningful work and job satisfaction only through additional mechanisms: people who know what they look for may seek out and

craft jobs that provide it, and they may appraise their work against criteria that their jobs at least partly meet. The universality of needs does not imply identical regression slopes across cultures.

3.2 Meaning as a standard: the value–reward account

Locke's (1976) value–percept theory holds that satisfaction depends on the discrepancy between what one wants and what one perceives one gets, weighted by the importance of the value. Kalleberg (1977) showed that values and rewards must be studied jointly. This account does not imply that valuing meaningful work is, on average, harmful: if those who value autonomy also tend to obtain it, a positive average association is fully compatible with it. The prediction unique to this account concerns the *combination* of values and job characteristics: valuing a feature should be associated with lower satisfaction when the job lacks it and with higher satisfaction when the job provides it. Testing this requires measuring both—and the ISSP allows it.

3.3 Meaning as privilege and as a trap

The critical tradition raises two concerns. First, post-materialist values spread where people feel economically secure (Inglehart, 1997); valuing meaningful work may therefore mark a privileged position, and its association with satisfaction may be concentrated among the better educated. Graeber (2018) adds that many people do work they themselves regard as pointless. Second, Bunderson and Thompson (2009) describe the "double-edged sword" of deeply meaningful work: people who experience their work as a calling identify strongly with it but also accept lower pay and sacrifices; Lips-Wiersma and Morris (2009) warn that the "management of meaning" by organisations can become manipulation. From this perspective, even a positive association between meaning and satisfaction is not necessarily good news for workers' quality of life: satisfaction is not a measure of fair treatment.

3.4 National context

We consider two cultural dimensions with a plausible link to meaningful work (Hofstede et al., 2010). Where power distance is high, hierarchy may limit the room for autonomous decisions and for personal interpretations of one's work; where long-term orientation is high, values directed at the future and at contribution may be culturally supported. These are country-level characteristics observed for 43 countries; tests of moderation therefore have limited precision.

Table 2
What each account implies for the analyses

Account	Mechanism	Implication for this study	Analysis
Meaning as a need (Maslow, Frankl, Herzberg, SDT)	Seeking and crafting meaningful work; appraisal through meaning-related criteria	Positive association; present for both components; not restricted to particular cultures	Main models; subscales; cultural slopes
Meaning as a standard (Locke, Kalleberg)	Satisfaction depends on value × reward	Valuing meaningful work is less positively, or negatively, associated with satisfaction when the job lacks meaningful features	Importance × presence models; response surface
Meaning as privilege (Inglehart, Graeber)	Valuing meaning reflects economic security	Association stronger among the better educated	WMO × education
Meaning as a trap (Bunderson & Thompson; Lips-Wiersma & Morris)	Meaning binds workers to poor conditions	Cannot be assessed with satisfaction alone	Not tested; discussed
Response style (alternative explanation)	Some people rate all job features as important and also report high satisfaction	Association similar for extrinsic values; WMO association disappears when they are controlled	Comparison with extrinsic values

We formulate the analyses as research questions rather than as a contest with a predetermined winner:

RQ1. Is WMO associated with job satisfaction among workers in the same country and year, and do both components contribute?

RQ2. Is the association specific to meaning-related values compared with extrinsic values (security, income, advancement)?

RQ3. Does the association depend on whether the job is perceived to provide interesting, independent, helpful and socially useful work?

RQ4. Does the association differ by education, by power distance and long-term orientation, and over time?

4. Data and Methods

4.1 Data and sample

We use the four waves of the ISSP Work Orientations module (GESIS: ZA1840, 1989; ZA3090, 1997; ZA4350, 2005; ZA6770, 2015), the only cross-national survey that has asked identical questions about

work values and job characteristics on national probability samples for more than a quarter of a century. In every wave the job-satisfaction and job-characteristic questions are routed to respondents currently working for pay (in 2015 also to those on leave from an employment relationship); this routing defines the sample, and no further employment filter is applied. Numeric country codes in 1989 and 1997 were mapped to ISO codes from the country lists in the GESIS codebooks; sub-national samples (West and East Germany, Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Flanders, the two Israeli samples) were merged into their countries. After listwise deletion on the outcome, the WMO index and controls, the analytic sample comprises 75,280 workers in 47 countries and 104 country-year cells (1989: 10 countries; 1997: 25; 2005: 32; 2015: 37; Table A1). Analyses of job characteristics and extrinsic values use the respondents with valid answers to these items (job characteristics: N = 73,175; extrinsic values: N = 74,490; 47 countries in both).

4.2 Measures

Job satisfaction was measured with the single item "How satisfied are you in your (main) job?" on a seven-point scale (completely dissatisfied to completely satisfied), z-standardised within wave.

Work-meaning orientation. Respondents rated how important it is personally that a job is interesting, allows one to work independently, allows one to help other people, and is useful to society (five-point scales, recoded so that higher values mean more important). WMO is the mean of the four items (α = 0.69), z-standardised within wave; the intrinsic–autonomy (interesting, independent; α = 0.55) and prosocial (help, useful; α = 0.79) subscales are the means of two items each.

Extrinsic work values are the mean importance of job security, high income and good opportunities for advancement, asked in the same battery and on the same scale.

Perceived job characteristics. Respondents indicated how far each of the corresponding statements applies to their job ("my job is interesting", "I can work independently", "in my job I can help other people", "my job is useful to society"; five-point agreement scales). Their mean is the index of meaningful job characteristics. Importance and presence are rated on different response scales (importance vs agreement); we therefore treat them as distinct constructs and model their interaction rather than computing difference scores (Edwards, 1994).

Controls are age, age squared, sex and education. Education is measured as years of schooling in most country-years, but in 1989 Great Britain, Northern Ireland and Norway report coarse categories; we therefore standardise education within each country-year. Service codes (e.g., "still at school", "no answer") are treated as missing and "no formal schooling" as zero years. Exact age is used in all waves except Denmark 2015, where only age-class midpoints are available. Power distance (PDI) and long-term orientation (LTO) are taken from Hofstede et al. (2010); they are unavailable for Bangladesh, Cyprus, the Dominican Republic and Suriname.

4.3 Analytic strategy

All models are linear regressions with fixed effects for each country-year cell, so that every comparison is made between workers interviewed in the same country in the same year; time-invariant and time-varying national conditions (income levels, labour-market institutions, survey practices) are absorbed. Standard errors are clustered by country (47 clusters). For RQ2 we compare the WMO coefficient with that of extrinsic values, separately and jointly. For RQ3 we estimate models with WMO, the presence index and their product, and report the association of WMO with satisfaction at low (− 1 SD), average and high (+ 1 SD) presence; we repeat this for each subscale and item. A polynomial regression with response-surface parameters (Edwards & Cable, 2009) is reported as a supplementary description, with the caveat that importance and agreement scales are not strictly commensurate. For RQ4 we add the interaction of WMO with education, PDI or LTO and report predicted slopes at the 10th, 50th and 90th percentiles of the country distribution; change over time is estimated on the countries present in both waves compared. We began with a specification with separate country and wave fixed effects; it yields 0.118 against 0.115 in the stricter country × year version (Table A2), a difference in the third decimal, so we kept the stricter one and report the looser specification and further sensitivity checks in Appendix A.

5. Results

5.1 Measurement: two related orientations

The two prosocial items are closely related (r = 0.65), whereas all other pairs correlate moderately (0.25–0.38). A one-factor model fits poorly (CFI = 0.903; TLI = 0.710; RMSEA = 0.205); a two-factor model with correlated intrinsic–autonomy and prosocial factors fits well (CFI = 0.997; TLI = 0.981; RMSEA = 0.053), with a factor correlation of 0.57 (Fig. 1). Because each factor has only two indicators, this is evidence for a conceptually grounded distinction rather than a definitive structure. "Interesting work" loads only moderately on its factor (0.60 in the CFA; 0.38 in the exploratory solution); it is the most highly rated feature (mean 4.41 on a 1–5 scale), so it discriminates less between respondents. We did not arrive at this at once: our first estimates used a single-factor index, and only when the two-factor model clearly fitted the data better (Fig. 1) did the subscales receive an analysis of their own. We therefore treat the overall WMO as a composite formed by theory, not as a latent trait.

5.2 Valuing meaningful work and job satisfaction (RQ1)

Compare workers in the same country and year: those who value meaningful work more are more satisfied with their jobs. One SD of the WMO index corresponds to 0.115 SD of satisfaction (95% CI 0.099–0.132; Table 3, model A1). That is modest, and normal when a single dispositional factor is set against an evaluation with many determinants. More important, the sign and significance hold in every wave, every region and every specification (Appendix A). Entered jointly, both components retain positive associations—intrinsic–autonomy 0.059 (0.045–0.073) and prosocial 0.076 (0.061–0.090). The difference between them (0.016; −0.004 to 0.037; p = 0.12) is not statistically distinguishable from zero: the prosocial association does not disappear once the intrinsic–autonomy orientation is accounted for, but the data do not show that it is larger.

5.3 Specific to meaning-related values? (RQ2)

If the WMO association merely reflected a tendency of some respondents to rate every job feature as important and to answer satisfaction questions favourably, the importance of extrinsic job features should show a similar association. It does not (Table 3, model B). In the same sample (N = 74,490), the extrinsic-value index—the mean importance of job security, high income and good opportunities for advancement—is not associated with satisfaction (β = 0.014; 95% CI − 0.004 to 0.031), whereas WMO is (0.115). Entered jointly, the WMO coefficient rises slightly to 0.123 (0.107–0.139) and the extrinsic coefficient becomes negative (− 0.026; −0.041 to − 0.012); the difference between the two is 0.150 (0.128–0.171).

At the item level, each meaning-related item entered on its own is more strongly associated with satisfaction (interesting 0.080, independent 0.067, helping others 0.092, useful to society 0.085) than any extrinsic item (security 0.034, advancement 0.033, high income − 0.041). Valuing high income is the only item with a negative association, and it remains negative when all seven items are entered jointly (− 0.075; −0.086 to − 0.065), while all four meaning-related items remain positive (0.032–0.050). A uniform response style would push all importance ratings in the same direction. Response style is therefore not the main explanation of the observed pattern; at most, given the small positive associations of security and advancement, a minor admixture remains.

5.4 Values and what the job provides (RQ3)

Model C in Table 3 adds the perceived presence of meaningful job characteristics (N = 73,175). Presence is strongly associated with satisfaction (β = 0.420 per SD; 0.397–0.444), more than three times as strongly as WMO in model A1. Once presence is controlled, the WMO coefficient changes sign: from 0.115 (0.098–0.132) in the same sample without presence to − 0.028 (− 0.046 to − 0.010) with presence (in the model without the interaction; in the model with it, − 0.024 at average presence, Table 3, model C). Workers who value meaningful work are more satisfied essentially to the extent that they report jobs that are interesting, independent, helpful and useful; among workers whose jobs are perceived as equally meaningful, those who value such work more are, if anything, slightly less satisfied.

The interaction between importance and presence is positive (0.021; 0.012–0.029), as the value–reward account predicts. Where presence is low (− 1 SD), a one-SD higher WMO is associated with 0.044 SD lower satisfaction (− 0.065 to − 0.024); at average presence with − 0.024 (− 0.042 to − 0.005); at high presence (+ 1 SD) the association is close to zero (− 0.003; −0.024 to 0.017) (Fig. 2). The pattern is clearer for the two components, each combined with its own job characteristics. Valuing interesting and independent work is associated with lower satisfaction where the job offers little of either (− 0.054; −0.075 to − 0.033) and with higher satisfaction where it offers much (0.023; 0.006–0.040); for the prosocial orientation the corresponding estimates are − 0.029 (− 0.051 to − 0.007) and 0.061 (0.042–0.080). The interaction is positive for each of the four items (0.041–0.057). At low presence the importance slope is negative for interesting work (− 0.042), independence (− 0.044) and usefulness to society (− 0.026), and indistinguishable from zero for helping others (− 0.016; −0.036 to 0.004).

These conditional effects are small compared with the association of presence itself, and the combination they concern is uncommon: 2.0% of respondents rate meaningful work more than one SD above the mean in importance while describing their job more than one SD below the mean in presence. The supplementary response-surface analysis (Table A3) gives a consistent picture: satisfaction rises along the line on which importance and presence increase together (a1 = 0.386; 0.369–0.403) without curvature (a2 = 0.007; p = 0.14), falls steeply where importance exceeds presence (a3 = − 0.424; −0.465 to − 0.384), and is lower the further importance and presence diverge in either direction (a4 = − 0.060; −0.081 to − 0.039). Because importance and agreement are rated on different scales, the surface describes relative rather than absolute (in)congruence.

Two cautions apply to these results. Presence of job characteristics and satisfaction are reported by the same person in the same questionnaire: part of the correlation between them is a shared appraisal of one's own job rather than a link between distinct constructs. The second caution is more substantive. If valuing meaningful work leads people to seek and shape jobs that provide it, presence is part of the mechanism, not a confounder: by controlling for it we remove precisely the part of the association that the need-based account predicts (see Section 6.1).

5.5 Education, culture and time (RQ4)

Education does not moderate the association (interaction − 0.004; −0.014 to 0.005): the WMO slope is 0.119 (0.099–0.140) for workers one SD below the country-year mean of education and 0.111 (0.094–0.128) one SD above it. The association is also similar across national cultures (Fig. 3). At the 10th, 50th and 90th percentiles of power distance among the 43 countries with Hofstede scores (PDI = 28, 49 and 81), the predicted slopes are 0.122, 0.116 and 0.107; the difference between the 90th and the 10th percentile is − 0.015 (− 0.054 to 0.024). For long-term orientation (LTO = 26, 51 and 83) the slopes are 0.101, 0.114 and 0.132, a difference of 0.031 (− 0.007 to 0.069). The confidence intervals admit moderate moderation in either direction; these results rule out large differences, not all differences.

Over time, comparisons restricted to the same countries show a stronger association in 2015. Among the 24 countries surveyed in both 2005 and 2015, the WMO slope was 0.097 (0.067–0.127) in 2005 and 0.056 higher (0.022–0.090) in 2015; among the 18 countries surveyed in both 1997 and 2015, the increase was 0.054 (0.017–0.092). Between 1997 and 2005 (22 countries) there was no change (0.005; −0.012 to 0.022). Because the comparisons hold the set of countries constant, the shift is not an artefact of changing country composition; with 18–24 country clusters and a single later wave, however, these estimates describe a difference in the 2015 wave and do not identify its cause.

Table 3
Main results (country × wave fixed effects)

Model	Term	β	95% CI	N
A. Main association				
A1	WMO	0.115	0.099; 0.132	75,280
A2	Intrinsic–autonomy	0.059	0.045; 0.073	75,280
	Prosocial	0.076	0.061; 0.090	
B. Specificity (meaning-related vs extrinsic values, jointly)				
B	WMO	0.123	0.107; 0.139	74,490
	Extrinsic values	−0.026	−0.041; −0.012	
C. Values and job characteristics				
C	WMO (importance)	−0.024	−0.042; −0.005	73,175
	Meaningful job characteristics (presence)	0.420	0.397; 0.444	
	Importance × presence	0.021	0.012; 0.029	
D. Education				
D	WMO	0.115	0.099; 0.131	75,280
	WMO × education	−0.004	−0.014; 0.005	

Note. Dependent variable: job satisfaction (z within wave). All models include country × wave fixed effects, age, age², sex and education standardised within country × wave; standard errors clustered by country (47 clusters). WMO, extrinsic values, presence and education are standardised; in model C the WMO coefficient is the association at average presence. Without presence, the WMO coefficient in the sample of model C is 0.115 (0.098; 0.132).

6. Discussion

6.1 What the findings say about the three accounts

Read together, the results suggest that the three traditions describe different parts of one process rather than competing predictions.

Meaning as a need. The positive association (RQ1)—present for both components and similar across cultures—is compatible with need-based accounts but does not by itself reveal a mechanism. The analysis of job characteristics does: the whole association runs through the job. Workers who value meaningful work describe their jobs as providing it, and such jobs are evaluated much more positively. At a given level of presence, valuing meaningful work adds nothing to satisfaction. This fits a picture in

which people who know what they look for move into suitable jobs and shape them to their needs, not one in which valuing meaning raises satisfaction whatever the job is like.

The reverse direction cannot be ruled out: satisfied workers may describe their jobs, and perhaps their values, in more meaningful terms. Cross-sectional data do not distinguish the two directions.

Meaning as a standard. The importance × presence results support the prediction unique to this account (Locke, 1976; Kalleberg, 1977). Valuing meaningful work is associated with lower satisfaction where the job lacks meaningful features and with neutral or higher satisfaction where it provides them; the response surface shows lower satisfaction where importance exceeds presence. The disappointment is real but bounded: a two-SD difference in presence changes the importance slope by about 0.04 SD, and few workers combine high importance with low presence. The need-based account thus describes why valuing meaning and having a meaningful job tend to go together; the value–reward account describes what happens when they do not.

Meaning as privilege. We find no evidence that the association is concentrated among the better educated within a country and year. Education is only one marker of economic security, and income and job security are not used here. More importantly, our results relocate the privilege question: because the association runs through presence, what matters is who obtains interesting, autonomous and useful jobs, not whether valuing such work pays off differently once they are obtained. That question concerns the distribution of job quality, which this study does not address.

Meaning as a trap. The trap argument cannot be assessed with job satisfaction. Workers in meaningful jobs may be satisfied while accepting lower pay, longer hours or weaker boundaries between work and life (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009); testing this requires measures of conditions and of other life domains.

Response style. The comparison with extrinsic values makes a general tendency to rate everything as important an unlikely main explanation: the importance of security, income and advancement is not associated with satisfaction on balance, valuing high income is negatively associated with it, and controlling for extrinsic values strengthens rather than weakens the WMO association. A residual role of response style cannot be excluded.

6.2 The prosocial dimension

Management practice often equates motivation with autonomy and challenge. The prosocial orientation —wanting one's work to help others and to be useful to society—is associated with satisfaction independently of the intrinsic–autonomy orientation, in line with Grant's (2007, 2008) work on prosocial motivation and with the contribution pathway in Rosso et al. (2010). The difference between the two components is not statistically distinguishable (0.016; −0.004 to 0.037), so we do not claim that the prosocial orientation matters more, only that it is not a by-product of the intrinsic–autonomy orientation. The congruence analysis adds a nuance: the largest conditional estimate is that of prosocial importance

where the job is perceived as helpful and useful (0.061), which suggests that the prosocial orientation goes with satisfaction particularly when the job visibly allows a contribution to others.

6.3 Culture, education and time

The WMO association is similar across levels of education, power distance and long-term orientation. This is consistent with the claim of need theories that the underlying concerns are widely shared, but it does not establish universality: with 43 countries and static cultural scores, moderate moderation cannot be excluded, and the two Hofstede dimensions are only two of many national conditions that might shape the slope. Country × wave fixed effects absorb differences in levels between countries, not differences in slopes. The stronger association in 2015 holds on the same countries and is therefore not a composition artefact. Possible explanations, such as post-crisis labour markets, a growing public discourse on purpose at work or changes in fieldwork, cannot be distinguished with these data and are a question for future research.

6.4 Implications for the quality of working life

Three implications follow, and each is limited by the observational design. Engagement surveys and quality-of-working-life assessments usually ask about pay, workload, security and career progression; the question "what are you looking for in your work?" rarely makes it in, yet according to our results it is consistently related to how workers evaluate their jobs. The second implication is less comfortable for practitioners: the two orientations call for different responses. People oriented to autonomy and interest need room for independent decisions and challenging tasks; people oriented to contribution need to see whom their work helps and why (compare contact with beneficiaries in Grant et al., 2007). The third, and most important: valuing meaningful work and having it are not the same thing, and the association with satisfaction lies in the second.

Some caveats are unavoidable. A manager who helps a person see their own meaning in work and an organisation that "manages meaning" by presenting the corporate mission as a personal one are different things; the latter risks manipulation (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009). And meaning does not replace fair pay and a manageable workload: satisfaction with meaningful work can coexist with sacrifices that lower other domains of quality of life (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009). Organisations that invest in meaning in order to save on people are likely to lose both.

6.5 Limitations and future research

The study has several limitations, and we state them plainly.

Design. Repeated cross-sections show associations among workers in the same country and year, not effects. Selection into jobs, shared dispositions and reverse influence (satisfaction may lead people to describe their values as more "meaningful") all remain in play. Panel data with individual fixed effects would control for stable personal traits, though not for time-varying confounders.

Measurement. Job satisfaction is a single item. The WMO subscales have two items each, and the intrinsic–autonomy subscale also has low reliability (α = 0.55), so its coefficients are probably attenuated. Importance and presence are measured on different scales, so the congruence results are descriptive; moreover, presence is reported by the same respondent as satisfaction, and part of their shared variance comes from a common appraisal of the job. Measurement invariance across 47 countries and four waves has not been established: within-wave standardisation removes mean shifts, but not differential item functioning across languages and cultures.

Comparability and context. Education in some 1989 samples is categorical; standardisation within country-year mitigates but does not remove the problem. Fieldwork years sometimes diverge from nominal wave years, and country composition changes across waves. Moderation by PDI and LTO rests on 43 countries with static scores, and regional estimates on 4–16 countries each: they are illustrations, not inference.

Scope. Job satisfaction is only one domain of the quality of working life. We do not observe pay fairness, workload, health or life satisfaction, so the "trap" argument remains outside the test. The four-axis model and the managerial role it proposes are not measured either. Future research should combine values, job characteristics, managerial support and broader well-being in panel or organisational designs.

7. Conclusion

People evaluate their jobs not only by what the jobs give them but also by what they look for in work. Across 47 countries and a quarter of a century, workers who value interesting, autonomous and socially useful work are, on average, more satisfied with their jobs than comparable workers in the same country and year, and the desire to contribute to others is part of this association, not a by-product of the desire for autonomy. The association is specific to meaning-related values (the importance of security, income and advancement is not associated with satisfaction), and it operates through the job: valuing meaningful work is reflected in higher satisfaction when the job offers interesting, autonomous and useful tasks, and in somewhat lower satisfaction when it does not. For quality-of-working-life research and practice, this means that what workers seek in work deserves systematic attention alongside what they are offered, and that meaning should never be treated as a substitute for fair conditions.

Declarations

Competing Interests

Yes, the authors have competing interests to declare. The authors use the four-axis model of human potential (van Zwieten, Legemate, Goudsmet, & Gonnissen, 2015) in their talent-management consulting and training practice. The model is mentioned in this study solely as the motivation for the research question and is not tested or validated here. The analyses use publicly available secondary data (ISSP) and were conducted independently of any commercial engagement. The authors have no other financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

Author Contribution

J.Z. conceptualized the study and developed the theoretical framework. L.M. performed data harmonization and formal statistical analysis. J.Z. wrote the main manuscript text. All authors reviewed and edited the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Data Availability

The datasets analysed in this study are third-party public data: the ISSP Work Orientations modules (1989, 1997, 2005, 2015), available from the GESIS Data Archive under accession numbers ZA1840 (https://doi.org/10.4232/1.1840), ZA3090 (https://doi.org/10.4232/1.3090), ZA4350 (https://doi.org/10.4232/1.11648) and ZA6770 (https://doi.org/10.4232/1.12848). Country-level cultural scores (power distance, long-term orientation) are taken from Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov (2010). The harmonised analysis datasets, the variable harmonisation protocol and all Python analysis scripts are deposited in an anonymised repository; an anonymised view-only link for peer review is available at https://osf.io/qx5m4/overview?view_only=262522f532e24d8eb4e104f245379ded, and the repository will receive a permanent DOI upon acceptance.

References

1. [Authors 2015]. Details removed for blind review.
2. Bunderson, J. S., & Thompson, J. A. (2009). The call of the wild: Zookeepers, callings, and the double-edged sword of deeply meaningful work. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *54*(1), 32–57. https://doi.org/10.2189/asqu.2009.54.1.32
3. Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2000). The what and why of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior. *Psychological Inquiry*, *11*(4), 227–268. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327965PLI1104_01
4. Edwards, J. R. (1994). The study of congruence in organizational behavior research: Critique and a proposed alternative. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, *58*(1), 51–100. https://doi.org/10.1006/obhd.1994.1029
5. Edwards, J. R., & Cable, D. M. (2009). The value of value congruence. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *94*(3), 654–677. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0014891
6. Frankl, V. E. (2006). *Man's search for meaning*. Beacon Press. (Original work published 1946).
7. Graeber, D. (2018). *Bullshit jobs: A theory*. Simon & Schuster.
8. Grant, A. M. (2007). Relational job design and the motivation to make a prosocial difference. *Academy of Management Review*, *32*(2), 393–417. https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2007.24351328
9. Grant, A. M. (2008). Does intrinsic motivation fuel the prosocial fire? Motivational synergy in predicting persistence, performance, and productivity. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *93*(1), 48–58. https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.93.1.48

10. Grant, A. M., Campbell, E. M., Chen, G., Cottone, K., Lapedis, D., & Lee, K. (2007). Impact and the art of motivation maintenance: The effects of contact with beneficiaries on persistence behavior. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, *103*(1), 53–67. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2006.05.004
11. Hackman, J. R., & Oldham, G. R. (1976). Motivation through the design of work: Test of a theory. *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance*, *16*(2), 250–279. https://doi.org/10.1016/0030-5073(76)90016-7
12. Herzberg, F., Mausner, B., & Snyderman, B. B. (1959). *The motivation to work*. Wiley.
13. Hofstede, G., Hofstede, G. J., & Minkov, M. (2010). *Cultures and organizations: Software of the mind* (3rd ed.). McGraw-Hill.
14. Inglehart, R. (1997). *Modernization and postmodernization: Cultural, economic, and political change in 43 societies*. Princeton University Press.
15. ISSP Research Group (1991). *International Social Survey Programme: Work Orientations I—ISSP 1989*(ZA1840 Data file Version 1.0.0) [Data set]. GESIS Data Archive. https://doi.org/10.4232/1.1840
16. ISSP Research Group (1999). *International Social Survey Programme: Work Orientations II—ISSP 1997*(ZA3090 Data file Version 1.0.0) [Data set]. GESIS Data Archive. https://doi.org/10.4232/1.3090
17. ISSP Research Group (2013). *International Social Survey Programme: Work Orientations III—ISSP 2005*(ZA4350 Data file Version 2.0.0) [Data set]. GESIS Data Archive. https://doi.org/10.4232/1.11648
18. ISSP Research Group (2017). *International Social Survey Programme: Work Orientations IV—ISSP 2015*(ZA6770 Data file Version 2.1.0) [Data set]. GESIS Data Archive. https://doi.org/10.4232/1.12848
19. Joshanloo, M. (2026). Eudaimonic well-being promotes subjective well-being through perceived job quality: A multilevel mediation analysis across 116 countries. *Applied Research in Quality of Life*, *21*(2), 817–837. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11482-026-10554-1
20. Kalleberg, A. L. (1977). Work values and job rewards: A theory of job satisfaction. *American Sociological Review*, *42*(1), 124–143. https://doi.org/10.2307/2117735
21. Lips-Wiersma, M., & Morris, L. (2009). Discriminating between 'meaningful work' and the 'management of meaning'. *Journal of Business Ethics*, *88*(3), 491–511. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-009-0118-9
22. Locke, E. A. (1976). The nature and causes of job satisfaction. In M. D. Dunnette (Ed.), *Handbook of industrial and organizational psychology* (pp. 1297–1349). Rand McNally.
23. Maslow, A. H. (1943). A theory of human motivation. *Psychological Review*, *50*(4), 370–396. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0054346
24. Pratt, M. G., & Ashforth, B. E. (2003). Fostering meaningfulness in working and at work. In K. S. Cameron, J. E. Dutton, & R. E. Quinn (Eds.), *Positive organizational scholarship* (pp. 309–327). Berrett-Koehler.

25. Ros, M., Schwartz, S. H., & Surkiss, S. (1999). Basic individual values, work values, and the meaning of work. *Applied Psychology: An International Review*, *48*(1), 49–71. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1464-0597.1999.tb00048.x
26. Rosso, B. D., Dekas, K. H., & Wrzesniewski, A. (2010). On the meaning of work: A theoretical integration and review. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, *30*, 91–127. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.riob.2010.09.001
27. Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2001). On happiness and human potentials: A review of research on hedonic and eudaimonic well-being. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *52*, 141–166. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.52.1.141
28. Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2017). *Self-determination theory: Basic psychological needs in motivation, development, and wellness*. Guilford Press.
29. Schwartz, S. H. (1992). Universals in the content and structure of values: Theoretical advances and empirical tests in 20 countries. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, *25*, 1–65. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601(08)60281-6
30. Sirgy, M. J., Efraty, D., Siegel, P., & Lee, D. J. (2001). A new measure of quality of work life (QWL) based on need satisfaction and spillover theories. *Social Indicators Research*, *55*(3), 241–302. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1010986923468
31. Sousa-Poza, A., & Sousa-Poza, A. A. (2000). Well-being at work: A cross-national analysis of the levels and determinants of job satisfaction. *Journal of Socio-Economics*, *29*(6), 517–538. https://doi.org/10.1016/S1053-5357(00)00085-8
32. Steger, M. F., Dik, B. J., & Duffy, R. D. (2012). Measuring meaningful work: The Work and Meaning Inventory (WAMI). *Journal of Career Assessment*, *20*(3), 322–337. https://doi.org/10.1177/1069072711436160
33. Weber, M. (1930). *The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism*. Trans.). Allen & Unwin. T. Parsons.
34. Wrzesniewski, A., McCauley, C., Rozin, P., & Schwartz, B. (1997). Jobs, careers, and callings: People's relations to their work. *Journal of Research in Personality*, *31*(1), 21–33. https://doi.org/10.1006/jrpe.1997.2162

Figures

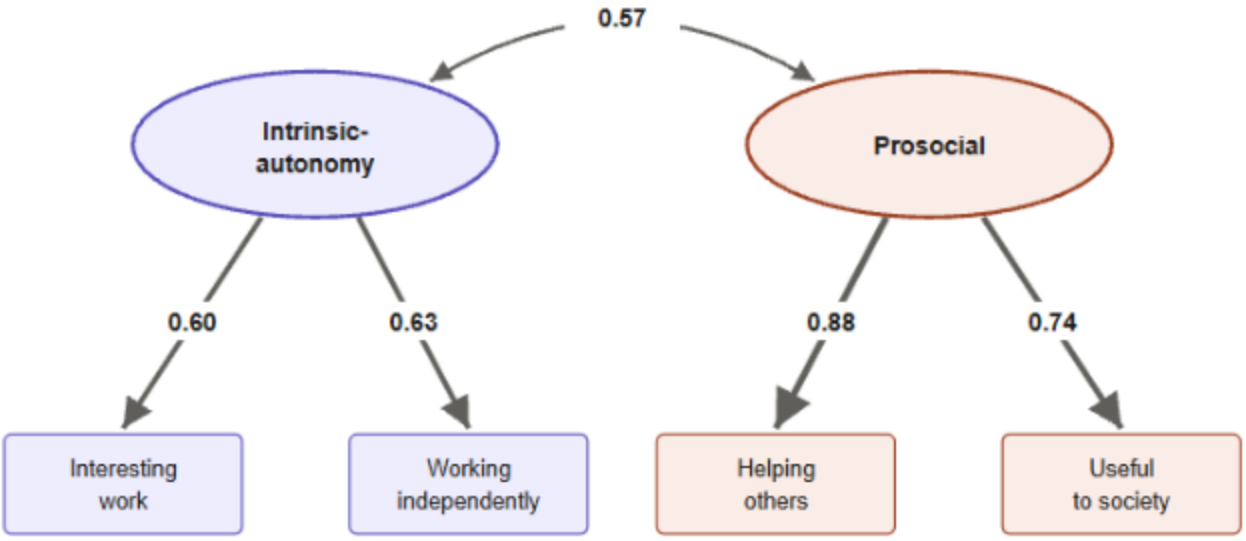

Figure 1

Two-factor model of work-meaning orientation (confirmatory factor analysis, maximum likelihood, N = 75,280). Numbers are standardised loadings; the arc shows the factor correlation. With two indicators per factor the model is just identified at the factor level and should be read as a conceptually grounded distinction.

Two-factor model: CFI = 0.997; TLI = 0.981; RMSEA = 0.053

One-factor model: CFI = 0.903; TLI = 0.710; RMSEA = 0.205

Arrow width is proportional to the standardised loading

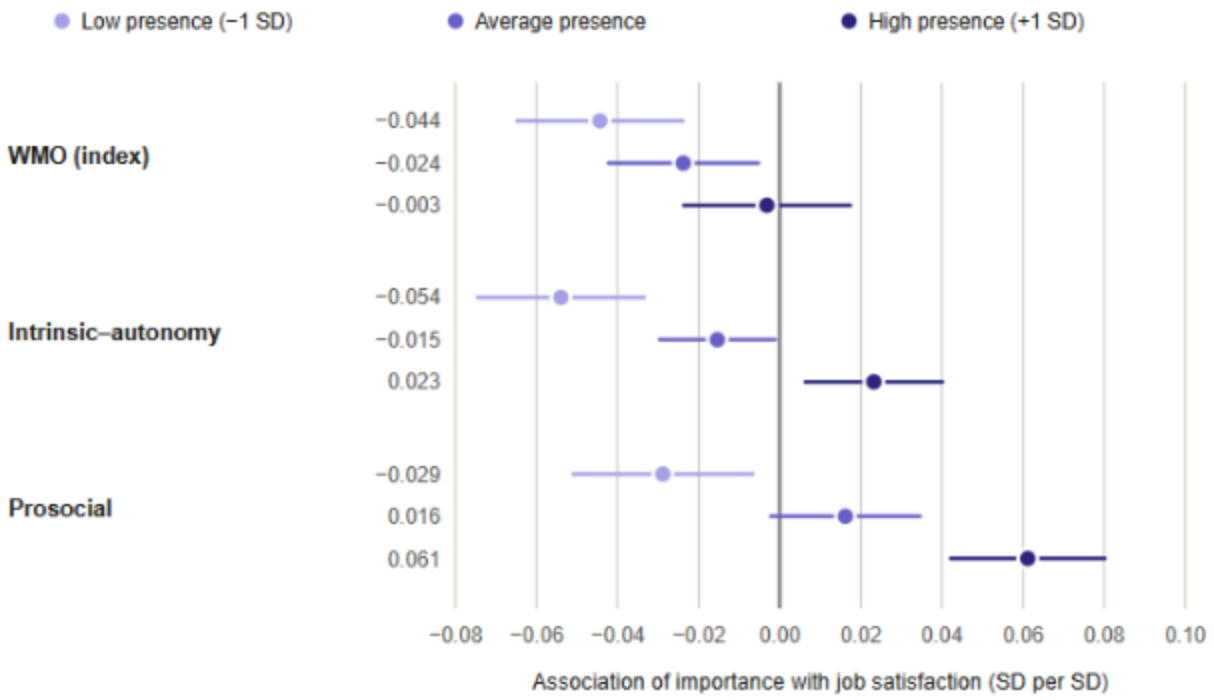

Figure 2

Association of value importance with job satisfaction at low (−1 SD), average and high (+1 SD) perceived presence of the corresponding job characteristics. Points are linear combinations from models with importance, presence and their product; lines are 95% confidence intervals (SE clustered by country; country × wave fixed effects; controls as in Table 3). WMO: N = 73,175; intrinsic–autonomy: N = 74,359; prosocial: N = 73,661.

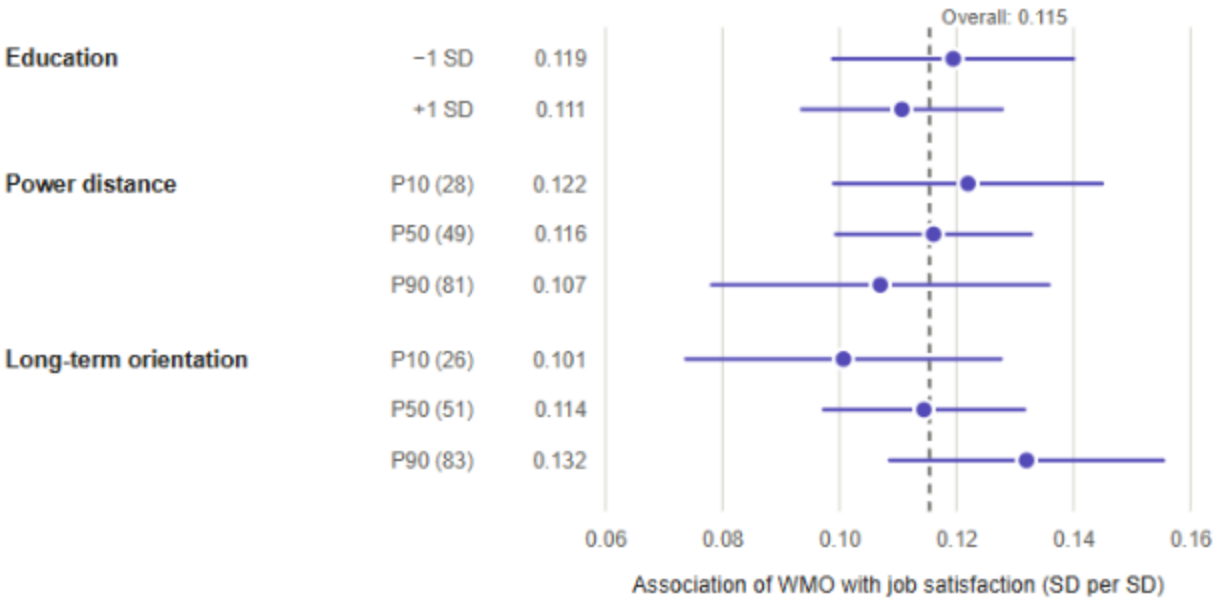

Figure 3

Association of WMO with job satisfaction at different levels of education (±1 SD around the country-year mean; N = 75,280) and at the 10th, 50th and 90th percentiles of power distance and long-term orientation across countries (43 countries, N = 72,240). Points are predicted slopes from models with the respective interaction; lines are 95% confidence intervals; the dashed line is the overall estimate from model A1.

Supplementary Files

This is a list of supplementary files associated with this preprint. Click to download.

- AppendixA.docx