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FINDING MEANING AT WORK: ENTREPRENEURSHIP AS A WAY OF ACHIEVING HIGHER MEANINGFULNESS

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Abstract

This study examines the role of entrepreneurship in fostering meaningful work. Using a qualitative approach, in-depth interviews were conducted with entrepreneurs and employees to explore differences in their perception of work meaning. The findings suggest that entrepreneurs experience higher levels of meaningfulness at work due to greater autonomy, purpose-driven engagement, and self-actualization opportunities. Employees, on the other hand, often experience constraints that hinder the experience of meaningfulness. This study contributes to the understanding of work meaningfulness by highlighting the distinct factors that influence the entrepreneurial and employee work experience. Additionally, the discussion explores implications for organizational design, policy recommendations, and the broader impact of work meaningfulness on well-being, productivity, and economic sustainability. The research findings provide a deeper insight into the impact of meaningful work on individual and organizational success.

Keywords: Meaningful Work, Meaningfulness Entrepreneurship, Employee Well-Being, Autonomy

1 INTRODUCTION

Why do we wake up in the morning, go to work, and repeat this routine throughout our lives? At first glance, one might assume this is an easy question to answer. However, the nature of work—how, where, and when we engage in it—has changed dramatically over the last several decades (Borman, Ilgen, & Klimoski, 2003). While work has always been essential for survival, our perceptions of it have evolved throughout history. Before the Industrial Revolution, farmers, craftsmen, and merchants bore heavy responsibilities but also enjoyed the autonomy to navigate new challenges daily (Schwartz, 2015). The significance of work is so deeply ingrained in identity that many surnames still reflect historical occupations (e.g., Smith, referring to a blacksmith) (Standing, 2010). Today, work takes place in a globalized and increasingly technological world, raising new challenges for individuals and organizations. As Baudrillard (1994, p. 79) observed, *"We live in a world where there is more and more information and less and less meaning."* In re-sponse, scholars from various disciplines, including psychology, philosophy, and organizational studies, have sought to understand how individuals construct meaning in their work.

Viktor Frankl's (1985) existential perspective suggests that individuals find purpose by identifying their *why*—a guiding sense of meaning amid the complexities of life. The search for meaning is a fundamental human endeavor, as people naturally attempt to interpret information and create coherence in their experiences (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002). Given that a significant portion of life is spent working, understanding the meaning of work is crucial to broader existential and psychological well-being (Ward & King, 2017). Research indicates that individuals do not perceive work merely as a means of financial sustenance but seek deeper significance in their professional roles (Šverko & Vizek-Vidović, 1995). The emergence of positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014) has further catalyzed research into meaningful work, emphasizing its role in well-being and fulfillment (Cameron & Dutton, 2003; Luthans, 2002; Wong,

2014). Studies have demonstrated that meaningful work is associated with positive organizational and individual outcomes, including job satisfaction (Kamdron, 2005), motivation (Hackman & Oldham, 1980), well-being (Arnold, Turner, Barling, Kelloway, & McKee, 2007), engagement (May, Gilson, & Harter, 2004), and even physical and psychological health benefits (Ward & King, 2017).

The meaning of work is commonly defined as an individual's understanding of what they do and the significance they attribute to it (Wrzesniewski, Dutton, & Debebe, 2003). However, research on this topic is fragmented across multiple disciplines, lacking a unified framework (Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski, 2010). Furthermore, scholars distinguish between *meaning* and *meaningfulness*. While meaning is an inherent component of cognition—individuals constantly interpret and assign meaning to their experiences—meaningfulness refers to the perceived significance and positive value attributed to work (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). This distinction has shaped ongoing debates, particularly regarding whether research on meaningful work has been overly eudaimonic (growth- and purpose-oriented) at the expense of hedonic (pleasure-oriented) perspectives (Steger, 2012; Wong, 2014; Ward & King, 2017).

The relational nature of meaning further complicates the discussion. Meaning in work arises from interactions between employees and employers, shaped by implicit psychological contracts (Schein, 1978). Organizations must adapt to shifting external conditions to maintain competitive advantages, with meaningful work emerging as a key factor in fostering well-being and engagement (Burke, 2017). Organizational culture, leadership, recruitment strategies, and job design all play roles in shaping meaningful work (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). Conversely, when these factors fail to support employees' psychological needs, meaninglessness—commonly understood as the absence or loss of meaningfulness—can emerge, leading to disengagement and dissatisfaction (Bailey & Madden, 2016).

Despite the extensive research on meaningful work, existing studies predominantly focus on employees within structured organizational settings. However, entrepreneurs—who often self-organize their work—may construct meaning in fundamentally different ways. Historically, work resembled entrepreneurial engagement more than contemporary employment structures, as individuals had greater autonomy to navigate challenges and develop skills (Schwartz, 2015). Autonomy is a well-established driver of well-being and engagement (Gagné & Bhave, 2011), yet modern hierarchical workplaces often constrain it (Harley, 1999). Given the increasing demand for meaningful work in today's complex and evolving professional landscape, this research aims to explore how entrepreneurs perceive and cultivate meaningful work. By comparing their experiences with those of employees, this study seeks to identify key mechanisms that contribute to meaningful work, offering insights for both theory and practice in organizational settings.

The following research questions are examined:

Research question 1: Which factors contribute to the meaningfulness of work?

Research question 2: How is the meaning of work perceived by entrepreneurs?

Research question 3: What are the differences between the way entrepreneurs and employees perceive the meaning of work?

Research question 4: Do entrepreneurs or founders of organizations have a higher chance of achieving higher meaningfulness based on their unique freedom in the work context?

2 MEANING AND MEANINGFUL WORK

Baumeister & Vohs (2002) identify the connection as "the essence of meaning." They define meaning as something that connects various entities. And those connections form a nonphysical reality that can help us manage what is happening around us and act as a tool for imposing stability in life. Meaning resides in no individual alone, but depends on socio-political as well as material-technological context (Hoeyer & Wadmann, 2020). Meaning in life is widely regarded as a crucial component of human well-being and flourishing (Ryff & Singer, 1998; Seligman, 2011; Steger, Kashdan, & Oishi, 2008) as well as the meaning of work being an essential aspect of

it (Steger & Dyk, 2009). According to the analysis of the 14 definitions Both-Nwabuwe et al. (2017) defined meaningful work as "the subjective experience of existential significance resulting from the fit between the individual and work."

Meaning could either be positive, negative or neutral (Wrzesniewski, 2003). Therefore, stating that work has meaning does not necessarily mean that work is meaningful. "Meaning of work" is commonly mistaken for meaningfulness (Rosso, Dekas & Wrzesniewski, 2010), which is associated with positive individual and organizational outcomes (Bailey et al., 2019; Lysova et al., 2019). Pratt and Ashforth (2003) define meaningfulness as the amount of significance something holds for an individual.

3 METHODOLOGY AND SAMPLE

A qualitative research design was employed, using semi-structured interviews with 20 participants—10 enterpreneurs (Research sample 1) 10 employees (Research sample 2). Thematic analysis was conducted to identify patterns related to work meaningfulness, autonomy, and job satisfaction. Participants were selected based on purposive sampling, ensuring a diverse range of industries and experiences. Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes, allowing for an in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives. Data were analyzed through iterative coding to reveal key themes and recurring narratives. The research design was guided by principles of grounded theory to ensure emergent insights were adequately captured (Charmaz, 2006).

A comparative analysis between entrepreneurs and employees was conducted to assess differences in their perception of work meaningfulness. Thematic clusters were identified in the areas of autonomy, job satisfaction, work engagement, financial motivation, and career growth. Additionally, demographic variables such as industry, years of experience, and job role were considered.

4 FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS OF THE RESEARCH SAMPLE 1

The findings indicate that entrepreneurs derive meaning from autonomy, creativity, responsibility, and impact. Many left employment due to restrictions, discovering greater fulfillment in entrepreneurship. However, autonomy comes with challenges, such as self-management and financial risks. While some struggled to define their purpose, all acknowledged a drive to build and create. The perception of meaning varied, influenced by past experiences, business impact, and personal philosophy.

Table 1: Research sample 1

	Gender	Age group	Position	Company's industry	Annual revenue in 2020
Interviewee 1	M	45-50	CEO	technology	"around 40 million €"
Interviewee 2	M	40-45	board member	finance	1,9 million €
Interviewee 3	M	35-40	CEO	education	"a few million €"
Interviewee 4	M	25-30	CTO	crypto	"half a million"
Interviewee 5	F	30-35	CEO	social	N/A
Interviewee 6	M	35-40	consultant/ investor	real estate/ start-ups	N/A
Interviewee 7	M	55-60	Partner	management coaching	0,14 million €
Interviewee 8	M	20-25	CEO	technology	0,3 million €
Interviewee 9	M	35-40	CEO	law	0,15 million €
Interviewee 10	F	25-30	CEO	marketing	"around 1 million €"

Source: Own work.

Table 2: Research sample 2

	Gender	Age group	Position	Years of work experience
Interviewee A	M	40-50	Head of the projects in construction, SME	22
Interviewee B	F	25-30	Technical steward in a pharmaceutical company	4
Interviewee C	F	60-65	Sanitary inspector, public sector	39
Interviewee D	M	55-60	Commercialist in a SME	35
Interviewee E	F	50-55	Medical doctor in a public healthcare institution	21
Interviewee F	M	35-40	Specialist for market relations in an energetics company	10
Interviewee G	F	40-45	Data and artificial intelligence lead in a multinational company	16
Interviewee H	M	65-70	System operator in an energetics company	41
Interviewee I	F	50-55	Marketing manager in a public institution	26
Interviewee J	M	25-30	Researcher in drug development, multinational company	3

Source: Own work.

4.1 Entrepreneurs and their formation of meaning

Entrepreneurs provided diverse perspectives on the meaning of work, often rooted in their personal experiences and career journeys. Some framed meaning as an extension of their vision and long-term goals. "If you want to create a meaningful life, you need to envision it before you build it. I created this film in my head when I was young, and now, 30 years later, I am living it" (Interviewee 1). Others associated meaning with problem-solving, autonomy, and personal fulfillment: "I do what I have chosen myself, and I enjoy it. That is what fuels me" (Interviewee 7).

Some entrepreneurs took a deeper, psychoanalytical approach, suggesting that work fulfills subconscious drives. "Everyone has a unique story, but in the end, we are all looking to find some sense through work. We push forward because of our deep internal motivations" (Interviewee 2). Others viewed work meaning as deriving from helping others and solving problems. "My purpose is to resolve problems and help people. I don't care what that is or on what level" (Interviewee 6). Many saw the process of creating something as inherently meaningful, regardless of the outcome. "As long as I am doing challenging work, I am fine. That is what I need" (Interviewee 8).

Feedback was also a significant source of meaning. Some derived satisfaction from positive client impact: "Meaning comes from seeing the result of your work and actually having an impact" (Interviewee 3). Others prioritized their employees' well-being and professional growth: "The most meaningful thing for me is building a platform that enables people to develop their talents. We are like a sports team performing in a big league. There are ups and downs, but we constantly push forward" (Interviewee 1). Similarly, Interviewee 5 emphasized the societal role of work: "If you give work to people, you give them dignity. You protect them from economic distress and give them social inclusion."

However, some questioned whether work needed to have meaning at all. "Even if I am deluding myself, as long as I enjoy it, it doesn't matter" (Interviewee 3). Others acknowledged that meaning is subjective and dependent on perspective: "Maybe our work has no meaning. It depends on how you look at it" (Interviewee 4). These responses suggest that meaning is not always a clearly defined concept but rather something that evolves with personal experiences.

4.1.1 Actively thinking about meaning

While some entrepreneurs frequently reflected on the meaning of their work, others rarely did. Three participants actively considered work meaning, linking it to leadership and long-term business strategy. "I think about the meaning of work all the time. Every decision must fit our vision" (Intervie-

wee 10). Another participant highlighted how existential reflections improved business decision-making and personal motivation.

In contrast, others saw overthinking meaning as unnecessary. "It's better to work toward a meaningful goal than to constantly question meaning itself. I think you ask these questions when you're not on the right path" (Interviewee 4). Some suggested that meaningful work naturally aligns with passion and values, reducing the need for active contemplation. "I don't think about meaning often, maybe because my work is already meaningful, and I don't see any problem" (Interviewee 3).

Despite differences in explicit reflection, most entrepreneurs made decisions that aligned with their values, whether consciously or unconsciously. Their focus on crafting meaningful businesses, ensuring alignment with personal goals, and seeking feedback suggests an underlying pursuit of purpose.

4.1.2 Impact and greater good

Many entrepreneurs believed in making a positive impact but were reluctant to claim they were changing the world. Some, like Interviewee SJ, who ran a social enterprise, felt strongly about creating change: "I have a feeling I am making a difference in the world. It's a small thing, but I hope to inspire others." However, most participants had a more modest perspective. "I hope I'm making a change, but I know I'm not ending world hunger" (Interviewee 1).

Several entrepreneurs grappled with the ethics of business impact. "Entrepreneurship is one of the best ways to create a powerful impact, but we are part of an unsustainable system" (Interviewee 1). Others noted that conflicts in business sometimes made it hard to stay true to meaningful work. Despite these concerns, many found impact in smaller, everyday contributions. "There is nothing better than seeing feedback from a happy client" (Interviewee 8).

A recurring theme was the role of employees in creating impact. "We try to be an organization where people feel good so they can pass on that positive influence" (Interviewee 1). Others emphasized that improving employees' lives was just as meaningful as creating a large-scale impact. "In-

stead of thinking about changing the world, I focus on changing the lives of my employees. If I provide them a good life, I am already making an impact" (Interviewee 10).

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4.3 Entrepreneurship vs. employment

A key research goal was to compare how entrepreneurs and employees perceive work meaning. While many struggled to articulate this initially, their responses became clearer when reflecting on their transition from employment to entrepreneurship.

4.3.1 Feeling limited at work

Many participants described employment as restrictive. "I felt trapped, like I had no freedom" (Interviewee 9). "Being employed really limits a person" (Interviewee 6). They noted that their work was confined to assigned tasks, limiting creativity and decision-making. "At a job, you can't just try something new" (Interviewee 3). Frustration with these constraints often motivated their entrepreneurial journey. "I felt that working in an organization was holding me down if I wanted to be creative. It was just a matter of time before I went on an entrepreneurial journey" (Interviewee 9).

4.3.2 Working as a subordinate

A common theme was dissatisfaction with having a boss. "Although the job was generally good, having a superior was always bothering me" (Interviewee 4). Some felt their efforts were unappreciated: "When I was employed, someone would tell me what I did wrong and correct it. Now, the market directly tells me how good my work is" (Interviewee 3). Others disliked being dependent on someone else's decisions: "Now I choose how I work, when, and with whom" (Interviewee 9). Many believed that employment forced them to follow someone else's dreams, while entrepreneurship allowed them to pursue their own vision.

4.3.3 Being your own boss

While autonomy was highly valued, some participants admitted it came with challenges. "When you leave a company, you feel free. But after some time, this taste of freedom is gone" (Interviewee 3). Several acknowledged the difficulties of self-management: "Now I often don't even know what problems to solve. It is difficult, but that is also the beauty of it" (Interviewee 3). Despite these challenges, none expressed a desire to return to employment.

4.3.4 Unlocking hidden potential

Many participants reported increased engagement and creativity after becoming entrepreneurs. "Entrepreneurship opened a whole new world for me. It released inner energy and creativity I was never aware of" (Interviewee 6). Some linked entrepreneurship to personal fulfillment: "Being in a workplace that doesn't fulfill you won't bring maximum engagement and commitment" (Interviewee 7). Creating their own work environment enabled them to align their tasks with personal strengths and aspirations.

4.3.5 Risk and responsibility

Entrepreneurship was seen as requiring greater responsibility, which enhanced its meaning. "If you own a business, motivation increases with responsibility" (Interviewee 3). Participants noted that financial risk and accountability heightened their engagement: "Now all the responsibility is on me. I take responsibility for what I do and what I don't do" (Interviewee 4). The idea of ownership fueled their motivation: "Entrepreneurship is risky, but less so if you believe in yourself. You own your decisions" (Interviewee 10).

4.3.6 Satisfaction at work

Overall, participants reported higher job satisfaction after transitioning to entrepreneurship. "Entrepreneurship brings me higher satisfaction. I can't even imagine not doing it" (Interviewee 5). Increased autonomy, ownership, and control over their work were the primary reasons for their enhanced satisfaction. Some, however, described a

shift rather than a dramatic increase: "I was satisfied before, but entrepreneurship brought me fulfillment. Now I feel at peace" (Interviewee 2).

4.4 Entrepreneurship and personality

Entrepreneurs attributed their drive to personal characteristics such as creativity, leadership, and risk-taking. "Entrepreneurship is a phase in life where you really need to look into yourself. After you have done that, you become more open to new solutions" (Interviewee 6). Self-awareness and personal development were recurring themes: "If you want to lead a company well, you need to know yourself and how to lead yourself" (Interviewee 2).

The notion of being a "builder" was frequently mentioned. "If you are an entrepreneur, you simply have it. I don't know if that is entrepreneurial, but it's also something artists have—you want to build and express yourself" (Interviewee 6). Some questioned whether entrepreneurial traits were innate or developed: "I am not sure if I was born to be an entrepreneur or if entrepreneurship made me one. It's a chicken-and-egg question" (Interviewee 1).

4.5 Meaning of work and private life

Participants noted that entrepreneurship blurred the lines between work and personal life, often integrating lessons from one into the other. "Ownership logic is very helpful in personal life as well. If you think you are a victim, you don't feel the ability to change. As an entrepreneur, you get the feeling that change happens" (Interviewee 3). Many saw entrepreneurship as a continuous process of self-improvement and reflection.

4.6 Entrepreneurship as a life trajectory

Many participants described entrepreneurship as a long-term vision rather than a short-term choice. "I always wanted to have an enterprise. It has become a part of my identity" (Interviewee 3). Some described it as a natural progression rather than a planned decision: "I never had a clear idea of becoming an entrepreneur. But throughout life, I was always building something" (Interviewee 8).

4.7 Entrepreneurs and their purpose

Entrepreneurs frequently reflected on their deeper motivations. "Always do your best, work with your best intentions, and don't stop. You can't build a good enterprise if you are not a good person" (Interviewee 2). Some struggled to articulate their exact drive but felt compelled to create: "Entrepreneurship is like building blocks. You just need to put them together correctly" (Interviewee 10). Their motivation often stemmed from a strong inner force pushing them toward their goals

5 FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS OF THE RESEARCH SAMPLE 2

5.1 Employees and their formation of meaning

Employees found it challenging to define the meaning of work, often refining their responses throughout the interviews. Some initially cited traditional sayings or practical necessities, particularly older interviewees who emphasized providing for their families. "I still have kids that need my financial support. Providing for them is meaningful to me," said Interviewee D. Over time, some developed a broader perspective, seeing meaning in their contributions to society, helping others, or personal growth. "My work is to help people in need; this gives my life meaning," explained Interviewee E.

A commonly accepted response was that work gains meaning when it creates value, whether by directly helping others or playing a role in a larger system. Some participants described work as a societal duty, emphasizing the collective effort needed for social and economic structures to function. "One's work is meaningful because it all makes sense in the end," said Interviewee H. Others focused on the personal aspect, stating that feeling useful is essential to meaningful work. "A person needs to feel significant, that their work matters to others. You can have everything, but if you do not feel useful, you will not find meaning," claimed Interviewee E.

Receiving feedback was another crucial factor in determining meaningfulness. Those who worked closely with clients or customers found significance in knowing their efforts were appreciated. Some

emphasized the importance of seeing the tangible results of their work. Others valued personal satisfaction above external validation, highlighting their contribution and sense of accomplishment. "It is more important to me that I have contributed, and if I am content with it, I want to have inner peace," said Interviewee G.

One notable outlier, Interviewee I, described work as deeply intertwined with her life, similar to perspectives observed in entrepreneurs. She fully immersed herself in her job and actively sought work that created value for both herself and society. "I want to do work that is meaningful, that creates value for society and myself," she explained. Unlike others, she also cited religion as a key source of meaning.

5.1.1 Meaninglessness at work

Employees also described experiences where they felt little or no meaning in their work. Identifying the causes of meaninglessness is as important as understanding what drives meaningfulness, as addressing these issues can improve employee satisfaction.

Many struggled to pinpoint meaninglessness directly but gradually revealed it in their responses. The most common cause was feeling that their work lacked purpose or did not make a tangible impact. Employees often cited bureaucratic tasks, unrecognized efforts, or redundant work as sources of frustration. "I need to make some Excel spreadsheets that no one ever reads," said Interviewee I.

Corporate environments and rigid structures also contributed to feelings of meaninglessness. Some employees described feeling disconnected due to top-down decision-making, where they had to execute projects they did not believe in. "Then it is up to you to handle the situation, which can be quite political. The problem is that these situations can demotivate people incredibly," explained Interviewee G.

Another key factor was the lack of recognition for effort. Some employees put significant work into projects only to see their contributions ignored or attributed to someone else. "You work hard to complete the project, and then all the commendation goes to the person that did not do much," complained Interviewee J. Without appreciation, motivation and fulfillment diminished.

Feelings of insecurity and doubt also played a role in meaninglessness, particularly when employees faced challenges beyond their expertise. "When things go wrong, and I do not know what to do, I start questioning the meaning of my work," said Interviewee B. Uncertainty in job roles and responsibilities hindered employees' ability to find satisfaction.

5.1.2 Changing meaning over time

Employees' perspectives on work meaning evolved throughout their careers. Younger employees often placed great importance on work, seeing it as central to their identity. "You are ambitious; everything needs to make sense," said Interviewee UP. Many younger participants formed strong relationships with colleagues, blurring the line between work and personal life. "People from your job become the people you hang out with since you spend so much time together. You start to equal job with your life," said Interviewee G.

Over time, priorities shifted, and many employees emphasized work-life balance. They realized that while work was significant, personal interests and relationships were equally important. "In the first years, I overestimated the role of work, positioning it beyond my personal interests. Now I see that a counterweight is needed to prevent burnout," said Interviewee E. Many reported learning to set boundaries and adapt expectations to maintain a healthier relationship with work.

Work experience also influenced how employees handled challenges. Early-career employees reported higher stress levels and self-doubt, whereas experienced workers described becoming more confident in managing work-related issues. "In the beginning, you have more doubt in yourself, but slowly the stress of new projects and challenges is gone," said Interviewee F. Similarly, Interviewee D noted, "Things that took much of my time and mental energy are just part of the routine now."

Career progression often shifted employees' understanding of meaning, as some realized the limitations of their autonomy. Some developed coping strategies to sustain meaning, while others grew disillusioned. "You need to set borders. You need to see what you receive for what you give," said Interviewee A, suggesting that realistic expectations help maintain fulfillment.

Contrary to most participants, Interviewee I actively sought meaningful work throughout her career, frequently changing jobs to align with her values. "Often, I was jobless just so I could find and do the work I really wanted," she said. Even when meaning diminished, she tried to reshape her role before ultimately deciding to move on.

5.1.3 Feedback

Feedback played a significant role in shaping employees' sense of purpose. Many initially downplayed its importance, but their enthusiasm when discussing positive feedback suggested otherwise. Recognition from clients, managers, or coworkers reinforced employees' sense of contribution. "The highest satisfaction for me is when the customer approves my work," said Interviewee A.

Some employees expressed a desire for more direct customer feedback, feeling disconnected from the impact of their work. "I wish I could be closer to a customer to hear their feedback," said Interviewee J. Others valued recognition from supervisors, noting that praise from management significantly boosted their motivation. "If there was an outage, and you managed to solve the situation quickly, you got praise, and that was very powerful," said Interviewee H.

Coworkers' feedback was also highly valued. Many employees described how peer appreciation was more meaningful than financial compensation. "Because of feedback, we have better relations, more flexibility, and that is far more important for me," said Interviewee A.

Additionally, employees emphasized feedback's role in defining their work identity and career growth. Constructive feedback helped them recognize strengths and weaknesses, guiding their pro-

fessional development. "You need to understand who you are at work. It is difficult to achieve that without feedback. You can say you have found your meaning, but maybe you are a headache for others," said Interviewee F. This suggests that continuous feedback is crucial for fostering a sense of purpose and improvement.

6 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study explores how entrepreneurs perceive the meaning of work and compares their experiences with those of employees. Findings indicate that entrepreneurs attribute higher significance to their work, making it more meaningful. This aligns with theoretical expectations, as entrepreneurs integrate personal, organizational, and societal meanings into their work more seamlessly than employees.

A notable aspect of the interviews was the depth of reflection participants engaged in. Entrepreneurs often demonstrated a strong sense of purpose, even if they struggled to articulate it explicitly. Employees, on the other hand, frequently expressed satisfaction with their work but later revealed constraints that limited their ability to align work with personal meaning. This suggests that employees' autonomy plays a crucial role in the meaningfulness they derive from work.

The findings resonate with research on meaning-making, which suggests that individuals construct meaning through narratives (Hermans, 1998; Sommer & Baumeister, 1998; Harari, 2016). Participants often uncovered their own work meaning through storytelling, reinforcing the idea that meaningful work is closely tied to relational and contextual factors. Frankl's (1959) argument that meaning is found through others, rather than in isolation, is particularly relevant in this context.

Moreover, this study supports the notion that meaningfulness is not merely about the presence of meaning but about the significance attributed to it (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Steger et al., 2012). Entrepreneurs appear to experience higher levels of meaningfulness due to their ability to act in alignment with their values and goals. Employees, in contrast, may struggle to redesign or reframe their work

experiences due to structural limitations. This is reflected in their descriptions, which, unlike entrepreneurs, often carried a sense of resignation regarding their capacity to shape their work environments.

6.1 Research question 1: Which factors contribute to the meaningfulness of work?

Research on work meaning has largely overlooked entrepreneurs, despite its link to well-being. This study finds that entrepreneurs derive meaning primarily through relationships, beliefs, and contributions to others. As leaders, they shape organizational values, influencing employees' perceptions of meaningful work. Family also plays a role in shaping their motivations. A key but underexplored source of meaning is their perceived impact on customers and society. Entrepreneurs exhibit high job involvement and often view work as a calling, seeing it as an intrinsic pursuit rather than just a means to an end. These findings highlight the deeper significance entrepreneurs attribute to their work.

6.2 Research question 2: How is the meaning of work perceived by entrepreneurs?

Entrepreneurs and employees derive meaning from similar sources, such as relationships, beliefs, and work outcomes. However, key differences emerge in job involvement, work centrality, and perceptions of meaninglessness. Entrepreneurs view work as a lifestyle, struggle to separate it from personal life, and experience higher meaningfulness due to greater autonomy. Employees, in contrast, prioritize work-life balance, often disengage from work after hours, and express frustration over tasks they find meaningless. Entrepreneurs rarely mention meaninglessness, as they have more control over their work. Employees, however, often feel constrained by external factors, leading to resignation and lower motivation. Entrepreneurs tend to see their work as a calling, while employees frequently describe their careers as unintentional, lacking clear purpose or direction. These differences suggest that autonomy and purpose are crucial in shaping meaningful work experiences.

6.3 Research question 3: What are the differences between the way entrepreneurs and employees perceive the meaning of work?

Meaningfulness at work is shaped by various factors, differing between entrepreneurs and employees. Employees frequently cited feedback as essential, while entrepreneurs emphasized autonomy and creativity. These findings align with Bailey and Madden (2016), who identified recognition, accomplishment, and engagement as key drivers of meaningful work. Entrepreneurs' strong preference for autonomy supports research suggesting that it enhances well-being (Shir, Nikolaev, & Wincent, 2019) and fulfills basic psychological needs (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Additionally, meaningful work fosters creativity (Cohen-Meitar, Carmeli, & Waldman, 2009). While individual factors vary, autonomy, competence, and relatedness appear central to meaningfulness across work contexts.

6.4 Research question 4: Do entrepreneurs or founders of organizations have a higher chance of achieving higher meaningfulness based on their unique freedom in the work context?

Entrepreneurs have a greater opportunity to experience meaningful work due to their autonomy and ability to align their work environment with personal values (Shir, Nikolaev, & Wincent, 2019). Unlike employees, who often feel constrained by external structures and limited in their ability to redesign their work, entrepreneurs can shape their organizations to reflect what matters most to them (deCharms, 1981). Employees frequently retreat into the most meaningful aspects of their work when faced with misalignment, but this often leads to shrinking engagement and unrealized potential. Responsibility also plays a crucial role in meaningfulness, as entrepreneurs bear significant accountability for their organizations, stakeholders, and society (Hebert & Link, 1989). This heightened responsibility shifts focus from self-interest to a broader purpose, aligning with Frankl's view that meaning is found through contributing to something greater than oneself (Wong, 2014).

6.5 Limitations

The research sample was relatively small and lacked heterogeneity, limiting the generalizability of findings. A larger sample covering industry, experience, company size, and organizational role would provide deeper insights. Most employee participants held higher education or senior positions, leaving room to explore how meaning varies by education level and job position.

The broad nature of the study encompassed multiple aspects of meaningful work, given the scarcity of research on entrepreneurs. Future studies could focus on specific factors driving meaningfulness. Combining in-depth interviews with questionnaires would allow for both qualitative depth and quantitative correlation analysis.

Bias may have influenced responses, particularly among entrepreneurs, who might have favored entrepreneurship over employment. However, they also engaged in more self-reflection, adjusting initial responses. Employees exhibited generalizations aligned with societal beliefs. Additionally, interview format differences—some in person, others virtual—may have affected participants' openness, which is crucial given the deeply personal nature of the topic.

6.6 Conclusion

This study highlights the central role of work meaningfulness in individual well-being, particularly among entrepreneurs. Findings confirm that entrepreneurs experience higher meaningfulness due to their autonomy, ability to shape their work environment, and strong sense of responsibility. Their high involvement and calling orientation further enhance their work's significance. In contrast, employees derive meaning from external factors such as feedback and personal life domains, yet often struggle with meaninglessness due to limited autonomy and misalignment with organizational structures.

Employees frequently cited demotivation and disengagement when facing meaningless work, often retreating into select aspects of their job rather than reshaping it. This loss of human potential underscores the importance of fostering work environments that encourage meaning discovery. While meaningfulness cannot be externally imposed, open discussions about strengths, values, and contributions can help employees cultivate a deeper connection to their work.

EXTENDED SUMMARY/IZVLEČEK

Ta študija raziskuje povezavo med delom in smiselnostjo, pri čemer se osredotoča na podjetništvo kot možno pot do globljega doživljanja smisla pri delu. Na podlagi spoznanj iz organizacijskega vedenja, pozitivne in eksistencialne psihologije preučuje, kako podjetniki in zaposleni dojemajo pomen svojega dela ter kateri dejavniki prispevajo k občutku smiselnosti. Kvalitativna raziskava, ki temelji na poglobljenih intervjujih s podjetniki in zaposlenimi, razkriva, da so ključni dejavniki smiselnega dela avtonomija, kreativnost in občutek namena. Podjetniki pogosto poročajo o večji smiselnosti svojega dela v primerjavi z zaposlenimi, saj imajo večjo svobodo pri oblikovanju svojega delovnega okolja. Študija poudarja vlogo samotranscendence pri doživljanju smiselnosti ter nakazuje, da podjetništvo lahko ponuja edinstveno priložnost za posameznike, ki iščejo izpolnitev onkraj finančnega uspeha. Ugotovitve prispevajo k širšemu razumevanju smiselnega dela in imajo pomembne posledice za oblikovanje delovnih mest ter organizacijsko vedenje.

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