**Meaningful Work, the Meaning of Work, and Business Ethics**

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# Meaningful Work, the Meaning of Work, and Business Ethics

Panel Abstract

Meaningful work has received sustained but limited direct attention from business ethics scholars over the past three decades. In that time, the term has been more commonly used in practice, and there has been an increase in research on the meaning of work among organizational behavior scholars, particularly in the field of positive organizational scholarship. The purpose of this panel is to review the current state of research on meaningful work and the meaning of work in order to introduce the topic to a broader audience of business ethics scholars and to explore connections and research directions with key business ethics topics.

Panel Overview

Business ethics scholars and normative philosophers have asserted that meaningful work – that is, work that supports a worker's rational, creative, and moral capacities and preserves the worker's autonomy to enter, exit, and change the work, among other characteristics – is a moral right (Bowie 1998; Ciulla 2000; Schwartz 1982; Werhane et al., 2004). In this respect, the study of meaningful work is closely aligned with key business ethics topics dealing with human rights, organizational integrity, and corporate social responsibility. Critics have questioned whether it is realistic for all work to be meaningful and whether workers are willing to exchange meaningful work for material compensation and benefits (Maitland 1989; Nozick 1974).

It follows that this so-called "objective" element of meaningful work implies also a "subjective" element of meaningful work, in that work has different meanings – not all of them meaningful – to different workers. Business ethics scholars have also explored the subjective urge for "something more" out of work and life (Ciulla 2000) and how work can define who we are (Gini 2001) and what is enough (Nash and Stevenson 2004). The subjective element of meaningful work has received increased attention from organizational behavior theorists, and particularly the positive organizational scholarship community, exploring, among other topics, how workers relate to their work, how communities of workers co-create meaning, how organizational contexts influence experiences of meaning, and impacts that result from meaning-making, including, for example, prosocial behaviors that support corporate social responsibility and business ethics (Grant 2007; May Meaning Meeting 2010; Pratt and Ashforth 2003; Wrzesnieweski et al. 1997).

Despite this sustained attention within and outside of business ethics scholarship to meaningful work and the meaning of work, these topics are underrepresented in business ethics education (Michaelson 2009) and are arguably not seen by many business ethics scholars as core to the discipline. Meanwhile, more workers are interested in work that has meaning and is meaningful as a result of economic, social, and generational forces (Greene and Tejada 2001; Michaelson 2010; Wrzesniewski 2002). Therefore, the purpose of this panel is to review the current state of research on meaningful work and the meaning of work in order to introduce the topic to a broader audience of business ethics scholars and to explore connections and research directions with key business ethics topics.

The format of the panel will be the following:

- Panel introduction and overview (5 minutes): The chair will explain the motivation for the panel and introduce the panelists and session format.
- Panelist remarks (30 minutes, 10 minutes per panelist): Panelists will briefly describe their research and explain how it they see its connection to other work on meaningful work, the meaning of work, and business ethics.
- Moderated discussion among panelists and audience (20-25 minutes): The chair will set forth a few key questions for moderated discussion among the panelists and invite audience members to contribute to the discussion.

The panelists will include:
- Craig Dunn, Western Washington University: Dunn will review conceptions of meaningful work that may be most familiar to business ethics scholars. In particular, he will set out the distinction between so-called "objective" and "subjective" conceptions of meaningful work and their associated implications and moral obligations. That is, exploration into meaningful work has at time been 'categorized' along a number of dimensions of meaningful work. Meaningful work has alternatively been characterized as work which reflects core values, or contributes to the greater good, or permits autonomy, or fulfills one's 'calling,' or leaves a legacy, or provides a continuing challenge, or builds caring relationships, or continues a tradition, or exhibits pride in craftsmanship, or connects one with nature, or offers diverse experience, or is fairly compensated. From an organizational point of view, it has been suggested worker preferences with respect to these attributes of meaningful work vary, and the manager's job in part is to ensure the most important attributes of meaningful work are available to each individual worker. What is objectively demonstrable is the extent to which any individual job captures each attribute; what is subjectively distinct is the relative importance of each attribute to the individual worker.
- Michael Pratt, Boston College: Pratt will discuss meaningful work from an organizational perspective. He will begin by distinguishing work *meaning* from *meaningfulness* – noting that the latter emphasizes the purpose and significance of work. He will then discuss how organizations (and work occupations) play a role in fostering meaningfulness *in* and *at* work. Meaningfulness "in work" involves a sense of purposefulness and significance that is derived from doing specific types of work. This perspective is best captured by research on job design. Meaningfulness "at work" involves the purpose and significance derived from who you do your work with, and who you do your work for. Research in this area has included the role that creating communities at work, fostering certain types of organizational cultures, and the like, have on the experience of work meaningfulness. He will conclude by discussing some of the ethical issues involved with organizational attempts to foster meaningfulness in and at work.
- Adam Grant, The Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania: Grant will summarize his program of research on prosocial impact as a source of meaningfulness in work. Across field experiments with fundraisers, lifeguards, and medical professionals, his studies have shown that enabling employees to understand how their work benefits others motivates increases in task effort, persistence, performance, productivity, helping behavior, and safety compliance, and unpacked the mediating mechanisms and boundary conditions for these effects. He will discuss the implications of these findings for business ethics, with particular reference to the double-edged sword of prosocial impact: it has the potential to both discourage unethical behavior and provide a moral justification for this behavior. Gaining a deeper understanding of these paradoxical effects on ethical decision-making and behavior represents an important and exciting opportunity for business ethicists.

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