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How do human resource managers make sense of their work? A study of changing work meaningfulness using the critical incident technique

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ABSTRACT

Despite the meaningfulness of one's work being of crucial professional and personal importance, in HRD, it remains understudied. Employing narrative interviews, this research retrospectively explores the formation and transformation of the process of work's meaningfulness. A sensemaking approach and the critical incident technique were applied. The data, collected during interviews with 16 HR managers, consisted of 37 critical incidents. This research contributes to the understanding of the dilemma of meaningfulness' dual nature by showing how work meaningfulness can change through an exploration of the role of meaning mechanisms in the experience and dynamic formation of meaningful work. Furthermore, it augments our knowledge about how ambivalent, complex, and critical situations affect their work as meaningful. It presents possible scenarios and phases of this process. It also shows how a critical situation can lead to a re-evaluation of the sources of meaningfulness. It explores how the ambivalence and ambiguity inherent in HR managers' role affects the meaningfulness of their work. The practical implication of the findings emphasises HRD professionals' responsibility to monitor the extent to which employees experience their work to be meaningful and to intervene as needed, while the methodological implication is a further distinction between sensemaking and meaningfulness-making processes.

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Introduction

Meaningful work has garnered growing attention from researchers and practitioners. This concept is broadly defined as work that is personally significant and worthwhile (Pratt and Ashforth 2003), which correlates positively with many important individual and organisational outcomes, including increased engagement, organisational commitment, job satisfaction, and job performance (for reviews, see Allan et al. 2019; Bailey et al. 2019; Lysova et al. 2019). The meaningfulness of work is one of the key areas of HRD (Bailey et al. 2019), and some research has been conducted on meaningful work and motivation (Chalofsky 2003), employee engagement

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(Fairlie 2011; Han, Sung, and Suh 2021), and belonging (McClure and Brown 2008). Nonetheless, this topic remains a relatively understudied and poorly understood topic in the area of HRD (You et al. 2021). Furthermore, the processes by which work is made meaningful to individuals have not been addressed empirically (Bailey et al. 2019). This study therefore aims to examine these processes by building on Rosso, Dekas, and Wrzesniewski's (2010) framework of meaning mechanisms, which determines several pathways through which work becomes meaningful for an individual.

In recent years, the temporality of meaningful work has received considerable attention from researchers (Bailey and Madden 2017). Tommasi, Ceschi, and Sartori (2020) highlighted that different time-based lenses have been used traditionally while examining the notion of meaningful work. Bailey and Madden (2016) emphasised its episodic, changeable nature and its link to memorable events and specific experiences. Other researchers (Allan et al. 2019) have defined meaningful work as a subjective, permanent, and steady mindset of an individual. The concept of meaningful work, according to Tommasi, Ceschi, and Sartori (2020), has different conceptualisations as a permanent/steady mindset or as a changeable/episodic experience. Based on the results of this research, we argue that episodes of stability are followed by episodes of potential change, which might end up as another stable episode. The findings provide evidence that meaningfulness may change and that change is triggered by critical incidents; this is how meaningfulness of work unfolds over time.

Human resource managers were chosen as representatives of the profession. Scholarly research has extensively examined the contradictions and ambiguities encountered by human resource (HR) practitioners in managing employees and navigating the complex stakeholder relationships involved in employment issues (Keegan, Brandl, and Aust 2019). The contradictions and ambiguity arising from the conflicting demands inherent in the roles of HR practitioners include reconciling the people-centred and business-centred interests served by HR policies and practices (Legge 2005); managing operational and strategic activities (Marchington 2015); and justifying the organisation's authority while promoting employees' well-being and ethical treatment (Greenwood 2013; Watson 1986). Although some of these tensions may be resolved, others persist, resulting in recurring challenges and ambiguities for HR practitioners (Keegan, Brandl, and Aust 2019), affecting their professional identities and values (de Gama, McKenna, and Peticca-Harris 2012; Guest and Woodrow 2012; Pritchard 2010). How the ambivalence and ambiguity inherent in HR managers' role affect the meaningfulness of their work is a subject that has been little studied.

Therefore, this research seeks to answer how the meaningfulness of HR managers' work changes over time in critical situations. It explores the role of meaning mechanisms in the experience and dynamic formation of meaningful work by describing the main phases and scenarios of its formation. Consequently, it contributes to the literature on meaningful work by deepening our understanding of the dual nature of meaningfulness. Furthermore, by pointing out that a critical situation might lead to a re-evaluation of the sources of meaningfulness, this article deepens our understanding of how ambivalent, complex, and critical situations render work meaningful. Moreover, it contributes to the expanding literature on tensions among HR managers by elaborating on how the ambivalence and ambiguity inherent in their profession affect the meaning of their

work. The sensemaking perspective was applied (Louis 1980; Pratt and Ashforth 2003), and individual narratives were analysed. The researchers interviewed 16 HR managers were interviewed and identified 37 critical incidents. The role and position of HR as an organisational function is infused with tension (Keegan, Brandl, and Aust 2019), which is the main theoretical consideration behind the choice of sample.

Literature review

Work meaningfulness

There is no full consensus in the literature on the definition of meaningful work, so, to obtain a comprehensive picture, it is helpful to gain an overview of how different authors have discussed this concept. Meaningful work has been defined and operationalised in different ways, often overlapping with the concept of the meaning of work (Allan et al. 2019; Rosso, Dekas, and Wrzesniewski 2010). The use of the terminology work meaning indicates the cognitive process by which individuals interpret and ascribe meaning to their work (A. C. Wrzesniewski, Dutton, and Debebe 2003); it is descriptive, revealing the particular meaning frame (Martela and Pessi 2018). Meaningful work is evaluative: it refers to the subjective experience of the individual and their perception of the value of their work (Martela and Pessi 2018; Rosso, Dekas, and Wrzesniewski 2010).

Scientists and philosophers alike have long argued that pursuing purpose gives a sense of meaning to life (Frankl 1959). Research has suggested that work experiences that reinforce the sense that one's actions have purpose or bring one closer to one's desired future goals are likely to be particularly meaningful (Bunderson and Thompson 2009). The relationship between life purposes and spirituality was highlighted by Lips-Wiersma (2002), who found that individuals made inter- and intra-role career transitions when they found that they could no longer actualise their life purposes authentically. Early conceptualisations of meaningful work reflected individuals' perceptions that their work was worthwhile, important, or valuable (Hackman and Oldham 1976; Pratt and Ashforth 2003). Perceptions of the meaningfulness of work can arise from 'intrinsic qualities of the work itself, the goals, values, and beliefs that the work is thought to serve' (Pratt and Ashforth 2003, 311). At the same time, people experience a range of meaningful episodic experiences at work, which they integrate into a belief system that influences how they perceive the meaningfulness of their work. In other words, meaningful and meaningless experiences contribute to an overall belief system about whether one's work has value (Allan et al. 2019).

The variability and time horizon of meaningful work have been a recent concern for researchers, highlighting the concept's dual nature (Bailey and Madden 2017; Tommasi, Ceschi, and Sartori 2020). According to the traditional approach, the subjective meaningfulness of work is a relatively constant way of thinking, which can be evaluated as a steady mindset concerning its presence and absence (Cheney et al. 2008; Lips-Wiersma and Morris 2009; Tommasi, Ceschi, and Sartori 2020). The steady mindset 'refers to a pervasive sense of the value of one's work' (Tommasi, Ceschi, and Sartori 2020, 2) resulting from the relationship between the individual and the work or work environment (Rosso, Dekas, and Wrzesniewski 2010). Meaningful work, in this sense, lasts for a long time but can vary from person to person. In recent years, some researchers have

pointed to the episodic and changeable nature of meaningful work, which is linked to daily fluctuations within the individual and is a function of environmental, psychological, and work conditions (Bailey and Madden 2017; Bailey et al. 2019, Fletcher and Schofield 2021; Lysova, Fletcher, and El Baroudi 2023). This differs from the traditional approach to meaningful work. The concept of meaningful work seems to have a dual nature when viewed through different time-based lenses. This raises the questions of when, why, and how the relatively constant way of thinking will change, if it changes at all.

Work meaningfulness is characterised in the literature by a positive bias (Mitra and Buzzanell 2017), and research typically defines meaningfulness in terms of positive experiences (e.g. Vuori, San, and Kira 2012). However, a growing body of research has explored the phenomenon in a more nuanced way, focusing its investigation on the impact of ambivalent (Lysova, Fletcher, and El Baroudi 2023), unexpected, and even tense (Mitra and Buzzanell 2017) situations concerning whether individuals experience their work as meaningful. Ambivalent, complex situations trigger sensemaking and affect the way in which individuals make sense of their work (A. C. Wrzesniewski, Dutton, and Debebe 2003), whether it is a refugee crisis (Jiang 2021) or a factor that is constantly present in the working conditions themselves (Müller, Huber, and Messner 2019). The research by Lysova, Fletcher, and El Baroudi (2023) showed that complex, ambivalent situations are made meaningful by positive social relationships. In this research, individuals report moments of meaningfulness, in which emotionally complex, ambivalent workplace events were also made meaningful by the individuals through the environment, signalling that they were valued and conveying care and security to them. However, how ambivalent, complex situations influence the sources of meaningfulness at work remains to be addressed.

Sensemaking

We argue that examining individuals' meaningful and meaningless experiences from a sensemaking perspective reveals how individuals integrate these experiences into their relatively enduring mindset regarding the meaningfulness of their work. The sensemaking approach is particularly appropriate for describing the individual (or even social) construction of the process: that is, how the individual's (or community's) understanding is formed, constructed, and changed. Sensemaking is typically triggered by critical incidents, interruption, uncertainty, or ambiguity, which can prompt a search for meaning (Weick 1995). Sensemaking is more than just an individual's interpretation of the world around them since it involves construing the world by recognising and reacting to factors that are extraordinary and disruptive. Enactment is one of the aspects that differentiates sensemaking from interpretation (Maitlis and Christianson 2014; Schabram and Maitlis 2017).

Sensemaking has already been explored, with Müller, Huber, and Messner (2019) and Jiang (2021) examining the meaningfulness of work from the perspective of sensemaking. Vuori, San, and Kira (2012) adapted the sensemaking perspective, designed and analysed the meaningfulness-making process, and identified three main tactics for increasing the proportion of positive cues. In contrast, Pratt and Ashforth (2003) pointed out an essential difference that links and distinguishes sensemaking and meaningfulness making. According to Pratt and Ashforth's (2003) approach, meaningfulness making is a type

of sensemaking in which the individual is not ‘just’ interpreting the stimulus but also seeking an answer to the ‘broader existential question’ of ‘Why am I there?’ (311). We view meaningfulness making as a meaningfulness-focused sensemaking process, which is rooted in an individual’s consideration of whether that particular aspect of work is worth undertaking. Whether the individual finds the work worthwhile is closely related to the extent to which they can experience the sources of meaningfulness through the mechanisms of meaning.

Thus, Rosso, Dekas, and Wrzesniewski’s 2010 bi-dimensional model provided the theoretical foundation for exploring the role of meaning mechanisms in the experience and dynamic formation of meaningful work. They identified four main dimensions and several different pathways through which it becomes possible to experience meaningfulness at work, highlighting the process of experiencing meaningfulness: individuation (self-efficacy: control/autonomy, self-efficacy: competence, self-esteem); contribution (self-efficacy: perceived impact, purpose: significance, transcendence: interconnection, transcendence: self-abnegation); self-connection (authenticity: self-concordance, authenticity: identity affirmation, authenticity: personal engagement), and unification (purpose: value systems, belonging: social identification, belonging: social identification). While building on the model of Lips-Wiersma and Morris (2009), Rosso, Dekas, and Wrzesniewski’s model adopted the concept of mechanisms from Stinchcombe (1991), thus emphasising the construction of meaningfulness. Although the model has been influential, so far little empirical research has been built on it (c.f. Chaudhary 2022; van Dierendonck and Sousa 2016). In addition to setting up the framework, Rosso’s, Dekas, and Wrzesniewski (2010) drew attention to the need for a balance between these dimensions but did not provide a pattern showing how the different mechanisms evolve in relation to each other. The present research therefore emphasises the dynamic evolution of mechanisms relative to one another.

We argue that, to capture the meaningfulness-making process, it is worth collecting situations in which individuals are seeking answers to the existential question of why it is worth undertaking a particular job. These can be captured in critical incidents, which, even after a long time, have a major impact on an individual’s relationship to work. The research’s purpose is to explore the different characteristics of the change of work meaningfulness in critical incidents. In line with our chosen interpretive tradition, an initial research question was formulated: How did HR managers’ meaningfulness of work change in critical situations? This research question indicated the critical incident technique (Flanagan 1954), which is defined as critical, memorable (pleasant or unpleasant) events’ effect on sensemaking at work and an individual’s reactions to such events (Bott and Tourish 2016). In this conceptual framework, a specific instance of surprise inculcates the process of a change of meaningfulness. Webster and Mertova (2007, 73) referred to critical events as those that individuals are able to recall after a long time and that contribute to a new understanding or worldview.

Methodology

The aim of discovering changes of meaningfulness necessitated an explorative study, with a subjective epistemology. The choice of this interpretive paradigm is not only the logical consequence of the unstructured nature of the research problem but is also in line with

the sensemaking perspective (Weick 1995) and the refinement that Flanagan's critical incident technique has offered to the interpretive paradigm (Butterfield et al. 2005; Chell 1998, 2004). Following the principles of interpretive analysis, the co-creation of research findings between the researchers and the research participants was granted, meaning that the interviewer followed the narrative line of the interviewees, employing open questions that encouraged the interviewees to tell their own stories and offer their own interpretations. Additionally, the interviewer paid attention to their own understanding and explanation of the situations described via critical incidents. Furthermore, all the interview transcripts were sent back to the interviewees so that they had a chance to revisit what they had said and amend the narratives whenever they found it necessary. It is important to note that no fundamental changes in narratives were requested by the interviewees. Finally, the interviewees were invited to comment on the first-order coding, when the organisation of the empirical material started, and they could add and clarify certain details of their interpretations as necessary. While the interviewees' intervention in the structuring and analysis of the data was minimal, they stated that the interviewer had understood their situations and narratives correctly, reinforcing the assertion that the critical incidents identified were significant and the data presentation was in line with their perceptions of particular situations. Consequently, the researchers focused on the participants' perspectives and let meanings emerge from the data, while their theoretical lenses and individual interpretations contributed to the insights of the research. Theoretical saturation was declared not merely when repeating cases occurred but also when the empirical material was rich enough to provide a complex picture and a range of evidence that resonated with the existing literature (Anderson 2017) and when novelties emerged beyond the current academic findings. The researchers also consciously included cases in which 'no changes' in meaningfulness occurred as the research participants listed them as events that greatly affected their relationship with work. These could be defined as 'negative cases' in our research context (Anderson 2017).

Sampling and data collection

Following purposive sampling, 16 HR managers from 16 different organisations were interviewed. Most of the interviewees were 25–57 years old, seven were men, and nine were women. The main characteristics of the interviewees are shown in Table 1. Following the traditions of qualitative research, the aim was to obtain samples that are intentionally heterogeneous in terms of age, gender, and types of interviewees and their respective organisations in terms of size, whether they are international or domestic, and the size of their respective HR departments (Robinson 2014). When using CIT, the sample size is based on the number of incidents, not the number of participants (Butterfield et al. 2005; Sharoff 2008). Ultimately, 37 critical incidents were identified and analysed, as in Bott and Tourish's 2016 study. The sample size was not determined in advance. Rather, theoretical saturation and the sample size of comparable papers were our guiding principles.

Face-to-face, semi-structured, and in-depth interviews were conducted by the first author in Hungarian, with each interview lasting between 60 and 140 mins. Trust was built on familiarity of situations; as the interviewer had worked in similar positions in the past but had left business and joined academia, it was possible to keep a certain critical

Table 1. Sample composition.

Interviewees ¹	Gender	Company size	Company ownership	Age	Mgmt level	No. of employees supervised
Balázs	Male	Large	International	40–50	Primary	20+
Bence	Male	Large	Hungarian	Under 32	Secondary	5–10
Csaba	Male	Small, medium	International	32–40	Primary	1–5
Csilla	Female	Large	Hungarian	Over 50	Primary	10–20
Hajnal	Female	Large	International	40–50	Primary	5–10
Hanna	Female	Small, medium	International	32–40	Primary	1–5
Janka	Female	Large	Hungarian	40–50	Primary	10–20
Léna	Female	Small, medium	Hungarian	32–40	Primary	1–5
Melinda	Female	Large	Hungarian	Over 50	Secondary	20+
Mihály	Male	Large	International	Over 50	Primary	5–10
Norbert	Male	Small, medium	International	40–50	Primary	1–5
Rita	Female	Small, medium	Hungarian	32–40	Primary	1–5
Szilvia	Female	Large	International	40–50	Primary	1–5
Tekla	Female	Large	International	Under 32	Secondary	5–10
Vajk	Male	Large	Hungarian	Over 50	Secondary	20+
Viktor	Male	Large	International	40–50	Primary	10–20

distance from the situations described. While the researchers are familiar with the HR context, they were not involved (even indirectly) with any of the interviewees' professional activity, strictly following the necessary ethical guidelines. All the interviews were audio-recorded with permission from the participants and were transcribed verbatim. Each interview consisted primarily of two major focal points: first, it explored the meaning and meaningfulness of work, as defined by the individual, and, second, it collected surprising and critical events or cases, which in some way significantly affected the meaning and meaningfulness of work either positively or negatively, as defined by the individual. Member-checking procedures (Anderson 2017) were built into the research design, and the researcher agreed to send the research participants the full research report once it had been completed. Furthermore, our research results have been presented at several internal and international academic research events.

Data analysis

Inductive top-down theorising (Shepherd and Sutcliffe 2011) was applied. After developing a comprehensive understanding of the literature, not only were the empirical data approached with the existing theoretical, predefined themes but also emerging codes were identified. The critical incident technique is especially suitable for identifying emerging themes and is in line with the interpretive epistemological tradition. Descriptive codes were identified based on thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006; King, Horrocks, and Brooks 2018). The interview corpus was analysed in Hungarian, and only the necessary parts were translated from Hungarian into English (category names and highlighted interview quotations) by a professional translator. A proofreader, who is a native speaker of English, polished the translations, and all the amendments were

double checked with the help of another professional English – Hungarian translator. The interview texts were categorised, and their connections were analysed using Atlas.ti software. The final code structure is presented in [Table 2](#).

Interpretive codes were then performed iteratively (Srivastava and Hopwood 2009). The content focus gradually progressed during the data collection as more concepts, namely meaning mechanisms, expectations, beliefs, and values, were incorporated. The cyclical process of data collection and analysis lasted until the point of theoretical saturation (Polit and Beck 2010). During the data analysis, the constant comparison method (Dye et al. 2000) was used (among others). Particular emphasis was placed on especially striking cases that, for some reason, did not fit into a group during the analysis or were impossible to group according to specific criteria. Academics and practitioners in the field were asked to give feedback about the analysis several times to ensure trustworthiness (Shah and Corley 2006).

Findings

Work meaningfulness change scenarios

Reflecting retrospectively on critical situations made it possible to explore the temporal formation of meaningfulness and to identify and distinguish its main stages. The main scenarios and stages in the evolution of work meaningfulness are presented below. [Figure 1](#) summarises the stages of various scenarios.

Table 2. Data structure.

DESCRIPTIVE CODING	INTERPRETIVE CODING	OVERARCHING THEMES
change of beliefs about managers change of beliefs about co-workers change of beliefs about the organization	temporary change	meaningfulness change scenarios
change of beliefs about own role change of beliefs about the profession change of beliefs about the work life domain change of beliefs about self at work value changes orientation change (more/less significance)	lasting/permanent change	
mechanism change: experiencing more mechanism change: experiencing less	direction of the change	
mechanism change: experiencing more/less mechanism priority change fundamental meaning mechanism orientation change: more/less significance orientation priority change values changes: more significance, change value ranking	magnitude of change	magnitude of change
no change in mechanisms no change in beliefs no change in values no change in orientations	no change	no change

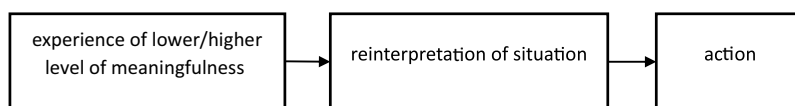


Figure 1. Work meaningfulness change process.

Scenario A: three stages: lower level of meaningfulness, reinterpretation, and action

These cases incorporated lasting changes: the different reinterpretations and the individual's actions led to an easing of tension within the individual. Before the empirical research was undertaken, it was assumed that the direction of change would be negative in the case of unpleasant surprises – that is, individuals would experience a lower level of meaningfulness. However, in the case of some unpleasant surprises, the change of meaningfulness entailed three stages. In the first stage, the interviewee perceived a lower level of meaningfulness, a lower level of significance (as a mechanism), or no sense in their work. In the second stage, the individual, after a period of a lower level of meaningfulness, managed to increase the meaningfulness of their work by reinterpreting their situation and implementing (the third stage) a change (i.e. relationship, task, position, or job change). Lasting changes only occurred if the individual reinterpreted their work identities and values along with their beliefs connected to work. Each scenario is accompanied by an illustrative case, the quotations for which are given in [Table 3](#).

Illustrative case (Lena case #2): In the course of the downsizing process, her company terminated an outplacement program, and she could no longer provide help. Fundamental meaning mechanism: help and services (perceived impact). Consequence: help and services (perceived impact) increased in significance.

Scenario B: three stages: lower level of meaningfulness, reinterpretation, cognitive dissonance remains afterwards, and eventual action

In the case of temporary changes, to varying degrees, individuals could not experience meaning mechanisms, which would have imbued their work with a sense of meaning and significance. This led to a drop in the significance that they attributed to their work and, indeed, in their self-esteem. The common feature of temporary changes is that the individuals' beliefs regarding their tasks and work relationships changed – that is, beliefs about the organisation and their colleagues – while their values and beliefs about themselves (work identity) remained intact. Another feature common to all temporary cases is that the narratives recounted by the individuals were characterised by cognitive dissonance. Compared with Scenario A, in the case of temporary changes, they perceived a lower level of significance (as a mechanism), but the second phase of meaning change did not bring about profound changes.

Table 3. Illustrative quotes for meaningfulness change scenarios and change magnitudes.

Meaningfulness change scenarios	Characteristics	Sample quotes
A: Three stages: decrease in meaningfulness, reinterpretation, and action	Surprises: unpleasant	'I did not really want to leave, but by then, my scope of tasks finally tipped over into such a direction that I would have had to undertake ultimately nonsense measures, that then I said, okay, let us try this' [...] 'so I said as an HR specialist, I will not sniff around in people's files to find their soft spots if I will, then that will be to develop them, to help them move forward' [...] 'I started to do those, to build them up. And I encountered, you know, this incredible enthusiasm' (Lena case #2)
	Change lasting, stable	
	Change of beliefs about work identity, own role or own profession, work life domain	
	Value change	'I was still trying ... I was still trying to change things and then such a, when I got to the moment when, like, oh, that's something I can't change, that I, well, need to do something' [...] 'So this was the negative thing that reassured me that what I need is to be able to make decisions and I do assume responsibility for those decisions and I really try to be a strategic partner' (Bence case #1)
	Orientation change (re-evaluation of significance)	
	Change of beliefs about tasks, position, work relationships, or organisation	
	Number of cases: 12	'and that was, you know, too much, that is, I felt I don't want this much, I don't need this, that is, I don't want to be a successful businesswoman' [...] 'that felt so bad, you have to prove it again and again, like, but I can do it and rest assured, you can leave it to me' [...] 'so yes, I realised it, that I won't learn this profession (HR) here' [...] 'When I saw that I can indeed be authentic, that is, managers accept what I say, that I see it right, that is, that my insights on one or the other assessment are valuable' (Lena case #1)
	Magnitude 1: mechanism gained in significance	
	Magnitude 2: mechanism and value ranking changed	
	Magnitude 3: change in the order of fundamental meaning mechanisms	'There are, there were points in my life, and this was one such point, when I said that my work and that I could experience success, that was not at all a decisive factor, it was already pure rationality that made me, that makes me take on certain tasks. I'm not willing to take on unrealistic requirements, while in the past, I was quite willing to, but it has changed quite a lot how I relate to that'. [...] 'I could do it, and okay, but I'm more important than that, this, and that, and the family, but if I could start over again, I'm sure this is what I would change, that is, I wouldn't take on so much. It was too much and life's too short for that'. (Melinda case #3)

(Continued)

Table 3. (Continued).

Meaningfulness change scenarios	Characteristics	Sample quotes
B: Three stages: decrease in meaningfulness, reinterpretation cognitive dissonance remains afterwards, and eventual action	Surprises: unpleasant Change temporary, unstable Change of beliefs about tasks, position, work relationships, or organisation Number of cases: 6	'Well, sure, the enthusiasm definitely faded away after a while. I mean, of course, well, if, yes. Sure it faded away, it was a different period obviously' [...] 'you are involved in everything [in the past], that you knew about everything, and that you are close to where the real things happen, well, let me put it this way, I could not really say I feel the same way now (silence)' [...] 'So, but this really is still in the process of taking shape' (Hajnal case #1)
C: Three stages: increase in meaningfulness, reinterpretation, and eventual action	Surprises: pleasant Change lasting, stable Change of beliefs about work identity, own role or own profession, work life domain Value change Orientation change (re-evaluation of significance) Change of beliefs about tasks, position, work relationships, or organisation Number of cases: 15 Magnitude 1: mechanism gained in significance	'I received a standard evaluation (from HR director), and he (his boss) [...] confronted the HR director [...] And this, as I said, this trust that they placed in me ever since 200X, I believe, ever since I was hired to the organisation, these reinforcements have always been absolutely positive' [...] 'And that reassured me that the work I do, it does have a yield, it does give palpable results'. (Bence case #2)
Work meaningfulness no change scenario	Surprises: unpleasant Change: no change Number of cases: 1	'But these stories occur on a say, well, say on a daily basis, obviously not one, not two of them, so this always makes me wonder whether I'm actually right about my principles, and whether you really need to always want to achieve something' [...] 'always enter these unpleasant situations. At the end of the day, the answer is always yes, yet, you know, these keep spoiling your mood all the time' (Balazs case #2)
	Surprises: pleasant Change: no change Number of cases: 3	I was participating in a course, and there was this head-hunter guy there, and he somehow really spotted me, and then a lot of offers, go to work here, go to work for them, which I was totally surprised about, I didn't think I was all that very talented, that is, okay, I know that I'm a hard worker and that I always do whatever task I'm assigned" (Melinda case #4)

Illustrative case (Hajnal case #1): She did not perceive her work to be important, exciting, and inspiring anymore. This was due to the relatively long duration of her employment, a lack of novelty, and a period of having an excessive workload. Fundamental meaning mechanism: personal engagement. Consequence: she changed job, but it was not inspiring and exciting enough.

Scenario C: three stages: a higher level of meaningfulness, reinterpretation, and eventual action

Before the empirical research was undertaken, it was assumed that, in the case of pleasant surprises, the direction of change in an individual's meaningfulness of work would be positive – they would experience a higher level of significance (as a mechanism). As expected, in the case of positive experiences, it transpired that, in most cases, the direction of the change in meaningfulness was indeed positive: individuals experienced a higher level of significance (as a mechanism). Individuals viewed pleasant surprises as reinforcing them. From a detailed analysis of the cases, it became clear that there was always a change in individuals' beliefs, sets of values, and work identity, and they became more committed to their roles, profession, and organisation.

Illustrative case (Bence case #2): He received an unexpectedly positive evaluation, which meant that he interpreted his work as being worthwhile or significant and, therefore, valuable. Fundamental meaning mechanism: significance. Consequence: the work he does has results (significance) that increased in significance.

Resolution of scenarios a and C according to the different magnitudes of change

Scenarios A and C, which represent persistent changes, are further differentiated regarding the magnitude of change identified. It was observed that each of the research participants had a preferred way of construing their work as meaningful. Each of these could be matched to a meaning mechanism. Through the experience of a mechanism that is subjectively important to them, they felt that their work was meaningful in the sense that they were working towards the realisation of important purposes and values. Not all of them explicitly emphasised what they were looking for or trying to achieve in their work. They only hinted at it or it could be identified as a recurring implicit pattern in their narrative.

A surprising situation could strengthen an individual's fundamental meaning mechanism or push them to modify it. In this regard, three different orders of magnitude of change could be distinguished. Magnitude 1 contains cases in which the individual's mechanism gained significance. Magnitude 2 consists of cases in which an individual's value ranking also changed: one mechanism gained priority over another. Magnitude 3 encompasses cases in which the most remarkable change was identified and the individual altered their most important mechanism, besides the change of the value ranking.

The first group of cases (Magnitude 1) includes narratives in which the individual's orientation and mechanism gained significance. Seven pleasant surprises were found in which the individual's fundamental mechanism was strengthened. Four unpleasant surprises were identified, in which the individual in the critical situation did not experience their most important meaning mechanism. These situations helped them to clarify their work's meaningfulness and their own fundamental professional purpose. Illustrative case (Bence case #1): The company's decision-making practice changed, as a result of which second-level management was excluded from decision making.

Fundamental meaning mechanism: significance. Consequence: making decisions and having responsibility for these decisions (significance) increased in importance.

The second group of cases (Magnitude 2) contains narratives in which the individual's value ranking changed, but the change did not affect their fundamental meaning mechanism: one mechanism gained priority over another. Two cases were found in which it was not the most important mechanism of the individual that was affected by the change but their identity and value ranking.

Illustrative case (Lena case #1): In her management job, she lost control and she did not feel authentic. Fundamental meaning mechanism: helping and serving others (perceived impact). Consequence: she re-evaluated what was important to her and found that managerial work and success with her enterprise were not important anymore (competence) but authenticity and control over her work were. (identity affirmation, control/autonomy)

Regarding Magnitude 3, two examples were found in which the individuals experienced such far-reaching changes in their lives that the order of their fundamental meaning mechanisms changed.

Illustrative case (Melinda case #3): In an unfamiliar and difficult organizational environment, she lost control and she developed health issues because of stress; she felt exploited and deceived. Fundamental meaning mechanism: competence. Consequence: the fundamental meaning mechanism changed from coping with difficult tasks (competence) to taking on realistic requirements. (control/autonomy)

Work meaningfulness no change scenario

There were four cases in which no change could be identified, although these participants thought certain incidents had had a major impact on their relationship with their work. In the case of unpleasant surprises, if the surprise was not beyond belief, they could reduce their cognitive dissonance without needing to change. This provides an important counterexample because similar situations happen often in everyday life, while reinterpretation is rare, unique, and memorable.

Illustrative case (Balázs case #2): This case presents a less significant conflict, in which Balázs questions both his goals and his principles. Fundamental meaning mechanism: significance. Consequence: he reduced his cognitive dissonance without change.

However, there was no change in pleasant surprises, for which the degree of surprise was hard for individuals to accept and individuals ignored positive reinforcement (three cases).

Illustrative case (Melinda case #4): For a time, she kept receiving offers from a headhunter and he recognized her as an expert manager. Fundamental meaning mechanism: competence. Consequence: she did not take this recognition into account.

Discussion

Our study addresses Bailey et al.'s (2019) call to examine the processes by which work is made meaningful. Several studies have argued that the meaningfulness of work may

change (Rosso, Dekas, and Wrzesniewski 2010; A. Wrzesniewski and Dutton 2001) and is 'dynamic and fluid' (A. C. Wrzesniewski, Dutton, and Debebe 2003, 97). The sensemaking perspective is particularly appropriate for describing the individual construction of a process, with several studies examining the meaningfulness of work and incorporating this into this perspective (Jiang 2021; Müller, Huber, and Messner 2019; Vuori, San, and Kira 2012). However, the process of meaningfulness formation remains an under-researched area. This study revealed that memorable episodes in critical events (Chell 2004), which were occasions when individuals perceived their work most clearly as meaningful or meaningless, may contribute to the formation or complete transformation of meaningful work. In all cases, a common turning point emerges when individuals question whether their work is really worthwhile. Cases in which individuals re-evaluate what is important to them in their work bring about lasting change in the work meaningfulness, whereas others, in which they do not re-evaluate what is important to them in their work, lead to a temporary, more unstable situation. In such situations, individuals experience a lower level of meaningfulness and their narrative is characterised by cognitive dissonance.

This research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the dilemma concerning the dual nature of constructing meaning in the workplace, namely the episodic and permanent natures of meaningfulness (Bailey and Madden 2016; Bailey et al. 2019; Lysova, Fletcher, and El Baroudi 2023; Tommasi, Ceschi, and Sartori 2020) by linking and pointing out how work meaningfulness can change in such a way that explores the role of meaning mechanisms in the experience and dynamic formation of meaningful work. These findings show that there can be memorable, very positive or very negative, situations that can bring about lasting changes in the meaningfulness of an individual's work. Thus, our research responds the above-mentioned stability versus change dilemma.

The current study reveals that there is a ranking, a prioritisation, of the mechanisms that make work meaningful for individuals. In critical incidents, individuals are typically unwilling to relinquish their primary mechanism. This primary mechanism can be related to individuals' life purpose, as highlighted by Lips-Wiersma (2002), who pointed out that individuals make inter- and intra-role career transitions when they find that they cannot enact their life purposes authentically, which is consistent with our research findings. However, according to the results of this study, even the primary mechanism may be altered in the face of a major change. The meaning mechanism model has until now emphasised the importance of balance between the dimensions (Rosso, Dekas, and Wrzesniewski 2010), which was confirmed by research that developed a similar model (Lips-Wiersma and Morris 2009; Lips-Wiersma 2002). Therefore, an individual's prioritisation of different mechanisms can be identified as a new feature of the model that may have implications for research on career decisions.

Although the literature on meaningfulness is characterised by a positive bias (Mitra and Buzzanell 2017), there is a growing body of research examining meaningfulness in ambivalent or tense situations (Bunderson and Thompson 2009; Mitra and Buzzanell 2017). The present research contributes to a better understanding of how ambivalent, complex, and critical situations affect people's view of their work as meaningful by contributing to the growing field of sensemaking research on work meaningfulness (Jiang 2021; Lysova, Fletcher, and El Baroudi 2023; Vuori, San, and Kira 2012;

A. C. Wrzesniewski, Dutton, and Debebe 2003). By presenting possible scenarios and phases of this process, it points out that a critical situation can lead to a re-evaluation of the sources of meaningfulness. This study is also a response to Bailey et al.'s (2019) statement that few studies have applied sensemaking and interpretivist approaches to studying tense, negative, or ambivalent situations and how these can lead to meaningful, positive experiences through individuals' reappraisal of what is important to them. In this research, HR managers experienced various highly influential (positive and negative) situations. In many cases, they redefined their position and work identity and then pursued action to create the conditions in which they could experience their work as meaningful. These complex situations contributed to their re-evaluation of their relationship with work and their clearer understanding of what is significant to them. However, complex, ambivalent situations in which the interviewees could not experience their work as meaningful triggered the active process of reinterpretation, action, and change.

This paper contributes to a growing literature focusing on the tensions that affect the role of HR managers and professionals (Keegan, Brandl, and Aust 2019) by pointing out how contradiction and ambiguity experienced at work shape the meaningfulness of HR leaders' work. It indicates the need for an approach that makes these manageable for HR managers, such as the ethical approach that is gaining ground in the literature and the link between HR and sustainability (de Gama, McKenna, and Peticca-Harris 2012; Keegan, Brandl, and Aust 2019). The article by Lysova, Fletcher, and El Baroudi (2023) has drawn our attention to the fact that complex and ambivalent situations can be meaningful if individuals perceive themselves as worthy, based on the cues from their work environment, and the work environment conveys a sense of care and security. Additionally, the present research may suggest that, in cases identified as critical for HR managers, they lacked the support of a group of colleagues or stakeholders. When HR managers face a critical, ambiguous event, their need for supportive relationships in the workplace grows. Supportive relationships can create a holding environment (Kahn 2001), which can also stem from mentoring or coaching relationships in the workplace. Murrell, Blake-Beard, and Porter (2021) investigated the practice of mentoring relationships in supporting and developing leaders, but it has not yet been investigated in the field of HR leaders. This raises a new research question: Is the lack of support from stakeholders related to the ambivalence and contradiction that persistently affect the meaningfulness of HR managers' work?

The methodological contribution of this article is to point out the difference between sensemaking and meaningfulness-making processes. In the sensemaking process (Louis 1980; Pratt and Ashforth 2003), an individual incorporates a different stimulus from their expectations into their cognitive framework. As Pratt and Ashforth (2003) indicated, in the meaningfulness-making process, individuals consider the unexpected event in existential terms and how it contributes to the fundamental question of 'whether it is worthwhile for them to do this particular job' (311). This research points out that 'whether an individual finds the work worth doing' is closely related to the extent to which they can experience the sources of meaningfulness through the mechanisms of meaning. When individuals ask themselves this existential question, they reach a point at which they might re-evaluate the significance of their work, and this process might lead to a change in their work meaningfulness. If they do not re-evaluate the significance of their work, a kind of quantitative change in meaningfulness occurs because they experience it to a greater or lesser degree. If

they do reassess the significance of their work, a lasting and qualitative change occurs, which in some cases may be transformative. In this way, our paper contributes to deepening the understanding of the meaningfulness-making process.

Implications for practice

This research highlights that the process of change is triggered when the experience of meaningfulness is hindered. On the one hand, individuals reinterpret different aspects of their work; on the other, they reconsider their own value system. If they cannot change within the boundaries of their job, they change job, organisation, or even profession. Thus, a critical situation can lead to the loss of valuable colleagues. Consequently, HRD professionals – particularly in times of crisis – are advised to monitor continuously the extent to which their employees perceive their work as meaningful, especially regarding the mechanisms that are significant to them. If they perceive a barrier to the experience of meaningfulness, it is worth supporting others to overcome it. This draws attention to the responsibility of HRD professionals not only to monitor the extent to which employees perceive their work as meaningful but also to intervene when necessary. Recent research (Fletcher and Schofield 2021) has shown that interventions to improve the meaningfulness of work significantly increase the levels of meaningfulness, employee engagement, and personal initiative.

Limitations

The main limitation of this research is the relatively low number of interviews (16), although the saturation of data and number of critical incidents are in line with those in previous studies (Polit and Beck 2010). At the same time, the retrospective approach to critical incidents is necessarily less detailed and precise than any real time data collection or diary method. Acknowledging this shortcoming of retrospective narrative empirical material, it is also important to highlight that this type of data collection is advantageous when the significance of events is equally important (Chell 2004). Consequently, critical incidents collected by this technique are considered relevant for interviews when medium- and short-term effects on work meaningfulness are being investigated.

Conclusion

During this analysis, individual narratives were examined using the sensemaking perspective. The researchers interviewed 16 HR managers and identified 37 important episodes. This study expands the existing literature in four different ways. First, it reveals that individual meaningfulness is characterised by episodes of stability and change, which follow each other, and that change is triggered by critical incidents; it also shows how individuals integrate specific and episodic work experiences into their enduring meaningfulness mindset. Second, by emphasising that a critical incident may cause a re-evaluation of the sources of meaningfulness, it leads to a deeper understanding of how ambivalent, complex, and critical situations affect whether people construe their work as meaningful. Third, it advances the growing body of literature on HR managers' tensions by discussing how the ambiguity inherent in their profession affects the meaningfulness of their work. Fourth, this study indicates that whether an individual feels their work to

be meaningful is closely tied to the extent to which they may experience the sources of meaning through certain mechanisms of meaning, leading to a better understanding of the meaningfulness-making process.

Note

1. In an effort to protect the interviewees, their data are presented by category and not by showing the precise information obtained. Interviewees' names have been changed. Hajnal and Melinda, at the time of the interviews, were not working as HR managers; therefore, the table above indicates their last HR managerial position.

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Data availability statement

The data supporting this study's findings are available on request from the corresponding author. The dataset is not publicly available due to the fact that it contains information that could compromise the privacy of the research participants.

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