

They who Have a “Why” to Live for: Purpose Facilitates Positive Employment Experience

Guangrong Dai¹, E. Susanne Blazek², Signe M. Spencer³

¹Senior Director, Korn Ferry Institute, USA, guangrong.dai@kornferry.com

²Director of Behavioral Research at Lirio, s.b.gabrielsen@gmail.com

³Client Research Partner, Korn Ferry Institute, USA, signe.spencer@kornferry.com

ABSTRACT: How people find meaning is fundamental to how they approach and experience their work and their personal lives. Purpose is an important construct implied, but often not explicitly discussed, in research on employee experience at work. We conducted a two-phase of research to advance the scientific understanding of individual purpose and the impact of intensity of purpose and types of purpose on work-related outcomes. We developed and validated a purposefulness survey and taxonomies of purpose and values in two samples totaling 1,212 adults from a wide range of educational and employment backgrounds. Popular writing suggests that millennials have the strongest sense of purpose, but this conviction was not validated in this research. Future research will need to elucidate the difference between presence of purpose and searching for purpose, the latter perhaps being stronger for younger than older generations. In our samples, purposefulness predicts work engagement, organizational commitment, perceived fit, planned tenure, and willingness to recommend one’s organization. All purposes do not work equally. Self-transcendent purposes correlate more strongly with purposefulness than do self-focused purposes. Similar pattern has been observed on values. Prosocial values (e.g., Altruism, Community) correlate more strongly with purposefulness than do self-oriented values (e.g., Pleasant Experiences, Open-mindedness). Employee well-being and engagement are important elements of employment experience. If purpose has a significant impact on employment experience, can purpose be manipulated to produce such a positive outcome? For whom is purpose intervention most effective? The current research has considerable practical implications.

KEYWORDS: purpose, mission, values, work engagement, well-being, employment experience

Introduction

Today, purpose has been touted as the bedrock of successful organizational transformation and value creation required for firms to thrive in the complex and disruptive business conditions. Along with increased scrutiny from customers, there is a growing recognition that young generations want to work for purpose over paychecks (Cook-Deegan & Bronk 2018). In addition, investors are increasingly using measures on social responsibility to guide their investment decisions. In an open letter to CEOs, Larry Fink, chairman and CEO of BlackRock, one of the world’s largest global asset management firms, stated that “Society is demanding that companies, both public and private, serve a social purpose” (Winston 2018). BlackRock sent a message that companies need to contribute to the greater good if they want to receive its investment and support.

Organizational purpose is defined as an objective beyond profit maximation (Henderson & Van den Steen 2015). It articulates the reason for the existence of a business. A purpose higher than financial gain reflects something more aspirational. It explains how the people involved with an organization are making a difference, gives them a sense of meaning, and draws their support. In a global survey of top executives, nearly all companies (90%) now recognize the importance of having a purpose that inspires and provides a call to action for the organization and provides benefit to society (Keller & Webb 2017).

To date, the scholarly exploration of purpose is built on the common good assumptions (Hollensbe, Wookey, Hickey, George, & Nichols 2014). Purpose is largely viewed as a collective concept that reflects the common, or shared identity among organizational members. Comparatively less attention has been paid to individuals in an organization. But an organization is comprised of the individual members in it and each individual has their own motives, their own curiosities, and their own hopes. The traditional view that companies should achieve consistency and unity by reducing deviations of individuals from the norms is antiquated. To the contrary, allowing authentic self-expression and employee proactivity has become critical to organizational success in the disruptive business environment (Cable, Gino, & Staats 2013). Our research intends to fill the gap in the purpose literature by focusing on personal purpose. We will examine how people enact their personal purpose at work and how the sense of purpose affects individual well-being and employment experience.

The Relationship between Meaning and Purpose

Originating in the domain of humanistic psychology, meaning in life address existential questions such as “who I am” and “what I am here for” (Crumbaugh 1968). Human beings have a deep-seated quest for existential meaning. People are motivated by the desire to understand the environment in which they live and to search for something out there worth their devotion. The absence of meaning creates the existential vacuum, which is categorized as the feelings of emptiness, boredom, apathy, alienation and disengagement (Schulenberg, Baczwaski, & Buchanan 2012).

Meaning and purpose are closely connected in the meaning of life literature. In fact, Victor Frankl, who has been recognized as the most influential person on this topic, used meaning and purpose interchangeably (Damon, Menon, & Bronk 2003). There exist a number of scholarly definitions of meaning in life. Though differing in various ways, these definitions share a common theme: a meaningful life is one that has a purpose (Heintzelman & King 2014).

Personal purpose reflects the psychological tendency to possess a sense of intentionality and goal-directedness that guides behavior. The pursuit of a purpose provides life with meaning. Conflating purpose with meaning, however, hinders the exploration of the mechanism through which purpose gives rise to meaning and meaningfulness. Purpose relates to meaning and meaningfulness as it helps people make sense of life experiences and gives them a sense of direction and significance in their lives.

Park (2010) illustrated how the sense of meaning and meaningfulness is affected by individual’s orientation system. Meaning is a constructed experience (King 2012). It is influenced by the individual’s self-concept or self-identity. People go through life holding certain beliefs and goals. Self-concept or self-identity consolidates one’s beliefs, values, and goals into a coherent story about self that orients and guides people’s meaning making. The orienting system provides people with the cognitive framework upon which an experience is interpreted. To the extent the appraisal of the situation matches an individual’s orienting system, the person feels he/she understand the situation and find meaning is made. To the contrary, when the appraisal and interpretation of the situation violates the orientation system, the person is compelled to reduce the discrepancy by engaging in the process of sense-making (George & Park 2017). Purpose in life is the integral part of one’s orientation system and plays an important role in the construction of meaning and meaningfulness.

Empirical Research on Purpose and Purposefulness

Unlike the traditional Job Characteristics Model (Hackman & Oldham 1976), more recent publications stress the role of personal factors in shaping and framing job experience (Lips-Wiersma & Morris 2009; Rothausen & Henderson 2018). Purpose has been identified as one of the personal factors that contributes to the psychological state of meaningfulness at work (Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski 2010). Despite its theoretical significance, systematic and empirical research on

purpose and the related concept of purposefulness at work is rare. An exception is the exploration of the goal structure.

Recognizing the existence of a wide range of goals, Chulef, Read and Walsh (2001) proposed a hierarchical structure to organize them. This theoretical model posits that human goals differ in terms of abstractness. Goals that are specific, concrete and time constrained are placed at the bottom of the hierarchy, while those that are abstract, far-reaching, and timeless are placed on the top of the hierarchy. This hierarchical structure also explains the relationship between goals and purposes. Both goals and purposes refer to intentionality or direction. Purposes are high-level goals in the goal hierarchy that represent abstract and lasting aspirations (Carton 2018). Higher purpose give meaning to short-term, specific goals. Empirical research has supported the hierarchical structure of human goals (Bagozzi, Bergami, & Leone 2003).

Extensive research has examined the impact of purpose in life on psychological and physical well-being. Having a strong sense of purpose generates health benefits, such as reducing the risk of Alzheimer's disease (Boyle, Buchman, Barnes, & Bennett 2010), the likelihood of heart attacks (Kim, Sun, Park, Kubzansky, & Peterson 2013), the odds of developing sleep disturbances (Kim, Hershner, & Strecher 2015), and the likelihood of strokes (Yu, Boyle, Wilson, Levine, Schneider, & Bennett 2015). Perhaps due to these positive impact on physical health, purpose in life has been found to be associated with reduced all-cause mortality (Cohen, Bavishi & Rozanski 2016).

The Current Research

Notwithstanding the positive impact of purpose in life, organizational research on purpose and purposefulness at work is limited. The literature also suffers from a thorough examination of the content of purpose. Are all purposes equal? What does it mean to be purposeful at work? We conducted a two-phase research to advance our understanding of the type of purpose people have, how purpose affects the feeling of purposefulness at work, their relationship with values, and the impact of purposefulness.

The objective of phase I of the research was to develop a Purposefulness at Work survey instrument and collect qualitative data to identify and build a taxonomy of purposes and a framework of values. Participants were recruited from two resources: the Qualtrics Sampling Service and a subsidiary office of a professional service firm in Boston. The Qualtrics sample contained many unemployed and part-time employed participants. Recruiting participants from the second source was intended to balance the make-up of employment status. The total sample size is 333. About two thirds of the participants were females, 48.3% of them were full time employers.

In phase II, the relationships among the purposefulness at work, the taxonomy of purpose and the value framework derived from phase I were examined. This study also validated these surveys by examining their impact on workplace attitude such as employee engagement and organizational commitment. Participants were recruited through Amazon's MTurk. Complete responses were collected from 879 participants. Gender was about equally distributed between males and females, and all participants were fully employed.

Results

Findings are reported for each phase in this section.

Phase I

Initially 15 items were developed to assess purposefulness at work. Through item and factor analyses, the survey kept 10 items assessing two factors named Clarity and Compatibility respectively. Each factor has 5 items. Clarity reflects how much an individual is clear and passionate about his/her purpose. Compatibility describes the degree to which an individual has a

purpose that matches with the organizational and social context. Both factors have good reliabilities ($\alpha s > .75$). The correlation between the two is 0.51.

Phase I asked participants to free write their personal missions. We used the word mission instead of purpose in the survey to guide participants' thinking toward relatively lasting ambitions or motives instead of immediate results or objectives one wants to accomplish, such as passing a professional certification exam or meeting a sales target. Though analyzing the text content, eight types of purpose were identified. Two researchers independently categorized participants' mission statements to the eight purpose types. A high level of inter-rater agreement (83.8%) was achieved, suggesting the reliability of the categorization. Table 1 describes the eight types of purpose.

Table 1. Eight Types of Purpose

Theme	Description	Example
Advocating	Supporting or sponsoring a cause or issues	Raising awareness of domestic violence
Basic needs	The need for money, health, housing, etc.	Staying healthy while aging
Benevolence	Serving or helping others	Providing shield to homeless people
Career	Personal success and accomplishment	Being able to achieve what I set out to
Family	Attention to family life	Being there with my family
Personal growth	Growing and developing myself	Overcoming my fears
Principled life	Living a life that expresses certain values or beliefs	Treat people as I would want to be treated
Quality life	Desired experience such as well-being and life style	Travel the world

In phase I, participants were also asked to identify up to five most important values. The survey obtained 1,266 responses from the participants. Through thematic analysis, the researchers identified 44 values. Definitions for the 44 values were developed. For instance, the value of power is defined as "having authority or influence over others; being a leader." Two researchers then independently assigned the 1,266 responses to the 44 values. They agreed on 1,070, which equals an 84.5% inter-rater agreement. A few values, such as fame, adventure, and peace, were removed due to their very low frequencies. The final list resulted in 37 values.

Phase II

The two-factor model of the purposefulness at work survey was replicated in phase II. Purposefulness at work was not correlated with gender ($r = 0.03, p > .05$). There was a slightly positive correlation between purposefulness at work and age ($r = .17, p < .001$). It seems that among employed adults, people become more purposeful as they age. However, different purposes do not seem to generate the same amount of purposefulness at work. Table 2 reports the mean scores of purposefulness survey by purpose types. ANOVA analyses found statistically significant mean difference on purposefulness ($F_{(7, 795)} = 6.31, p < .001$), clarity ($F_{(7, 795)} = 6.07, p < .001$), and compatibility ($F_{(97, 795)} = 4.72, p < .001$). In general, participants with self-transcendent purposes (e.g., Advocating and Benevolence) felt more purposeful than those with self-focused purposes (e.g., Basic Needs and Quality Life).

Table 2. Means on Purposefulness and Two Factors by Purpose Type

Mission Focus	Clarity	Compatibility	Purposefulness
Advocating	4.06	3.74	3.90
Basic Needs	3.45	3.07	3.27
Benevolence	3.90	3.75	3.82
Career	3.88	3.86	3.87
Family	3.76	3.41	3.59
Personal growth	3.69	3.52	3.60
Principled life	3.94	3.64	3.79
Quality life	3.48	3.25	3.37

Phase II asked participants to rate how much the 37 values are important to them. Factor analysis found that the 37 values can be grouped into 5 factors, named Greater Good (e.g., Community and Altruism), Personal Well-Being (e.g., Security and Health), Getting Ahead (e.g., Power and Recognition), Belong (e.g., Tradition and Responsibility), and Self-Transformation (e.g., Growth and Authenticity) respectively. The five clusters of values appeared to be different along two latent dimensions: self- versus others-orientation, being versus doing. The first dimension concerns the “where” issue—where people direct their attention and efforts. The second dimension reflects what Lips-Wiersma and Morris had named the Being (Who I am) versus Doing (What I do to contribute). Figure 1 shows the relationship among the five clusters of values.

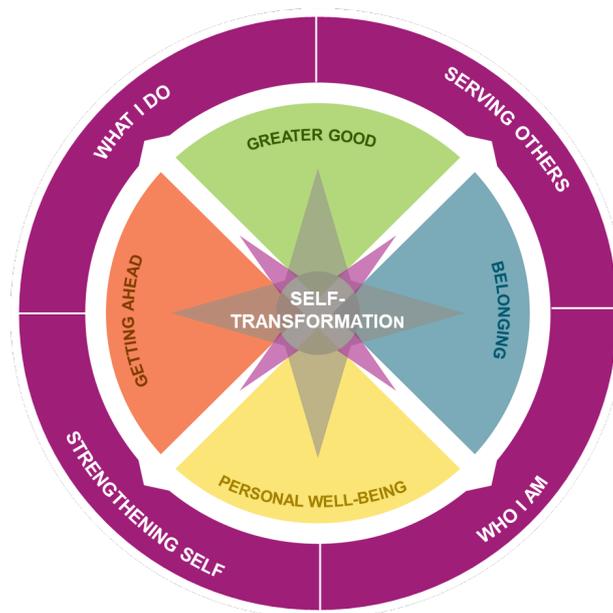


Figure 1. The Value Framework

Phase II also revealed the correspondence between values and purposes. Analyses of variance (ANOVA) were conducted to investigate how value preferences relate to purpose types. Table 3 reports mean scores of value clusters for different purpose types. Four of the five ANOVAs (the columns) were statistically significant. Alignment exists between personal purposes and value preferences. For instance, people who value Greater Good are more likely to select Advocating and Benevolence as their purposes. They are concerned about the community, environment, and world. They dedicate themselves to the well-being or success of others. This contrasts with those who prioritize the values around personal well-being. Their purpose is more likely to center on promoting quality of life, primarily their own. Sensibly, those whose purpose is on career are likely to value getting ahead more than other people do, and those whose purpose is personal growth tend to rate more highly the self-transformation values.

Table 3. Mean Scores on Value Clusters by Purpose Types

Mission Focus	Values clusters				
	Greater Good	Personal Well-Being	Getting Ahead	Belonging	Self-Transformation
Advocating	3.48	3.61	2.22	3.29	3.59
Benevolence	3.46	3.69	1.98	3.38	3.55
Career	3.11	3.68	3.07	3.32	3.71
Personal Growth	3.21	3.81	2.44	3.38	4.02
Meaning of Life	3.33	3.59	2.01	3.37	3.63
Family	3.07	3.75	2.28	3.48	3.57
Quality of Life	3.21	3.94	2.29	3.31	3.87
Basic Needs	2.87	3.48	2.28	2.89	3.63
ANOVA					
Degree of freedom	7,797	7,797	7,795	7,796	7,796
<i>F</i> value	4.00	2.39	6.45	1.60	3.51
<i>p</i> value	0.00	0.02	0.00	0.13	0.00

If value preferences affect the purposes people select, and purposes relate to purposefulness, how do values influence the feeling of purposefulness? Table 4 reports the correlations between the two sets of variables. Other-oriented, self-transcendent values (Belonging and Greater Good) correlate more strongly with purposefulness than do self-oriented values (Getting Ahead and Personal Well-being). This suggests that when individuals turn their attention outward and dedicate to something that is greater than self, they feel more purposeful.

Table 4. Correlations between Purposefulness and Values

	Clarity	Compatibility	Purposefulness
Belonging	0.34**	0.38**	0.41**
Greater Good	0.28**	0.29**	0.33**
Personal Well-being	0.18**	0.21**	0.22**
Self-Transformation	0.19**	0.16**	0.20**
Getting Ahead	0.10*	0.21**	0.18**

* $p < .01$, ** $p < .001$.

Being purposeful at work has positive impact on employee attitude. Table 5 reports the correlations of purposefulness with employee engagement, organizational commitment, perceived fit, planned tenure, and willingness to recommend one's organization. In general, people who are purposeful at work have more positive attitude toward the work and their organizations. It is noteworthy that among the two factors, compatibility has higher correlations with the outcome measures than the clarity factor.

Table 5. Correlations between Purposefulness and Employee Attitude

	Clarity	Compatibility	Purposefulness
Work Engagement	.35**	.46**	.47**
Organizational Commitment	.30**	.53**	.48**
Recommending organization	.27**	.49**	.44**
Continue working	.22**	.41**	.37**
Cultural fit	.27**	.40**	.39**

** $p < .001$.

Discussion and Conclusion

Purpose has become a frequent word on media headlines. Referred as the “why” behind the work, purpose is believed having a significant role in promoting individual well-being and productivity. Despite its theoretic soundness, managers and organizations need guidance and technical know-how to design and implement purpose programs. This research advances our understanding on the mechanism through which purpose engenders positive employment experience in the workplace.

In general, people who are purposeful possess more positive attitude toward the work and the working environment than those who are less purposeful. The traditional job characteristic model (Hackman & Oldham, 1976) mainly focused on the designing feature of the job as the major antecedent of employee attitude. Latest theories, however, consider individuals not as passive job recipients (Wrzesniewski & Dutton 2001). How people make sense of the work is an interpretative experience that is subject to the influence of self-concept. Self-concept integrates one’s beliefs, values, and goals into a meaning structure through which sensory perceptions are interpreted.

People do not have the same purposes and values, even among those who do the same job in the same organization. The direct implication for managers is to understand individual preferences and allow employees opportunities for authentic self-expression. Some practical examples include job crafting (Bruning & Campion 2018) and workplace personalization (Felix & Cavazotte 2019).

This research found that individual purposes and values differ along the continuum of self-other orientation. Self-transcendent purposes and values are associated with higher level of purposefulness than are self-focused purposes and values. This finding is consistent with the research on calling. Employees who consider their work as a calling are more likely to have positive attitude toward their job, and as a result becoming more productive (Duff et al. 2018). The implication of this finding is that more organizational effort should be invested to facilitate employees’ pursuit of something that is bigger than self. For instance, companies could offer paid time off to allow employees involve in charity or community services.

One limitation of this research is the cross-sectional nature of the data. The causal relationship between purposefulness and employment experience could be tested with longitudinal research design in the future. Participants were asked to select one purpose type that characterized their missions. Future research could investigate how different purposes together influence individual well-being and workplace attitude.

In conclusion, purpose is a construct that can be applied to organizational research. Purpose research emphasizes personal agency in interpreting the work and the environment. It supplements traditional job characteristic model to employment experience.

References

- Bagozzi, R. P., Bergami, M., and Leone, L. 2003. "Hierarchical Representation of Motives in Goal Setting." *Journal of Applied Psychology* 88: 915-943.
- Boyle, P. A., Buchman, A. S., Barnes, L. L., and Bennett, D. A. 2010. "Effect of a Purpose in Life on Risk of Incident Alzheimer Disease and Mild Cognitive Impairment in Community-dwelling Older Persons." *Archives of General Psychiatry* 67: 304-310.
- Bruning, P. F., and Campion, M. A. 2018. "A Role Resource Approach-Avoidance of Job Crafting: A Multimethod Integration and Extension of Job Crafting Theory." *Academy of Management Journal* 61: 499-522.
- Cable, D. M., Gino, F., and Staats, B. R. 2013. "Breaking Them in or Eliciting Their Best? Reframing Socialization around Newcomers' Authentic Self-expression." *Administrative Science Quarterly* 58: 1-36.
- Chulef, A. S., Read, S. J., and Walsh, D. A. 2001. "A Hierarchical Taxonomy of Human Goals." *Motivation and Emotion* 25: 191-232.
- Cohen, R., Bavishi, C., and Rozanski, A. 2016. "Purpose in Life and Its Relationships to All-cause Mortality and Cardiovascular Events: A Meta-analysis." *Psychosomatic Medicine* 78: 122-33.
- Cook-Deegan, P., and Bronk, K. C. 2018. "Want a Purpose-Driven Business?" *Fast Company*, Apr 21. <https://www.fastcompany.com/40552232/want-a-purpose-driven-business-know-the-difference-between-mission-and-purpose>
- Crumbaugh, J. C. 1968. "Cross-validation of Purpose in Life Test Based on Frankl's Concepts." *Journal of Individual Psychology* 24: 74-81.
- Damon, W., Menon, J., and Bronk, K. C. 2003. "The Development of Purpose During Adolescence." *Applied Developmental Science* 7: 119-128.
- Duff, R. D., Dik, B. J., Douglas, R. P., England, J. W., and Velez, B. L. 2018. "Work as a Calling: A Theoretical Model." *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 64: 423-439.
- Felix, B., and Cavazotte, F. 2019. "When a Calling Goes Unanswered: Exploring the Role of Workplace Personalizations as Calling Enactments." *Frontiers in Psychology* 10: 1940.
- George, L. S., and Park, C. L. 2017. "Meaning in Life and Violations of Beliefs and Goals: Reciprocal Relations Among Individuals with Congestive Heart Failure." *Anxiety, Stress, & Coping* 30: 282-289.
- Hackman, J. R., and Oldham, G. R. 1976. "Motivation Through the Design of Work: Test of a Theory." *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance* 16: 250-279.
- Heintzelman, S., and King, L. A. 2014. "Life is Pretty Meaningful." *American Psychologist* 69: 561-574.
- Henderson, R., and Van Den Steen, E. 2015. "Why Do Firms have 'Purpose'? The Firm's Role as a Carrier of Identity and Reputation." *American Economic Review: Papers & Proceedings* 105:326-330.
- Hollensbe, E., Wookey, C., Hickey, L., George, G., and Nichols, C. V. 2014. "Organizations with Purpose." *Academy of Management Journal* 57: 1227-1234.
- Keller, V., and Webb, C. 2017. "Find Purpose in Even Your Most Mundane Tasks at Work." *Harvard Business Review Digital Articles*, Mar. 08. <https://hbr.org/2017/03/find-purpose-in-even-your-most-mundane-tasks-at-work>
- Kim, E. S., Hershner, S. D., and Strecher, V. J. 2015. "Purpose in Life and Incidence of Sleep Disturbances." *Journal of Behavioral Medicine* 38: 590-597.
- Kim, E. S., Sun, J. K., Park, N., Kubzansky, L. D., and Peterson, C. 2013. "Purpose in Life and Reduced Risk of Myocardial Infarction Among Older U.S. Adults with Coronary Heart Disease: A Two-year Follow-up." *Journal of Behavioral Medicine* 36: 124-133.
- King, L. A. 2012. "Meaning: Effortless and Ubiquitous." In *Meaning, Mortality, and Choice: The Social Psychology of Existential Concerns*, edited by Phillip R. Shaver and Mario Mikulincer, 129-144. Washington, D.C.: APA.
- Lips-Wiersma, M., and Morris, L. 2009. "Discriminating Between 'Meaningful Work' and the 'Management of Meaning'." *Journal of Business Ethics* 88: 491-511.
- Rosso, B. D., Dekas, K. H., and Wrzesniewski, A. 2010. "On the Meaning of Work: A Theoretical Integration and Review." *Research in Organizational Behavior* 30: 91-127.
- Schulenberg, S., Baczwaski, B. J., and Buchanan, E. M. 2012. "Measuring Search for Meaning: A factor-analytic Evaluation of the Seeking of Noetic Goals Test (SONG)." *Journal of Happiness Studies* 15: 693-715.
- Winston, A. 2018. "Does Wall Street Finally Care About Sustainability?" *Harvard Business Review Digital Articles*, Jan 19. <https://hbr.org/2018/01/does-wall-street-finally-care-about-sustainability>
- Wrzesniewski, A. and Dutton, J. E. 2001. "Crafting a Job: Revisioning Employees as Active Crafters of Their Work." *Academy of Management Review* 26: 179-201.
- Yu, L., Boyle, P. A., Wilson, R. S., Levine, S. R., Schneider, J. A., and Bennett, D. A. 2015. Purpose in Life and Cerebral Infarcts in Community-dwelling Older People." *Stroke* 46: 1071-1076.