Meaningless work threatens job performance

Open, transparent communication across the organisation is generally associated with improved employee motivation and organisational outcomes. For supervisors, the question arises how to deal with rather inconvenient information, such as in the case of a project failure. Informing employees after significant investments of time and effort might lead to negative effects on subsequent work motivation, one could argue. To identify a causal relationship between the meaning of previously completed work and workers' subsequent work performance, we exploited a natural working environment in which the loss of the job's meaning occurred as a matter of fact. At the same time, it was possible to credibly guide only part of the workforce to believe in the sudden loss of meaning by conducting a controlled experiment.

The experimental setting

Due to the necessity of collecting inventory data on business reports collected over decades, we hired 140 workers for a one-time half-day job. At first, the collection of business reports was perceived as comprehensive, unique, and therefore a valuable resource for researchers. Subsequently, however, the managing director decided to dissolve the archive when the inventory project revealed the collection's fragmentary character, the bad condition of some reports, and the increasing online accessibility of such reports.

Approximately one week after the undertaking of the inventory, we contacted workers and invited them to take part in a follow-up survey online. We randomly assigned each worker to one of three information sets that were part of the questionnaire. In one group, we simply reminded workers about the meaning of their previous task (i.e., creating a database for research purposes), so that they were likely to still believe in the *Original Meaning*. Additionally, we told the *No Meaning* group that the managing director had decided to dissolve the archive after the creation of the database.

To study how employees respond to a new purpose after the original one had disappeared, a third group received an *Alternative Meaning* treatment. Employees got to know that their previous work had become meaningless with regard to its stated purpose, but we also informed them that their work served an additional purpose not previously communicated (as the data collected in the course of the inventory project could be used for research in the field of personnel economics, see Jeworrek and Mertins 2014). Afterwards, we asked participants to answer a series of similar and monotonous survey questions to support ongoing research activities. Since this part of the questionnaire was not paid additionally, participants were allowed to quit the survey at any point in time and, hence, the number of answered questions can be used as an indicator for an individual's motivation to work.

Work performance

Despite the short-term nature of the job and the time lag between the tasks, which might weaken employees' responses, the data reveal a strong impact of previous task meaning on workers' subsequent motivation (see Figure 1). This effect, however, is driven by those workers who answered our survey invitation within a few days. A particular subgroup of employees did not respond to the survey invitation until they received a final call. These workers do not seem to be susceptible at all to the variation in task meaning. Although there might be an exogenous reason for the delayed answer, such as limited reachability during holidays, it could also constitute a self-selection related to particular personal characteristics. For instance, one may think of low loyalty toward the employer or low interest in continuing the relationship. In that case, they are generally expected to be less motivated to answer the survey questions across treatments and presumably less responsive to the information about the meaning of the task.

Figure 1: Meaning of work and its impact on work performance
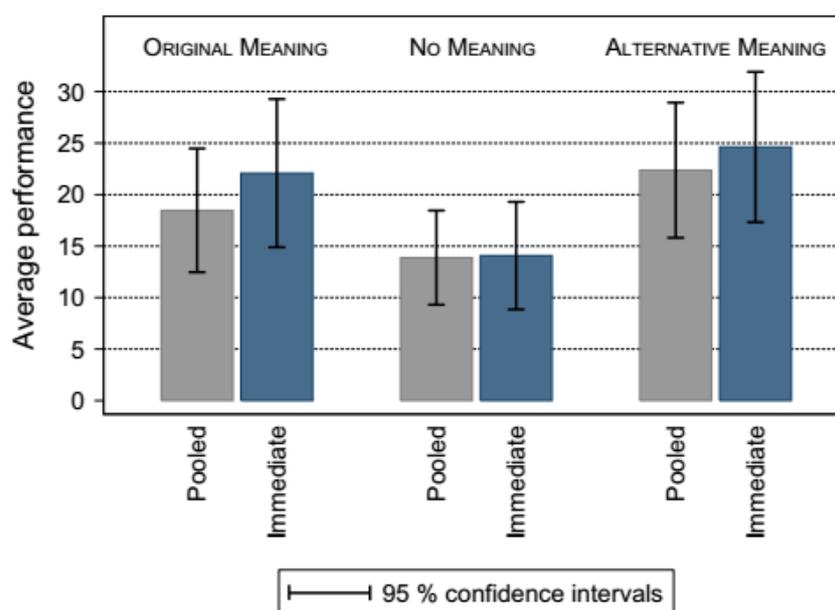
Note: The grey bars depict the average number of answered survey questions for the whole sample, including those workers who did not answer until they received a final call. The blue bars cover only those workers who responded after the first survey invitation.

Alternative meaning and conclusions

Employees seem to "forgive" their employer for canceling a project if another and still valid purpose is credibly communicated. When comparing the means of answered survey questions, it becomes obvious that providing an alternative meaning for the previously conducted job absorbs the negative performance effect of the loss of the original meaning completely. Apparently, it does not matter that the task's original meaning was lost: what counts is that it had a meaning at all.

By analysing whether individual personality traits do matter in this context, we find that distrustful individuals perform significantly worse than trustful ones, probably because they might suspect that the supplied alternative task meaning would become similarly futile.

Since participants' earnings did not depend on their behaviour and, the situation mirrored the incomplete contracts that are typical of employment relationships. Hence, our findings have some practical implications for how companies deliver feedback and organise work. The evidence suggests that providing information on work which has turned out to be futile does not only prompt feelings such as disappointment and anger but it can trigger negative consequences for employees' subsequent motivation as well.

To counter these possible implications, the identification of an alternative purpose can help compensate for the experienced loss, and supervisors may be well advised to anticipate these behavioural effects in their information strategy. If employees' experiences and perceptions from a half-day job already trigger the observed negative effects, it seems very likely that the effects on behaviour and emotions arising from a loss of meaning in longer projects will be even more severe.

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Notes:

- *This blog post is based on the authors' paper [When the Meaning of Work Has Disappeared: Experimental Evidence on Employees' Performance and Emotions](), Management Science, Vol. 63, Issue 6 (2017)*
- *The post gives the views of its authors, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.*
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