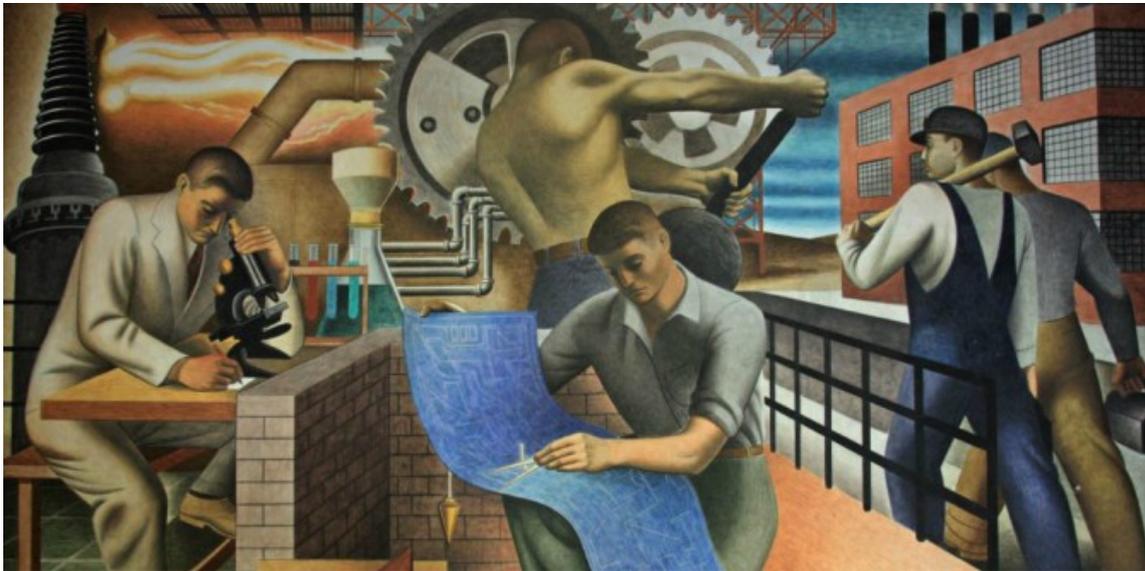


# Mismanaged souls: why does employee engagement remain stubbornly low?



You would have to have been in solitary confinement in a particularly remote location during recent years not to be aware of the tidal-wave of interest there has been in employee engagement. High levels of engagement have been associated with a host of important benefits to both employers in terms of raised performance and productivity, and for employees in terms of improved health and well-being.

Yet, despite the plethora of advice on how to 'do' engagement, and the many millions spent on engagement programmes and initiatives, the evidence suggests that levels remain stubbornly low. The Gallup organisation goes so far as to talk of a ['worldwide employee engagement crisis'](#), with global levels static at around 13 per cent.

There are likely to be a number of different reasons for this. Employers often focus on how to engage their staff through involvement and participation schemes, supportive and empathetic management styles, and appropriate reward structures.

However, our research has led us to consider the often-overlooked issue of meaningful work. Meaningful work is work that the job holder regards as important, as having a wider significance and impact, and that enables the individual to grow and develop.

## Why does this matter for engagement?

Although many employers are not aware of this, academics have been researching the link between meaningfulness and engagement ever since William Kahn's seminal study published in [1990](#) which identified meaningfulness as a necessary pre-condition for high levels of engagement. Building on Kahn's work, our research has shown a link between meaningfulness and high levels of engagement, performance, and well-being, and low levels of absenteeism and intention to quit.

For some people, meaningful work is a nice-to-have, or something that is only relevant for people in creative, professional or managerial positions, but not of interest to workers in general. Contrary to this popular belief, our research has suggested that meaningful work, or the sense that your work actually matters and makes a difference, is important to just about everyone. Any job can be experienced as meaningful, as our research with people in a variety of different occupations shows. And people who find their work meaningful are more likely to be engaged.

So, what can organisations do to manage meaningfulness and raise levels of engagement?

According to research, there are four core areas that make the most difference.

1. Leadership style: people tend to look outside themselves for guidance, so trustworthy leaders who emphasise ethical and purposeful values and behaviours can inspire employees and serve as a role model for meaningfulness.
2. Human resource management: HR practices including recruitment, selection, and socialisation that emphasise creating a strong fit between the employee and the organisation, as well as personal development interventions such as coaching and mentoring can enhance meaningfulness by creating a strong sense of community and inclusiveness.
3. Job design: job design is another feature that is often overlooked, yet the work people do, and how that work fits with that of colleagues and the wider purpose of the organisation can be very significant in terms of meaningfulness. Enriched jobs that enable the individual to come into contact with beneficiaries such as clients, customers or service users can be highly meaningful because people can directly see the impact their work has on others.
4. Culture and values: the overall culture of the organisation and the values that are espoused by senior leaders and employees alike can provide the context within which people can find their work meaningful.

Although there is much that employers can do, it is important to realise that meaningfulness cannot be easily 'managed', in part because it is such a personal experience. According to many researchers, the quest for meaningfulness is an innate human tendency. Consequently, each individual will look around their work environment seeking clues that will help them to discern how much their work matters, whether it makes a difference, and whether they have opportunities to grow and flourish.

Employers also need to be aware that meaningfulness has a 'dark side', where the language of meaning and purpose can be cynically and inauthentically used to manipulate employees. For example, organisations that talk about their ethical and environmental credentials in public when employees know that they regularly flout the law will develop a toxic culture that fails to inspire real meaning. Equally, some organisations require their staff to participate in culture-building activities or to demonstrate that they are enthusiastic proponents of the corporate values, yet at the same time employees know they will suffer in some way, for example by failing to secure an important promotion, if they do not take part with the right kind of attitude.

Under circumstances such as these, meaningfulness becomes subverted and, rather than being a force for good, becomes a malign force that pushes employees into meaninglessness and inauthentic behaviours. Such experiences will undermine engagement, so, if employers are struggling with low levels of engagement, it is worth exploring whether the organisational climate and environment are conducive to employees finding high levels of authentic meaningfulness through their work.



#### Notes:

- This blog post is based on the author's paper [The mismanaged soul: Existential labor and the erosion of meaningful work](#), co-authored with Adrian Madden, Kerstin Alfes, amanda Shantz and Emma Soane, *Human Resource Management Review*, September 2017
- The post gives the views of its author, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.
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**Katie Bailey** is professor of work and employment at King's College's Business School. Previously, she has held posts at the Universities of Sussex, Kent and Kingston, and at London Business School, where she completed her PhD. Her current research focuses on what makes work meaningful, temporality and the experience of work, employee engagement and strategic human resource management. Her research has been funded by grants of almost £1m from the ESRC, CIPD, NIHR and industry, and she has recently completed a study of purposeful and ethical leadership funded by the CIPD. She has published her research widely in peer-reviewed journals and has been an associate editor or editorial board member of several academic journals. She is currently co-editing the 'Oxford Handbook of Meaningful Work'.

