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# The economics of meaningful work: A scoping review

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## Abstract

Meaningful work plays a central role in many people's lives, and the topic attracts interest across a range of social science disciplines. What is the economists' view on meaningful work? This chapter presents a scoping review on the economics of meaningful work. We identified 43 relevant English-language articles in top-quartile economics journals through a systematic search in EconLit and citation tracking. We synthesize how these studies conceptualize, perceive, and operationalize meaningful work, along with their insights into individuals' preferences for meaningful work, how meaningful people consider their work to be, the antecedents and outcomes of meaningful work, and the broader conclusions, implications, and recommendations.

## Keywords

Purpose, bullshit jobs, useful job, meaning at work, task significance, literature review

## JEL codes

J22, J24, J28, J31, J81

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# 1 Introduction

Traditional economic theory views work as a source of disutility: a necessary trade-off in which individuals exchange their time and effort for money (Cassar and Meier, 2018). In this view, work is necessary to attain consumption levels, and the labor supply decision is subject to one's preferences for consumption on the one hand and leisure on the other. A growing body of evidence, both within and beyond economics, has challenged the traditional economic view by demonstrating that people care about nonmonetary job attributes (for discussions, see e.g. Maestas et al., 2023; Burbano et al., 2024; Cassar & Meier, 2018; Spencer, 2023). One notable example is the theory of compensating wage differentials (Rosen, 1986), which states that workers require higher pay to accept jobs with less desirable attributes (e.g., higher risk, unpleasant environment, irregular hours) and are willing to accept lower pay for jobs with more desirable attributes (e.g., safer conditions, flexible hours, pleasant environment). The wage differential acts as a compensation for the positive or negative aspects of the job beyond the wage itself. Taking it one step further, economists increasingly acknowledge that work itself can have intrinsic value that enhances utility when its contents fulfil (mostly psychological) needs of workers, such as viewing one's work as a purposeful activity (e.g. Bénabou & Tirole, 2003; Besley & Ghatak, 2005; Cassar & Meier, 2018; Nikolova & Cnossen, 2020). These studies seek to bridge a clear disciplinary divide. Economists tend to emphasize monetary incentives and extrinsic motivation, while fields such as work psychology, organizational psychology, organizational behavior, and (human resource) management place greater importance on intrinsic motivation and nonmonetary incentives, including meaningful work (e.g., Allan et al., 2019).

One specific nonmonetary reason to work lies in people's search for meaning. This can be considered a eudaimonic dimension of well-being, in which jobs allow workers to flourish and live a life that realizes their potential (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Graham & Nikolova, 2015). People gain motivation from the intrinsic satisfaction they feel when tasks align with their values, interests, and sense of purpose. This positions task significance as a salient nonmonetary job attribute, and the related perception of doing meaningful work as a salient nonmonetary job outcome, with notable implications for labor market behavior and worker performance, as will be demonstrated in Section 3 of this chapter. To align with the growing desire for meaningful work, companies are placing greater emphasis on social missions and corporate social responsibility efforts (Cassar & Meier, 2018). This has led several pioneering economists to conclude that there is a gap between the importance workers and organizations place on meaningful work and the importance that economists have traditionally assigned to it (Nikolova & Cnossen, 2020; Kaplan & Schulhofer-Wohl, 2018; Ariely et al., 2008), even though related concepts such as the organizational mission and prosocial motivation have received earlier attention (e.g. Bénabou & Tirole, 2003; Besley & Ghatak, 2005). As a result, mainstream economists have traditionally struggled to explain employee behavior, such as discretionary effort, which contradicts their assumption that workers are inherently effort-averse (Lopes, 2018).

In recent years, a small but growing body of literature in economics has emerged that recognizes the significance of meaningful work alongside other nonmonetary aspects of a job. Yet, there is limited integrated knowledge about the contemporary economic discourse on meaningful work, in part because contributions are fragmented across the economic literature and terminology is used inconsistently (e.g. meaning, purpose, usefulness, or 'bullshit' jobs). To foster a more systematic understanding of meaningful work in economics, we conducted a scoping review to map existing perspectives and research in this field. The research question guiding this review is: What is the economists' view on meaningful work?

Our chapter is structured as follows. We begin by explaining how we conducted the scoping review. The remainder of the chapter draws on and is limited to the identified studies. The discussion starts with how meaningful work is conceptualized and perceived in the economics literature and the extent to which people experience meaningful work. Section 2 explores insights from the economics literature on the antecedents of meaningful work. Section 3 examines the consequences of meaningful work. Finally, Section 4 presents the main conclusions, implications, and recommendations from this literature, as well as (dis)connections with other literatures on meaningful work, open questions, and directions for further research.

## 1.1 Methodology scoping review

We conducted a scoping review following the principles and protocol outlined in the PRISMA extension for scoping reviews (Tricco et al., 2018). We prospectively registered the protocol with the Open Science Framework (<https://osf.io/vmj6u/>). We utilized a two-step search strategy in this review. In the first step, a systematic search was conducted in the EconLit database on December 18, 2024, to identify relevant articles. The search targeted English-language journal articles with combinations of specific words in the abstract or title: one from the first group: meaning\*, purpose\*, bullshit, fulfil\*, worthwhile, useful\*, or useless\*, and one from the second group: work, job\*, entrepreneurship, or task\*.<sup>1</sup> The words could be separated by up to two intervening words. Asterisks functioned as truncation characters to capture word variants (e.g., meaning\* captures meaning, meaningful, meaningfulness, and meaningless). At the pre-screening stage, the inclusion criteria were limited to articles published in top-quartile journals, as listed in the 2023 Scimago Journal Rankings under the categories ‘Economics and Econometrics’ and ‘Economics, Econometrics, and Finance (miscellaneous)’, resulting in a pool of 171 peer-reviewed journals. During the screening process, we excluded articles for containing misaligned terminology (e.g., when “purpose of our work” refers to the article’s intention rather than meaningful work), not being grounded in economics (e.g. articles in multidisciplinary journals that do not engage with the economics literature), being unrelated to the work context, or lacking a significant contribution to the field (e.g. loosely referring to meaningful work in the abstract but no substantial discussion/analysis in the main text). The initial search identified 21 eligible articles. In the second step, an additional 22 studies published in top-quartile journals were identified by backward and forward snowball searches of all eligible studies, resulting in a total of 43 studies included in the scoping review. The most common reasons these studies were not identified in the first step are: (1) meaningful work was discussed in the main text but not explicitly mentioned in the abstract or title—often as part of a broader set of job attributes or outcomes; and (2) different phrasing was used in the abstract or title, with sometimes the search terms from the two groups being too far apart (we limited the distance between search terms from the two groups to a maximum of two words to avoid retrieving an unmanageable number of studies from EconLit with a low likelihood of eligibility). The references section separately lists the articles identified in the scoping review. For further details on the review strategy and study selection process, please refer to the OSF webpage (<https://osf.io/vmj6u/>). It includes the review protocol, a flow diagram and an Excel-overview of the study selection process, and the PRISMA-ScR-Checklist with information on each essential reporting item of the PRISMA-ScR protocol.

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<sup>1</sup> We included ‘bullshit’ because Graeber popularized this term in his influential work referring to meaningless jobs as ‘bullshit’ jobs (Graeber, 2018). We also tested additional search terms, such as ‘labor/labour’, but these did not yield any further articles that met the inclusion criteria.

The 43 articles are distributed across 27 journals. Small Business Economics features the most studies (five), followed by Labour Economics, Oxford Review of Economic Policy, Ecological Economics, and Journal of Business Ethics with three studies each. The journal distribution shows that studies on meaningful work are spread across core economics journals. We excluded articles in multidisciplinary journals, particularly business ethics journals, that were not grounded in economics. Most of the articles are recent, with 70% published in 2020 or later. This statistic demonstrates that meaningful work has only recently started receiving attention in economics. The literature includes 15 cross-sectional studies, 11 experimental studies, nine position papers, three qualitative studies, two panel studies, reviews, and theoretical papers, and single studies using observational, time-series, or census data.<sup>2</sup> The experimental studies are typically stylized, often using trivial and brief work tasks, with a notable exception being the field experiment of Fracchia et al. (2023). Out of the 27 empirical studies, 11 used data from the United States, ten used data from a single Northwestern European country, six use cross-national datasets (focusing primarily but not exclusively on WEIRD countries), and some single studies used data from other countries including Japan, India, China, Guinea-Bissau, and Slovakia. In general, the empirical work is dominated by samples from WEIRD countries.

The review will focus on economic literature that explicitly discusses meaningful work. However, meaningful work plays a vital, implicit role in several nascent strands of literature in economics. We will briefly discuss two of these important literature streams. First, the economics literature contains an extensive body of research on compensating wage differentials, demonstrating that workers are willing to accept lower wages and work longer hours for jobs that provide social value. Non-pecuniary job rewards, such as the warm glow derived from engaging in altruistic (and implicitly meaningful) work, can compensate for lower financial rewards. This kind of pro-social motivation is typically associated with employment in the public sector, non-profit organizations, or social enterprises (e.g., Preston, 1989; Francois, 2000; Besley & Ghatak, 2005; Gicheva, 2020; Schneider et al., 2025). Second, a vast literature demonstrates increased worker motivation and performance in mission-oriented jobs and when workers are aligned with organizational missions that transcend business goals and serve the greater good, such as a pro-social or pro-environmental higher purpose (e.g., Ashraf et al., 2014; Giné et al., 2022; Henderson & van den Steen, 2015).

## 1.2 How is meaningful work conceptualized?

Of the 43 articles, the majority, 30, primarily refer to meaningful work, jobs, or tasks. Eight studies primarily refer to useful/useless work, six to purposeful work, and single studies referred to bullshit jobs, fulfilling work, impactful work, or significant work.<sup>3</sup> Ten studies provided definitions of meaningful work, which are presented in Table 1.<sup>4</sup>

**Table 1: Definitions of meaningful work in the economics literature**

<sup>2</sup> See data charting form on the OSF webpage for details. The total exceeds 43 because some studies used multiple types of data.

<sup>3</sup> See data charting form for details. The total exceeds 43 because some studies used two terms interchangeably. Although manuscripts often include multiple relevant terms, specific expressions (e.g., socially useful work), and related concepts (e.g., prosocial work), we focus here on the most common and general terminology most closely associated with meaningful work in each paper.

<sup>4</sup> The terminology ‘useful/useless jobs’ was mostly used in empirical studies to align with survey questions in secondary data, such as “my job is useful to society”, typically referring to socially useful jobs. ‘Purposeful work’ is commonly defined as work that aligns with personal goals and values or with an organization’s higher purpose beyond profit (e.g. contributing to a better world).

Source	Concept	Definition
Ali et al. (2023)	Meaningful job	"A job is considered meaningful to the extent that it is recognized and/or has a purpose."
Ariely et al. (2008)	Meaningful labor	"We view labor as meaningful to the extent that (a) it is recognized and/or (b) has some point or purpose."
Brieger et al. (2021)	Work meaningfulness	"The perception that their work is valuable and significant (Rosso et al. 2010)"
Burbano et al. (2024)	Meaning at work	"Meaning at work refers to an individual's sense of impact as a result of their work: their understanding of the purpose and what they believe is achieved as a result of their work"
De Schouwer & Kesternich (2025)	Work meaning	"the ability to positively impact one's community or society through work"
Kesternich et al. (2021)	Work meaning	"The significance of a job for others or for society"
Kosfeld et al. (2017)	Meaningful work	"A task that is recognized by others and/or has some point or purpose" (Ariely et al. 2008)
Nikolova & Cnossen (2020)	Meaningful work	"Job-related activities that individuals view as purposeful and worthwhile"
Nikolova et al. (2023)	Work meaningfulness	"Activities that individuals view as purposeful and worthwhile and bring external appreciation and fulfillment"
	Meaningful work perceptions	"the degree to which people believe that what they do at work has personal significance, contributes to finding meaning in life, facilitates personal growth, and positively impacts the greater good"
Non et al. (2022)	Job meaning	"A job that has some purpose for others"

Six out of ten studies do not specify whether meaningful work is determined by the individual worker (a subjective approach) or externally (a more 'objective' approach). The remaining four studies consider meaningful work to be a subjective experience or evaluation of the individual worker, using phrases such as 'an individual's sense of', 'their understanding of', 'the perception that', 'that individuals view as', and 'the degree to which people believe that' (Brieger et al., 2021; Burbano et al., 2024; Nikolova & Cnossen, 2020; Nikolova et al., 2023). This distinction is relevant because, as argued by Hoeyer and Wadmann (2020), "What is considered meaningless in one place or situation is typically considered meaningful for others or in other situations and places" (p. 435). Seven of the ten studies referred in their definition to 'purpose', three studies referred to 'significance', 'impact', and 'recognized', two studies referred to 'worthwhile', and single studies referred to related terms including 'valuable', 'fulfilment', 'has some point', 'achieved', and 'external appreciation'. Four studies specified who should benefit from the work, including three references to 'others', two to 'society', one to 'community', and one to 'the greater good'.

Taken together, there is substantial but no full consensus of what constitutes meaningful work, with main differences being whether meaningful work is a purely subjective concept, whether it requires external recognition or appreciation, and whether it requires prosocial impact.

Some studies view work meaningfulness as a eudaimonic dimension of worker well-being. Eudaimonia entails flourishing and living a life that realizes one's potential, which is separate from but related to *hedonic* (e.g., engagement or stress at work) and *evaluative* (e.g., job satisfaction) dimensions of subjective well-being (Nikolova & Cnossen, 2020; Boudreaux et al., 2022; Kautonen et al., 2024; Nikolova et al., 2023).

Other studies distinguish between different forms of work meaningfulness. Burbano et al. (2024) distinguish between meaning derived from social impact and nonsocial impact, which are both nonmonetary attributes. Social impact refers to the impact that an individual's work has on the broader community, society, or environment. Nonsocial impact refers to the impact that an individual's work has on clients and customers, the own organization, and a worker's own feeling of accomplishment. When classifying the ten definitions using this distinction, three studies defined work meaningfulness solely in terms of social impact, including three of the four studies that specified who should benefit from the work (Kesternich et al. 2021; Non et al., 2022; De Schouwer & Kesternich, 2025). The others took a more general approach that could also include non-social impact. Asuyama (2021) distinguishes between the prosocial meaning and economic meaning of work, proposing that a job can be economically meaningful to a person because it entails pecuniary rewards, such as career opportunities, high income, and financial security. Similarly, Santos et al. (2024) takes such a broad definition by stating that, in essence, meaningful work embodies the question 'Why am I here?' as it pertains to the workplace. Finally, Peters et al. (2020) use meaningful work in a more general way to refer to intrinsically rewarding work as measured by four indicators: task variation, challenging assignments, interesting assignments, and work autonomy.

The distinction between meaning and meaningfulness is key to understanding the varied definitions of meaningful work discussed in the studies. While many studies in Table 1 focus on what makes work meaningful, it's important to clarify that meaning and meaningfulness are related but not identical concepts (Rosso et al., 2018). As outlined earlier, meaning refers to the understanding or interpretation of what work represents: its purpose, value, or significance within the broader context of an individual's life. For example, a worker might interpret their role as contributing to a larger societal good or simply providing financial support. In contrast, meaningfulness is the depth of significance or emotional weight that this interpretation holds for the individual. It is not just about understanding what the work means, but about how deeply that understanding resonates, providing a sense of fulfillment, purpose, or alignment with personal values. In the studies presented, many definitions of meaningful work implicitly refer to meaning, such as the idea of work having "purpose" or "significance" (e.g., Ali et al., 2023; Kosfeld et al., 2017). However, meaningfulness emerges when considering how much personal significance that work holds. This distinction is critical because an individual may understand their work's purpose or value (meaning) without feeling it is deeply fulfilling or worthwhile (meaningfulness). Therefore, the variations in how economists define meaningful work may reflect whether they are focused more on understanding the work's significance (meaning) or on the subjective experience of its personal value (meaningfulness). The subjectivity of meaningfulness explains why the perception of meaningful work can vary significantly among individuals, as some may experience their work as profoundly meaningful while others may not, despite having similar interpretations of its meaning. Notably, the economics literature on work meaningfulness is much smaller compared to the job meaning and task significance scholarship. In the remainder of this chapter, when discussing articles, we will, where possible, refer to the same concepts (meaning, meaningfulness, useful work, etc.) as those used by the article under discussion. Nevertheless, the limited literature precludes attributing differences between studies to conceptual distinctions.

### 1.3 How is meaningful work operationalized?

Most experimental studies manipulated meaningful work by varying task or job significance. This is done by informing participants or showing them that a task does or does not have practical use (Ariely et al. 2008; Chandler & Kapelner, 2013; Kesternich et al., 2021; Kosfeld et al., 2017), presenting alternate job

descriptions with varying levels of positive societal impact (Maestas et al., 2023), or using different videos about the job's significance (Fracchia et al., 2023). Other manipulations involve varying the company's mission (Non et al., 2022) or monetary donations from organizations and their workers to causes that are more (UNICEF) or less (National Rifle Association) widely supported (Reggiani & Rilke, 2024).

All non-experimental studies use subjective measures in the form of self-reports. The survey questions commonly include short scales with one to three items, with the majority of studies using secondary data. Items measuring prosocial impact are included in 13 of the 18 studies. Examples include "My job is useful to society" and "How often does your job provide opportunities to make a positive impact on your community or society?". More general questions are asked in six studies, such as "Feeling of doing useful work" and "Your job gives you the feeling of work well done". Most scales refer to 'useful' work (10 studies), which far exceeds other terminology such as 'a positive impact', 'important or significant work', 'helping others' (3 studies each), 'meaningful work', 'influence', and 'contribution' (2 studies each). The word use in the operationalization is often inconsistent with the name of the concept ('meaningful') and its common definition in terms of 'purpose'. Most scales also refer to 'society' (10 studies), followed by 'others' or 'other people' (5 studies), and 'community' (3 studies). A detailed overview can be seen in the data charting form on the OSF webpage.

#### 1.4 Do people consider meaningful work important?

Several studies have assessed the extent to which people consider having meaningful work important. Using data from the 2015 International Social Survey Program across 37 countries, Dur and van Lent (2019) find that close to 77 percent of responders report having a job useful for society as important or very important to them. Kesternich et al. (2021) report that while contributing to society is considered at least somewhat important by 75% of the German population, it ranks below job security and fair wages, which are the two most appreciated job attributes for both employed and unemployed individuals. In the United States, Cotofan et al. (2023) find that the working-age population considers doing important work that gives a feeling of accomplishment more important than having a high income, chances for advancement, job security, and short working hours. By contrast, Maestas et al. (2023) find that the working-age population in the United States is less willing to sacrifice wages for more frequent opportunities to make a positive impact on society than for other nonmonetary benefits, such as autonomy, paid time off or training opportunities. A discrete choice experiment by de Schouwer and Kesternich (2025) shows that Dutch people are willing to sacrifice as much of their wage for a socially useful job as they are for high schedule adaptability, and slightly more than for the option to work from home.

Preferences for meaningful work differ strongly across demographic groups. One particularly well-studied pattern is that women place higher value on meaningful work than men (e.g. Fortin 2008; Chevalier 2007; Burbano et al. 2024; Non et al. 2022; de Schouwer and Kesternich 2025). Gender differences in preferences for meaning are particularly large and widespread when it comes to making a social impact, with smaller differences noted for nonsocial impact, especially in wealthier countries and among educated individuals (Burbano et al., 2024). It helps explain critical behavioral outcomes, including women's self-selection into more prosocial occupations and increased likelihood of working in the public rather than the private sector. Chevalier (2007) provides direct evidence that these value differences contribute to the gender wage gap.

Beyond gender, the literature documents a few other patterns in preferences across demographics. The first is parental status: mothers value work meaning lower than women without children (de Schouwer &



Kesternich, 2025). Kesternich et al. (2021) demonstrate that unemployed individuals value work meaning less than employed individuals. Cotofan et al. (2023) find that preferences for job meaning increase with age and decrease with income. This contradicts the observation of Baudot et al. (2022) that younger generations desire more purposeful work, based on their research on accounting firms. Macroeconomic conditions also shape preferences for meaning: Cotofan et al. (2023) finds that economic recessions during young adulthood, known as the impressionable years, create cohorts of workers who give higher priority to income, whereas booms make cohorts care more about job meaning for the rest of their lives. They also demonstrate an impact of contemporaneous booms and decreases, with people's preference for meaningful work being higher during prosperous economic times.

In conclusion, having meaningful work is important for many, though not all, people. Its relevance is not new; the longstanding view that humans are guided instinctively by a desire for purposeful work can be traced back to, for instance, Karl Marx and Thorstein Veblen in the 1800s (Wisman, 2023; Spencer, 2023; Dean et al., 2022; Nikolova & Cnossen, 2020). Yet, results on the relative importance of meaningful work compared to other job attributes are mixed. It remains an open question whether people consider having meaningful work more important nowadays than in the past.

## 1.5 Do most people consider their work meaningful?

Empirical studies show that most people perceive their work as meaningful. The influential work of the anthropologist David Graeber suggests that 20% to 50% of jobs in the developed world are meaningless to the point that even the employee cannot justify its existence, referring to them as 'bullshit jobs'. In response, Dur and van Lent (2019) find much lower rates in a cross-national survey: only 8% of workers disagree or strongly disagree with the statement "My job is useful to society", while nearly three quarters of respondents consider their job useful, and the remaining 17 percent is doubtful about the usefulness of their job. Using the same survey, Asuyama (2021) shows that responses are similar for the question "In my job, I can help other people". For college-educated individuals in the United States, Dean et al. (2022) show that approximately half are very satisfied with "their job's contribution to society", while 36% are somewhat satisfied, 10% are somewhat dissatisfied, and 3% are very dissatisfied. For a representative adult population in the United States, Bolotnyy et al. (2022) report that 63 percent of the working age population finds their work to be useful always or most of the time, while 53 percent of the population feels that they have opportunities to make a positive impact on their community or society. In Europe, Nikolova and Cnossen (2020) find that only 5% of workers disagree or strongly disagree that they do useful work and that it gives them the feeling of work well done. While these studies report lower percentages of people with meaningless jobs than suggested by David Graeber, they are not negligible.

Kaplan and Schulhofer-Wohl (2018) examine using time-use data how perceptions of having meaningful work have evolved in the United States from 1950 to the present due to shifts in occupational structures. They estimate that the share of meaningless jobs is lower than in the past. Women have shifted toward occupations that produce more meaningfulness while men have shifted towards occupations that produce less meaningfulness. These shifts are concentrated among people with lower education levels. The trends in meaningfulness are the same across races; it has risen for both white and black women and fallen for both white and black men. Dur and van Lent (2019) examined time trends across 37 countries for the period 1989-2015. They find that the percentage of perceived useless jobs has remained stable and has not fluctuated with the business cycle.

Half of socially useless jobs are occupied by workers who find it important to have a socially useful job (Dur & van Lent, 2019). This raises the question to what extent preferences for meaningful work translate into actual meaningful work. The initial evidence is mixed. Maestas et al. (2023) find no evidence for a sorting effect in relation to meaningful work, that is, individuals who value meaningful work more do not select into jobs with meaningful work. By contrast, Burbano et al. (2024) and de Schouwer and Kesternich (2025) show that preferences for meaning shape sorting on the labor market, where women are more likely to sort into certain occupations where there is a larger chance of finding meaningful work.

The economic literature on meaningful work has given relatively much attention to the question: Who considers their work meaningful? Considerable heterogeneity in the incidence of meaningful work is observed. The percentage of useless jobs varies between 5% and 14% across the 37 nations covered by Dur and van Lent (2019). The variation seems to be more driven by country-specific reasons than by broader geographic, cultural, or development patterns (see also Asuyama, 2021).

There are considerable demographic differences. Young workers consider having the least meaningful jobs, with meaningfulness increasing with age afterwards (Dur and van Lent, 2019) or peaking in people's late 30s and 40s (Maestas et al., 2023). More educated workers consider having more meaningful work (Dur and van Lent, 2019; Maestas et al., 2023), and workers with more intellectually challenging jobs are more satisfied with their job's social contribution (Dean et al., 2022). However, the evidence on education levels is not fully consistent. Kaplan and Schulhofer-Wohl (2018) find different results when exploring, with a different dataset, a similar representative sample of American workers as Maestas et al. (2023). They observe that less educated women experience more meaningful work than their higher-educated counterparts, while lower-educated men experience the most meaning, followed by the high-educated, while medium-educated men experience the least meaning. The evidence on gender is also mixed. Maestas et al. (2023) find that women perceive to have more socially useful jobs in the United States. Similarly, for the Netherlands, de Schouwer and Kesternich (2025) find that 47.8% of women report having a highly meaningful job, as opposed to just 32.5% of men. However, Dur and van Lent (2019) do not find this across nations despite women's greater preference for meaningful work (Burbano et al., 2024). Concerning race, whites tend to have more meaningful jobs than non-whites in the United States (Maestas et al., 2023), and upon further inspection, white women experience more meaningfulness than black women, but black men experience more meaningfulness than white men (Kaplan & Schulhofer-Wohl, 2018).

There is also strong variation in perceptions of meaningful work across sectors and occupations (Dur & van Lent, 2019; Nikolova & Cnossen, 2020; Dean et al., 2022). Studies consistently find that workers in the public or non-profit sector consider their job to be more meaningful and are more satisfied with their job's social contribution than workers in the private sector (Dur & van Lent, 2019; Dean et al., 2022). Workers in smaller firms tend to experience more meaningful work (Dean et al., 2022; Nikolova & Cnossen, 2020). Virtually all workers in objectively 'essential' jobs such as teachers, healthcare workers, and police officers consider their job highly meaningful to society. Moreover, occupations providing creativity and autonomy tend to have greater meaningfulness perceptions, such as jobs in the craft and related trades industry and agricultural sector. Occupational groups considering their work the least meaningful include elementary professions with simple and routine tasks, as well as certain white-collar jobs in, for instance, finance, sales, marketing, and public relations.

Several studies find that top managers, and to a lesser extent middle managers, are likely to report more socially useful work, and greater satisfaction with their job's contribution to society, than regular workers

(Dur & van Lent, 2019; Dean et al., 2022; Nikolova et al., 2023). Correspondingly, self-employed supervisors experience slightly more work meaningfulness than solo entrepreneurs (Nikolova et al., 2023). However, Nikolova and Cnossen (2020) find that management, along with elementary occupations, is associated with the lowest levels of job meaningfulness in Europe, compared to the seven other occupational groups in the 1-digit ISCO-88 classification, after controlling for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. A manager's number of subordinates has no effect (Nikolova & Cnossen, 2020).

Finally, there is mixed evidence on the relationship between pay and meaningful work. Maestas et al. (2023) find that higher-wage workers in the United States tend to have jobs that offer more opportunities to make a positive impact on society. However, Dean et al. (2022) finds that higher-wage workers in the United States are less satisfied with their job's social contribution. For Europe, Nikolova and Cnossen (2020) find no clear relationship between income and meaningful work.

## 1.6 How is the future of meaningful work perceived?

In ecological economics, some recent publications argue the need to reorient work toward socially useful and ecologically sustainable outcomes while phasing out socially useless or harmful jobs (Gerold et al., 2023; Bohnenberger, 2022; Mair et al., 2020). Mair et al. (2020) argue that much work in modern Western society is something people are coerced into doing in order to secure their livelihoods. If people are free to choose, they are likely to choose work they believe is socially useful. One approach discussed by Gerold et al. (2023) to reduce people's dependence on work for their livelihood is universal basic income, which could be financed through increased taxes on wealth, luxury consumption, inheritances, resources, and energy. Workers may not only be coerced into socially useless or harmful jobs but may also perceive their work as meaningful while unknowingly engaging in harmful activities. This perception can be shaped by contextual factors, such as misinformation. Robbins and Sharp (2003) demonstrate how this dynamic sheds light on why individuals who seek to engage in meaningful environmental action—by cultivating and preserving a “green” lawn—nonetheless persist in using lawn chemicals despite their harmful ecological effects.

Some other studies discuss how technological progress will influence the future of meaningful work. If technological progress would lead to less need for work, this would be considered desirable in (neo)classical economics that views work as a “disutility”. However, Spencer (2023) argues that having no work to do threatens people's need for purpose and achievement derived from pursuing meaningful activities in work, even if leisure offers a source of meaning in its own right. This issue might be alleviated by the fact that automation might reduce the exposure of workers to work that lacks meaning, such as simple and repetitive tasks, while at the same enabling them to potentially do other work that is more meaningful and life-enhancing. Spencer (2023) argues that the extent to which future work brings meaning to workers, even while technological progress accelerates, offers important input in the discussion between proponents for preserving work by upskilling work while leaving burdensome, low-skilled jobs for robots versus proponents for eliminating work and supporting, for instance, a universal basic income.

## 2 What are the antecedents of meaningful work?

Most of the papers described in the scoping review implicitly or explicitly discuss the antecedents of meaningful work: what factors are likely to increase workers' meaning(fulness) at work? However, theories on the antecedents of meaningful work in economics are scarce.

## 2.1 Three categories of antecedents

To structure the discussion on which antecedents economists have described so far and how they function, we build on the theoretical framework proposed by Rosso et al. (2010), visualized in Figure 1. Originating in organizational psychology, this framework was developed to bring conceptual structure to the otherwise fragmented meaning of work literature. It therefore also offers a useful guide for economists, who face a similar challenge in explicitly incorporating meaning into formal economic theory.

The framework distinguishes three main sources of meaning at work: the self, others and the work context.<sup>5</sup> These range from more intrinsic sources, such as personal values or preferences, to more extrinsic ones, like relationships with coworkers or organizational mission. We begin by explaining this framework and how it relates to economic perspectives, followed by a detailed discussion of empirical evidence from the economics literature in Section 2.2.

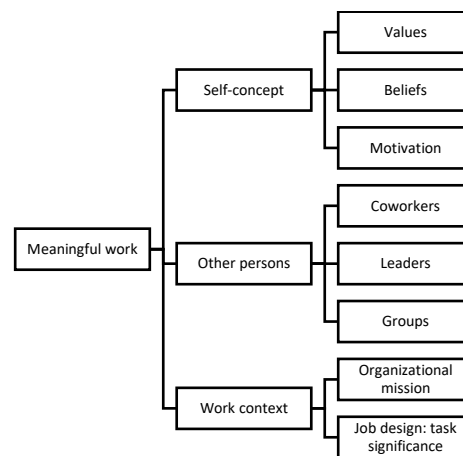


Figure 1 Visualization of antecedents of meaningful work, based on Rosso et al. (2010).

### 2.1.1 The self

An individual's self-concept, the way in which they see themselves, influences their perception of the world and, by extension, their perception of the meaning of work. Studies indicate that a person's values, motivations, and beliefs play a significant role in shaping their perception of the meaning of work (Rosso et al., 2010). Importantly, from an economic perspective, this self-concept can be viewed as either a time-varying or constant characteristic of individuals that influences preferences. These can pertain to preferences for consumption and leisure, but also for meaning in work (Burbano et al., 2024).

The self-concept influences how individuals experience meaning at work through three key factors: values, motivations, and beliefs related to work. Values, shaped by cultural, institutional, and personal factors, significantly affect how people interpret their work. In the workplace, work values represent the outcomes individuals hope to achieve through their jobs – and thus how they make sense of their work. However, the broad range of definitions and interpretations of work values complicates efforts to generalize across

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<sup>5</sup> The original model also includes a fourth 'spiritual' aspect, but we have excluded it from the discussion for brevity, as it has little direct link to existing economic studies.

different contexts. Similarly, internal beliefs about the role of work in life can shape one's experience of meaning.

Motivation, and particularly intrinsic motivation, also plays a critical role in shaping perceptions of meaningful work. Intrinsic motivation stems from engaging in activities that individuals find inherently enjoyable or interesting, with affective motivation theories suggesting that it arises when individuals feel they are the primary cause of their own actions, i.e. have an internal locus of control (De Charms, 1968; Seo et al., 2004). Alternatively, cognitive motivation theories propose that motivation results from the interaction between a person's preferences and the work environment (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In this category, self-determination theory posits that people feel intrinsically motivated when three psychological needs are met: feeling competent, autonomous and related at work. Workers who are intrinsically motivated are able to actually experience meaningful work. Both theories imply different perspectives on the antecedents of meaningful work for economists: intrinsic motivation originating from internal locus of control may lead individuals to self-select into jobs with the right working conditions to find meaning, whereas cognitive motivation theory would predict that the environment may help shape the degree to which work is perceived as meaningful.

### 2.1.2 Others

A second area of research within the meaning of work literature examines how individuals' interactions and relationships with others, both inside (e.g. colleagues, supervisors) and outside the workplace (e.g. clients, customers, patients), impact their perceptions of work's meaning. Scholars in organizational studies have investigated the influence of various relationships on the meaning of work, focusing on coworkers, leaders, groups and communities, and family. Social recognition and peer appreciation, which are external non-financial rewards, can have internal effects on work meaningfulness and intrinsic motivation (Rosso et al., 2010).

The roles individuals play in their groups and their sense of identification with these groups significantly impact their perceived levels of meaningfulness at work. Organizations can shape the meaning of work by providing opportunities for employees to develop stronger connections to their larger communities. When organizations enable employees to contribute meaningfully to their community, they experience a greater sense of purpose, agency, and impact, which enhances their perception of meaningfulness (Rosso et al., 2010).

Leaders play a crucial role in framing the mission, goals, purpose, and identity of the organization, which influences employees' perceptions of their work's meaning. Leadership styles which facilitate social recognition of a subordinate's accomplishments can enhance meaningfulness, as demonstrated by for instance the experiments of Ariely et al. (2008). When leaders articulate work in ideological terms and emphasize higher-order values, followers may perceive their work as aligned with their personal values, thus enhancing its meaning. Leaders can effectively connect the individual self to the organizational mission, and are therefore crucial in linking the self to the work context in creating meaning at work.

### 2.1.3 The work context

Perhaps most significant to economists is the third source of meaning: the work context. Consistent with the framework of Rosso et al. (2010), Cassar and Meier (2018) emphasize two key antecedents of meaningful work in relation to the work context: the mission of the organization and job design as a mechanism to promote task significance.

The organizational mission represents the fundamental goals, values, and purposes to which an organization is committed. Consistent with person–organization (P–O) fit theory, these missions serve as sources of meaning when employees perceive a congruence between their core values and those of the organization (e.g. Brieger et al., 2021). While perceived congruence can enhance meaning for employees, the deep meanings inherent in organizational missions can also have drawbacks. Organizations that establish psychological contracts with employees based on their mission or ideology may encounter stronger negative reactions if they are seen as violating these ideals (Cassar & Meier, 2018). While many organizations do not have an obvious and direct social purpose beyond profit maximization, they can nonetheless seek to create this purpose through concrete socially responsible business activities, such as philanthropic activities, and more generally, by paying attention to corporate social responsibility (Henderson & van den Steen, 2015).

Job design, which refers to the process of organizing work tasks, responsibilities, and roles, is considered important in helping fulfill the three psychological needs at the basis of self-determination theory: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. When work is designed to promote a sense of purpose and impact, it contributes to greater perceived task significance. In turn, greater task significance, which refers to the extent to which individuals feel their work impacts others, increases perceptions of having meaningful work. Job tasks are critical in shaping this experience, especially regarding social context. Job crafting also plays a role, as individuals can redesign their jobs to align their values with their tasks, thereby enhancing meaningfulness.

#### 2.1.4 Intrinsic versus extrinsic meaning makers

The conceptual model illustrates a range of antecedents to meaningfulness, ranging from the individual self, through social relationships, to the broader work context. This spectrum reflects a progression from intrinsic to extrinsic sources of meaning. Motivation, primarily driven by intrinsic psychological needs, emerges from internal drivers, similar to personal beliefs and values. Although these intrinsic factors may be influenced by external conditions, either through the satisfaction of or the shaping of these needs, values, and beliefs, they are largely of internal origin. In contrast, meaning derived from other people, such as leaders or communities, is more extrinsic in nature, illustrating the ways in which the surrounding environment can shape the experience of meaningful work. Finally, the work context itself, including the nature of tasks and their broader societal impact, represents the most extrinsic factor. As such, it is also the most amenable to change through policy interventions, making it particularly relevant for economists.

Nevertheless, although the model and the proposed spectrum suggest that meaningfulness originates from distinct sources, these antecedents are, in practice, always interrelated. While individuals possess intrinsic needs, values, and beliefs, the fulfilment of these needs or the alignment of their values with their work requires interaction with specific work contexts or relationships with others. Meaningfulness arises from the dynamic interplay between internal factors and external circumstances. The subjective weighting of the perceived importance of certain meaning makers, based on person-specific values or needs, then influences the perception of extrinsic meaning makers. Together, they determine the meaning experienced by the individual.

Empirically, this poses challenges on distinguishing between the antecedents, and not all empirical studies make or even discuss the explicit distinction. Importantly, what the economist can empirically *observe* most likely occurs in a combination of the three elements: e.g. leaders that communicate an organization's mission, that might appeal more to some than others because of their belief system. Nevertheless,

conceptually understanding that these elements interlink helps understanding the origins of meaningfulness at work.

## 2.2 The economic view on the antecedents of meaningful work

This section will discuss some of the papers of the scoping review that explain differences in the antecedents of meaningful work, structured according to the three categories of antecedents identified in Section 2.1 and a separate category for papers that explicitly focus on the interrelation between some of the factors. Of the 43 papers in the scoping review 32 papers make mention of the origins of meaningful work. 11 don't mention it explicitly, for instance because they focus on the outcomes of meaning (see Section 3 on the consequences of meaningful work for a discussion of these papers).

### The self-concept

Eleven studies explicitly highlight the role of antecedents that are rooted in personal values, beliefs or motivations in shaping perceptions of meaningful work.

A relatively large subgroup in this part focuses on differences between workers in *preferences for meaning*. In most cases, this is driven by personal values: (some) workers find it important to be useful to society and therefore sort into occupations and firms that allow them to be useful to society. They also tend to organize their work in ways that make their tasks more meaningful, largely driven by their values around the importance of meaningful work. There can be various channels through which this occurs: racial identity (Santos et al., 2024), prosocial attitudes (Non et al., 2022), ideas on how donations of volunteer work should be spent (Mertins & Walter, 2021), and by forming internal preferences for useful or impactful work (e.g. Chen et al., 2020; Maestas et al., 2023; Reggiani, 2024; Mair et al., 2020; Fortin, 2008). Importantly, the self-concept can also be formed by external factors, as Cotofan et al. (2023) demonstrate: workers have higher preferences for meaning when they entered the labor market during an economic boom.

In many cases, these preferences are gendered, where women tend to assign more value to doing intrinsically meaningful work (Peters et al., 2020), useful work (Chevalier, 2007), meaning derived from social impact (Burbano et al., 2024), the ability to positively impact one's community or society through work (de Schouwer & Kesternich, 2025), and the importance of being useful to society (Fortin, 2005). As a result women are more likely to sort into meaningful work both by sorting into more meaningful occupations, or within occupations sorting into more meaningful tasks (Kaplan & Schulhofer-Wohl, 2018).

Some studies that deal with meaningful work from the self-concept focus explicitly on the case of entrepreneurs. For instance, Boudreaux et al. (2022), Kautonen et al. (2024) and Nikolova et al. (2023) argue that entrepreneurship facilitates the development of one's potentials, through self-actualization and a sense of purpose, leading to eudaimonic well-being. Santos et al. (2024) discuss how entrepreneurship can be a means of expressing identity and finding meaning in work. They focus on African American entrepreneurs who find meaning by building ventures that express their racial identity and inspire others in their community.

Drawing on cognitive motivation theories, particularly self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), several studies emphasize the role of fulfilling psychological needs in experiencing meaningful work. Cassar and Meier (2018), Burbano et al. (2024) and Nikolova and Cnossen (2020) explore the role of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in enhancing work meaningfulness, demonstrating that these intrinsic factors significantly contribute to perceptions of work meaningfulness. An individual's personal needs for the three

psychological elements are then part of the self-concept, whereas the satisfaction of these needs can only emerge in interaction with their environment.

## **Others**

Of the three channels, the 'others' is the least discussed in economics papers from our scoping review. De Schouwer and Kesternich (2025) show that higher levels of interpersonal interaction are correlated with higher levels of meaning. Nikolova and Cnossen (2020) go even further to show that relatedness, whether workers feel appreciated by their colleagues and supervisors, is the strongest predictor of perceived meaningfulness at work, even more so than objective job indicators such as wage, job security and occupation. This makes it all the more intriguing that this component is often the least emphasized in economics papers.

Furthermore, leaders play a crucial role in framing the mission and goals of an organization, which influences employees' perceptions of their work's meaning. Leadership styles that facilitate social recognition can enhance meaningfulness (Ariely et al., 2008). Nikolova et al. (2023) suggest that self-employed supervisors experience more meaning due to higher levels of autonomy, self-efficacy, but also (societal) recognition. In their study on economics graduate students, Bolotnyy et al. (2022) argue that effective PhD advisers are essential in helping students identify meaningful research questions, and as a guide to finding purpose outside academia.

Kosfeld et al. (2017) also focus on recognition, but as a social status tool, and find that task meaning and meaning from recognition work via the same motivational channel. In tasks where students are both recognized for their effort and informed about the direct meaning of the tasks, both factors contribute to motivation. While Kosfeld et al. treat recognition and meaning as separate elements, one could view their definition of meaning as encompassing both task meaning (originating from the work context) and social meaning (originating from the recognition of others). In this sense, we align with their conclusions that recognition and meaning have a crowding effect, as both serve to provide meaning to work: one through the 'context' channel and the other through the 'others' channel. Similarly, Levitt and Neckermann (2014) distinguish between task meaning and worker recognition, both of which, following Rosso et al. (2010), can be seen as contributing to meaning: task meaning through the context channel and recognition through the others channel.

## **The Work Context**

The work context is the most frequently discussed source of meaning, as it is the most extrinsic factor and heavily influenced by firm or policy interventions, making it particularly relevant to economists. Out of the 43 papers in our scoping review, 21 discuss the context as a meaning-maker. Given that 32 papers explicitly address the origins of meaning, this indicates that roughly two-thirds of the economics literature describing antecedents of work meaningfulness focuses on the context in which work occurs.

Cassar and Meier (2018) identify two key pathways through which meaning influences labor market outcomes: the organization's mission and job design. Jobs with a social mission are more likely to fulfill employees' need for meaning by linking their actions to a larger social impact. Job design that fosters autonomy, competence, and relatedness is crucial for satisfying workers' psychological needs. Employees can derive meaning from the higher organizational purpose (Thakor, 2024; Song et al., 2023) or from job-specific roles and responsibilities. Most papers in the scoping review focus on job design, particularly task



significance, i.e. the degree to which tasks are seen as useful, meaningful or impactful (e.g., Chandler & Kapelner, 2013; Kosfeld et al., 2017). Another central theme is the mission, often linked to an organization's goals or broader societal missions, such as the distinction between 'green' and 'brown' jobs (Bohnenberger, 2022).

Task significance, the perception that one's work positively benefits others, is one of the strongest predictors of meaningful work, as well as the autonomy a person has on their job (Santos et al., 2024). This is in line with the work by Ariely et al. (2008), who understand the motivational foundations of meaning to be in purpose, the idea that employees understand how their task is linked to a larger objective, as well as in recognition (as described above). There seems to be, however, an upper boundary to the extent to which perceived task significance can be increased for workers with high levels of meaningfulness. In a field experiment, Fracchia et al. (2023) find that a video treatment emphasizing the task significance of community health workers, whom are typically unpaid volunteers with high levels of intrinsic motivation, did not consistently raise the perceived social impact of their work.

A common complaint among healthcare workers is that bureaucratic tasks, particularly data registration for which they don't see a direct benefit to the patient, are often perceived as meaningless, leaving them with insufficient time to care for patients (Hoeyer & Wadmann, 2020). Pathways to more meaningful work include improved job design, such as identifying which data are essential, to what extent forms should be standardized versus customized, and optimally delegating these tasks, and better communication to ensure healthcare workers understand the relevance of the data they handle. This is also what Levitt and Neckermann (2024) highlight: meaning can be embedded in seemingly 'mundane' tasks, such as bureaucratic ones, thus stimulating the meaningfulness of a job. Furthermore, the same task can be seen as significant in one part or occupation within an organization, but not the other, such that task significance is not a uniformly understood concept (Hoeyer & Wadmann, 2020).

Dur and van Lent (2019) study whether people perceive their jobs as being useless to society and identify several factors that contribute to this perception. They present five potential causes, supported by tentative empirical evidence. First, they highlight the role of occupation: professions like salespersons, lawyers, and finance professionals rank highest in terms of individuals believing their work is socially useless. This may stem from the nature of these jobs, which can involve activities perceived as harmful to society, such as selling unnecessary products, exploiting psychological vulnerabilities, or engaging in rent-seeking and lobbying for harmful causes. Second, alienation caused by division of labor into highly specialized parts can make meaningful work look meaningless, a concept dating back to Marx and Taylorism. Third, management quality, which is a concept that touches on 'others'. Fourth, job protection legislation may keep people in a job, but with very few tasks to do – which makes their work less meaningful. Their fifth and final potential cause is labor hoarding: the tendency of firms to hold on to more workers than necessary (Dur and van Lent, 2019).

Bohnenberger (2022) argues that green jobs enable workers to transform their work into sustainable, responsible and meaningful activities, in contrast to brown jobs, as the significance of their tasks is to contribute to a larger goal, namely that of a green economy. Bolotnyy et al. (2022) focus on the importance of meaningful research questions for a specific subsample of workers: economics graduate students. Dean et al. (2022) document a series of objective job characteristics and their relationship to meaningful work: income, firm size, intellectual challenge, private versus public sector, IT use and hierarchical position. They

find that of all managers, those in education and in healthcare, sectors with a clear mission, are most likely to be satisfied with their job's contribution to society.

Self-employment can lead to higher levels of work meaningfulness, as it often follows from a self-directed journey, driven by a personal purpose (Nikolova et al., 2023). Reasons that supervisors could experience more meaning include their higher levels of autonomy, self-efficacy, empowerment, recognition, participation in decision-making, visible impact on others' well-being, and the ability to motivate, coach, and advise employees while aligning their roles with the organization's mission. The fact that self-employed supervisors are more financially successful may be one reason why they experience slightly more work meaningfulness than solo entrepreneurs. Kautonen et al. (2024) add to that that a sense of place, or place attachment, also contributes to shaping meaningful work for entrepreneurs. The fact that they can achieve social impact for their local community helps shape experiences of meaning.

### **The interplay of three meaning-makers**

Most of the empirical findings from the papers of the scoping review either implicitly or explicitly study a combination of the three meaning-makers, where the combination of the self-concept and the work context is the most common.

Nikolova and Cnossen (2020) emphasize that meaningful work arises from the interplay between personal motivations (the self) and the work context. They argue that intrinsic motivation, driven by feelings of enjoyment, interest, and satisfaction, emerges when the environment is able to satisfy workers' psychological needs, allowing them to experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness in their work. This aligns with cognitive motivation theories, such as self-determination theory, which suggest that motivation arises from the alignment between one's self-concept and the work environment (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Cassar and Meier (2018) treat the three psychological need aspects of a job as (exogenously or endogenously) chosen by the employer, while Nikolova and Cnossen (2020) treat them as emerging in the interaction between personal needs and the environment.

Whereas Burbano et al. (2024) focus mostly on differences in preferences for meaning originating from the self-concept, they also highlight the importance of task significance, measured as the (non)social impact of their job. This concerns the interaction between the self-concept and the job design. In a similar vein, Non et al. (2022) focus on the match between the mission of the organization and the employees' preferences and values.

Entrepreneurship can facilitate the development of one's best potentials and a sense of purpose and meaning in life (Boudreaux et al., 2022). Drawing on the concept of eudaimonic well-being, Boudreaux et al. (2022) state that entrepreneurs often experience flourishing through the everyday tasks that entail autonomy, engagement, meaning, and a sense of achievement. All of which are fundamental for greater well-being. Entrepreneurial actions are themselves forms of expression and autonomy. Thus, entrepreneurship embodies the very process of self-actualizing one's human potential through purposeful activities that can lead to a fulfilling life. Hence, entrepreneurial work may offer much in terms of self-determination and personal fulfilment even for those struggling to make ends meet. Kautonen et al. (2024) provide tentative evidence that entrepreneurs' sense of place, their psychological bond with the local setting of their entrepreneurial activities, can provide them with more purpose in life.

All in all, this section reviewed several papers from our scoping review that explain the antecedents of meaningful work, structured around the three categories of the self, others and the work context, with a separate category for studies focusing on the interrelation between these factors. Of the 43 papers reviewed, 32 explicitly discuss the origins of meaningful work. The studies explore different sources of meaning, including personal values and motivations, job design, and the role of relationships with others. Other research suggests that meaningful work emerges from the interplay of intrinsic factors, such as autonomy and self-concept, as well as extrinsic elements like job significance and social recognition. These findings highlight the complexity of meaningful work and underscore the importance of both personal and contextual factors in shaping individuals' perceptions of work meaning.

### 3 What are the consequences of meaningful work?

Standard models of labor supply exclude intangible factors such as meaning, identity, and pride because these were traditionally difficult to quantify (Ariely et al., 2008). With more data available, Cassar and Meier (2018) propose to extend the basic neoclassical model of work motivation and labor supply to include work meaning as the third argument in the utility function, which then includes: the utility from income  $Y$  as a means to consumption, a cost  $C$  of providing effort (or foregoing utility from leisure), and the utility from meaningful work. Drawing on self-determination theory, work meaning enters positively into the utility function representing a source of intrinsic motivation (see also Asuyama, 2021). In relation to this proposed framework, section 3 will explore the following question: How, and to what extent, does meaningful work shape labor market behaviors and experiences, including labor supply, (reservation) wages, performance, and well-being?

#### 3.1 Effect on labor supply and (reservation) wages

Cassar and Meier (2018) argue that job meaning could be either a substitute or a complement to monetary compensation, which in turn will influence whether people accept lower pay for a meaningful job, or whether job meaning and pay tend to rise together (see also Thakor, 2024; Song et al., 2023). On the one hand, the theory of compensating wage differentials suggests that workers are willing to accept lower wages to perform tasks that offer intrinsic rewards, one prominent example being the fulfilment of the intrinsic desire to spend time and effort in a meaningful way. On the other hand, workers may demand higher compensation for doing work that contributes more to society out of fairness concerns (Kesternich et al. 2021). Alternatively, if a job is described as meaningful, workers may infer from this that a high level of effort is required to do the job properly, which in turn may increase the reservation wage (Kesternich et al. 2021).

Experimental studies elicit respondents' reservation wages or labor supply based on meaningful or meaningless tasks (Ariely et al., 2008; Chandler & Kapelner, 2013; Kesternich et al., 2021), job descriptions (Non et al., 2020; Maestas et al., 2023; de Schouwer and Kesternich, 2025), or donation incentives (Regianni & Rilke, 2024). As predicted by the theory of compensating wage differentials, Ariely et al. (2008) and Chandler and Kapelner (2013) demonstrate that more meaningful tasks elicit a lower reservation wage and increase labor supply. Yet, the results seem context-dependent given that Chandler and Kapelner (2013) find these effects to a lesser extent for Indian workers than US workers. Kesternich et al. (2021) find that, overall, work meaning has no significant effect on labor supply. Indeed, there is no effect for subjects for whom work meaning is not 'very important'. However, for subjects who consider work meaning as very important (18%), a more meaningful task reduces the reservation wage. By contrast, among unemployed individuals (14%), work meaning increases the reservation wage. This is explained by their observation that

unemployed individuals value work meaning less than employed individuals, allowing the opposing mechanisms discussed above to dominate. Thus, making jobs meaningful is not necessarily an inexpensive way to increase one's willingness to accept a job.

More consistent support for the theory of compensating wage differentials is observed by experimental studies using job descriptions. Using a representative sample of the US population, Maestas et al. (2023) observe that individuals are willing to forgo 3.6% of their wage to have frequent opportunities to impact the community/society relative to occasional opportunities. While the compensation differential for work meaning is substantial, it is smaller than that of some other job attributes, such as work flexibility. The willingness to pay for meaningful work is similar across gender, race, education level, and age. Using a representative sample of the Dutch population, de Schouwer and Kesternich (2025) find that a job offering 'often or always' a positive influence on the person's community or society, as opposed to 'never or sometimes', is valued at 9.0% of the wage by women without children, 6.7% by women with children, 4.8% by men without children, and 4.5% by men with children.

Non et al. (2022) elicit meaning by manipulating the organization's mission in the job description. They provide evidence that high-tech companies with a mission centered on innovation or corporate social responsibility (CSR) are the most preferred, followed by non-profit organizations, while profit-driven companies are least preferred. These results suggest that commercial organizations with social missions enjoy a competitive edge in attracting talent. Furthermore, women and individuals who exhibit higher levels of prosocial behavior and lower levels of competitiveness are more likely to be drawn to non-profit organizations and commercial companies with social missions. Notably, these preferences do not appear to negatively impact the ability to attract talented candidates, as there are no significant differences in respondents' grade point averages or self-efficacy across different groups. In terms of reservation wages, workers are on average willing to forgo €170 in terms of net monthly salary to work in a company that focuses on innovation, and €220 to work in a company that focuses on CSR and sustainability, which equals around 10% of the wage. Non et al. (2022) and de Schouwer and Kesternich (2025) find similar reservation wages and gender differentials, which are more pronounced compared with Maestas et al. (2023). Possible reasons are that the degree of meaning differs less in the experimental conditions of Maestas et al. (2023) ('frequent' vs. 'occasional') or the country context (United States versus the Netherlands).

Regianni and Rilke (2024) manipulate meaning through different types of donation incentives. They show that gig workers are more likely to take the job when donation incentives are unifying (donating to UNICEF) rather than polarizing (donating to the National Rifle Association). However, labor supply decreases when unifying donation incentives become larger at the expense of their own wages. The experiment also includes a condition without donation incentives, leaving workers with a higher wage, as donations come at the expense of the worker's wage. Gig workers are just as likely to accept the job when no donation is offered as when a small unifying donation incentive is offered at the worker's expense. However, labor supply is lower when unifying donations become larger, and thus their wages lower, compared to the job without donation incentives. Job acceptance for polarizing donation purposes is lower for all relative donation sizes than when no donation is offered. This study shows that adding meaning through donations does not give companies a competitive advantage if it comes at a cost to the worker's wage.

The main advantage of these experiments is that they provide causal insights. However, the experimental studies have various limitations. Hypothetical job choices in experiments using job descriptions may not equate to actual job choices. Effects observed by manipulating perceptions of task significance may not

equate to experiencing work meaningfulness in one's overall job. Moreover, these experiments assume choice freedom. However, Spencer (2023) points out that, in reality, choice freedom to do meaningful work is limited. Many workers must work to live and have little choice between jobs. Moreover, once workers agree to undertake jobs, they face having to take orders from managers. The extent to which workers' choices for a meaningful job is realized depends on the actions of those with power in the workplace. These issues limit the theory of compensating differentials in predicting how wages are traded off against meaningful work.

Some studies take these issues into account by exploring non-experimental survey data. Cross-sectional studies provide mixed evidence. Consistent with the experimental evidence, Chevalier (2007) observes lower wages in the United Kingdom among workers who consider having a useful job more important, particularly among men. By contrast, Dur and van Lent (2019) find, contrary to the theory of compensating wage differentials, that workers in socially useless jobs are not financially compensated for this disadvantage. Dur and van Lent (2019) also explored effects on job leavers. They find that workers who perceive their job as socially useless are more likely to take action to leave the organization and find work elsewhere, particularly those who care about holding a socially useful job. Similarly, Nikolova and Cnossen (2020) demonstrate that workers who believe to have meaningful work are more willing to delay retirement, as well as participate in training.

### 3.2 Effect on effort and performance

The default approach in economics is to promote effort and improve performance through formal structures and practices, financial incentives, and extrinsic motivation (Ali et al., 2023). Economics lags behind other disciplines in incorporating non-financial and intrinsic drivers in modelling the determinants of performance. A growing number of economists consider that incorporating intrinsic drivers more in economic models of performance is a major opportunity to improve such models. Advocates of considering the role of meaningful work argue that an employee engaged in meaningful work gains marginal returns not only from a potentially higher financial reward but also from the increased utility derived from performing intrinsically meaningful tasks (Song et al., 2023; Lopes, 2018). In this regard, some studies explain how meaningful work reduces the principal-agent problem (Spencer, 2023; Song et al., 2023). The assumption is made in modern economics that workers wish to 'shirk' where work is assumed to be painful and unattractive. This leads to the view that managers cannot rely on the voluntary effort of workers to achieve their goals. Economic theory rarely considers that people might benefit from not shirking and contributing positively to activities that they find meaningful.

The impact of meaningful work on effort and performance has been empirically explored in experimental studies by varying task significance across respondents. For instance, in certain studies (Chandler & Kapelner, 2013; Kesternich et al., 2021; Kosfeld et al., 2017), participants in the control group are either informed or shown that the simple tasks they completed have no practical use, for instance, by destroying the completed work or stating it won't be utilized further. Conversely, participants in the treatment group are told that their output will be preserved and used, or that it will make a difference. Chandler and Kapelner (2013) and Kosfeld et al. (2017) find that workers who are assigned "significant" tasks are more likely to increase their quantitative and qualitative output compared to the control group (see also Levitt & Neckermann, 2014). Conversely, Kesternich et al. (2021) finds no effect of work meaning on productivity in the German population, and upon further inspection, the effort of unemployed but not employed individuals increases in work meaning.

Kosfeld et al. (2017) further investigate the interplay between worker recognition and task meaningfulness. They find that recognition significantly boosts performance only when workers perceive the task as having low meaning. In such cases, recognition provides meaning to an otherwise meaningless task. Conversely, task meaningfulness does not enhance performance when recognition is present. This suggests that recognition and task meaning may act as substitutes, operating through the same motivational channel, for instance by contributing to a positive self-image.

Some studies used a different type of experimental manipulation. Regianni and Rilke (2024) varied donation incentives and showed that productivity is higher when donations are unifying (donating to UNICEF) compared to when they are polarizing (donating to the National Rifle Association) or when no donation incentive is provided. Inspired by the notion that many organizations whose core purpose is to advance a social mission pay employees below-market wages, Chen et al. (2020) manipulated earnings in social-mission jobs. Those attracted to social-mission organizations that pay below-market wages perform better individually and cooperate more effectively in teams than those attracted to social-mission organizations that pay higher wages. The individual performance effect arises because below-market pay facilitates the selection of value-congruent employees who are naturally inclined to work hard for the organizational mission. This finding is consistent with agency theory, which suggests that employees whose values and goals are congruent with those of the organization work harder toward the organizational mission. By contrast, for a simple task, Kosfeld et al. (2017) find that financial incentives do not crowd out intrinsic motivation derived from meaning.

In summary, existing evidence indicates that meaningful work can enhance effort and performance, with its impact depending on the context.

### 3.3 Effect on well-being

More meaningful work is associated with more job satisfaction and job pride, particularly for those who care about holding a socially useful job (Dur and van Lent, 2019), as well as better mental health (Bolotnyy et al., 2022), more engagement and job enthusiasm, and less stress and absenteeism (Nikolova and Cnossen 2020). Brieger et al. (2021) demonstrate, among entrepreneurs, that work meaningfulness mediates the relationship between the belief that their organization creates social value and both lower burnout and higher work engagement, particularly among entrepreneurs with strong social concerns. They explain their finding using the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory. This theory argues that resource gains, such as positive self-evaluations that work is meaningful and worthwhile for themselves or others, fuels positive work energy (e.g., higher work engagement), and prevents energy depletion (e.g., lower work burnout). The positive impact is stronger than a possible dark side of work meaningfulness in that it can spur workaholism and enhance work-life conflict. In summary, the literature consistently shows that meaningful work is associated with better well-being.

### 3.4 Other studies

In line with the literature on well-being, Asuyama (2021) shows for Western high-income countries that perceived prosocial meaning of a job is the most important predictor of job interestingness, and that its relevance is larger among public sector workers. By contrast, the economic meaning of a job (career opportunities, job security, and wage) is not a prominent predictor of job interestingness.

De Schouwer & Kesternich (2025) show that meaningful jobs typically offer less flexibility, such as work in healthcare and education. They show that women and parents value flexibility more but do not work more flexible jobs. The gender dimension of this flexibility puzzle is related to differences in meaningful work, which women value higher and sort into, at a significant price corresponding to 20 to 70% less flexibility. Using counterfactual scenarios, they estimate that if work meaning would not come at a cost to flexibility, the gender gap in compensation would be reduced by up to a quarter. Yet, it would have only a modest effect on the motherhood gap in compensation. Along these lines, Peters et al. (2020) find that achieving meaningful work in a broader sense (task variation, challenging and interesting assignments, and work autonomy) simultaneously with a good work–life balance and financial independence is difficult in female freelancers’ careers.

Lubyova and van Ours (1999) studied meaningful work from a different angle than the other studies discussed in this review. They studied the system of active labor market policies (ALMP) in the Slovak Republic in the 1990s, which largely revolved around the creation of government-subsidized ‘socially purposeful jobs’ and ‘publicly useful jobs’. Socially purposeful jobs were primarily subsidized positions created in the private sector, targeting higher-qualified functions. These jobs were socially purposeful in the sense that they were designed to reduce unemployment by offering temporary employment, improving participants’ employability, and facilitating their transition to regular jobs. Publicly useful jobs were typically lower-skilled roles in the public sector that benefited the community, such as maintenance of public spaces or infrastructure projects. They find that subsidizing publicly useful jobs, but not socially purposeful jobs, increased the chance of transition from unemployment into regular jobs.

In closing, the evidence base generally, though not in every context, aligns with the proposed framework of Cassar and Meier (2018) that workers derive utility from meaningful work. Accordingly, several studies follow Cassar and Meier (2018) in advocating for integrating the concept of meaningful work into economic models, arguing that it provides crucial insights into labor market behaviors and the structuring of work environments (see e.g., Nikolova & Cnossen, 2020). The findings generally align with the statement of Ariely et al. (2008; p.672): “Meaning is cheap [to improve], so to speak, but ignoring the dimension of meaning may be quite expensive, for employers and for society”.

## 4 Discussion

### 4.1 Conclusions

In this chapter, we summarized the extant literature in the field of economics of meaningful work. The economics literature on meaningful work comprises 43 studies, with 70% published in 2020 or later. This statistic demonstrates that meaningful work has relatively recently emerged as a focal topic of interest among economists, with the literature still being in its infancy. Compared to other disciplines, meaningful work has received relatively little attention within economics. Furthermore, existing research in the economic literature has concentrated more on the consequences of meaningful work than on its antecedents, a pattern that contrasts with the focus observed in other fields investigating meaningful work. Among the studies included in this scoping review that address antecedents, most merely discuss potential factors without empirically testing them, often relying on theories and insights borrowed from other fields.

The core contribution of the economics literature on meaningful work lies in its exploration of the economic consequences of meaningfulness, including its effects on labor supply, (reservation) wages, and worker

performance. The current evidence suggests that more meaningful work generally, though not always, leads to increased labor supply, lower (reservation) wages, and improved performance.

An important observation is that preferences for meaningful work, and by extension the willingness to trade financial compensation for meaningfulness, vary according to economic conditions and socio-demographic factors such as gender. These variations can help explain broader labor market dynamics, including the gender wage gap, employee turnover, and retirement decisions. While meaningful work is a relevant job attribute, it is neither the only nor necessarily the most important nonmonetary factor influencing worker behavior.

Conceptually, the literature reveals partial consensus on what constitutes meaningful work, with key differences regarding whether it is purely subjective, whether it requires external recognition or appreciation, and whether it necessitates a prosocial impact. A notable discrepancy exists between conceptualization and operationalization: while conceptual definitions often emphasize purpose and intrinsic meaning, operationalizations in survey-based studies tend to focus more on prosocial impact and the notion of "useful work."

## 4.2 Implications

The economics literature on meaningful work suggests deeper limitations of a 'pure' focus on economic incentives and outcomes, in particular, neglecting the importance of meaningful work. Incorporating nonmonetary job attributes, such as meaningful work, enriches economic models and enhances their ability to explain labor market dynamics and worker performance. Given that other nonmonetary job attributes show similar relevance, meaningful work should be perceived as part of a broader set of relevant nonmonetary job attributes that should be considered rather than as the dominant nonmonetary job attribute. The findings of the scoping review have implications on three levels.

At the societal level, the prevalence of jobs perceived as lacking meaning is concerning due to its implications for labor supply and productivity. In particular, in economies facing labor shortages driven by aging populations, promoting meaningful work can help boost labor supply and productivity, thereby alleviating workforce shortages. Many of these jobs could either be made more meaningful through improved job design and clearer communication of their purpose or replaced with work that has a clearer societal function. The findings also contribute to a better understanding of labor market dynamics such as the gender wage gap and the ways in which preferences for meaningful work vary with macroeconomic conditions. Moreover, the evidence reviewed on the prevalence of meaningful jobs across occupations, sectors, and industries can inform policy decisions aimed at designing more resilient and optimal economic structures, including strategies for managing the decline of 'old' industries.

At the organizational level, meaningful work reduces the principal-agent problem. Given the impacts of meaningful work on productivity and effort, there is all the more reason for employers to invest in creating meaningful work for their employees. Employers who facilitate meaningful work can reduce labor shortages and reservation wages while enhancing organizational productivity. An example is to structure work environments more based on worker-centered job design, rather than fragmented technologically optimal task design, or Taylorism, that is commonly associated with perceptions of less meaningful work. Investing in job design that aligns with workers' values and promotes autonomy, competence, and relatedness can yield long-term benefits for organizations.



Lastly, at the individual level, meaningful work can enhance well-being and performance. By implication, meaningful work is important for people to reach their full potential. It can also explain individual behaviors, such as job-switching, absenteeism, and early retirement decisions.

### 4.3 Recommendations from the literature

We found a number of recommendations from the papers in the scoping review that are worth repeating here. A key recommendation is the proposal of Cassar and Meier (2018) to extend the basic neoclassical model of work motivation and labor supply to include work meaning as the third argument in the utility function. The reviewed literature demonstrating the economic implications of meaningful work generally supports the relevance of incorporating meaningful work in economics models. However, other nonmonetary job attributes matter as well, implying that nonmonetary job attributes should be considered in general rather than only meaningful work specifically.

Burbano et al. (2024) use the gendered origins of meaning as explanation for gender segregation by industry of work and therefore propose policies to take into account and seek to rebalance existing gender differences in preferences for meaning at work in order to achieve more equity in the labor market. Dur and van Lent (2019) focus on the role of governments in this. They may use taxation to discourage employers from creating or retaining pointless and harmful jobs and encourage them to create socially useful jobs. Stricter regulation of harmful economic activities (e.g., through consumer protection laws) may, of course, also contribute to reducing the number of socially useless jobs. When the social uselessness of jobs is a matter of perception rather than reality, employers may use nudging or adapt job design. Boudreaux et al. (2022) propose that entrepreneurial accessibility is an important pathway to more eudaimonic equality, thus allowing more equal opportunities of meaningful work.

### 4.4 Divergences from other literatures on meaningful work

Given its focus on the consequences of meaningful work, the economics literature includes a relatively high number of experimental studies manipulating task significance. Psychologists might argue that most of this economic literature captures the “meaning” of work, but not the depth of significance or emotional weight they refer to as “meaningful” or “meaningfulness” (Rosso et al., 2017). Future research in economics could move beyond solely manipulating task significance by, for instance, measuring the extent to which different manipulations evoke a sense of fulfillment, purpose, or alignment with personal values.

Furthermore, our discussion on the antecedents of meaningful work showed that most of the economics literature either assumes meaning to originate from personal values – leading individuals to sort into jobs based on their preferences for meaning – or on the work context that generates meaningful work. These include the mission of the organization or the perceived importance, relevance or meaningfulness of the tasks they execute. However, the specific source of meaning(fulness) at work is often not explicitly identified, in contrast to the (organizational) psychology literature, which tends to be more explicit and systematic in categorizing the antecedents of meaningful work.

### 4.5 Open Questions and Suggestions for Future Research

Several open questions remain that could be studied within the field of economics on this matter. First, the field lacks conceptual models on why meaningful work is relevant for economics, and specifically for the labor supply decision. Some studies build on self-determination theory (e.g., Cassar & Meier, 2018; Nikolova & Cnossen, 2020), borrowing its insights to formalize how meaningfulness may shape utility from labor and thus labor supply. A crucial step will be to further develop formal models of work meaning. For example,

we need to explore how the dimensions of meaning (the self, the others and the context) interact with each other, whether they are substitutes and complements, and how monetary incentives are affected and affect the different dimensions (Cassar & Meier, 2018).

Second, mixed findings are observed in various respects. Notable examples are mixed findings on how individuals trade off work meaningfulness relative to other job attributes, whether preferences for meaning shape sorting on the labor market, how preferences for meaning vary by education level, and the impact of meaningful work on labor supply and worker performance. Given the small literature, what causes these differences could not be isolated in this review, such as the role of study design, the operationalization of meaningful work, and/or the study population. This aligns with a need for further exploration of labor market behaviors. Mostly likely, meaningful work is related to an array of labor market outcomes, yet the current literature has mostly focused on a few outcomes like labor supply and performance. Future research could investigate the full range of labor market behaviors impacted by meaningful work, such as more research on absenteeism, job search and employee turnover.

Third, measurement issues could be addressed, such as reducing the commonly observed inconsistency between definitions and measures. One particularly helpful step would be for authors to clearly connect their definition of meaningful work to existing literature, as our scoping review shows this is often done implicitly, leading to various, distinct concepts to be classified as meaning(fulness). Moreover, to date, no economic study has used the Work As Meaning Inventory (WAMI), a widely recognized survey-based measure of meaningful work in other disciplines.

Fourth, further research is needed on the effectiveness of interventions to increase job meaning, and its effects on work performance, particularly when traded off against monetary incentives or other nonmonetary incentives. Finally, digitalization and technological advances, such as Artificial Intelligence and robotics, influence the meaning of work (Hoeyer & Wadmann, 2020; Spencer, 2023; Nikolova et al., 2024). Further research is needed to explore how the sense of meaningful work can be optimized in this evolving future landscape.

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