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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Meaningful work over time: The impact of relative meaningful work on organizational citizenship behaviour

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Abstract

Research on meaningful work (MW) has largely presumed that its effects are determined by absolute levels: when MW is high, outcomes are favourable, and when it is low, outcomes are less so. Yet, this assumption overlooks the fact that employees interpret current experiences against the backdrop of the past. In this study, we apply a temporal lens to MW by examining how directional changes (gains vs. losses) and inconsistency (deviations from prior experiences) shape organizational citizenship behaviour (OCB). Across two experience-sampling studies (daily: 252 participants, 2200 observations; weekly: 387 participants, 2600 observations), we find that relative evaluations of MW explain OCB beyond absolute levels. Increases in MW generally enhance OCB more than decreases, but at the weekly level, inconsistency and even increases can undermine OCB. These findings underscore that MW is inherently dynamic and relative, advancing theory on how temporal comparisons shape work experiences and highlighting practical risks for sustaining employees' discretionary effort.

KEYWORDS

meaningful work, organizational citizenship behaviour, polynomial regression, relative meaningful work, temporal comparison

INTRODUCTION

Over recent years, the concept of meaningful work, defined as “the value of a work goal or purpose, judged by the individual's own ideals or standards” (May et al., 2004, p. 14), has become central in organizational research and practice. As employees increasingly seek purpose and fulfilment in their work,

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Practitioner points

- Meaningful work is evaluated relative to past experiences. Employees do not assess meaningful work in isolation but compare it to previous days or weeks. Organizations should be aware that fluctuations in meaningful work—rather than just its absolute level—can influence employee behaviour.
- Consistency in meaningful work matters. While meaningful work fosters OCB, instability can undermine employees' motivation. Managers should create stable work environments through structured feedback, clear expectations and supportive leadership to maintain a steady sense of meaningfulness.
- Pay attention to the time frame. Daily fluctuations in meaningful work may be less impactful, but week-to-week changes can significantly affect behaviour. Managers should monitor meaningful work over longer periods to identify trends and intervene when stability is threatened.

creating meaningful work has become important for organizations (Meng et al., 2023). Experiencing work as meaningful is a key resource in employees' working lives (Kim & Beehr, 2018; Lu et al., 2025), linked to outcomes such as engagement, commitment, job performance and organizational citizenship behaviour (OCB) (Allan et al., 2019).

Although often conceptualized as stable, recent research highlights its dynamic nature, with fluctuations across days (Fletcher et al., 2018; Sonnentag et al., 2021; Tommasi et al., 2020; Vogel et al., 2020) or weeks (Geldenhuis et al., 2021; Lysova et al., 2023). Fluctuations occur because meaningfulness depends on daily tasks and interactions (Tommasi et al., 2020; Vogel et al., 2020) and evolves over weeks as employees reflect on experiences (Shipp & Jansen, 2011; Wheeler & Reis, 1991).

Understanding these dynamics requires acknowledging that meaningful work is subjective and multifaceted (Lysova et al., 2019) and judged not only in absolute terms but also relative to past experiences (Bailey & Madden, 2017). Employees may evaluate today's meaningfulness against yesterday's or last week's. This reflects a broader principle: people rarely evaluate experiences in isolation, but relative to prior experiences or other referent points (Albert, 1977; Shipp & Cole, 2015; Yoon et al., 2023). Past experiences shape current feelings, thoughts and behaviour (Sonnentag, 2012), and, when objective indicators are absent, individuals often rely on comparisons to interpret current experiences (Gilbert et al., 1995). This is particularly relevant for subjective and less objectively quantifiable phenomena, such as meaningful work. Indeed, research shows that temporal comparisons matter (Dimotakis et al., 2023). Extending this, we suggest that fluctuations in meaningfulness similarly shape employees' daily and weekly experiences and behaviour.

If meaningfulness is judged relative to the past, shifts are unlikely to be neutral. Such changes require psychological adjustment and reorientation, which can be effortful and may temporarily diminish their capacity for discretionary behaviour. This offers a more nuanced perspective than the prevailing “more is better” view of work meaningfulness (Allan et al., 2019). Our aim is not to challenge this established understanding but to extend it by highlighting situational dynamics that complement existing insights. Changes in meaningful work, whether increases or decreases, demand resources for sensemaking and adaptation. Stability may therefore sometimes support behaviour more effectively than frequent change, even when positive (i.e., increases from t to t_{+1}). Moreover, employees may also react differently to gains versus losses, with decreases more detrimental than increases are beneficial (Baumeister et al., 2001). This highlights the need to examine both the direction and magnitude of change, particularly for outcomes such as OCB. Building on this reasoning, we investigate whether (a) discrepancies in meaningfulness, regardless of direction, are associated with lower OCB and (b) increases are more beneficial than decreases, reflecting potential asymmetries in responses to gains and losses.

OCB, defined as voluntary work behaviour that goes beyond formal job requirements (Organ, 1988; Podsakoff et al., 2009), represents a particularly suitable outcome for our study. It is conceptually linked to meaningful work, as a heightened sense of purpose can motivate employees to invest effort beyond formal requirements (Allan et al., 2019). At the same time, OCB is sensitive to short-term fluctuations (Spence et al., 2011), aligning well with our focus on day-to-day and week-to-week dynamics. Moreover, because OCB consistently enhances organizational functioning and performance (Podsakoff et al., 2009), even temporary changes in OCB carry meaningful implications at both the individual and organizational levels.

To ground our investigation, we draw on Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989), which offers a compelling lens for understanding how changes in meaningfulness influence work behaviour. COR emphasizes the role of valued resources in shaping motivation and action, particularly in contexts of resource gain and loss and positions meaningful work as a critical psychological resource. However, while COR explains how resources accumulate, deplete and are protected, it is less explicit about the temporal and dynamic nature of these processes. To address this, we integrate COR with research on time and temporal perspectives, which highlights that employees compare current experiences with prior ones (Carver & Scheier, 1982; Dimotakis et al., 2023). This allows us to conceptualize meaningful work not as static, but as a dynamic resource whose fluctuations can have immediate behavioural consequences. Specifically, we examine how temporal changes in meaningfulness affect employees' willingness to engage in OCB.

Building on this integration of COR and temporal perspectives, we focus on fluctuations in meaningful work over time, reflecting employees' reference standards. Two levels of temporal comparison are particularly relevant: daily and weekly. To capture both, we test our assumptions across two complementary studies. The daily level reflects immediate variations in work experiences and behaviour (Ohly et al., 2010), whereas the weekly level encompasses a naturally bounded timeframe—an “end of chapter”—providing a more stable set of experiences, less influenced by short-term cycles (Gabriel et al., 2019; Shipp & Jansen, 2011; Wheeler & Reis, 1991). Considering both time frames allows us to examine meaningful work across different temporal horizons and to develop a more comprehensive understanding of how it unfolds and shapes behaviour.

Taken together, our research makes three contributions. First, we advance theory on meaningful work by offering a temporal-comparison perspective. Whereas prior research has focused on absolute levels of meaningfulness within given time frames (e.g., a day or a week), we argue that employees interpret their current sense of meaningfulness relative to past experiences. By connecting past and present, we shift the view of meaningful work from absolute states towards a dynamic, comparative process, providing a novel conceptual lens for future research. Second, we offer a more fine-grained conceptualization of these temporal patterns by distinguishing between inconsistency (deviations from the previous day or week, regardless of direction) and directional shifts (gains vs. losses). This distinction highlights that not all changes carry the same psychological meaning and that stability itself represents a meaningful signal. By capturing these different types of change, we broaden how meaningful work can be conceptualized and studied over time. Third, we establish the organizational relevance of temporal comparisons. By linking changes in meaningful work to OCB, we show that employees' willingness to go beyond formal requirements depends not only on how meaningful their work feels but also on how meaningful it feels compared to the past. This shifts attention from static predictors of OCB to the temporal processes that shape employees' day-to-day and week-to-week contributions.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES

COR theory provides a valuable framework to explain the effects of meaningful work on OCB. Beyond examining the effects of existing resources, COR also enables the exploration of how changes in resources—such as gains or losses—impact behaviour and outcomes. At its core, the theory posits that “individuals strive to obtain, retain, protect, and foster those things that they value” (Hobfoll, 2001, p.

341). Resources, broadly defined as “objects, personal characteristics, conditions, or energies that are valued” (Hobfoll, 1989, p. 516), are central to this framework because they have value in achieving goals (Halbesleben et al., 2014). They motivate individuals to preserve current resources and seek new ones (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Hobfoll, 1989).

Within this framework, meaningful work is treated as a valued resource (Kim & Beehr, 2018; Lu et al., 2025) because it reflects employees' subjective experience of their work as significant and worthwhile (Lysova et al., 2019; May et al., 2004). This aligns with COR theory's view of resources as experiences that individuals consider personally valuable. It is helpful because it enables individuals to recognize a broader purpose and allocate more resources towards goal achievement (Meng et al., 2023). Moreover, meaningful work operates in resource caravans (Liu et al., 2025), meaning that the possession of one resource is typically associated with the possession of others (Hobfoll, 2001). These associated resources, not meaningful work itself, can then be mobilized and invested in behaviour that requires further resources (Hobfoll, 2001). Experiencing work as meaningful is therefore a more favourable overall resource state. Within such a context, employees have greater overall capacity to allocate effort towards discretionary behaviour, such as OCB. Consistent with this, Allan et al. (2019) revealed a positive between-person relationship between meaningful work and OCB.

Temporal variability in meaningful work

In research on meaningful work, it is recognized that meaningful work is not constant, but varies over time. Building on the idea that employees evaluate current experiences in relation to prior ones, meaningfulness can be seen as a temporal interpretive lens: employees assess their work not only moment-to-moment but also across days and weeks, integrating experiences into a coherent sense of purpose at work. This appraisal process renders meaningfulness inherently dynamic, with both gains and losses being possible. Recent research captures fluctuations in daily (Fletcher et al., 2018; Sonnentag et al., 2021; Tommasi et al., 2020; Vogel et al., 2020) and weekly experiences (Geldenhuis et al., 2021; Lysova et al., 2023). Before examining how changes in meaningful work influence OCB, we outline its temporal dynamics.

One central perspective concerns everyday work experiences. Daily demands, resources and situational conditions shape daily meaningfulness (Martela & Riekkki, 2018; Tommasi et al., 2020). For example, tasks with significance or challenge (Allan et al., 2019; Vogel et al., 2020), autonomy (Vogel et al., 2020), social interactions and the perceived working atmosphere (Tommasi et al., 2020) influence meaningfulness. Daily assessments also depend on whether employees feel their actions make a difference for the future (Fay et al., 2023). Thus, some days centre on meaningful activities, others on less significant administrative tasks; some are marked by collegial exchange, others by isolation. These daily fluctuations show that meaningful work is strongly influenced by situational and short-term conditions and enable the identification of short-term changes (Ohly et al., 2010).

Beyond situational features, fluctuations in meaningfulness may also arise from how employees interpret their work. Even stable or routine tasks can take on different significance depending on how they are evaluated in relation to current goals or future perspectives. This highlights that meaningful work is shaped not only by what employees do but also by how they make sense of their work in light of broader contexts and states of mind.

Weekly considerations, in contrast, reflect more enduring evaluations. They represent the sum of daily experiences and are typically updated only once a week. Weeks constitute well-defined time frames, as work periods bounded by non-work periods. The end of the week marks the completion of an episode, offering reflection and narrative construction (Shipp & Jansen, 2011). Weeks provide reliable, representative sets of experiences (Wheeler & Reis, 1991) and are less subject to cycles than days (Gabriel et al., 2019). Accordingly, meaningfulness develops as a continuous process over longer periods such as weeks rather than days (Berg et al., 2013; Geldenhuis et al., 2021). Weekly assessments yield a higher-level evaluation: a week may be meaningful overall, even if individual days were less so. A daily

perspective risks overemphasizing fleeting highs or lows, whereas the weekly lens captures broader patterns more reflectively.

To capture these dynamics, we investigate meaningful work at both daily and weekly levels in two complementary studies. This dual approach acknowledges that days capture immediate, situational influences, while weeks represent integrative work episodes. In doing so, we follow Lance's (2024) call to align measurement intervals with the natural rhythms of the phenomena under study. Considering both perspectives provides a more comprehensive and theoretically grounded account of meaningful work dynamics than relying on a single temporal lens.

Changes in meaningful work and OCB

Meaningfulness at work reflects both employees' perceptions of purpose and their ability to translate that purpose into action. It satisfies two fundamental psychological needs. The first, the "need for being," captures the desire to find significance and coherence in one's work, providing vision, hope and inspiration (Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012; Lysova et al., 2019; O'Connell et al., 2011). The second, the "need for doing," reflects the motivation to act in line with one's values and goals, acknowledging the realities of one's current work situation and what can be feasibly accomplished (Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012). Because perceived meaningfulness is a state rather than a trait, it fluctuates as employees reflect on experiences and pursue purposeful action. Building on our temporal-comparison perspective, we examine how such fluctuations relative to prior experiences affect OCB—first by considering discrepancies in general, then by differentiating between increases and decreases.

When meaningfulness is high, it serves as a catalyst for discretionary behaviour that sustains both work and the organization. In reflection ("need for being" dimension), employees reconnect with the overarching purpose that imbues their efforts with value. This renewed sense of meaningful direction then may manifest in concrete acts of citizenship ("need for doing" dimension): Employees express loyalty and identification with the organization, proactively prevent problems, help colleagues with time and expertise, and show consideration through respectful and courteous interactions. This dynamic aligns with COR theory. When employees feel that their work truly matters, this experience is interconnected with other resources, as resources tend to co-occur and accumulate in resource caravans (Hobfoll, 2001). Those who experience meaningful work have a greater capacity to invest resources in citizenship behaviour (Liu et al., 2025). Thus, when employees experience higher levels of meaningful work, they are likely to show greater OCB.

Yet *stability* may be just as critical as the absolute level itself. COR theory emphasizes not only the accumulation of resources but also their stability. Many core resources—such as secure employment or financial security—implicitly rely on consistency (Hobfoll, 2001). Stability facilitates resource conservation, whereas fluctuations introduce uncertainty and demand adjustment. Empirical evidence shows that stable conditions yield more positive outcomes than variable ones (Matta et al., 2017; Scott et al., 2012; Yoon et al., 2023). Unstable conditions can also trigger defensive reactions (Hobfoll, 2001), reducing proactive effort. We therefore argue that the stability of meaningful work is critical for OCB. As a valued resource, meaningful work is subject to the same dynamics as other resources: day-to-day changes can disrupt resource continuity and demand effortful adjustment. Although increases may appear beneficial and decreases detrimental, we propose that *any* change in the perception of meaningful work, regardless of direction, may have adverse effects on OCB relative to stable levels. Fluctuations signal instability, prompting individuals to conserve and protect their limited resources rather than invest in discretionary behaviours. This reasoning builds on COR theory, which views resources as limited and highlights individuals' motivation to preserve and protect them (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Hobfoll, 2001).

Although COR is inherently dynamic, it has rarely been applied to study the short-term effects of resource fluctuations and thus provides only limited orientation. To explain why changes in meaningfulness can affect OCB, we draw on insights from literature on intra-individual comparisons and

how individuals evaluate changes from prior experiences (Carver & Scheier, 1982). Deviations from prior experiences initiate self-regulatory processes aimed at restoring internal balance. These processes involve monitoring changes, interpreting their significance and adjusting behaviour accordingly. COR theory explicitly integrates these ideas by highlighting that such regulatory processes themselves require and consume resources (Halbesleben et al., 2009; Hobfoll et al., 2018), thereby limiting the capacity for sustained, goal-directed behaviour (Hobfoll, 2001). Thus, when employees experience changes in meaningful work, they must invest time and energy to interpret, integrate and respond to these shifts. Although increases in meaningful work may, in the long run, stimulate resource gain, COR theory holds that gain processes unfold more slowly than losses and are initially weak (Hobfoll et al., 2018), meaning that resource gains typically require time to accumulate before they exert noticeable effects. Thus, even increases may require reorientation, as employees recalibrate their understanding, align expectations and integrate new experiences into existing narratives. Because these regulatory processes consume resources, they temporarily limit the capacity for discretionary extra-role behaviour. Consequently, employees may conserve resources by focusing on essential tasks and reducing OCB. Since resources are limited (Hobfoll, 2001), the adaptation process implies that fewer resources remain available for voluntary behaviour such as OCB.

Taken together, these arguments suggest that any discrepancy in the perception of meaningful work can temporarily undermine employees' capacity for OCB. Accordingly, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1. Daily organizational citizenship behaviour is lower when the level of meaningful work today diverges from yesterday's level, regardless of direction, compared to when they are equivalent.

Increases and decreases in meaningful work and OCB

While Hypothesis 1 establishes that any deviation from stable levels of meaningful work temporarily consumes resources and therefore reduces OCB, this baseline effect does not imply that all deviations are equally consequential. Rather, in line with COR theory, H1 captures the resource costs of *instability* per se, whereas H2 *differentiates within these fluctuations*. COR theory explicitly posits that gains and losses have asymmetrical implications—losses are more potent and restrictive, whereas gains, despite initial adjustment demands, ultimately broaden the resource pool. Thus, although both increases and decreases in meaningful work incur short-term regulatory costs (as articulated in H1), their subsequent resource trajectories diverge. Building on this distinction, we examine whether the direction of change matters for OCB, over and above the general destabilizing effect.

According to COR theory, individuals can only invest resources if they have a sufficient resource base (Halbesleben et al., 2014). Individuals who gain resources are “in a better position to invest and gain additional resources” (Halbesleben et al., 2014, p. 1336). Thus, increases in meaningful work—although they require initial reorientation—also broaden employees' overall resource pool, thereby placing them in a better position to invest in OCB compared to the previous day.

Conversely, “as individuals lose resources, investment becomes more difficult” (Halbesleben et al., 2014, p. 1337). Losses trigger a defensive posture (Hobfoll, 2001), making them more cautious about investing their remaining resources. This means that when individuals lose resources, they prioritize protecting what they have left (Halbesleben et al., 2014) and refrain from extra-role behaviour that exceeds job demands and consumes additional resources. Accordingly, decreases in meaningful work not only require adjustment processes but also diminish employees' available resources. Because OCB involves discretionary, resource-consuming acts beyond formal job requirements, employees facing resource loss are more likely to retreat to core tasks and avoid additional investments (Spanouli & Hofmans, 2021).

To illustrate, an employee who experiences greater meaningfulness today than yesterday may—after initial adjustment—feel more resourced to support colleagues or take initiative. In contrast, if

meaningfulness drops, the same employee is likely to prioritize conserving resources and refrain from extra-role contributions. In summary, while Hypothesis 1 proposes that fluctuations in meaningful work generally consume resources, Hypothesis 2 specifies that increases should be less detrimental than decreases. Based on COR's distinction between resource gains and losses, we expect:

Hypothesis 2. When meaningful work today diverges from yesterday's level, daily organizational citizenship behaviour is expected to be higher when meaningful work today exceeds its previous level (i.e., following an increase) than when it falls below it (i.e., following a decrease).

STUDY 1 METHOD

Sample and procedure

This study is part of a larger data collection effort in Germany. Because diary studies place considerable demands on participants, individuals are more willing to take part when invited by relatives, colleagues or friends (Biron & van Veldhoven, 2016). Following previous research, participants were recruited by students. To ensure the quality and trustworthiness of the student-recruited sample, we followed the recommendations by Demerouti and Rispens (2014). Students received detailed information about the aims of the study and clear instructions on how to approach, invite and guide participants throughout the process. Each student recruited only a limited number of participants, which helped to reduce potential pressure to deviate from the instructions. To further enhance students' personal control and interest in the study, they were allowed to use the collected data for their own research projects. This procedure increased the likelihood that students were motivated to collect valid and reliable data. Participants were recruited from diverse backgrounds, which contributes to heterogeneity and reduces the risk of selection. Prior research shows student-recruited samples yield results comparable to other methods (Wheeler et al., 2014).

All participants completed a voluntary web-based survey. Data collection took place in November and December 2022. First, participants' personal and organizational demographic variables were collected in an initial survey. In a second step, we used the experience sampling method (ESM, Uy et al., 2010) to measure daily meaningful work and daily OCB, once a day after finishing work for 10 consecutive working days. Ten days were chosen because it is a relatively generalizable and stable reflection of a person's social life (Wheeler & Reis, 1991). The overall sample consisted of 2415 observations nested in 279 respondents. To ensure sufficient data for modelling daily changes and discrepancies across days, only respondents who completed at least three of the daily surveys were included in the final sample. Thus, the final sample ultimately contained 2200 daily observations nested in 252 individuals. On average, the participants took part for 8.73 days.

The average age of the employees was 33 years ($SD = 12$), with 48% being female. The majority of respondents had no managerial responsibilities (77%). Nineteen per cent were employees with managerial responsibilities, while only 4% reported being entrepreneurs. Seventy-one per cent of the participants were employed in profit-orientated organizations predominantly within the manufacturing sector (34.1%). Further, 11.9% were associated with the trading, traffic and hospitality sector, while 13.3% worked in health and social care. Concerning company size, 22.2% were employed in companies with 50 or fewer employees, 25.8% in companies with 2000 or more employees and 38.9% worked in companies with 50–500 employees. Approximately, 48% of the participants had been with the organization for less than 3 years, 18.3% for 3–5 years, 20% for 5–10 years and 30.6% had a tenure exceeding 10 years.

Measures

The questionnaire was administered in German, which all participants were proficient in. The measures were translated from English into German and then back-translated into English, by a different researcher. Any inconsistencies were discussed and resolved to ensure equivalence with the original version. Due to the ESM, variables were adapted to the daily context (Beal, 2015).

Daily meaningful work

This variable was assessed using four items of the measurement by May et al. (2004). The items were: “The work I did today on this job is very important to me”, “My job activities today were personally meaningful to me”, “The work I did today on this job is worthwhile”, and “I feel that the work I did today on my job is valuable”. Responses were provided on a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

Daily organizational citizenship behaviour

To measure daily OCB, we used four items from the scale of Lee and Allen (2002). Following Fehr et al. (2017), we applied a shortened version of the original measure. To reduce participant burden in the daily diary format, and to capture both OCB-O and OCB-I equally, we selected four of the five items used by Fehr et al. (2017), deliberately including two representing OCB-O (“Today, I expressed loyalty toward the organization”, and “Today, I took action to protect the organization from potential problems”) and two representing OCB-I (“Today, I willingly gave my time to help others who had work-related problems”, and “Today, I showed genuine concern and courtesy toward my coworkers”). The items were answered on a 7-point Likert-type scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

Controls

Following Dimotakis et al. (2023), we controlled for the lagged values of OCB (group-mean centred). Controlling for the previous day's OCB accounts for the autoregressive nature of daily OCB and allows us to examine whether meaningful work predicts day-to-day deviations in OCB beyond individuals' prior levels. Additionally, we controlled for leadership position and organizational type (profit vs. non-profit). At the within-level, we controlled for emotional exhaustion, measured using three items from Demerouti and Bakker (2007), and uncertainty, measured using three items from Colquitt et al. (2012). Emotional exhaustion was included because it depletes resources and may reduce both meaningful work and OCB, while uncertainty captures contextual instability that could systematically shape perceptions of meaningful work. Omitting these control variables did not affect the study results in a qualitative sense.

Confirmatory factor analyses and reliabilities

We examined construct validity using confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) in Mplus. Following Geldhof et al. (2014), we first assessed intraclass correlations (ICCs) to determine the proportion of variance at the between level. ICCs for OCB items (.009–.024, $M = .019$) and meaningfulness items (.010–.016, $M = .013$) indicated negligible between-cluster variance. As the data did not support between-level factors, CFAs and omega (ω) reliabilities were estimated at the within-level only. Initial attempts to estimate a multilevel CFA produced convergence warnings, which were resolved by adjusting model settings.

The two-factor model (OCB and meaningfulness) showed acceptable fit ($\chi^2(28) = 2998.63$, $p < .001$; RMSEA = .068, 90% CI [.060, .077]; CFI = .938; TLI = .909; SRMR = .050), whereas a one-factor model exhibited poor fit (RMSEA = .124, CFI = .782, TLI = .695, SRMR = .086). Omega reliability, calculated from unstandardized loadings, residuals and latent variances, was moderate for OCB ($\omega = .61$) and good for meaningful work ($\omega = .72$).

Variance components and change frequencies

As recommended by Shanock et al. (2010), and following prior applications such as Dimotakis et al. (2023), we conducted some descriptive analyses to investigate the relative incidence rates of increase, decrease and consistency, and to record the average change in the case of changes from the previous day. Specifically, we operationalized daily change by computing a simple difference score for meaningful work (day t minus day t_{-1}), with positive values indicating increases and negative values indicating decreases. Descriptive statistics were then computed for the change score. As a result of this analysis, we gained insight into the number and direction of the changes. We saw a decrease in meaningful work on 40.3% of days compared to the previous day, an increase in meaningful work on 38.8% of days compared to the previous day, and stable meaningful work on 20.9% of days, with no relative change compared to the previous day. The average change in meaningful work (compared to the previous day) was $-.79$ ($SD = .59$) when meaningful work decreased and $.78$ ($SD = .59$) when meaningful work increased. The magnitude of these changes represents approximately the entire between-individual dispersion ($SD_b = .76$), indicating that daily fluctuations in meaningful work were not only frequent but also substantial compared to stable individual differences.

Furthermore, in line with Dimotakis et al. (2023), we estimated a null model for each Level 1 variable to assess the degree of within-individual variation. The results indicated that a significant proportion of the variance was due to within-individual variation: 46.2% for meaningful work and 41.5% for OCB. This within-person variability suggests that our analyses are valid.

Data analysis

The data of this study were hierarchical, with days (Level 1) clustered within individuals (Level 2). Given this structure, we performed a multilevel polynomial regression, combined with a response surface analysis (RSA) (Edwards, 2002; Shanock et al., 2010), adjusted for the within-individual context (Dimotakis et al., 2023) in Mplus 8 (Muthén & Muthén, 2017). RSA allows us to examine how today's OCB relates to employees' comparison of meaningful work today (X) with yesterday (Y), without relying on problematic difference scores (Edwards, 2002; Shanock et al., 2010). Both predictors were group-mean centred (Shanock et al., 2010) to improve interpretability and reduce multicollinearity (Aiken & West, 1991). Consistent with prior within-person research (Dimotakis et al., 2023), this day-to-day comparison is represented by a three-dimensional response surface, which is bisected by two theoretically relevant lines (see Figures 1 and 2) corresponding to our hypotheses regarding stability and change.

The first, the line of stability ($X = Y$), represents days on which meaningful work remains constant. Examining the surface along this line allows us to evaluate how stable levels of meaningful work are associated with OCB. The second, the gain-loss line ($X = -Y$), represents days on which meaningful work changes from one day to the next. Along this line, the surface captures the effects of fluctuations in meaningful work, indicating whether increases or decreases in meaningful work are linked to higher or lower OCB.

Technically, the response surface is defined by both linear and higher-order terms. Quadratic terms (X^2 , Y^2) and the interaction term (XY) are included to allow the surface to represent nonlinear and interactive effects of meaningful work on consecutive days. These terms are essential for testing our hypotheses because they provide two interpretable components.

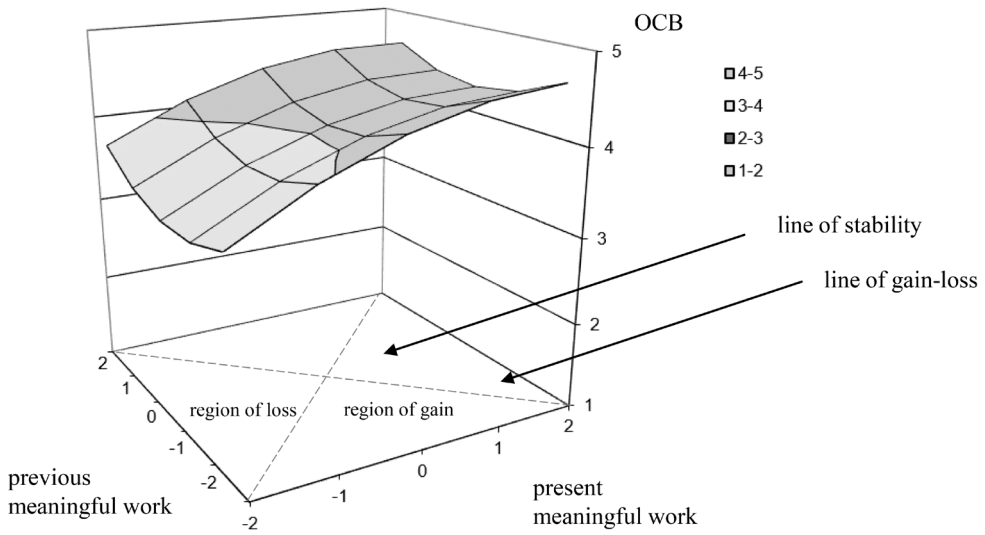


FIGURE 1 Daily change and stability in meaningful work and OCB for Study 1.

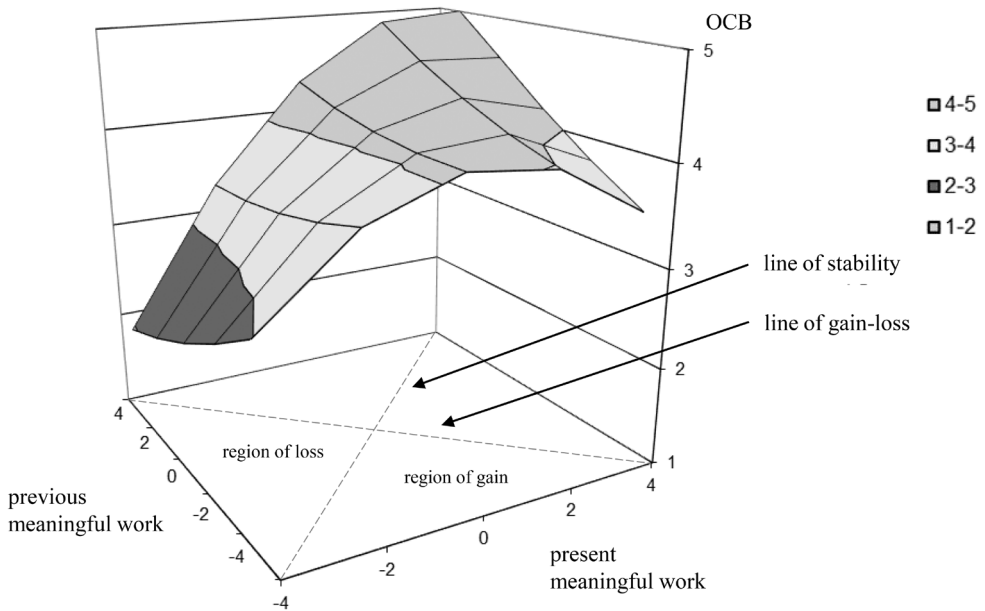


FIGURE 2 Weekly change and stability in meaningful work and OCB for Study 2.

The gain–loss slope ($b_1 - b_2$) compares OCB following an increase versus a decrease in meaningful work. A positive, significant slope indicates that OCB is higher after increases than after decreases, consistent with Hypothesis 2. The gain–loss curvature ($b_3 - b_4 + b_5$) captures whether any deviation from stability—regardless of direction—is associated with lower OCB. A negative, significant curvature indicates that OCB declines as meaningful work fluctuates more strongly, reflecting the destabilizing effect of change and supporting Hypothesis 1. In this way, the combination of squared and interaction terms ensures that the model can simultaneously assess both the general effect of fluctuations and the differential impact of increases versus decreases, providing a direct link between the technical analysis and our theoretical reasoning.

STUDY 1 RESULTS

Descriptive statistics

Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics, reliability scores and correlations for meaningful work and OCB, on both the present day and the previous day. Both variables were positively associated with their lagged counterparts. However, there was still enough variation left to continue with the analyses, which confirmed the results of previous variance components analyses.

Hypotheses tests

Table 2 shows the results of the polynomial regression analysis and the response surface characteristics. The results of the response surface methodology are displayed in Figure 1.

Hypothesis 1 proposed that OCB would be lower when meaningful work changed from the previous day than when it remained stable. This hypothesis would be supported by a negative curvature along the gain–loss line, indicating that greater day-to-day fluctuations in meaningful work are associated with lower levels of OCB. However, the curvature ($b_3 - b_4 + b_5$) was positive and non-significant ($curvature = .03, p = .68$), indicating that fluctuations in meaningful work were not associated with lower OCB. Thus, Hypothesis 1 was not supported.

Hypothesis 2 predicted that, when meaningful work changed from the previous day, OCB would be higher following an increase than a decrease. In line with this expectation, the slope along the gain–loss line ($b_1 - b_2$) was positive and significant ($slope = .22, p < .001$), indicating that OCB was higher following increases in meaningful work than after decreases. Thus, Hypothesis 2 was supported.

STUDY 1 DISCUSSION

The findings of Study 1 did not support the hypothesis that any day-to-day change in meaningful work reduces OCB. Instead, the results indicate that the *direction* of change matters: OCB was higher following increases than following decreases. From a COR perspective, employees respond differently depending on whether changes signal resource gains or losses. Increases may be *relatively less resource-depleting* and allow for greater engagement in discretionary behaviour, whereas decreases may signal losses that constrain OCB. Fluctuations in meaningful work are not inherently harmful—what matters is whether they are perceived as upward or downward movements.

At the same time, these findings point to a potential limitation of a strictly daily perspective: day-to-day changes may reflect momentary fluctuations attributed to situational factors and thus may not elicit strong resource-conservation responses. This raises the question of whether fluctuations become more consequential when they persist beyond single days, motivating an examination of meaningful work and OCB at a broader, weekly time frame.

WEEKLY CHANGES IN MEANINGFUL WORK

In Study 1, hypotheses were tested at the daily level. The same rationale applies weekly, as resource fluctuation mechanisms are not tied to a specific temporal frame. Research indicates that meaningful work not only varies both day to day but also across weeks (Geldenhuis et al., 2021; Lysova et al., 2023). Weekly assessments provide a more aggregated perspective that integrates daily fluctuations into broader, more stable evaluations. Examining meaningful work and OCB weekly extends our analysis beyond the short-term fluctuations captured in Study 1 and tests the robustness of the hypothesized dynamics across temporal

TABLE 1 Means, SD and correlations among Level 1 variables of Study 1.

Construct	M	SD _w	SD _b	Intercorrelations						
				1	2	3	4	5	6	
1. Emotional exhaustion	2.37	1.14	0.74							
2. Uncertainty	2.26	1.04	0.73	.43**						
3. Organizational citizenship behaviour _{t0}	4.39	1.51	1.16	-.04	.03					
4. Organizational citizenship behaviour _{t-1}	4.40	1.53	1.20	.02	.05*	.64**				
5. Meaningful work _{t0}	4.83	1.47	1.20	-.21**	-.14**	.35**	.30**			
6. Meaningful work _{t-1}	4.84	1.46	1.22	-.11**	-.07**	.28**	.35**	.60**		

Note. Sample: N_{level 1} = 1777–2170; N_{level 2} = 252. The smaller sample size involves analyses for lagged variables. Within-person correlations are shown below the diagonal; between-person correlations are above the diagonal.

Abbreviations: SD_{ip}, between-individual SD; SD_{wp}, within-individual SD.

***p* ≤ .01. **p* ≤ .05.

TABLE 2 Polynomial regression results for meaningful work predicting organizational citizenship behaviour (Study 1).

Variables	OCB	
	Est.	SE
Level 1		
Emotional exhaustion	-.05	.02
Uncertainty	.03	.03
Meaningful work _{t0} (b_1)	-.26***	.03
Meaningful work _{t-1} (b_2)	-.04	.03
Meaningful work _{t0} squared (b_3)	-.07*	.03
Meaningful work _{t0} × meaningful work _{t-1} (b_4)	-.02	.05
Meaningful work _{t-1} squared (b_5)	-.02	.05
Organizational citizenship behaviour _{t-1}	-.08*	.03
Response surface characteristics		
Stability slope ($b_1 + b_2$)	.29***	.05
Stability curvature ($b_3 + b_4 + b_5$)	-.01	.06
Gain-loss slope ($b_1 - b_2$)	.22***	.05
Gain-loss curvature ($b_3 - b_4 + b_5$)	.03	.07
Level 2		
Management responsibility	.36*	.17
Profit-orientation	.26	.16

Note: Sample: $N = 1775$ daily observations from 249 individuals. All values are unstandardized coefficients.

Abbreviations: Est., estimate; SE, standard error.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

frames. This approach assesses whether daily processes replicate at the weekly level and how temporal rhythms shape the relationship between meaningful work and OCB at different temporal scales.

WEEKLY HYPOTHESIS

Building on the theoretical rationale of Study 1, we extend our hypotheses to the weekly level. COR theory does not differentiate resource processes by temporal unit, implying that the mechanisms of resource fluctuation and adjustment should operate similarly across days and weeks.

However, fluctuations persisting for an entire week may carry different psychological meaning. Weekly evaluations are more reflective and aggregated (Dimotakis et al., 2023; Shipp & Jansen, 2011), making week-to-week deviations more likely to be interpreted as meaningful trends rather than situational variation. From a COR perspective, such sustained deviations may require stronger cognitive and emotional adjustments, rendering them more resource-intensive and thus potentially more consequential for behaviour like OCB than short-lived day-to-day changes.

Thus, while the theoretical logic mirrors Study 1, these considerations provide additional justification for examining whether weekly fluctuations exert stronger or distinct effects. Accordingly, in Study 2, we test the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 3. Weekly organizational citizenship behaviour is lower when the level of meaningful work this week diverges from last week's level, regardless of direction, compared to when they are equivalent.

Hypothesis 4. When meaningful work this week diverges from last week's level, weekly organizational citizenship behaviour is expected to be higher when meaningful work this week exceeds its previous level (i.e., following an increase) than when it falls below it (i.e., following a decrease).

STUDY 2 METHOD

Sample and procedure

To replicate and extend Study 1, we conducted a second ESM study (Uy et al., 2010) over 8 weeks. As before, we recruited participants using a student sampling method, with the same requirements to ensure data quality. This study is part of a broader data collection effort in Germany. All participants were invited to voluntarily complete a web-based survey. Initially, we collected participants' personal and organizational demographic variables through an initial survey, followed by the ESM period. Participants received a weekly survey via email every Friday, which they were asked to complete at the end of the working week, before the start of the new working week. The questionnaire asked about the perceived meaningfulness of work and the OCBs performed during the week.

The data collection occurred in May and June 2023; a second wave in November and December 2023 increased sample size. At the end of both waves, the overall sample stood at 473 participants and 2833 weekly ratings. To be included in the final sample, participants had to complete the initial survey and the weekly survey for at least 3 weeks. Thus, the sample ultimately consists of 2600 weekly observations, nested in 387 individuals (6.72 observations per respondent).

The employees had a mean age of 34 years ($SD = 13$), with 52% being female. A large proportion of respondents (75%) did not have managerial responsibilities. Twenty per cent were in managerial positions, while only five per cent identified as entrepreneurs. The majority of participants (71%) worked in profit-orientated organizations and were primarily employed in the manufacturing sector (24%). In addition, 10.3% of the individuals were affiliated with the trading, traffic and hospitality sector, while 12.4% worked in health and social care. In terms of company size, 23.6% were employed in companies with 50 or fewer employees, 40.6% of the individuals worked in companies with 50–500 employees and 35.8% in companies with 2000 or more employees. Nearly half of the participants had been with the organization for less than 3 years (44.8%), 18.9% for 3–5 years, 15.1% for 5–10 years and 21.2% had been with the organization for more than 10 years.

Measures

The survey was conducted in German. We followed the same procedure for translating the English items into German as in Study 1. Due to ESM, all items were adjusted to account for weekly variations (Geldenhuis et al., 2021) by adding the phrase ‘In this week...’.

All variables were answered on a 7-point Likert-type scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

Weekly meaningful work

In this study, meaningful work was measured with the three-item scale from Spreitzer (1995). The items were: “In this week, the work I did was very important to me”, “In this week, my job activities were personally meaningful to me”, and “In this week, the work I did was meaningful to me”.

Weekly organizational citizenship behaviour

This variable was assessed as in Study 1 using the same four items of the measure of Lee and Allen (2002). The items for OCB-O were “In this week, I expressed loyalty toward the organization”, and “In this week, I took action to protect the organization from potential problems” and for OCB-I “In this week, I willingly gave my time to help others who had work-related problems”, and “In this week, I showed genuine concern and courtesy toward my coworkers”.

Controls

The same control variables were used as in Study 1. Again, the exclusion of these variables had no qualitative effect on the results.

Confirmatory factor analyses and reliabilities

ICCs indicated substantial between-cluster variance for OCB items (.380–.530, $M = .444$) and meaningfulness items (.488–.532, $M = .508$), supporting estimation of a multilevel CFA. The two-factor target model (OCB and meaningfulness) showed good fit at both within- and between-levels ($\chi^2(26) = 160.48$, $p < .001$; RMSEA = .045; CFI = .957; TLI = .931; SRMR_{within} = .028, SRMR_{between} = .072), whereas a one-factor null model exhibited poor fit ($\chi^2(28) = 1309.66$, $p < .001$; RMSEA = .133; CFI = .595; TLI = .392; SRMR_{within} = .133, SRMR_{between} = .217). Omega reliabilities, calculated from unstandardized loadings, residuals and latent variances, were good for OCB ($\omega_{\text{within}} = .82$, $\omega_{\text{between}} = .87$) and meaningfulness ($\omega_{\text{within}} = .76$, $\omega_{\text{between}} = .94$).

Variance components and change frequencies

Again, we conducted descriptive analyses to examine the relative changes from week to week in meaningful work. The perception of meaningful work decreased in 41.8% of observations compared to the previous week, while it increased in 38.9%. There was no change in 19.3% of observations. On average, the weekly change in meaningful work was -1.28 ($SD = .90$) if it was lower than the previous week and 1.03 ($SD = .88$) if it was higher than the previous week. The magnitude of these weekly changes is in the range of the between-individual dispersion ($SD_b = 1.20$), highlighting that week-to-week shifts in meaningful work were both frequent and substantial.

As in Study 1, the results of the within-person variance analysis revealed significant within-individual variance: 40.4% for meaningful work and 46.6% for OCB. These results suggest that there is enough within-person variance to justify continuing with our analyses.

Data analysis

We used the same analyses as in Study 1. The procedure described in Study 1 was applied accordingly to the weekly data, so that $X = Y$ means that meaningful work in the previous week and the present week are at the same level, and $X = -Y$ means that meaningful work in the present week and the previous week are not at the same level.

TABLE 3 Means, SD and correlations among Level 1 variables of Study 2.

Construct	M	SD _w	SD _b	Intercorrelations						
				1	2	3	4	5	6	
1. Emotional exhaustion	2.76	1.22	0.90							
2. Uncertainty	2.42	1.06	0.78	.46**						
3. Organizational citizenship behaviour _{t0}	4.39	1.51	1.16	.03	.08**					
4. Organizational citizenship behaviour _{t-1}	4.40	1.53	1.20	.06*	.10*	.63**				
5. Meaningful work _{t0}	4.83	1.47	1.20	-.09**	-.17**	.38**	.31**			
6. Meaningful work _{t-1}	4.84	1.46	1.22	-.06*	-.11**	.32**	.39**	.65**		

Note. Sample: $N_{\text{level } 1} = 2004$ –2853; $N_{\text{level } 2} = 381$. The smaller sample size involves analyses for lagged variables. Within-person correlations are shown below the diagonal; between-person correlations are above the diagonal.

Abbreviations: SD_{ip}, between-individual SD; SD_{wp}, within-individual SD.

* $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$.

TABLE 4 Polynomial regression results for meaningful work predicting organizational citizenship behaviour (Study 2).

Variables	OCB	
	Est.	SE
Level 1		
Emotional exhaustion	.09	.03
Uncertainty	-.03	.03
Meaningful work _{t0} (b_1)	-.22***	.03
Meaningful work _{t-1} (b_2)	-.04	.03
Meaningful work _{t0} squared (b_3)	-.05*	.02
Meaningful work _{t0} × meaningful work _{t-1} (b_4)	.04	.03
Meaningful work _{t-1} squared (b_5)	.01	.02
Organizational citizenship behaviour _{t-1}	-.08*	.03
Response surface characteristics		
Stability slope ($b_1 + b_2$)	.26***	.04
Stability curvature ($b_3 + b_4 + b_5$)	-.01	.04
Gain-loss slope ($b_1 - b_2$)	.19***	.04
Gain-loss curvature ($b_3 - b_4 + b_5$)	-.09*	.04
Level 2		
Management responsibility	.13	.15
Profit-orientation	.13	.13

Note: Sample: $N = 1996$ daily observations from 378 individuals. All values are unstandardized coefficients.

Abbreviations: Est., estimate; SE, standard error.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

STUDY 2 RESULTS

Descriptive statistics

Table 3 reports the descriptive statistics and correlations for our study levels, for within- and between-person levels. As in Study 1, meaningful work and OCB correlated with their lagged counterparts. The results of the variance component analyses indicate that there is sufficient variance here, too.

Hypotheses tests

The results of the hypotheses tests of Study 2 are presented in Table 4 and visualized in Figure 2.

Hypothesis 3 proposed that OCB would be higher when meaningful work remained stable (i.e., at the same level as the previous week) compared to when it fluctuated (either increasing or decreasing). In contrast to Study 1, the curvature of the gain-loss line was negative and significant ($curvature = -.09$, $p < .05$), indicating that stronger week-to-week fluctuations in meaningful work were associated with lower OCB. This finding provides support for Hypothesis 3.

Hypothesis 4 suggested that OCB would be higher when meaningful work in the current week increased compared to the previous week. The results confirmed this prediction: the slope along the gain–loss line was positive and significant ($slope = .19, p < .001$). Thus, consistent with Study 1, upward changes in meaningful work were associated with higher OCB than downward changes.¹

STUDY 2 DISCUSSION

The results confirmed both hypotheses, underscoring the importance of a relative perspective. In contrast to Study 1, the findings suggest that, at the weekly level, not only the direction of change but any fluctuation in meaningful work matters. Specifically, fluctuations in meaningful work significantly diminished OCB, supporting Hypothesis 3. Moreover, when considering week-to-week changes, increases in meaningful work were associated with higher OCB than decreases, consistent with Hypothesis 4. This suggests that, over longer periods, fluctuations are more likely to be perceived as enduring and consequential, thereby exerting a stronger impact on OCB.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Previous research has not considered that the evaluation of momentary meaningful work depends on prior experiences. As past experiences shape current evaluations (Shipp & Cole, 2015; Sonnentag, 2012), we examined meaningful work relative to the previous day and week. Across two studies, we showed that the relative evaluation of meaningful work is crucial, although its effects differ by temporal frame. At the daily level, it was the direction of change that mattered: days with increases in meaningful work were associated with higher OCB than days with decreases, indicating that positive changes are more favourable than negative ones. At the weekly level, any fluctuation in meaningful work diminished OCB, suggesting that longer-term changes carry greater weight and appear more disruptive.

Theoretical implications

Our findings extend research on meaningful work by showing that meaningful work should be understood not only in dynamic terms but also in relative terms. Although prior work has demonstrated that meaningful work fluctuates over time (Geldenhuis et al., 2021; Lysova et al., 2023; Vogel et al., 2020), most studies have examined absolute levels at single points. Our results align with broader theorizing on temporal comparisons (Shipp & Cole, 2015; Sonnentag, 2012) and suggest that employees evaluate meaningful work in relation to their recent experiences. This relational perspective has, however, been largely absent from meaningful work research. Introducing the concept of relative meaningful work, we highlight that the effects of meaningful work emerge from temporal patterns—whether meaningful work remains stable, increases or decreases—rather than from isolated daily or weekly assessments.

Our findings contribute to meaningful work theory in two ways. First, we demonstrate that stability in meaningful work matters in its own right. Employees who experience stable meaningful work exhibit higher OCB than those facing fluctuations, suggesting that consistency itself provides important information for discretionary behaviour. These findings underscore that meaningful work is shaped not only by its level but also by its temporal consistency. Greater deviations from prior experiences are

¹In response to a reviewer's suggestion drawing on COR's Principle 1 (i.e., that resource losses are more potent than gains), we conducted an additional descriptive comparison using the response-surface plot of Study 2. Specifically, we compared the predicted OCB at stability with the points representing the strongest observed increases and decreases in meaningful work. While both deviations were associated with lower OCB than stability, the decline was substantially larger for losses ($\Delta \approx -2.2$ units) than for gains ($\Delta \approx -.7$ units). This complementary pattern aligns with the idea that losses may weigh more heavily than gains.

linked to lower OCB, suggesting that strong fluctuations impose higher adjustment demands. Temporal stability, by contrast, may function as a critical signal that preserves employees' resources and facilitates discretionary behaviour. Future research should examine these magnitude effects more explicitly. Second, our findings challenge the assumption that "more meaningful work is always better" (Vogel et al., 2020). Although increases are more beneficial than decreases, they do not yield the highest levels of OCB. Instead, stability leads to the highest OCB. This nuance qualifies common interpretations of meaningful work as uniformly beneficial and suggests that change, regardless of direction, can have costs. Together, these insights advance meaningful work theory by emphasizing that its temporal patterning—stability, gains and losses—shapes how employees interpret and respond to their work. This relational and temporally patterned view suggests that meaningful work should be studied not only in terms of its level or variability but also in terms of trajectories. Such a perspective likely has implications beyond OCB, affecting outcomes such as satisfaction, engagement or performance.

Our findings also contribute to COR theory. First, by showing that increases in meaningful work are more beneficial than decreases, at both the daily and weekly level, we demonstrate that a core assumption of COR theory—namely, that gains are more enabling than losses (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Hobfoll, 2001)—can be successfully applied and empirically supported in the context of meaningful work in the present research. Second, our results extend COR theory by showing that resource dynamics unfold not only in absolute terms, but relative to one's recent past. COR research has paid limited attention to such time-referenced fluctuations. By examining increases and decreases relative to the previous day or week, we show that short-term changes themselves can carry meaningful implications for resource investment. Third, we highlight the importance of resource stability. At the weekly level, fluctuations—regardless of direction—were associated with lower OCB, suggesting that instability in a resource can impose adjustment demands and tax individuals' capacity to invest. Stability may function as resource security, whereas variability signals potential resource risk and conservation. Finally, our findings underscore that COR dynamics depend on the timescale through which resource experiences are interpreted. Daily fluctuations did not reduce OCB, whereas weekly fluctuations did, indicating that resource variability becomes consequential only once it persists beyond momentary situational noise. This temporal nuance has received little attention in COR theory.

A final implication concerns the temporal nature of meaningful work fluctuations. Our findings show that daily and weekly changes do not carry the same psychological meaning. Relative to day-to-day stability, daily fluctuations did not reduce OCB. However, weekly fluctuations did, implying that instability likely exerts an effect only when it persists long enough for employees to interpret it as a meaningful pattern. This aligns with extant research showing that daily experiences are often attributed to situational events (Gabriel et al., 2019; Ohly et al., 2010), whereas weekly evaluations reflect aggregated, more reflective assessments (Dimotakis et al., 2023) that correspond to natural temporal cycles of meaning-making (Shipp & Jansen, 2011). A single difficult day can be dismissed as temporary, but a week of change signals something more enduring. Thus, weekly fluctuations may threaten employees' sense of stability more strongly, prompting resource conservation rather than investment in OCB. This pattern highlights that employees assess the stability and significance of meaningful work through broader temporal lenses, and that the psychological consequences of relative meaningful work differ fundamentally across time frames. In this way, our findings support and extend temporal theorizing in organizational research (Shipp & Cole, 2015) by demonstrating that the effects of meaningful work unfold differently across distinct temporal units.

Practical implications

Our findings highlight the importance of meaningfulness in motivating employees to go beyond their formal job responsibilities and actively contribute to the organization. Organizations should foster meaningful work by designing jobs that provide purpose, offering opportunities for employees to see the impact of their work and creating a culture that values personal and professional growth. Strong

leadership, open communication and recognition of employees' contributions are also key factors in reinforcing a sense of meaningfulness in the workplace (Meng et al., 2023). Additionally, stability matters. Organizations should ensure that employees experience a consistent sense of meaningfulness in their work. Such stability could be achieved through opportunities for strong social relationships and work design, or well-designed and appropriate workplaces (Lysova et al., 2019). Our findings further suggest that, while small daily ups and downs in meaningful work may be inevitable, stability over longer time frames is crucial. Organizations should therefore focus less on eliminating short-term fluctuations and more on ensuring that employees perceive a reliable sense of meaningfulness across weeks and months. By prioritizing a consistent and balanced approach, organizations can maximize the benefits of meaningful work while mitigating its potential drawbacks. This means that organizations should not only strive to enhance meaningful work but also to maintain its stability across time, as both the level and consistency of meaningful work are critical for fostering sustained OCB.

Limitations and future research

Despite valuable contributions, limitations must be acknowledged when interpreting the results from both studies.

First, although our studies used longitudinal designs, the analytical approach does not allow for causal conclusions. While our findings align with theory and we controlled for lagged effects, causality cannot be established and should be tested through experimental or more advanced longitudinal methods.

Second, our temporal design focused on short-term daily and weekly dynamics. This limits insights into longer-term effects, cumulative inconsistencies (e.g., across several days or weeks) and potential energizing consequences of meaningful-work increases that may emerge only after initial adjustment processes. Future research should examine broader temporal windows (e.g., monthly, quarterly) to determine whether relative meaningful work produces delayed motivational benefits or long-term costs.

Third, we examined only OCB as an outcome. Although our findings demonstrate the relevance of relative meaningful work, future studies should investigate additional outcomes (e.g., satisfaction, engagement, performance) to further develop the construct's theoretical relevance.

Fourth, compared with stable experiences over time, inconsistency reduced OCB at the weekly level, but not at the daily level. While we proposed potential explanations, empirical evidence remains limited. Future work should clarify why such temporal differences occur, under which conditions variability arises and how it can be managed to minimize inconsistencies. Some ideas were discussed in the section on theoretical implications.

Fifth, several limitations relate to our use of COR theory. Our design did not allow us to identify specific resources that accompany fluctuations in meaningful work, despite COR's emphasis on resource caravans. Future work should explore which resources co-occur with meaningful work, for example, energy or vitality, positive affect or self-efficacy — and how different resource configurations shape behaviour. In addition, COR's principle that resource losses are more potent than gains (Hobfoll, 2001) raises the possibility that decreases in meaningful work may exert disproportionately stronger effects on OCB than increases. Although we do not formally test this proposition, our results provide initial descriptive indications for this principle. Future research should explicitly test such asymmetries to further specify how COR principles operate in the context of meaningful work.

Sixth, our focus on past–present comparisons did not consider employees' future-oriented expectations (Bailey & Madden, 2017). Incorporating anticipated future meaningfulness may provide a more complete understanding of temporal-comparison processes.

Finally, we relied on self-reported OCB, which raises concerns about social desirability and common-method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Although common and often necessary in diary research, self-reports should be complemented with supervisor or peer ratings to strengthen construct validity.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights that meaningful work is inherently dynamic. Its impact depends not only on absolute levels but also on how it evolves relative to past experiences. Importantly, the effects differ across time frames: while directional changes matter at both daily and weekly levels, inconsistency undermines OCB primarily at the weekly level, reflecting the greater salience of aggregated, longer-term fluctuations. By adopting a relative perspective, we offer a more nuanced understanding of meaningful work, highlighting that both change and stability shape its effects on extra-role behaviour.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Luisa Liedtke: Conceptualization; investigation; writing – original draft; methodology; writing – review and editing; formal analysis. **Kai C. Bormann:** Conceptualization; writing – review and editing; formal analysis.

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None.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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