SECTION 1

# Meaningful Work

# 1

# The Elements of Meaningful Work



**INTRINSIC MOTIVATION** and personal and professional growth are two aspects of individual and organizational behavior that are more critical today than when first proposed and advocated by the legendary motivation theorists Maslow, Hersberg, and Aldefer. In our desire to assist workers and organizations to be more productive, we have forgotten our roots as human resource and organization development professionals, as well as managers and leaders. There are two reasons this is important:

1. In our rush to get to performance (the end goal), we keep neglecting the importance of the means to the end.
2. Traditional paradigms around issues such as organizational structure, management style, and employee benefits are no longer valid, and neither are traditional paradigms around motivation and development.

We haven't changed our approaches to these two elements even though the work we do and the environment in which we do the work have changed

dramatically. We are trying to survive and prosper in a service-era and knowledge-era economy with a bureaucratic and manufacturing mind-set.

We also keep trying to fix problems using a mechanistic, cause-and-effect mind-set and then cannot understand why individuals and organizations don't change.

> There is a lot of turmoil, confusion, and pain in the business world today. . . . Managers and human resource people attend workshop after workshop [and call in consultant after consultant], embracing each new tool as a way to create the new workplace, only to see their hopes dashed. They say, "If only we could find the right technique. Surely there must be a way of making best management practices stick." Yet, after a short application, it's back to business as usual.
>
> —*Nirenberg (1995), p. 2*

Nirenberg found that, paradoxically, if the conditions were appropriate and the people open to the application of a given tool, *then the tool itself was often not needed.* Conversely, many organizations block introduction of new ideas such that no tool or technique is going to work; then they use the tool or technique as the scapegoat. In the end, the people who suggested the tool or technique in the first place are blamed for it not being the panacea. As one consultant sized up the dilemma, "Organizations don't change. People change. And then people change organizations" (Richard, 1996, p. 3).

One way of helping people change is to assist them in finding, or offering them, meaningful work. This way the intrinsic motivation and development is built in, so we do not have to find a fix for it or throw perks at it. If people have meaningful work, then they want to do good work, they have commitment to the job and the organization, they act professionally (ethically and responsibly), and they feel fulfilled.

## Meaning Plus Work

I want to be clear about the words *meaning* and *work* as I use them. For the sake of comparison, meaning *at* work implies a relationship between the person and the organization or the workplace, in terms of commitment, loyalty,

and dedication. Richards (1995) says that if there is meaning at work, "[only then] will our work become more joyful [and] our organizations will flourish with commitment, passion, imagination, spirit, and soul" (p. 94). According to Porters and colleagues (1974), commitment involves the willingness of employees to exert higher efforts on behalf of the organization, a strong desire to stay in the organization, and acceptance of the major goals and values of the organization. I deal with meaning at work in the second half of the book. Meaning *of* work implies a sociological and anthropological concern for the role of work in a society, in terms of the norms, values, and traditions of work in the day-to-day life of people. Dubin (1976) uses the term *work centrality* as a general belief about the value in one's life of working. I do not address this aspect of meaning plus work.

Meaning *in* work, or *meaningful work*, suggests an inclusive state of being. It is how we express the meaning and purpose of our lives through the activities (work) that make up most of our waking hours. For some, work is their life, as reflected in the comments of an unemployed forty-five-year-old construction worker captured in Studs Terkel's *Working* (1974): "Right now I can't really describe myself because . . . I'm unemployed. . . . So, you see, I can't say who I am right now . . . I guess a man's something else besides his work, isn't he? But what? I just don't know." The opposite of meaningful work is alienation, which Wilensky (1960) defined as dissociation of self from work and loss of capacity to express oneself in work. For the purpose of this book, I have chosen *meaningful work* as the term to focus on that which gives essence to what we do and brings a sense of fulfillment to our lives.



Values have usually been considered intrinsic motivators to performing a task and deriving satisfaction from accomplishing a task (or job). Although the emphasis may be on the congruence of the task with our beliefs, objectives, and anticipated rewards, motivation focuses on accomplishing the task. The value is based on what is received as a result of the accomplishment. We are motivated intrinsically by what the outcome or accomplishment gets us in terms of feelings (emotions). Meaning, on the other hand, is more deeply intrinsic than values, suggesting three levels of satisfaction; extrinsic, intrinsic, and something even deeper—meaningful work.

## The Meaningful Work Model

This deeper level of intrinsic motivation has to do with work that reflects "the expression of our inner being" (Fox, 1994).

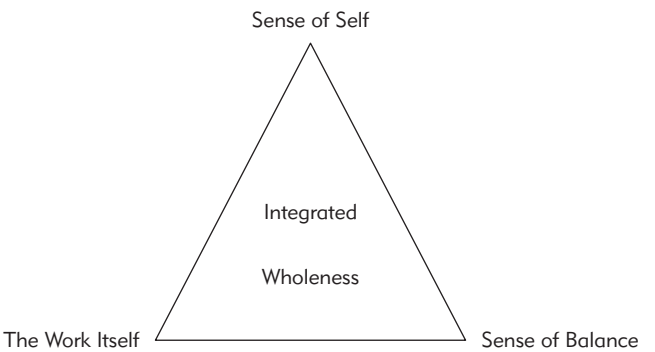
The Meaningful Work Model of Figure 1.1 consists of:

- The sense of self
  - Bringing one's whole self (mind, body, emotion, spirit) to the work (and the workplace)
  - Finding one's purpose in life, and how work fits into that purpose
  - Taking care of the self by taking care of others
  - Developing one's potential
  - Having a positive belief system about achieving one's purpose
  - Being in control
  - Favoring meaningful learning
- The work itself
  - Fulfilling one's purpose
  - Mastering one's performance
  - Seeking learning: challenge, creativity, and continuous growth



**Figure 1.1. The Meaningful Work Model**





- Pursuing the opportunity to carry out one's purpose through the work
- Having autonomy, empowerment, and a sense of control over one's environment

- The sense of balance
  - Balancing work and the rest of life
  - Balancing career and the rest of life
  - Managing the tensions

No single factor in each of these three elements can stand alone or is more important than the others. Meaningful work requires the interplay of all. We can examine each element separately while acknowledging its interdependence.



## Sense of Self

People need to bring their whole selves (mind, body, emotion, and spirit) to their work. The sense of the whole self is critical to finding meaning in work. People often fail to bring their whole selves to work out of fear of rejection, prejudice, or misunderstanding. In his book *Artful Work: Awakening Joy, Meaning, and Commitment in the Workplace,* Richards (1995) said that "we work hard to create physical safety in our workplaces. Can't we also create mental, emotional, and spiritual safety—safety for the whole person?" One of the significant findings of a recent study on spirituality and work was the number of respondents who believed they could not bring their whole self to their present workplace. Before one can bring the whole self to work, one has to first be aware of one's own values, beliefs, and purpose in life. The sense of self also includes constantly striving to reach one's potential, believing in the ability to reach that potential, and realizing the criticality of continuous lifelong learning. The sense of self also includes having control over personal and work "space."

## The Work Itself

"Real joy comes not from ease or riches or from the praise of men, but from doing something worthwhile." Wilfred Grenfell's statement (ThinkExist.com, 2008) personifies the essence of what really motivates people. Csikszentmihalyi

(1990) found in his research on high performance that people in what he refers to as a "flow state" actually feel a sense of disappointment when they achieve the objective of their performance, because the act of performing is the motivator, not accomplishment of the task. So the end goal of money or status is not what was of importance; it is the ability to have an impact on the organization's effectiveness through the work, and the self-directed space to be continuously challenged, creative, and learning. In the not-so-distant past, managers made decisions about the structure and process of work activities, in the name of efficiency. Jobs were broken down into tasks, which involved certain competencies as well as specific and measurable objectives. People were hired to perform tightly defined jobs. But work has now changed dramatically. Knowledge workers are hired to bring their skills and abilities to bear on multiple projects having ill-defined goals and boundaries. This requires more worker autonomy, flexibility, empowerment, continuous learning, risk taking, and creativity.



## Sense of Balance

To paraphrase a Zen Buddhist saying, work and pleasure should be so aligned that it is impossible to distinguish one from the other. The sense of balance at its ideal is that life is so integrated that it doesn't matter what one is doing, so long as it's meaningful. A sense of balance concerns the choices we make between the time we spend at paid work, unpaid work (work at home, with family, as a volunteer), and pleasurable pursuits. We try to keep up with it all—job, home, community, health, family, and personal relationships—but life doesn't feel fulfilling. We are not doing what we want to do, and we are not acting according to our true values. We feel disconnected from the people who matter most, and we are not taking care of ourselves.

Balance is not a state of being where everything in our lives is apportioned equal weight. Greenhaus, Collins, and Shaw (2003) suggest that balance should be considered from three perspectives:

1. *Time balance* How time is divided between the roles we play at work, at home, with family and friends, in the community, in our religious or spiritual affiliations, etc.

2. *Involvement balance* How our psychological involvement is invested in these roles
3. *Satisfaction balance* How much satisfaction we gain from the roles

Some people say there is no such thing as work-life balance. Work pays the bills and comes first. Balance, though, is not about work opposed to the rest of your life, but about accepting all the parts of your life, in the present and throughout your career, and learning to manage the tensions among (not between) the parts of your life. You do this by looking at how you focus your energy and your time, to make them as enriching and fulfilling as possible. Work-life balance has to do with a sense of balance anchored by a foundation of purpose and meaning, while being flexible enough to bend with changing needs and conditions.

Meaningful work requires the interplay of all of these elements, and they all come together in the term *integrated wholeness* (Maslow, 1943). One of Maslow's earliest works described the key principles to be included in any theory of human motivation. He believed "the integrated wholeness of the organism must be one of the foundation stones of motivation theory" (p. 370). The next three chapters elaborate on the three elements of the Meaningful Work model.