



# MEANING AT WORK THE VALUE OF REFLECTION

## WHO IS THIS TOOL FOR?

HR professionals

## OBJECTIVES OF THE TOOL:

- Understand the concept of meaning at work
- Recognize the importance of reflection on meaning at work to promote well-being
- Explore individual and collective action steps to foster meaningful work

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## CONTEXT

The sense of purpose at work is a global concern that has been growing over the past thirty years. The COVID-19 pandemic has given it a new momentum, to the point that it seems there isn't a week that goes by without discussions about a widespread sense of meaninglessness among workers.

But where has this lost sense gone? Some might argue that it's not so much the mourning of a lost meaning that burdens them, but rather the realization of its absence, which brings about feelings of vertigo, emptiness, fear, and even frustration.

This realization impacts individuals' well-being at work. Whether in Canada, the United States, or Europe—particularly in France—data from 2023 indicates that, on average, one in two people reports feeling a lack of meaning in their work.

## MEANING AT WORK

Meaning at work can be defined as the degree to which an employee is able to connect their self-concept to the work environment. This connection enhances their sense of purpose and fulfillment in their job. In other words, it's the interrelation of a sense of identity (**who am I?**) with one's role at work (**what do I do?**), one's sense of belonging (**with whom do I do it?**) and one's rationale for being at work (**why am I here?**).

Unsurprisingly, the advent of the pandemic disrupted this perception of meaning, as the answers to these questions became much more confused. This is quite normal, given that many people suddenly experienced remote work. They lost the sense of connection with others, which is difficult to replicate through technology, and found themselves in a new environment with less social support.

Work goes far beyond the execution of specific tasks for a salary; it is a strong identity system in which we can explore our potentials and feel the impact of what we achieve on others. However, with working from home, connections have been severed. So, now that the pandemic is behind us, can simply returning to the office solve the problem?

It's not that simple. We tend to assume that meaning at work arises from certain aspects of the job, such as work-life balance, meeting individual needs, teamwork, and participating in something greater than ourselves. While all of this can indeed enhance the feeling of meaning, it is not its source. The source of meaning is reflection.

## A MATTER OF TIME

For years, employers have been seeking solutions to increase the sense of meaning at work, and rightly so: it is now clear that a lack of meaning leads to significant productivity losses. However, no solution can be generalized to all employees, as meaning is a highly subjective feeling—**what is significant for one person may not be for another.**

That said, there is a common denominator for everyone: meaning exists only through reflection. Recent scientific discoveries suggest that those who feel a "loss" of meaning at work are primarily individuals who have stopped to ask themselves a question: why do I feel this way?

*Taking the time to pause and reflect on what is coherent and meaningful can make all the difference.*

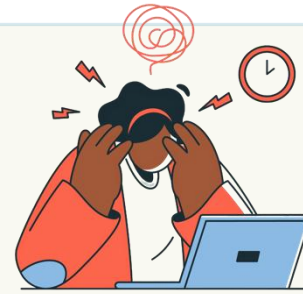
This reflection remains essential, even if it leads to less pleasant realizations. It is actually the failure to ask these questions that can cause a shock when faced with the facts.

So, how can we leverage these insights to enhance employee well-being and support performance at work?

## CONCRETE ACTION STEPS

Time is the most scarce resource at work. This issue is exacerbated by a critical level of increasing workload. This overload, combined with the accompanying stress, creates the perfect recipe for a loss of meaning. It's often when we reach our breaking point, when we feel overwhelmed, that reflection becomes necessary: why am I doing all this if it ends up making me sick and unhappy?

Paradoxically, it is by taking time for reflection that we can truly strengthen the sense of meaning, which then becomes a protective factor for individual and team well-being.



### THE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON THE SENSE OF MEANING AT WORK

The COVID-19 pandemic created a pause—a moment outside the usual hustle, routine, and constrained schedules. Alone in front of their screens, many people took the time to question the meaning of their daily activities for the first time. They realized a certain lack of coherence, whether it was between their personal values and those of the company, between their current job and their aspirations, or more deeply, between the person they wish to be in this world and the path they have taken.

By allowing remote work or even temporarily pausing their jobs, the lockdown facilitated this widespread awareness.

## Organize Reflection Time

It is important to establish dedicated moments for collective reflection, where everyone can express their thoughts honestly and openly. These sessions can illuminate both the positive and negative aspects of work. If negative observations arise, it's important to take action to recreate meaning. For example, workshops could be organized to discuss the company's values and how they align with daily work.

## Encourage Individual Reflection and Sharing

Reflecting on the meaning of work can be an intimidating exercise if it lacks structure. The accompanying box presents questions that could help your team members, both personally and collectively.

Encouraging employees to reflect on what gives meaning to their work and to share situations where they feel a lack of meaning can be beneficial. This can be done through team meetings or internal communication platforms.

### QUESTIONS TO GUIDE REFLECTION

- What adds meaning to my work?
- What takes away meaning from my work?
- How can my work become more significant?
- How does our teamwork contribute to a sense of meaning?
- How could we organize our teamwork to make it more meaningful?
- How can my manager help me make my work more significant?
- What actions can I take in the short term to enhance the meaning of my work?

## Framing Reflection on Meaning at Work

When encouraging employees to reflect on the meaning of their work, it's important to ensure that their reflections are constructive. The scientific literature offers ample guidance on how to foster meaning in the workplace. Employers can implement several concrete actions, such as:

1. **Ensure Alignment of Values:** Employees' personal values should align with those of the organization. This may require adapting management practices to allow for the expression of individual skills. It could involve reviewing goals and work methods to better reflect shared values.
2. **Recognize Contributions:** Recognition involves appreciating employees' efforts and successes. This can be expressed through regular positive feedback, rewards for exceptional performance, or simply by acknowledging the work done.
3. **Match Tasks to Skills:** It's important that the tasks assigned to employees correspond to their skills and challenge them appropriately. This means customizing responsibilities and providing opportunities for professional development.
4. **Promote Fairness and Justice:** All employees should feel treated equitably. This entails maintaining transparency in decisions and policies and ensuring that everyone has access to the same opportunities.

5. **Trust Employees:** It is essential to trust employees' judgment and grant them the autonomy needed to make decisions regarding their work.
6. **Foster Meaningful Connections:** To combat feelings of loneliness, it's important to create a work environment where employees can build meaningful relationships with their colleagues.
7. **Protect Employees:** Ensure that employees are not placed in risky situations, whether physically or emotionally. This includes implementing safety and well-being policies in the workplace.

**By implementing these actions, employers can significantly contribute to creating a work environment where meaning and well-being are at the forefront of concerns.**



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