

If the desire for meaningful work relates to the broader question of meaning in a person's life, then there is no reason to believe that employers have any great insights into that question. While special individuals may, managers, who must be responsive to the bottom line, are unlikely sources for insights into the meaning of life. Fortunately, our lives consist of all sorts of activities that we consider work but fall outside the economic definition of work for pay such as, volunteering, hobbies, and learning new things. Life would be empty if we could not engage in activities that were good in themselves and not driven by necessity. When we redefine meaningful work to be work that has meaning in our lives, then our survey of answers to the meaningful life question helps us understand meaningful work. Different things will be valuable to different people at different times. Like the meaning of life question, meaningful work has subjective and objective features to it. One man's meaningful work may be one woman's meaningless work. The social meanings and moral values of work vary over time for cultures and individuals. Humans are seekers of meaning. We not only make sense of the world, but we assign significance to it. Organizations don't create meaningful work; they are simply places where one might find it. People employed in what the company or society deems meaningful work may not find the work meaningful because they are personally unable to "light up" the meanings around them. Such was the case with the charity worker mentioned earlier. Individuals or organizations can try to create meanings, but if they are illusions created with smoke and mirrors, they produce nothing but cynicism. To find meaning, people first must grasp the truth or reality of a situation. The objective element of meaningful work consists of the moral conditions of the job itself. All employees must be treated with dignity and respect. (All too many workers over the years have complained because they were not "treated like adults.") To seek meaning, one has to feel like a human being. The subjective elements of meaningful work consist of the outlooks and attitudes that people bring with them into the workplace. Our ability to find and "light up meaning" comes from personality, life experiences, and the things we value. The best way to understand the idea of "lighting up" meanings is by looking at what it means not to exercise this ability. Consider the idea of sloth. While the early Christians talked about it in spiritual terms, in secular terms, sloth is apathy, lack of care, lack of joy, and a certain laziness, not about work per se, but about active engagement in life. You can work long hours today, but still be slothful. Aristotle makes a slightly different point about how humans engage in life. He says that a slave lacks the ability to decide and deliberate but regains it back when set free. But he also tells us that some people can be slaves by nature, meaning that they are happy to let others decide and deliberate for them. Hence, the things that keep us from finding meaning are failure to actively engage in life and a certain laziness or lack of caring that allows us to let others make our decisions and tell us what things mean. It would be wrong, in fact morally dangerous, to assume that meaningful work is purely subjective. Meaningful work, like a meaningful life, must be morally worthy work undertaken in morally worthy organizations. Work has meaning because there is some good in it. The most meaningful jobs are those in which people directly help others or create products that make life better for people. Work makes life better if it helps others, alleviates suffering, eliminates difficult, dangerous, or tedious toil, makes someone healthier and happier, or aesthetically or intellectually enriches people and improves the environment in which we live. All work that is worthy does at least one of these things in some small or large way. Still not all people will find worthy work personally meaningful to them. On a day-to-day basis most jobs can't fill the tall order of making the world better, but particular incidents at work have meaning because you make a valuable contribution, or you were able to genuinely help someone in need or

you come up with a creative solution to a difficult problem. These meaningful acts are distinctive because people do them with a good will and not for the sake of a paycheck. They are inherently rewarding and often occur unexpectedly. Such moments fill valuable lives. A life abundant with small acts of kindness is not necessarily a happy life, but it does have meaning because it leaves something behind that mattered to others. And is apt to be happier. Meaningful work is something that we must find on our own. While some occupations appear to be inherently meaningful such as religious callings, they are still only meaningful if the person who does them finds them so. Meaningful work is not always happy or a bed of roses. We may not be able to define it, but we know it when we see it. Meaningful work sometimes involves pain, drudgery, and stress. Those who have it may still come home from work frustrated or tired. However, the most distinctive thing about having meaningful work is that it energizes one's life. In this respect the experience of meaningful work and the elevated notion of leisure that we have been discussing are almost indistinguishable from each other. These kinds of activities are important parts of happy lives and those who don't have them at work may still have them in leisure. Both are not specific activities, but the way that we experience them. Meaningful work can include anything from brain surgery to trash collection. Lastly, there is the role of hope and faith in meaningful work. Under the Protestant work ethic work had meaning because people believed that all work, no matter how dirty and rotten, had dignity because it was the work that God gave us along with hope for eternal salvation. A calling was meaningful work because it was work done for a purpose determined by God. The problem with this assumption is that not all jobs are created equal. It takes tremendous faith to overcome the demoralizing impact of a tedious dead-end job that offers no hope of a better life. Unemployment not only destroys hope, but it destroys the faith that we have in organizations and the social and economic system. Not everyone wants meaningful work. Many just want to be treated with respect and earn a decent living. In the long run, meaning cannot be psychologically engineered, but it tends to flourish among people who are treated with dignity. Organizations do not have a moral obligation to provide meaningful work; however, they do have an obligation to provide work and compensation leaves employees with energy, autonomy, will, and income to pursue meaning at work and a meaningful life outside of work.