

Meaning, Work and Social Responsibility

By Wayne Visser

Surprisingly little has been written about the search for meaning in a workplace or business context, and nothing, in my knowledge, has made the explicit link to corporate social responsibility (CSR). It is surprising, partly because meaning has been a serious topic of research and application for at least fifty years now, following the seminal work of Viktor Frankl and others, as have the fields of industrial psychology and CSR. But it is more surprising still, simply because work is where we spend about a third of lives. If meaning cannot be found in the workplace, our ability to lead a fulfilling life is seriously impaired.

The importance of understanding how work can contribute to meaning in life seems more critical now than ever before. Anecdotal evidence is mounting that people in the West are increasingly feeling a sense of existential crisis in their working lives. On the one hand, they are expecting more from their work experience, including that it will nurture personal development and self actualisation. On the other hand, they are finding the capitalist, corporate model of work to be lacking in a meaningful higher purpose, or to put it another way, the modern workplace and economy is devoid of a sense of soul.

Some may argue that this growing frustration in the Western workplace is a vindication of Karl Marx's (1975) concept of the alienation of labour through capitalism, whereby work "does not belong to his essential being; that he therefore does not confirm himself in his work, but denies himself, feels miserable and not happy, does not develop free mental and physical energy, but mortifies his flesh and ruins his mind".

Modern social commentators like Charles Handy are less extreme, arguing for reformation rather than revolution. In his book, *The Hungry Spirit*, which is subtitled "Beyond Capitalism – A Quest for Purpose in the Modern World", Handy calls for capitalism to embrace the notion of social capital (and I would add ecological capital as well) in addition to the more traditional economic capital. He also emphasises the need for citizen companies, which demonstrate greater accountability and a restored balance between the rights and responsibilities of business.

The question remains, however, whether these ideas have any grounding in the theory of meaning on the one hand, and management theory on the other hand. According to Frankl's logopsychology and logophilosophy, work – doing, or as he referred to it, realising creative values – constitutes one of three paths to meaning. "As long as creative values are in the forefront of the life task," he noted, "their actualisation generally coincides with a person's work". In fact, his other two paths to meaning may be equally applicable in the work situation, even if less common, namely being, or the experience of values (e.g. love, truth, beauty), and perceiving, or the adoption of constructive attitudes (especially in the face of suffering).

Frankl's notions of work as ideally being an expression of a life task are not dissimilar to iconic industrial psychologist Abraham Maslow's conclusions about self-actualising individuals. Writing about the higher-order needs of his famous motivational hierarchy, Maslow used words like vocation, calling, mission, duty, beloved job, even oblation, to describe the sense of dedication and devotion to their work experienced by self-actualising people. Maslow interestingly also identified high levels of perceived meaningfulness in the lives of the self-actualising subjects that he studied.

This was not the only similarity between their conceptions of work and meaning. Both Frankl and Maslow qualify their comments by emphasising that work only becomes meaningful when it entails contribution to a cause, or society, beyond selfish needs. Maslow (1973) talks about "offering oneself or dedicating oneself upon some altar for some particular task, some cause outside oneself and bigger than oneself, something not merely selfish" and Frankl (1965) introduces his concept of responsibility by saying that "this meaning and value is attached to the person's work as a contribution to society, not to the actual occupation as such".

Only Oliver Philips (1979) appears to have attempted any substantive conceptual application of the Frankl's theory of meaning to business. In a chapter entitled "A New Course for Management", he proposes a model in which the human will meaning can be channelled in one of three directions in organisations. It can either find healthy expression in freedom of choice with responsibility (leading to self-transcendence and unique meaning), or it can be frustrated by a lack of freedom and responsibility (leading to collective neurosis and nihilism), or there can be a failure to find meaning (leading to existential frustration and reductionism).

Key influencing factors, according to Philips, are management style (authoritarian companies make successful meaning-seeking difficult), strategic horizon (focus on profits encourages short-term thinking which detracts from meaning) and job enrichment (categorizing and depersonalizing jobs makes them less meaningful). He builds on Frankl and Maslow's ideas of self-transcendence, saying that in affluent societies, "dedication to something outside one's self-interest is stronger motivation to work than money or power" and a person will therefore "look for new meaning potentials in work that benefits his co-workers, minority groups he identifies with and causes he considers worth supporting". This begins to hint at the link between work, meaning and social responsibility.

In perhaps the strongest theoretical support of this link, academic Paul Wong's (1998) Personal Meaning Profile model identifies "self-transcendence" as one of seven factors that characterises people's perceptions about what makes an ideally meaningful life. Some of the descriptive statements associated with this factor make its relevance clear, for example: I believe I can make a difference in the world; I strive to make the world a better place; it is important to dedicate my life to a cause; I make a significant contribution to society; and I attempt to leave behind a good and lasting legacy.

Pulling the threads together now, the underlying argument in this article, which remains to be adequately empirically tested, is that one of the ways companies can address an apparent lack of purpose and meaning in the workplace, which may in turn be associated with lower levels of employee motivation, job satisfaction and worker loyalty, is to actively engage in corporate social responsibility activities. By the same token, employees that make an effort to be involved in social responsibility initiatives in their workplace, be it through volunteering on community projects or in other ways, are likely to experience an enhanced their sense of meaning in the lives.

References

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Article reference

Visser, W. (2003) *Meaning, Work and Social Responsibility*. *Positive Living E-Zine*, International Network on Personal Meaning, September.

Part of the WAYNE VISSER ARTICLES Series

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