



How to Find Meaning at Work



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Most people want to be engaged in meaningful work, but are at a loss as to how to find such work. A meaningful job is a fundamental precursor of workplace well-being, yet it remains an illusive and esoteric concept that many have given up hope for finding.

One of the challenges with the concept of meaning in the workplace is many business leaders shy away from discussing something that sounds soft or difficult to manage. Executives have been taught to focus on profit, loss, productivity, ROIC, and other so-called hard business measures; they frankly don't want to hear about meaning.

Let's make this easier for you

Meaningful work may be viewed as a corollary for productive work, and productivity is a concept any business leader should be comfortable discussing.

Those workers who are fortunate enough to have work that is personally meaningful are among the most productive. When people find meaning, they are using their strengths; meaningful work is work people are meant to do, and it's hard not to be productive when doing work that engages natural abilities.

An analogy from the sports world is being in the zone. Great basketball players talk about being in the zone when they knock-down five 3-pointers in a row. Baseball players are in the zone when they're batting close to .400. These are highly productive times for athletes, and they are obviously utilizing their strengths when they have these in-the-zone moments. It's also fair to assume that a 90-yard punt return for a game-winning touchdown feels pretty meaningful too, further illustrating the connection between productivity, meaning and personal strengths.

There's proof in the research too

Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi, formerly the head of the department of psychology at the University of Chicago, uses the word *flow* to describe moments where people are fully engaged in an activity — so engaged the activity seems effortless and time passes without cognition. This state of flow occurs when people undertake a challenge closely related to personal strengths. Csikszentmihalyi has studied hundreds of successful people in diverse careers such as biology, dancing, physics and writing. His findings suggest that prolonged periods of enjoying and being absorbed in an activity combined with the belief the activity had meaning, leads to amazingly creative and productive careers.

While executives may be hesitant to talk about meaning, flow moments, or even being in the zone, in reality it is just another way to talk about productivity, creativity and success.

So how do you find meaning?

How can organizational leaders help employees (and themselves) find meaningful work? The solution generally starts with a better understanding of ourselves — specifically, our personality, strengths and motivations.

There are a number of tools on the market to help individuals better understand themselves. These include assessments such as Meyers-Briggs, DISC and Strengthsfinder. Another tool is called the System for Identifying Motivated Abilities® (SIMA®). This system is based on the notion that everyone is uniquely motivated, attracted to certain situations and has talents that come naturally to them.

Any parent with more than one child can quickly understand the proof of this theory. Parents know the diversity of interests and abilities in each child starting when they are quite young. Even though two children come from the same gene pool, are raised by the same parents, in the same household, go to same schools and churches, etc, they have different orientations, likes & dislikes, and motivations. For

example, one child has a propensity to draw and create new things, while the other child is more analytical and enjoys solving problems.

SIMA has found these patterns of motivated abilities remain constant throughout one's life. The child who at five enjoys solving math problems is very likely to pursue analytical problem solving activities throughout her life. The child who at young age can rally friends to climb a hill together will likely be a leader most of his life.

The output of SIMA is called a Motivated Abilities Pattern® (MAP®). This MAP is generated through a rigorous interview process based on a person's recollection of key achievements during their life, dating back to childhood, where they did something enjoyable and felt they did well. Unlike other personality profilers, MAPs aren't assigned to predefined categories. In fact, since 1961 SIMA had developed over 100,000 MAPs and never found two that were the same.

Applying this stuff at work

In the workplace, if employees' primary motivated strengths can be identified, they may be placed in new jobs that better fit these motivated patterns, or they may orient their current jobs around the patterns. Work that engages motivated patterns is typically done more productively and effectively. Engaging in work that taps into core motivations is a path to finding meaning in work. So from the employer's perspective, accessing these core motivations is a great way to increase productivity, and from the employees' point of view these core motivations lead to heightened engagement and well-being.

Examples of how MAPs have helped companies

Steve Darter, President of People Management SMD, and author of the book *Managing Yourself Managing Others*, offers a few examples of how the SIMA process has helped individuals, teams, and companies to achieve greater success.

In a recent interview, Steve described how one organization promoted a highly valued employee into a role for which he was not motivated, resulting in a poor job fit. The individual's motivation and performance decreased, and because of his frustration he began to seek jobs outside the company. A MAP provided the employee and his management the basis to understand the job-placement mistake and then correct the situation. The employee was then placed in an equally important role for which he was highly motivated. As a result, the company avoided losing a valued employee, and also saved significant expenses that would have been associated with his termination and replacement.

In a second illustration, Steve talked about a senior executive whose motivated strengths had become a weakness. Steve teaches that a weakness is the flip side of a strength — in other words, a strength that is not understood and managed well. As a result of this phenomena several key employees left this exec's company, and other employees had become disenfranchised. The result was that critical operational changes and new product introductions were behind schedule. After receiving his MAP and getting coached on how to best manage his motivated strengths, the executive changed some of his behaviors using his MAP to develop stronger working relationships with others. These changes resulted in dramatic improvements in performance, productivity, and results.

In a third example, Steve described how a newly formed executive team lacked adequate understanding of each other creating mistrust and dysfunction, and resulting in missed corporate goals and objectives.

After each team member went through the SIMA process and received coaching on how to best manage their motivated strengths, they participated in a structured process to learn how to interact more effectively. As a result, the team improved their performance, and achieved their operational objectives.

In all three examples, company performance and productivity improved, while employees felt more engaged and found more meaning in their work.

A final note about meaning

This notion of finding meaningful work may seem daunting. Many people struggle with finding meaning in life in general, and getting paid to do something that has meaning seems an even bigger leap.

Yet meaning is achievable, and it doesn't have to be complicated. For example, the CEO of a large healthcare company significantly impacted the meaningfulness of his employees' work by illustrating how their company was helping to solve the healthcare crisis in America. By repeatedly framing their work not only within the context of individual's health, but also within the context of providing effective, low-cost health solutions for a large part of the population, this CEO was able to imbue a sense of meaning to workers across the company.

Another great illustration is of a hospital orderly who found by regularly changing the pictures on the walls of long-term patients' rooms, he could help speed recovery times. Even though his work was cleaning bedpans, mopping floors, and dusting pictures, this orderly found great meaning by helping seriously ill patients recover faster.

Jobs don't have to change drastically, nor do workers need to pursue long pilgrimages of personal discovery to find purpose and meaning in their jobs. There are simple solutions and practical tools to enhance meaning in the workplace. The SIMA process is a prudent tool for helping people identify what their natural motivations are, and set them on a path for using their MAP both on the job and in life. SIMA helps them to identify an important ingredient to achieving a sense of purpose and meaning in what they do, while also increasing the productivity and success of their organizations.