Meaningfulness interventions as a way to facilitate engagement and personal initiative in the workplace: a field experimental study

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Overview

- Rationale/Purpose
- Study Design
- Overview of Findings
- Embedding Meaningfulness Initiatives
- Conclusions and What Next?
Rationale/Purpose of the Study

- Many scholars have argued that personal development at work is important for meaningfulness and engagement (e.g., Shuck & Rocco, 2014), and that increasing meaningfulness could lead to higher levels of employee engagement (e.g., Soane et al., 2013; Fletcher, 2016).

- Syntheses of the evidence on engagement and on meaningfulness revealed that there are very few intervention studies (Bailey et al., 2015; Bailey et al., 2016). Therefore, I sought to conduct an intervention study to examine the effects of a personal development initiative focused on facilitating meaningfulness.

- This research project was funded by the Richard Benjamin Trust Foundation; and assisted by Dilys Robinson, Institute for Employment Studies.
Predictions

-*It was predicted, drawing on Kahn’s (1990) psychological conditions framework and broaden-and-build explanations (Fredrickson, 2001; Soane et al., 2013), that a meaningfulness intervention would, compared with a control group, increase levels of: a) meaningfulness, b) job engagement, and c) personal initiative.*

-*In contrast, a more traditional stress management intervention would not, compared with the control group, increase meaningfulness or engagement/personal initiative as it serves primarily to protect and maintain existing resources (Hobfoll, 1989; Ivancevich et al., 1990).*
## Study Design: Sample Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Public Co</th>
<th>Engineering Co</th>
<th>Total Sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Female</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Fulltime</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Managerial responsibility</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average age (years)</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average job tenure (years)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average organisation tenure</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average core self evaluations (1-low to 7-high)</td>
<td>4.52</td>
<td>4.55</td>
<td>4.53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Study Design: Procedure and Conditions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study Group</th>
<th>Week 1</th>
<th>Weeks 2 to 8</th>
<th>Weeks 8 to 12</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Control</strong></td>
<td>Baseline survey</td>
<td>No training</td>
<td>End of development period survey; final survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N=23</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Stress management</strong></td>
<td>Baseline survey</td>
<td>2 hour training session and 4 weeks personal development</td>
<td>End of development period survey; final survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N=25</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Meaningfulness</strong></td>
<td>Baseline survey</td>
<td>2 hour training session and 4 weeks personal development</td>
<td>End of development period survey; final survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N=29</td>
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</table>
Study Design: Personal Development Activities

- **Meaningfulness intervention**
  - Identify, describe, and reflect upon a relatively meaningful event/situation that happened at work over the last week or so;
  - Focus a different broader source of meaningfulness and discuss how this could be utilised/strengthened within the workplace;
  - Set a behavioural goal, and a plan to achieve it, that they feel would have a meaningful impact to themselves and in their workplace. Plus some space of reflection of previous goal.

- **Stress management intervention**
  - Categorise, prioritise, and plan different types of upcoming tasks, duties, and responsibilities.
  - Reflect upon different elements of performance evaluation and monitoring, and how these could be utilised to facilitate wellbeing.
  - Identify and reflect upon a difficult or demanding work task and how to better cope with this in the future.
Survey Measures

- **Meaningfulness in work** – May et al.’s (2004) 6 item measure, e.g., ‘Over the past month, I work I did on my job was very important to me’

- **Meaningfulness at work** – 3 items developed drawing on Pratt & Ashforth’s (2003) and Saks’s (2011) definitions, e.g., ‘Over the past month, my work has contributed to the success of the organisation’.

- **Job engagement** – Soane et al.’s (2012) 9 item measure capturing: a) intellectual, e.g. ‘Over the past month, I have focused hard on my work’; b) social, e.g., ‘Over the past month, I have shared the same work values as my colleagues’; and c) affective, e.g. ‘Over the past month, I have been enthusiastic in my work’ engagement.

- **Personal initiative** – Frese et al.’s (1997) 7 item measure, e.g. ‘Over the past month, I actively attacked problems’.
Findings

- Looking at the changes in scores between baseline and the end of study

- Used ANCOVA to examine whether each of the intervention conditions improved any of the psychological factors compared against the control group

- Controlled for organisation (Public Co/Engineering Co) and level of core self evaluations, i.e. positive vs negative view of one’s self – includes self-esteem and self confidence.
Changes in Meaningfulness in Work

Meaningfulness intervention showed increases in meaningfulness in work against the control condition, whereas the stress management intervention did not.
Changes in Meaningfulness at Work

Meaningfulness intervention showed increases in meaningfulness at work against the control condition, whereas the stress management intervention did a little, although not to statistically significant level.
Changes in Job Engagement

Meaningfulness intervention showed a slight increase in job engagement against the control condition, whereas the stress management intervention did not.
Changes in Personal Initiative

Meaningfulness intervention showed a relatively large increase in personal initiative against the control condition, whereas the stress management intervention did not.
Summary of Findings

- The meaningfulness initiative showed a positive impact, against the control group, on meaningfulness, engagement, and personal initiative whereas the stress management initiative showed little significant impact.

- Another interesting finding was that the meaningfulness intervention showed increases in psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999) against the control condition, whereas the stress management intervention did not.

- Note – EU Referendum may have influenced the findings, particularly for meaningfulness intervention group. Indicates potential fragility of meaningfulness and the impact of socio-political factors.
Embedding Meaningfulness Initiatives

- Voluntary rather than mandatory; build interest and participation through champions and ‘quiet evangelising’

- Line managers crucial to encouraging and facilitating within teams, particularly setting time aside for individual/team reflection and discussion

- Could link with team level objectives as well as individual personal development actions/goals

- Use of technology and already utilised systems/processes to embed within day to day activities

- Workplace social events where different departments get together to share ideas and experiences
Conclusions and What Next?

- The preliminary findings from this study show that meaningfulness is a promising and fruitful area of research and practice, and indicates that meaningfulness interventions could be viewed as an employee-centric way of harnessing the engagement and performance of employees.

- Would benefit from research within critical management and HRM areas of research that bring together micro, meso, and macro level perspectives.

- Would benefit from utilising longer time frames and more complex and embedded interventions that are co-created by organisations/HR practitioners.

- Balance needs to be struck so that employees can authentically promote their meaningfulness within teams and workplaces, thus need to examine how meaningful work can be cultivated as a shared experience.
References 1


References 2


