“Every man’s [or woman’s] work, whether it be literature or music or pictures or architecture or anything else, is always a portrait of him-[or her] self” (Butler, 1903/1998, p. 70). When people are asked to describe who they are, it is common for them to tell a story about what they do. As Butler suggested in the quote above, one’s story paints a picture of oneself that focuses on the tasks the individual performs—one’s job is central to one’s identity.

But there are also important background features that give this picture depth and meaning. These other important features include where one is going professionally, how one approaches or values one’s job, and how one is treated by others who connect to one’s work (customers, managers, coworkers, and society). The theme of *Purpose and Meaning in the Workplace* follows this structure, and the contributors to the volume argue that a person’s
work is more than a collection of tasks performed for money: It is an important part of how individuals create and explain their identity. As the title of the book suggests, work has the potential to give an individual a sense of purpose and meaning.

The central theme of the book is not new. In his 1930 book *Civilization and Its Discontents* Freud wrote, “The communal life of human beings had, therefore, a two-fold foundation: the compulsion to work, which was created by external necessity, and the power of love” (Freud, 1930/1962, p. 101). In addition, Alfred Adler considered work as one of the three important life tasks and a key foundation in establishing psychological health (Adler, Liebenau, & Stein, 2004). Both of these psychologists, as well as others, suggested that work is not sufficient but that finding good work and being treated with dignity and respect at work are important elements in establishing and maintaining positive mental health.

Unfortunately, not all work is positive. For some, the jobs they perform are socially or morally tainted. Others are treated with disrespect, and work becomes a daily humiliation. As suggested by Dutton, Roberts, and Bednar (2010), individuals need a path for building a positive identity. This path includes both the structure of work and important social support systems. This book presents some current research and thinking in the development of this path to good work.

The Scope and Organization of the Book

*Purpose and Meaning in the Workplace* addresses a range of theoretical issues for developing psychologically and professionally healthy workplaces. In addition, the 27 contributors provide a set of strategies for applying these ideas. The book is organized into 10 chapters addressing three major themes. These themes include career development, job structure/content, and organizational leadership.

The career development section focuses on the importance of employees actively constructing their career path. Ideally, this active process should help move an employee from a job (work for money) to a calling (work that is viewed as important to others and integral to the employee’s identity). Moving toward a calling requires a good fit between the personality, skills, and abilities of the individual and the demands of the situation. The chapters in this section reinforce the idea that establishing fit is not a passive process. The organization must provide opportunities for development, but the individual must take advantage of these opportunities. This process is captured in the concept of the protean career, namely, one that the employee is ultimately in charge of.

The majority of jobs in the workplace of today are not static or even a fixed bundle of tasks. Rather, they are an evolving set of tasks altered by technological, social, and organizational changes. The second theme of this book addresses issues related to the
process of creating meaningful work. The first two chapters in this section suggest that the process of job crafting can balance the needs of the organization with those of the individual.

This process of job crafting necessitates both parties taking an active role in the development of work. By valuing and ennobling employees, the organization supports the goals of the protean career, and work moves away from being just a job to a calling. Employees in these jobs see connections between their work and identity. Job crafting does not occur in a single moment but is a continuous process. When it is done well, work becomes more meaningful; employees are increasingly engaged and motivated.

Although many jobs can be crafted to yield these positive outcomes, there are some jobs that are just difficult and unpleasant. The book includes a chapter in this section addressing how to encourage meaning in work that is morally or socially tainted. An example of this type of work could be euthanizing unwanted animals. Because organizations cannot change the job, helping employees with such jobs cognitively restructure how they think about their work is the key to giving them a sense of meaning and value. Although all jobs require some social-cognitive framing, some situations are often not ideal and require more constant support. In the example above, by focusing on the good they are doing (possibly by reducing suffering of these animals), an employer can help employees refocus and redefine their work.

The concepts of meaningful career development and job crafting thrive in an environment buoyed by flexible organizational structures and supportive management. The final section of the book examines the importance of leaders in cultivating these positive work environments. Specifically, organizational leaders are responsible for establishing procedures for selecting individuals who fit the organization (job), supporting their professional development, and creating a culture that promotes self-efficacy. These seemingly simple tasks are complex and require constant attention. They often manifest as complex situations involving appropriate work/life balance, clear definitions of corporate citizenship, and myriad other issues. It is important that leaders understand and promote a culture that enhances meaningful work.

Each of the three core themes in this book (career development, job structure/content, and organizational leadership) is clearly developed and supported. There is a nice balance in each chapter about what we know, how we can apply this information, and where questions remain.

Summary

The body of work in positive organizational scholarship and practice is growing, and this book makes an important contribution. Although the core idea of this book is not new (work that has meaning and purpose is good for individuals and organizations), the contributors
present some valuable new insights and applications. *Purpose and Meaning in the Workplace* is thoughtfully organized around three important themes, and each chapter is clear and concise. There is a nice balance among theoretical, research, and applied issues.

One of the important and unique features of this book is that each chapter concludes with a summary table that captures the core ideas presented in the chapter. Each of the ideas is then evaluated on three criteria: derived from theory, supported by research, and tested in practice. Although every main point is theoretically based, it is easy to see which of these concepts need more research or need additional work in practical applications.

Although based on theory and research, the book is accessible to a wide range of audiences. For example, I believe that managers interested in a clear and interesting introduction to positive organizational development would find this book useful and interesting. In addition, there is enough academic substance in this book to make it a valuable component for graduate-level courses in industrial/organizational psychology or business administration. I can see it fitting into courses in organizational behavior or human resource management, as well as seminars in applications related to positive psychology. I can also see how this book, or at least sections of it, could be incorporated into upper level undergraduate seminars. The ideas in *Purpose and Meaning in the Workplace* could also serve as a fertile source for ideas for future research in this area.

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**References**


