

Meaningful Work and Generational Differences: New Challenges in Employee Motivation

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Abstract

In the contemporary organizational environment, employee motivation increasingly relies on the perception of meaningful work. Meaningful Work represents a crucial factor in employee motivation, job satisfaction, and organizational engagement. It refers to the employee's sense that their activity is personally valuable, purposeful, and socially significant. Recent studies indicate that meaningful work is positively associated with engagement, well-being, and productivity (Allan et al., 2019; Martela & Pessi, 2018).

Generational diversity in the labor market, along with differences in ideas and values, leads to variations in motivational priorities (Costanza et al., 2012; Czerwińska-Lubczyk & Jankowiak, 2025). Managing multigenerational teams—comprising Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z—poses a major challenge for modern organizations. Each generation differs in values, attitudes toward work, and motivational factors, creating new challenges for HR management. The aim of this article is to analyze the role of meaningful work in employee motivation and to compare the values of different generations.

Despite generational differences, the analysis reveals that meaningful work is a universal motivational factor across all generations. The difference lies not in the existence of meaning itself, but in its perception and expression. For example, one generation may be motivated by loyalty and stability, while another values innovation and opportunities. These findings provide important insights for human resource management, forming the basis for effective HR strategies such as:

- Implementing job design models that enhance the perception of meaningful work (feedback, autonomy, etc.)
- Creating flexible work environments that meet the expectations of different generations
- Applying personalized motivational approaches that consider employees' individual needs

The results of this study carry practical significance for HR management, as they demonstrate how organizations can create work environments that simultaneously strengthen motivation and engagement across generations. Understanding and effectively applying these methods supports HR practice adaptation, diversity management, and contributes to organizational sustainability, development, and competitiveness.

Keywords: meaningful work, employee motivation, generational differences, engagement, HR management, multigenerational workplace, job satisfaction, organizational effectiveness, HRM.

Introduction

Although interest in meaningful work has significantly increased in recent years, most existing research focuses on its general impact on employee well-being and satisfaction. Comparatively less attention has been paid to how the perception of meaningful work differs across generations and how these differences influence organizational motivation and engagement. This issue therefore remains a major research challenge in organizational behavior and human resource management.

This study addresses the following research questions:

1. What is the role of meaningful work in shaping employee motivation in modern organizations?
2. How does the perception of meaningful work differ across generations?
3. How can organizations adapt HR strategies in multigenerational workplaces?

In the context of globalization, digitalization, and structural transformation of labor markets, organizations continuously seek ways to create work environments that not only meet economic goals but also foster employees' intrinsic motivation, engagement, and satisfaction. Employee motivation is no longer defined solely by financial rewards. Factors such as professional development, autonomy, and alignment between organizational and personal values have gained importance.

Rapid technological development, the spread of hybrid and remote work systems, and the presence of diverse generations in the labor market create new challenges for organizational management (Allan et al., 2019; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

In this context, meaningful work—subjectively perceived significance of work—has become a central concept in HR management and organizational behavior research. Employees' perception of purpose and significance in their work fosters psychological motivation, increases responsibility, and enhances organizational effectiveness. Meaningful work is closely linked to intrinsic motivation, which drives psychologically fulfilled employees to achieve higher performance (Martela & Pessi, 2018).

Meaningful Work is a concept that describes an employee's experience that their activity is significant, purposeful, and exerts a positive impact on others or on society (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012).

Contemporary organizations simultaneously comprise multiple generations that differ in values, lifestyles, and motivational priorities. Organizations function in a multigenerational environment in which representatives of different generations work: Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z. Each generation differs in values, sources of motivation, and attitudes toward work, which creates new challenges for HR management (Ng, Schweitzer, & Lyons, 2010).

The aim of this article is to analyze inferential relationships between Meaningful Work and generational differences, and to propose HR strategies that will enhance employee motivation and strengthen engagement.

Generational diversity creates specific challenges for HR management, since each generation perceives the meaning of work differently and requires distinct approaches to ensure high levels of motivation and engagement (Costanza et al., 2012; Czerwińska-Lubszczyk & Jankowiak, 2025).

At the same time, it is important to note that meaningful work is not a standardized, uniform concept—its perception varies according to individual, social, and generation-related factors. Research shows that younger generations (Millennials and Gen Z) place greater emphasis on the purposefulness of work, development opportunities, and social impact, whereas older generations (Baby Boomers, Gen X) often focus on stability, experience, and achievements attained within organizational hierarchies.

The article's objective is to analyze the role of meaningful work in employee motivation and engagement, to examine inferential links between Meaningful Work and generational differences, and to propose HR strategies that will foster increased employee motivation and stronger engagement. It further seeks to compare differing generational priorities and to lay the groundwork for HRM strategies that acknowledge the diversity of the contemporary labor market and create a motivationally resilient work environment.

For contemporary organizations, it is particularly important to develop HR policies that account for generational diversity and ensure the strengthening of employees' intrinsic motivation. Integrating the concept of meaningful work into organizational culture can become one of the key instruments for increasing employee engagement, loyalty, and organizational effectiveness.

This study synthesizes contemporary theories of meaningful work and models of generational differences, thereby contributing to the development of the theoretical framework of human resource management.

The article also provides a foundation for future empirical research that will more closely examine the influence of perceived meaningfulness of work on employee motivation and organizational outcomes.

Literature Review

Theoretical Foundations of Meaningful Work

Meaningful work is defined as the perception of work that evokes a sense of significance and purpose (Martela & Pessi, 2018). Based on a meta-analysis, Allan et al. (2019) conclude that meaningful work is directly associated with job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and performance indicators.

Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory is recognized as one of the most well-known motivation models. According to the theory, human behavior is driven by needs that develop in the following sequence: physiological, safety, social belonging, esteem, and self-actualization (Maslow, 1943).

Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) explains that intrinsic motivation is strengthened when the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are satisfied. Meaningful work integrates precisely these three components. Within an organizational context, the need for self-actualization is equally linked to the experience of Meaningful Work, as employees strive to fully realize their capabilities and achieve significant outcomes in their work.

Generational Differences in Motivation

The labor market features four primary generations: Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z. Costanza et al. (2012) note that differences in work values across generations exist, though they are moderate and often contingent upon social context. Recent studies indicate that younger generations (Millennials and Gen Z) place higher value on purposeful activity, development, and the component of social responsibility (Czerwińska-Lubczyk & Jankowiak, 2025). Older generations attach greater importance to stability, professional achievements, and organizational loyalty.

Comparative Analysis

Meaningful work constitutes a significant motivational factor for all generations; however, its substantive perception and motivational effect differ markedly by generation. Studies demonstrate that generational differences manifest not only in the perception of work but also in the stimulation of engagement and productivity (Costanza et al., 2012; Czerwińska-Lubczyk & Jankowiak, 2025).

Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan's Self-Determination Theory states that intrinsic motivation is enhanced by the following psychological needs:

- **Autonomy** – the capacity to make independent decisions.
- **Competence** – the opportunity to use and develop one's skills.
- **Relatedness** – social relationships and support.

When the work environment satisfies these needs, employees are more motivated and perceive their work as more meaningful (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

J. Richard Hackman and Greg R. Oldham's Job Design Model indicates that the meaningfulness of work depends on five core factors:

- Skill variety
- Task identity
- Task significance
- Autonomy
- Feedback

Through job design, motivation and job satisfaction among employees are increased (Hackman & Oldham, 1976).

Generational Differences in Motivation (by Generation)

Baby Boomers (born 1946–1964): Loyalty and Recognition

They associate meaningful work with professional identity and career achievements. For this generation, work primarily signifies responsibility, the application of experience, and professional status. Organizational loyalty and stability are important motivators for this cohort, whereas the social/innovative component of work is relatively less salient. Non-material recognition and the sense that their many years of experience remain relevant are important to them; when they fulfill a “mentor” role, they tend to be more motivated and satisfied.

For this generation, work is associated with professional identity, and “meaningful work” denotes responsibility and status.

Generation X (1965–1980): Efficiency and Autonomy

This generation is characterized by a striving for autonomy and independence. For Gen X, meaningful work is primarily linked to professional self-actualization, independent decision-making, and work flexibility. Gen X employees value professional growth and the opportunity to fully utilize their professional skills, yet they also place considerable importance on work–life balance. As the so-called “sandwich generation,” they must simultaneously care for both children and aging parents. Therefore, work–life balance is not merely a preference but a survival strategy and a primary motivator.

For Gen X, results matter most, with minimal micromanagement.

Millennials / Generation Y (1981–1996): Development and Feedback

They attach importance to self-actualization, opportunities for development, and the social impact component of work. For Millennials, meaningful work often implies not only financial or status-related purposes but also the possibility of social influence and personal growth. Millennials view work as a means of self-expression/individual benefit, particularly when the organization exhibits values that align with their own. Feedback is important to them.

Generation Z (born 1997 onward): Ethics and Financial Security

They are particularly sensitive to the social significance of work, values-based activity, and motivation within an inclusive environment. For Gen Z, meaningful work entails not only individual success but also socially impactful activity that reflects the organization’s ethical principles and responsibility to society. Engagement among Gen Z employees increases when the organization allows them to develop their skills, see the outcomes of their activity, and when their values align with those of the organization (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). Unlike previous generations, Gen Z places greater emphasis on financial stability, having experienced economic crises and the pandemic. However, alongside finances, critical for them is support

for mental health in the workplace and real (not merely declared) policies on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI).

They value opportunities for self-expression and creativity, as well as long-term societal outcomes.

Synthesis and Practical Implications

Comparative analysis reveals that, despite differences, all generations perceive meaningful work as a significant motivator. In successful organizations, this perception is integrated into organizational culture, HR strategies, and the formulation of future career plans.

Organizations that implement generation-sensitive policies—for example, career development for Millennials and social responsibility projects for Gen Z—achieve higher levels of engagement, productivity, and employee loyalty. Meaningful work is not only an instrument of individual motivation but also a significant tool for enhancing organizational effectiveness, while accounting for generational particularities improves the efficacy of strategic HR decisions.

The following practical approaches are especially important:

- Conscious articulation of the purpose and social significance of work;
- Increasing employee involvement in decision-making processes;
- Providing professional development opportunities and a flexible work environment;
- Caring for employee well-being and recognizing their achievements.

Such approaches enhance intrinsic motivation, employee engagement, and organizational effectiveness.

Conclusion

Meaningful Work represents a significant factor in increasing employee motivation, job satisfaction, and organizational engagement—one of the most important and central components of motivation. Research confirms that the subjectively perceived meaningfulness of work is directly related to employee engagement, job satisfaction, psychological well-being, and ultimately to increased organizational effectiveness (Allan et al., 2019; Martela & Pessi, 2018). In a multigenerational environment, organizations must account for the motivational factors of different generations. Although generational differences indeed exist, the experience of meaningfulness at work is a universal factor that influences all employees; however, the form of perception, priorities, levels of motivation, and its motivational effect differ.

“Leadership style should be transformational.” Organizations should not attempt to fit generations into a single framework but should instead leverage their strengths: Boomers’ experience, Gen X’s pragmatism, Millennials’ creativity, and Gen Z’s ethical fortitude.

At the same time, HR policy in contemporary organizations should be flexible, values-based, and accommodate diverse motivational needs. Specifically, the following are recommended:

1. **Individualized approach** – the value and purpose identified for the employee should be tailored to each position/role.
2. **Generational sensitivity** – systems and incentives should be adapted to the motivations of different generations; for example, professional development opportunities for Millennials, social responsibility initiatives for Gen Z, and recognition of stability and experience for older generations.
3. **Support for engagement** – meaningful work fosters active employee involvement, which is directly linked to organizational effectiveness and retention.
4. **Reinforcement of cultural and organizational values** – the meaningfulness of work is stronger in organizations where the purpose and values of the activity align with employees' personal and social expectations.
5. **Monitoring and evaluation** – regular studies and focus groups enable the organization to adapt and respond innovatively to employee needs.

A significant portion of the existing literature examines Meaningful Work in the context of general motivational factors, yet comparatively less attention has been devoted to how the perception of meaningfulness at work differs among representatives of different generations. This study aims precisely to fill that theoretical gap and to analyze the specificity of Meaningful Work perception in a multigenerational work environment.

Thus, meaningful work is not merely a motivational instrument—it is the foundation of organizational success and sustainable effectiveness, enabling employees across generations to experience personal self-actualization, professional growth, and social impact. Its systematic integration into the work environment yields a competitive advantage, strengthens employee loyalty, and enhances the effectiveness of achieving organizational goals.

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