

Agnieszka Wojtczuk-Turek

Duty, Calling or Passion? : The Meaningfulness of Work in Narratives of Public Administration Employees

Problemy Zarządzania 14/3 (1), 70-88

2016

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

Duty, Calling or Passion? The Meaningfulness of Work in Narratives of Public Administration Employees

Submitted: 10.03.16 | Accepted: 10.10.16

Agnieszka Wojtczuk-Turek

One of the important aspects related to work is the sense of its significance and meaning. In Hackman and Oldham's model (Job Characteristics Model – JCM), experienced meaningfulness of work is a function of task identity, subjective perception of task significance and the employees' engaging a variety of skills. Research shows that persons who practice different professions define their work differently and attribute it different meanings. The cognitive and application-related value of these studies is based on a better understanding of the mechanisms of shaping positive attitudes towards work, whose behavioural consequence is employee's engagement in work. The aim of the paper is to analyse the sense of work meaningfulness among the public administration representatives. In order to explore this issue, qualitative methods, which in principle are applied to discover subjective meanings attributed by individuals to various aspects of reality, were used in the study.

Keywords: sense of work meaningfulness, work objective, professional role, calling.

Obowiązek, powołanie czy pasja? Sens pracy w narracjach pracowników administracji publicznej

Nadesłany: 10.03.16 | Zaakceptowany do druku: 10.10.16

Jednym z istotnych aspektów związanych z pracą zawodową jest poczucie jej znaczenia i sensu. W modelu Hackmana i Oldhama (Job Characteristics Model – JCM) doświadczanie poczucia sensowości jest funkcją angażowania przez pracownika różnorodnych umiejętności, tożsamości zadań, a także subiektywnej percepcji znaczenia zadań. Badania pokazują, że osoby wykonujące różne zawody odmiennie definiują swoją pracę i nadają jej znaczenie. Poznawczy i aplikacyjny walor tych badań polega na lepszym zrozumieniu mechanizmów kształtowania się pozytywnych postaw wobec pracy, których behawioralną konsekwencją jest zaangażowanie pracownika w pracę. Celem artykułu jest analiza poczucia sensu pracy wśród reprezentantów administracji publicznej. W celu eksploracji tego zagadnienia zastosowano metody jakościowe, które z założenia wykorzystywane są do odkrywania subiektywnych znaczeń, jakie nadawane są przez jednostki różnym aspektom rzeczywistości.

Słowa kluczowe: poczucie sensu pracy, cel pracy, rola zawodowa, powołanie.

JEL: M12, L2

* **Agnieszka Wojtczuk-Turek** – Ph.D., Institute of Human Capital, The Collegium of Business Administration, Warsaw School of Economics.

Correspondence address: Warsaw School of Economics, The Collegium of Business Administration, Institute of Human Capital, Al. Niepodległości 162, 02-554 Warszawa; e-mail: awojtc@sgh.waw.pl.



1. Introduction

Work is one of the fundamental experiences in human life. An important aspect of professional activity is the sense of its meaningfulness which can translate into organisational engagement, thus determining performance. It seems, therefore, that knowledge about this area allows a better understanding of the relationship between the sense of well-being and task performance of employees.

In the model (Job Characteristics Model – JCM) developed by Hackman and Oldham (1981), **experienced meaningfulness of work** is a function of employees engaging various skills, the sense of task identity and self-perceived meaning and purpose of work (awareness of the work value and objective and translating its meaning into the overall meaning of life).

The sense of work meaningfulness is driven, on the one hand, by external factors: character of tasks, social-organisational conditions of work, human capital management practices and leader behaviours that instil positive organisational attitudes. On the other hand, the meaning attached to professional activity is a function of internal determinants – as an effect of coexistence of various aims, psychological needs, attitudes and values that employees can realise, and of the perception of the organisational climate. As a consequence, diverse motives occur that initiate and sustain organisational engagement.

The meaningfulness of work may also have its source in other factors, e.g. craftsmanship orientation, provision of services and cooperation (Pratt, Pradies & Lepisto, 2013). Research shows that persons who practice different professions define their work differently and attribute it different meanings, e.g. those employed in non-profit organisations and public administration regard their work as their calling more frequently than employees in the private sector (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009). The cognitive and application-related value of these studies lies in a better understanding of the mechanisms behind positive attitudes towards work whose behavioural consequence is engagement underpinned by the sense of meaning of professional tasks performed. In the case of public institutions, the issue is particularly important, given “deficiencies” indicated by the studies as regards implementation of human resource management (HRM) processes, e.g. low efficiency of motivational systems (Hysa & Grabowska, 2014). Yet public organisation employees display high organisational engagement and mission-oriented attitude perhaps resulting from a sense of “social service” and a strong identification with the ethos and mission of their profession (Wright & Pandey, 2008).

In order to understand the mechanism behind such positive attitudes and proactive behaviours among public administration employees, the key may be to understand the meaning and significance attributed to work by public administration staff as analysed in this article.

2. The Meaning of Work – A Conceptualisation Attempt

2.1. In Search of the Meaning of Reflection on Work Meaningfulness – Main Trends of Analysis

Due to the personal and subjective aspects of the construct described, namely the *sense of work meaningfulness*, its understanding requires a reference to “sources” at the very outset. The sources here mean a philosophical reflection (providing a more general reflection framework for the meaning *per se*) and psychological strands that describe how experienced meaningfulness manifests itself and explain the mechanisms behind its emergence and its impact on behaviour in the workplace. In particular, the latter trend creates an opportunity to provide useful knowledge for management whereby adequate influence mechanisms aimed at building employee engagement are designed.

Expressed in philosophical approaches¹, the anthropological vision of man outlines the man’s primary attribute, i.e. reflective thought that opened the inner world to him – *the awareness of his own existence and its meaning* (Kowalczyk, 1990, p. 57). Simultaneously, the external dimension of human activity – activity in the world – assigns meaning and understanding to human existence. In addition, man as a “co-creator of the world” seeks meaning of his actions and subjects the world to meta-reflection. This meta-cognitive activity is a process and involves asking questions. Yet it is not just an analysis of meaning in terms of logic but rather axiology – its understanding and interpretation in reference to the category of values. This universality in the characteristics of the human being ignores, however, individual aspects of experienced meaningfulness. Subjective, personal meaning attributed to human activities is analysed in broad psychological terms. This discipline makes it possible to describe the sense of meaningfulness in a multidimensional manner, while explaining the reasons for differences in evaluating and assigning meanings² to the same events and actions, which in turn can trigger contradictory behaviours in the workplace.

A particular potential for exploring the issue of meaning *per se* is offered by existential psychology considering more broadly how people define the meaning of their own existence. At the same time, it is emphasised that when answering this question, one *is not subject to the limitations and laws of the natural world in one’s sense-creating activity* (Oleś, 2003, p. 318). The question about the meaning of life highlights the “teleological” facet and, as stressed by Csikszentmihalyi (2005, p. 369), the author of the concept of flow, reflects the assumption that *events are connected with each other because of their ultimate goal; that there is a temporal order and a causal relationship. This means that events are not random but form a pattern defined by the ultimate goal*. According to that author: *attributing meaning involves organising the contents of the mind by merging all our actions into a single*

experience of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 2005, p. 369). In turn, attributing meaning to life is usually associated with having a purpose.

It seems that perceived meaning and purpose of one's own existence are the foundation of psychological well-being, translating positively into judgements on the meaning of specific aspects of one's life, including the professional sphere. Studies show that employees who perceive their work meaningfulness offer even more "good" and are better adjusted psychologically, while also having features desired in the organisation (Steger, Dik & Duffy 2012). For management practice, this raises the need to devise specific measures to develop a positive workplace perception resulting from favourable evaluation, for instance, of the organisational climate, perceived support and sense of appreciation, satisfaction of needs important to the employee, and person-job and person-organisation fit. These activities help to enhance the sense of work meaningfulness among employees.

2.2. The Definitional Scope of Work Meaningfulness and Its Dimensions

The meaningful work concept refers to perceived overall degree or level of its significance (Dik, Byrne & Steger, 2013). However, authors distinguish between the meaning in work and the meaning of work. Meaning in work refers to the amount of meaning people experience (*"how meaningful" is the work?*), whereas meaning of work refers to the specific content of work that provides people with meaning (*"what makes" work meaningful?*) (Dik, Byrne & Steger 2013, pp. 4–5). The authors also point out that meaningful work does not only refer to its attributed significance (what does it mean to people?) but covers the evaluation process by including the aspects of how important and positive it is in terms of value (meaning). The perspective integrating these facets is exemplified by the definition coined by Hackman and Oldham (1976), who argue that experienced meaningfulness is the degree to which the individual experiences the job as one which is generally meaningful, valuable, and worthwhile.

In order to describe this phenomenon, both dimensions of a sense of work meaningfulness and the work itself must be defined. Within the proposed multi-dimensional model, researchers treat it as a subjectively significant experience covering a positive meaning that translates into a sense of meaning of life and allows achieving satisfactory goals (Steger, Dik & Duffy, 2012). The overall meaning of work consists of:

- *positive meaning in work* – refers to the subjective feeling that what one is doing in the workplace has personal significance. Employees believe that their career is meaningful and are aware of what gives meaning to their professional activity and what satisfactory goals can be thereby achieved;
- *meaning making through work* – shows a broader context, the individual's contribution to building the meaning more generally. Work is an important source of the meaning of life in general, and employees are

aware of how it contributes to their personal growth, helps to better understand their selves, others and the world around;

- *greater good motivation* – desire for the work to be meaningful to the environment and to exert a positive influence. Its performance then serves “higher purposes”.

The proposal presented seems to be general, without exhausting the range of dimensions of meaningfulness, yet it indicates the key role of work in an individual’s self-definition. Furthermore, under this approach, work is an important “instrument” for the pursuit of personal life ambitions, needs and aspirations.

In order to describe and understand the various dimensions of work meaningfulness, a reference must be made to personal and organisational factors that shape these dimensions.

2.3. Psychological Mechanisms of Experienced Meaningfulness of Work

An analysis of the sense of work meaningfulness requires invoking such psychological categories such as: **motives, aspirations, beliefs, needs, emotions, and intentions**. Their exploration reveals and allows understanding how psychological processes related to evaluation, needs arousal, self-motivation or self-perception build readiness (intention) to take an action that is assessed as reasonable, purposeful, worthwhile and meaningful.

The process of “experiencing” and developing the sense of work meaningfulness is both cognitive and affective. “Formally”, it is an attitude to the actions taken and their effects. It is treated as an important psychological state in between job characteristics, consisting of a variety of skills, task identity and meaning, and the results (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). The cognitive aspect of experienced meaningfulness is based on an individuals’ subjective belief that their work is meaningful. This leads to a feeling of well-being. Well-being includes both the level of experienced work meaningfulness and the degree of positive emotions felt by employees (Robertson & Flint-Taylor, 2008). Such emotions may arise as a result of activating cognitive factors, i.e. the perception of work as a place where important needs of the employee are satisfied, among others. And as feedback, a positive affective state affects work evaluation and perception processes.

The basis of positive work evaluation and its experienced meaningfulness is the emotional factor – the feeling of satisfaction. The models of job satisfaction and adjustment described in the related literature rely on an analysis of psychological variables, in addition to organisational factors. The social-cognitive career theory (SCCT) proposal takes into account the importance of a general sense of satisfaction, personality (particularly dimensions such as: extraversion, neuroticism, conscientiousness) and affective characteristics, goal-oriented activity, belief in self-efficacy (Lent, 2013). And moreover: self-esteem, locus of control, positive/negative emotionality and emotional stability (Coutts & Gruman, 2012). What is particularly impor-

tant is the positive affect (expressed, *inter alia*, as enthusiasm, confidence, cheerfulness) whose influence on satisfaction may be expressed as a more favourable perception of one's abilities (leading to the reinforcement of self-efficacy) and social support (Lent, 2013). The latter, *i.e.* the social functioning of individuals in the organisation, also has a strong impact on experienced meaningfulness of work, especially when such motives as community activities, social needs (affiliation, membership, approval/acceptance) and social identification are strong. This is because the workplace is an important context for building one's social identity. According to the social identity theory as formulated by Tajfel and Turner (1986), positive evaluation of the reference group provides an opportunity to raise one's self-esteem. In addition, pro-community orientation and the need for social utility may lead to pro-social behaviours in the workplace, while laying solid foundations for experiencing the meaningfulness of professional activity through working with and for others, *i.e.* "serving others" as sometimes a purpose in itself.

However, there is also another, "efficiency-related", aspect where meaning and intentions must be translated into actions (Csikszentmihalyi, 2005), and undertaking actions is not only an expression of individual aspirations, needs and motives but also an effect of anticipated outcome. From this point of view, two beliefs are vital: self-efficacy³ and expected positive outcomes. The causal relationship of these psychological variables with the sense of meaningfulness seems to ensue from the fact that their influence is not merely external and outcome-related but has also an internal dimension – they allow for sustaining motivation to continue efforts, also thanks to positive evaluation of one's actions (through attributing them meaning). In the professional context, what is indicated is the role and task self-efficacy, and specifically goal self-efficacy (Lent, 2013). This approach, although applying to behavioural manifestations, is intrapsychic. One's activities associated with the concentration on one's "self" and oneself as the goal achiever are described as self-agency orientation that emphasises efficacy, efficiency, entrepreneurship, resourcefulness (Wojciszke, 2010). These features allow for carrying out difficult tasks and achieving ambitious goals. Thereby they offer the opportunity to experience success and improve competences as aspects potentially meaningful to an individual. Researchers stress that higher self-efficacy determines a greater sense of happiness and self-esteem (Wojciszke, 2010), which – as already mentioned – are significant factors in attributing meaning to work. If the performance of professional duties is an opportunity to meet challenges and self-improve, the employee may achieve "mastery" and satisfy one of three key human needs – competence⁴ (Deci & Ryan, 1985). This is where the employee can seek meaning of his/her work.

These aspects relating to employee needs and goals allow incorporating the organisational context into the issues concerning work meaningfulness.

2.4. Organisational Sources of the Sense of Work Meaningfulness

It is believed that the sense of meaningfulness ensues from work that is considered valuable and **purposeful** by employees. The purpose refers to the identification and intentions as regards highly evaluated life ambitions and aspirations. Given that it is **needs and values** that underlie the motivational mechanism of choice, goal formulation and implementation, goals may be *telic*, related to efficacy (e.g. when the need for achievement dominates), or *paratelic*, connected with the need for enjoyment (Apter, 1982). And although the aspect of pleasant emotions is important for a favourable evaluation of work, it is not essential. When the axiological dimension, i.e. the work value (that gives it meaning) is included in the work evaluation process, a positive work evaluation is eudaimonic (focus on growth and goal) rather than hedonistic (focus on pleasure) (Dik, Byrne & Steger 2013). In this way, all dimensions of engagement may unfold: *vigour* (high levels of energy, willingness to invest effort in one's work), *dedication* (commitment, enthusiasm at work), *absorption* (being engrossed in and concentrated on one's work) (Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Roma & Bakker, 2002). This last dimension resembles the state of mind described as flow, consisting in feeling pleasure and being absorbed in the performance of a particular task, with maximum focus of attention and mental energy targeted towards a certain direction to do something difficult and worthwhile – an experience satisfactory to the individual (Csikszentmihalyi, 2005, p. 16).

From the point of view of creating a sense of work meaningfulness, both the work content itself and, more broadly, its purpose and outcome are important. The content aspects are described in job characteristics. In the already mentioned model of Hackman and Oldham (1976), which relies on the assumption that the employee may be motivated to perform tasks by their “inner nature”, those authors pointed to three psychological states determining positive work evaluation: meaningfulness, responsibility, knowledge of results. The characteristics leading to the occurrence of these states include: skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy, job feedback. All these characteristics are correlated with a sense of job satisfaction, with the highest coefficient having been achieved for autonomy (Coutts & Gruman, 2012). From the point of view of experienced meaningfulness of work, task identity and significance and skill variety are important.

Other significant points related to work content are person-task **fit**, i.e. matching job requirements to the employee's physical, intellectual and emotional capabilities and resources, as well as person-organisation fit. Person-job fit shows a strong correlation with the level of job satisfaction (and person-organisation fit – with engagement) (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman & Johnson, 2005). Therefore, it may play a considerable role in the positive perception of work and its meaningfulness because of a sense of achievement but also congruence between organisational and individual

objectives and values. The authors suggest that correspondence between values and behaviours of the individual and the work environment as well as job characteristics (variety, autonomy, task significance) correlate with work meaningfulness⁵ (Hansen, 2013). Its source may thus lie in obtaining measurable results – achieving goals thanks to the optimal fit as regards at least the requirements-employee capabilities dyad.

A broader perception of work and its experienced meaningfulness can be achieved if it is looked at in terms of its goals and results. People feel that their professional activity is more meaningful if there is a point or objective of professional responsibilities (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). The basis for building work meaningfulness is thus the perception of the aim of professional tasks or, even more broadly, of the impact of outputs extending beyond the immediate context of work performance.

Apart from the purposefulness facet, an important part of building a positive meaning of work is orientation, which seems to be linked with certain **values** involved in the job and profession practised. Pratt, Pradies and Lepisto (2013) found that a sense of meaningfulness is achieved by:

- *good performance of work – craftsmanship orientation (meaningfulness through “doing well”)*. It emphasises the criterion of quality in task performance and focus on goal achievement, leading to expansion of expertise and competences. The employee defines himself/herself in terms of “master”;
- *“doing good” – “service provision” orientation (meaningfulness through “doing good”)*. It expresses the focus on the impact of work outcomes on improving and promoting the quality of life of others. This could apply also to animals, nature, ideology or religion, apart from people. Behaviours based on pro-social values, e.g. altruism, are characteristic here;
- *work with others – orientation towards cooperation (meaningfulness through “doing with”)*. It focuses on social relations at work based on friendship and ties. In this orientation, the mechanism through which a sense of work meaningfulness is developed involves affiliation and relationship.

Individuals can derive a sense of meaning from many work aspects, including opportunities for personal development, expression and self-definition, service provision to others, or from a more utilitarian aspect, namely work as a source of income (Lent, 2013).

The authors note that the perception of one’s own work as significant, meaningful and serving a “higher purpose” is characteristic when work is defined as **calling** (Dik & Duffy, 2009). This treatment of work translates not only into greater satisfaction but also into greater “participation” in the organisational life as manifested even in spending more time at work on a voluntary basis.

It is also worth pointing to some other determinants of building a sense of meaningfulness, namely the role of interpersonal relations with colleagues

and superiors, awards and appreciation, and promotion opportunities. These factors allow new objectives to be formulated and challenges to be addressed in the context of professional activity, which fosters a sense of work meaningfulness.

3. Work Meaningfulness and Significance in the Narratives of Public Administration Employees – The Author’s Own Research

3.1. Research Model Assumptions and Research Methodology

The aim of the study was to answer the question of what meaning and significance is attributed to work by public administration representatives. In order to analyse this issue, the qualitative research methodology was used, as justified by the researched subject. When designing the research model, the assumption was adopted that studying the sense of work meaningfulness escapes any attempts to “objectify” and quantify the phenomenon for at least two reasons – methodological and “ontological”: 1) the researcher encounters semantic problems related to the operationalisation (necessary to define empirical indicators of the variable) of the work meaningfulness notion; 2) the problem of unobservable “nature” of the variable as such. It seems, therefore, that the opportunity to explore this issue is offered by the qualitative approach, which by definition aims to “discover subjective meanings” (Creswell, 2013). As pointed out by Lent (2013) recommending an idiographic approach to this phenomenon, interpretation of the work meaningfulness is a function of individual cognition, similar to perception of beauty, which “is in the eye of the beholder”.

Since the qualitative approach was employed, answering the research question required a definition of the work meaning attributed by respondents when going beyond their direct views on this issue, but also when “indirectly” referring to the categories that constitute experienced meaningfulness of work – goals, motives behind their choice of work (and related professional role), values gained from working, and sources of related satisfaction and dissatisfaction. In this way, some insight may be obtained into how respondents, attributing a subjective meaning to work, refer to duty, calling or passion, among others.

In order to explore the topic in question, the following methods were employed:

- individual in-depth interview (IDI) – partly structured;
- sentence completion test;
- association test.

The interview was consistent with the assumptions of this method⁶ and served to gather data on how public administration employees understand the purpose of their work and the meaning of their professional role and

to identify the motives behind their choice of work. Open-ended questions were aimed at obtaining a wide range of content reflecting the sense of work meaningfulness and significance, on the one hand, and – on the other hand – enhancing the “construct validity” (by obtaining and including categories indicated by respondents in the analyses, thereby achieving a more complete description of the analysed construct “grounded”⁷ in empirical data).

In addition to the interview, a sentence completion test and an association test were conducted; they belong to the group of projective methods based on the mechanism of projection. The choice of these methods was motivated by the assumption that their use would more accurately reflect the respondents’ subjective interpretation of their described work-related experience and would enable accessing affective aspects (often difficult to reveal because of the mechanism of control). Besides inquiring about work-related associations, respondents were asked to complete sentences (activating certain cognitive patterns) referring to various work-related aspects such as: what was most important to them at work, why their work was meaningful, what gave them most satisfaction, what emotions they felt at work, and what was the source of their dissatisfaction.

3.2. Research Sample and Field

The sample consisted of public administration representatives (non-random sampling)⁸: the judiciary (23 judges), ministries (8 persons), offices (2 persons), with the largest number of respondents representing district courts.

People aged 36–45 constituted the biggest proportion (70%) of those interviewed. The distribution by position was: managers – 41% and non-managers – 59% of respondents. The proportions of genders in the sample were as follows: women – 52%, men – 48%. As regards years of experience, most respondents had performed their work for over 5 years – 87%.

The research was carried out from January to March 2015.

4. Analysis and Interpretation of the Results Obtained

The analysis of the obtained qualitative data included:

- semantic (meaning) analysis;
- frequency analysis;
- relationship analysis.

The meaning-oriented analysis covered: coding of meaning, meaning condensation and interpretation (Kvale, 2012). Moreover, data exploration included – as recommended by Miles and Huberman (2000) – data reduction and transformation through selection and integration into general patterns. On the basis of the content of respondents’ answers, key words were identified and categorised, and relationships were established⁹.

The first stage concerned a semantic analysis of respondents' answers and covered work-related associations. The categorisation of the various associations, including frequency specification, was presented graphically by means of a cognitive map¹⁰ reflecting respondents' mental representations of their work (Figure 1).

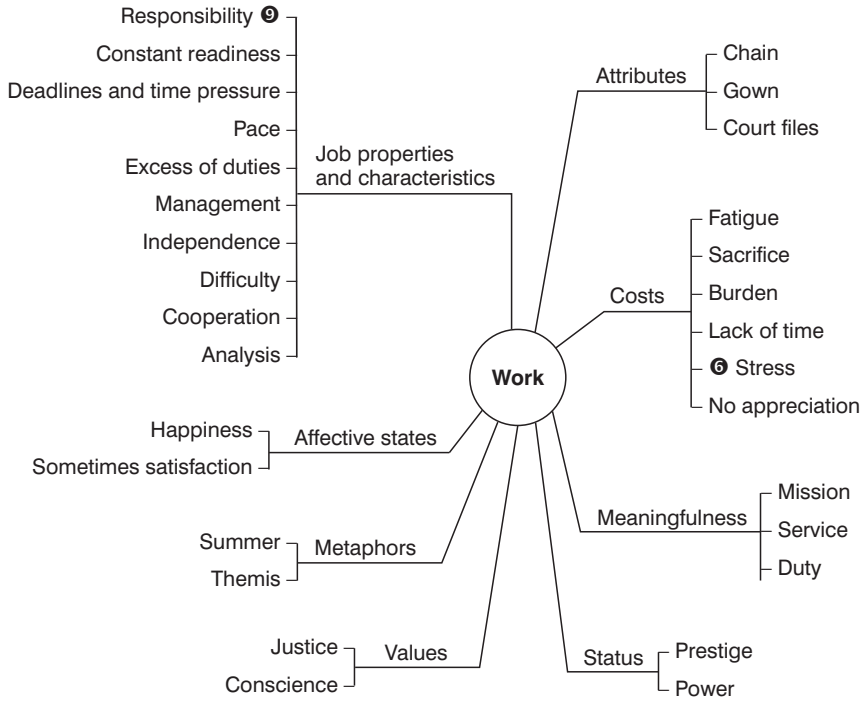


Fig. 1. Overview of work-related associations of public administration representatives. Source: the author's own elaboration based on qualitative data.

The work-related associations given by respondents were included in more general categories connected with constructs existing in the literature, for example job characteristics (Hackman & Oldham, 1981) and “costs” understood as emotional overload and stressors (Janssen, 2000). The most frequent associations are those with the most concrete and “tangible” context of functioning at work – job properties and characteristics. Respondents indicated factors that constituted considerable challenges (excess of duties, responsibility, management) and burdens (constant readiness, time pressure). These involve physical and emotional costs such as: fatigue, stress, sacrifices, lack of time. Respondents also voiced a sense of being underestimated, which may bring about disappointment and frustration where

work is treated as a mission and service. Still, some interviewees indicated positive affective states such as happiness and satisfaction. In addition, the map reveals attributes indicated by the judiciary representatives (chain, gown, court files) and values inscribed in the professional role of a judge – justice.

The next step was a content analysis with respect to the main aspects of work (and professional role) purpose and meaning and indicated motives. The following semantic areas emerge (Table 2).

The respondents' statements express the main **motives** behind their choice of career path, including: the importance of work for the society and work prestige, positive meaning of work for the individual also as a source of satisfaction, attainment of the professional goal, passion and mission, benefits from work (including financial stability), autonomy and independence. It can thus be said that the narratives of public administration representatives echo positive evaluation of work which is a source of satisfaction and which ensures their high professional status, offering considerable autonomy but also opportunities to bring about change, influence the reality and fulfil educational tasks for the society. The content analysis of **work purpose** and **meaning** indicates: organising the reality and building awareness, administering justice, working for the greater good (for others), representing the state authorities on the national and international arena. It can, therefore, be said that respondents treat "public service" as something special and socially significant, something that corresponds to the "greater good motivation" described by researchers (Steger, Dik & Duffy, 2012). Thus, new meanings emerge that extend beyond those that were expressed by respondents as part of their work-related associations.

These conclusions are confirmed by the analysis of responses given in the sentence completion test where employees deepened the understanding of work meaningfulness, gave their views on the world of their values, outlined the emotional aspects and sources of work-related dissatisfaction. The synthesis of coded thematic categories is included in Table 3.

The analysis of thematic categories distinguished based on the content analysis of narratives in order to identify what respondents consider most important at work reveals primarily aspects of fulfilling professional tasks. This is about high standards of work performance. The statements suggest positive evaluation of work which is regarded as important and socially useful and as a source of satisfaction for interviewees.

A sense of its meaningfulness in respondents' narratives stems from social utility of professional activity that has a positive impact on the surrounding reality: it ensures order, gives tangible results, and serves people. In this regard, the work performed has a purpose that goes beyond the immediate context of task implementation – it brings good and help. Noticing its measurable effects allows generating positive expectations as to the results and the belief in self-efficacy.

Natural semantic unit	Central topic
Work purpose and meaning	
"I understand the purpose of work as a possibility of influencing the course of events..."	Shaping/organising reality/awareness building
"organising chaos in a small segment"	
"assisting in the implementation of legal norms"	
"building legal awareness"	
"the purpose of my work is fair retribution against criminals and offering a sense of justice to victims"	Realisation/administration of justice
"the purpose is to establish the truth, hold to account"	
"the aim is to work for others", "to help solve human problems", "resolve conflicts"	Working for others
"I understand the purpose of work as a possibility of influencing the course of events, meeting challenges, a certain professional status"	Challenges
"I understand the purpose of work as acting for Polish interests abroad", "representing the state vis-a-vis citizens properly"	Representing the state vis-a-vis citizens and the interests of the state
Motives behind the choice of professional work	
"I like it, I think it's important socially", "I see my work as a great honour and prestige, I have expectations of development through work"	Social significance of work and prestige
"because it gives me satisfaction and purpose", "because I feel self-fulfilled at this work"	Positive meaning for the individual and job satisfaction
"I am satisfied with doing it, and I think that what I do I do well"	
"the work is in line with my interests and character"	Goal achievement
"because I was educated in this field"	
"there's always been a goal, a dream career, all my earlier career was focused on entering this profession"	
"work is the culmination of my career path I chose after graduation"	
"work is my passion"	Passion, mission
"I have a sense of mission of my profession, a sense of responsibility"	
"because it gives me considerable autonomy, independence", "I have a great sense of self-agency, I'm independent, I like to settle disputes, I derive satisfaction from contact with people"	Benefits and autonomy
"career stability"	
"there's unemployment"	Financial security and stability

Tab. 2. Work purpose and meaning and the motives behind work choice in respondents' narratives. Source: the author's own elaboration based on qualitative data.

Sentence to be completed	Thematic categories
<i>In my work, I attach the greatest importance to...</i>	Social significance, independence, flexible working hours, diligent performance of duties, accuracy and order, stability, sense of justice, wages, sense of performing important and necessary tasks, responsibility, diligence and discharging duties, possibility of indulging my passion, effective action, satisfaction with the outcomes.
<i>My work is meaningful because it...</i>	Improves citizen safety, strengthens the sense of justice, makes it possible to help and serve people, is important, allows influencing the reality, is socially needed and useful, affects the society positively, ensures order, brings measurable effects, contributes to appropriate people management, improves work of others.
<i>In my work, I derive the greatest satisfaction from...</i>	Resolving difficult cases, solving real problems, considering cases fast, independence, a sense of job well done, contacts with people, the feeling that I can help someone, issuing a fair judgement (a judgement accepted by both parties), contact with colleagues and superiors, meeting open people and knowledge sharing.
<i>Emotions that I most often feel at work are:</i>	Stress, fatigue, emotions of other people who appear at trial, gratification, irritation, satisfaction, sense of justice, anxiety, responsibility for another human being, happiness.
<i>What I mind most about my work is:...</i>	Rush, excessive red tape, incompetence and ignorance of others, statistics, workload, lack of understanding of people and their work, poor organisation on which I have no influence, haste, lack of time and time pressure, pressure exerted by people, failure to ensure proper working conditions, too low wages, work overload, limited decision-making powers with considerable responsibility, unclear promotion procedures, groupthink and opportunism.

Tab. 3. Compilation of major thematic categories identified in respondents' narratives in the sentence completion test. Source: the author's own elaboration based on qualitative data.

Although respondents see a broader dimension of the outcomes of their work, their narratives focused on what was closest to them – the organisational context of tasks performed that, unfortunately, is not positive in their opinion. Task implementation is frequently accompanied by overload resulting from excess of duties, time pressure, no access to resources. On top of that, there are bureaucracy-related barriers, the need to do “administrative and organisational” tasks that sometimes prevent concentration on the merits. This leads to consequences not only such as physical fatigue but also negative affective states – anxiety, irritation. Fortunately, these are offset by experiencing happiness, satisfaction or moral emotions – responsibility for another person – embedded in the professional ethos of, for example, judges.

The sources of job satisfaction indicated by respondents include both self-agency dimensions: challenges, efficacy, independence and community spirit: contact with colleagues, learning about others, helping.

The in-depth content analysis of respondents' narratives reveals that they indicate categories corresponding to those that emerged in the case of work-related associations: 1) job characteristics (independence, flexible working hours, accuracy, excessive red tape), 2) "costs" (anxiety, stress, fatigue, time pressures, work overload), 3) affective states (satisfaction with the results, happiness, sense of justice), 4) meaningfulness (possibility of indulging a passion, social significance, helping people). The latter indicates that what gives meaning to the work of public administration representatives is its social utility and a "higher purpose" it serves. This recurs in most responses given in the sentence completion test.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

Despite the psychological or even "metaphysical" dimension involved in the exploration of the sense of work meaningfulness, its analysis has a very practical aspect, namely the fact that positive work evaluation and attributing meaning to it has behavioural consequences – it stimulates certain behaviours in the workplace. The analysis conducted allows conclusions to be drawn for both the theory in the area in question and the practice of HR management in public institutions.

Firstly, the research shows a positive evaluation of work and its considerable importance in the opinion of public administration representatives. They are aware of the impact of their work that goes beyond the context of task implementation and build its meaning through the greater good motivation – work for others (Steger, Dik & Duffy, 2012). This might reflect the servient role of public institutions, which is understood and realised by respondents as evidenced by most of them treating it in terms of passion and calling. They discern the positive meaning of work for themselves and derive satisfaction from it.

What should be considered worrying, however, is respondents indicating unfavourable conditions of task performance and job characteristics: excess of duties, considerable responsibility and burdens (constant readiness, time pressure). These involve physical and emotional costs such as: fatigue, stress, sacrifices, lack of time. It should be recalled that in the model of Hackman and Oldham (1976), job characteristics are an important factor in employee-experienced meaningfulness. Very challenging work indeed stimulates the desired organisational behaviours, but only for people with a strong need for sensations; otherwise, it may be a source of negative emotions. Therefore, the key here is to match tasks to the employee's capacity to complete them so that the employee can achieve his/her goals, which in return promotes self-motivation, develops the belief in self-efficacy and strengthens the sense of work meaningfulness.

Another recommendation concerns job design whereby changes are made to improve the functioning in the organisation. It is such organisational

work-oriented practices that are indicated as significant for enhancing the meaningfulness of professional activity (Pratt, Pradies & Lepisto, 2013). This strand also covers other measures termed job crafting, a process of redefining and re-creating the image of work by the employee in the manner that is meaningful to him/her personally (Berg, Dutton & Wrześniewski, 2013). The work boundaries are transformed actively through: 1) *task crafting* – changing responsibilities, adding or removing certain tasks, modifying the amount of energy and attention that are assigned to certain actions; 2) *relational crafting* – transformations in task performance in the framework of cooperation; 3) *cognitive crafting* – changes in the perception of tasks and relations.

The research has revealed a negative emotional context of performing work which is a source of stress (somehow associated with considerable responsibility) for some people who experience anxiety and irritation (certainly, apart from happiness and satisfaction). Stress and insecurity may lead to reduced psychological availability, which is one of the essential conditions (alongside the sense of security and work meaningfulness) helping to determine how individuals engage in their role (May, Gilson & Harter 2004). In this case, it seems obviously reasonable to recommend measures to improve working conditions and eliminate organisational sources of stress, yet stress may not always be reduced effectively, in particular where work involves frequent (and difficult) social interaction (e.g. contact with colleagues and interested parties) and situations of great emotional burden (such as those experienced by judges hearing “difficult cases”). Then, additional actions to successfully reduce the emotional tension and offset psychological costs may encompass educational activities (involving training, coaching, mentoring) concerning emotional labour strategies (the emotion regulation process)¹¹. Otherwise, long-term stress may lead to the burnout syndrome.

What should also attract attention of managers who fulfil HRM-related functions in public institutions is signals of no appreciation that may bring about disappointment and frustration when work is treated as a mission and service. All the more so since respondents are aware that, according to social perception, work in administration (at least in some institutions) ensures their social prestige. Hence the recommendation that the function of motivating employees should be fulfilled so as to produce in employees’ minds the belief that their work is significant and necessary, which can also enhance the sense of its meaningfulness. A major role in this process is played by managers and co-workers. The social aspect of functioning is extremely important even though respondents pointed to the value of independence at work. Simultaneously, they stressed that the source of job satisfaction, perceived meaning and value lies in meeting people, sharing knowledge, improving the work of others, responsibility for another human being.

To summarise, although the research does not allow generalisation of findings (due to their qualitative nature) to the entire population of public

administration employees, the results obtained are consistent with reports by authors who argue that perceiving one's work as significant, meaningful and serving a "higher purpose" is characteristic of defining it as a **calling** (Dik & Duffy, 2009). This treatment of work translates not only into a sense of greater satisfaction but also into more intensive professional activity. This is because engagement in these institutions is, at least by assumption, rather based on solid foundations: 2) identification – as an expression of accepted and shared goals and values; 2) a sense of work meaningfulness and significance of professional role, derived from the belief that the work performed brings good and serves a higher purpose.

Endnotes

- ¹ Most comprehensively in E. Husserl's phenomenology and M. Heidegger's existentialism.
- ² Interestingly, judgements on even simple interpretations of behaviours are not problem-free. What is problematic is the assessment of the meaning of a particular behaviour. Wojciszke (2010, pp. 16–18) points to the hierarchy of meanings of behaviours and distinguishes: the *primary* meaning of a behavioural act (with uniqueness and context insensitivity as its properties), *teleological* meaning whose identification (apart from recognising the primary meaning) requires establishment of the purpose of the acting person, *personal* meaning relating not only to the act characteristics but also to those of the human performing the act. Therefore, there are both evaluative ambiguity – occurring in a situation where the same behaviour is interpreted in a positive or negative manner, and descriptive ambiguity – appearing when the same behaviour may be interpreted by means of different (because of the level of abstraction) descriptive categories.
- ³ Described by A. Bandura (1997) as one's belief in self-agency and personal influence on the course of events that determines the actions taken, persistence in pursuit of goals, coping with obstacles.
- ⁴ Alongside autonomy and relations with others.
- ⁵ Besides, the authors emphasise that the same foundations of the meaning of life, such as personal control, autonomy, significance of the group, individual and group experiences, intrinsic motivation, affective commitment, strengths (interests, abilities, values, personality), overlap with predictors of job satisfaction.
- ⁶ Describing the life world of interviewees with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena (Kvale, 2012).
- ⁷ The grounded theory methodology involves formulating theories based on empirically grounded data rather than measurement, and indicating the existence of relationships between concepts (the hypothesis is understood as a theorem or proposition pointing to relationships between concepts). Under the grounded theory methodology, a good theory is such that its categories "fit" to data, which is related to the essence of what the phenomenon concerns. More about the grounded theory methodology see: Konecki (2000).
- ⁸ Both the sample size and selection (resulting from the adoption of the qualitative research methodology) and a broad representation of the judiciary limit the generalisability of findings to the entire population of public administration employees. This is, however, inherent in qualitative research aimed at exploring and understanding

meanings (exploration, idiographic approach) rather than identifying relationships, explaining and forecasting as in the case of quantitative research (explanation, nomothetic approach).

- 9 The “quantitative” aspect of codes (in the content analysis) applied only to work-related associations. Other codes were not quantitative and only served a qualitative analysis of the relationships between the codes, an approach characteristic of grounded theory as stressed by Kvale (2012).
- 10 Cognitive maps illustrate mental representations of individuals’ knowledge. In this research, a cognitive map was used as a form of graphical presentation of work-related associations.
- 11 The term “emotional labour” refers to emotion self-regulation processes during social interactions (concerning, in particular, work in the services sector) and may take the form of surface (suppressing emotions) and deep acting (cognitive reinterpretation leading to activation of other emotions). For more see: Hochschild (2009).

References

- Apter, M.J. (1982). *The experience of motivation: theory of psychological reversals*. New York: Academic Press.
- Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: the exercise of control*. New York: Freeman & Co.
- Berg, J.M., Dutton, J.E. & Wrześniewski, A. (2013). Job crafting and meaningful work. In: B. Dik, Z. Byrne & M. Steger (eds), *Purpose and meaning in the workplace*. Washington, D.C.: APA Books.
- Bunderson, J.S. & Thompson, J.A. (2009). The call of the wild: zookeepers, callings, and the dual edges of deeply meaningful work. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 54, 32–57.
- Coutts, L.M. & Gruman, J.A. (2012). Applying social psychology to organizations. In: F.R. Schneider, J.A. Gruman & L.M. Coutts (eds), *Applied social psychology*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Creswell, J.W. (2013). *Projektowanie badań naukowych. Metody jakościowe, ilościowe i mieszane*. Kraków: Wyd. Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2005). *Przeptyw*. Taszów: Biblioteka moderatora.
- Deci, E.L. & Ryan, R.M. (1985). *Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behavior*. New York: Plenum.
- Dik, B., Byrne, Z.S. & Steger, M.F. (2013). *Purpose and meaning in the workplace*. Washington, D.C.: APA Books.
- Dik, B.J. & Duffy, R.D. (2009). Calling and vocation at work: definitions and prospects for research and practice. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 34, 424–450.
- Hackman, J. & Oldham, G.R. (1976). Motivation through the design of work: test of a theory. *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance*, 16, 250–279.
- Hansen, J-I. C. (2013). A person-environment fit approach to cultivating meaning. In: B. Dik, Z. Byrne & M. Steger (eds), *Purpose and meaning in the workplace*. Washington, D.C.: APA Books.
- Hysa, B. & Grabowska, B. (2014). System motywacji pracowników administracji publicznej na podstawie wybranej jednostki ZUS. *Zeszyty Naukowe Politechniki Śląskiej*, 74, 324–342.
- Hochschild, A.R. (2009). *Zarządzanie emocjami. Komercjalizacja ludzkich uczuć*. Warszawa: Wyd. Naukowe PWN.
- Jansen, O. (2000). Job demands, perceptions of effort-reward fairness and innovative work behavior. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 73, 287–302.
- Kaczmarek, M., Olejnik, I. & Springer, A. (2013). *Badania jakościowe – metody i zastosowania*. Warszawa: CedeWu.

- Konecki, K. (2000). *Studia z metodologii badań jakościowych. Teoria ugruntowana*. Warszawa: Wyd. Naukowe PWN.
- Kowalczyk, S. (1990). *Człowiek w myśli współczesnej*. Warszawa: Wyd. Michalineum.
- Kristof, A. (1996). Person-organization fit: an integrative review of its conceptualizations, measurement, and implications. *Personnel Psychology*, 4, 1–49.
- Kristof-Brown, A.L., Zimmerman, R.D. & Johnson, E.C. (2005). Consequences of individuals' fit at work: a meta-analysis of person-job, person-organization, person-group, and person-supervisor fit. *Personnel Psychology*, 58, 281–342.
- Kvale, S. (2011). *Prowadzenie wywiadów*. Warszawa: Wyd. Naukowe PWN.
- Lent, R.W. (2013). Promoting meaning and purpose at work. A social-cognitive perspective. In: B. Dik, Z. Byrne & M. Steger (eds), *Purpose and meaning in the workplace*. Washington, D.C.: APA Books.
- May, D.R., Gilson, R.L. & Harter, L.M. (2004). The psychological conditions of meaningfulness, safety and availability and the engagement of the human spirit at work. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 77(1), 11–37.
- Miles, M.B. & Huberman, A.M. (2000). *Analiza danych jakościowych*. Białystok: Trans Humana.
- Oleś, P. (2003). *Wprowadzenie do psychologii osobowości*. Warszawa: Wyd. Naukowe Scholar.
- Pratt, M.G., Pradies & C., Lepisto, D. (2013). Doing well, doing good, and doing with: Organizational Practices for Effectively Cultivating Meaningful Work. In: B. Dik, Z. Byrne & M. Steger (eds), *Purpose and meaning in the workplace*. Washington, D.C.: APA Books.
- Robertson, I.T. & Flint-Taylor, J. (2008). *Leadership, psychological well-being and organisational outcomes*. In: S. Cartwright & C.L. Cooper (eds), *Oxford handbook on organisational well-being*. Oxford: University Press.
- Schaufeli W.B., Salanova, M., González-Roma, V. & Bakker, A.B. (2002). The measurement of engagement and burnout: a two-sample confirmatory factor analytic approach. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 3, 71–92.
- Steger, M.F., Dik, B.J. & Duffy, R.D. (2012). Measuring meaningful work: the work and meaning inventory (WAMI). *Journal of Career Assessment*, 20, 322–337.
- Tajfel, H. & Turner, J.C. (1986). The social identity theory of intergroup behaviour. In: S. Worchel & W.G. Austin (eds), *Psychology of intergroup relations*. Chicago: Nelson-Hall.
- Wojciszke, B. (2010). *Sprawczość i wspólnotowość. Podstawowe wymiary spostrzegania społecznego*. Gdańsk: GWP.
- Wright, B.E. & Pandey, S. (2008). Public service motivation and the assumption of person-organization fit. *Administration and Society*, 49(5), 502–521.