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How to make any job more meaningful, according to a positive psychology researcher

We are most productive when we do work that feels meaningful—and it's possible to make any job more meaningful.

BY TAMARA MYLES
5 MINUTE READ

As someone who studies human thriving, productivity has always interested me. Humans are wired for it—we crave new challenges and opportunities to pursue our passions. But as a positive psychology researcher, my definition of productivity has never been about doing more in less time. Instead, I see productivity as doing more of what matters.

I developed and wrote a book about the Peak Productivity Pyramid framework, based on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, to help people do just that. The idea is that by moving up through five levels of organization and time-management techniques, we can move from surviving to succeeding to thriving. But the more I spoke with readers, the more I realized that the secret to doing more great work runs a lot deeper.

I have found we are most productive when we do work that feels meaningful—and that it's possible to make any job more meaningful. Here's how:

WHAT MOTIVATES PRODUCTIVITY MATTERS

The motivation to do more of what matters comes in many flavors—and some are more powerful than others. Earning a paycheck, for instance, isn't always a very compelling reason to do great work. Neither is impressing a hard-to-please boss or the promise of a promotion. These might be powerful productivity motivators in the short-term, but the reward and resulting positive feelings will inevitably come and go.

With stress and burnout near all-time highs, people are questioning the "why" behind their work. And when you're left to wonder if your job really matters, or worse, if you even matter, it's difficult to do your best work. But research shows that when we find our work meaningful, performance improves by 33% and the increased productivity amounts to as much as $10,000 per individual.

To achieve the kind of productivity that unlocks excellence, our work must be *meaningful.* And meaningful work is something we all want. A recent study found that 9 out of 10 workers would take a more meaningful job elsewhere, even if it paid less. But as stunning as that statistic is, it's also a bit misleading. The underlying assumption is that some jobs are inherently meaningless. This simply isn't true—and speaks to a common but dangerous misconception about the nature of meaningful work.

In her groundbreaking study of hospital custodians, Yale professor Amy Wrzesniewski discovered that about one-third of custodians changed their mindset about the work to find meaning in it. For some, cleaning was just a job. But others saw their role as critical to the patient's healing process. These janitors got to know the patients and their families, often going the extra mile to make them more comfortable. And they found their work to be deeply meaningful.

A lot of people believe meaningful work is only for people in helping professions, nonprofits, or social impact work. While it's true that some jobs are engineered for meaning, *any* job can be meaningful—even (especially) those that our culture might deem "mundane."

My research partners and I have spent the last three years studying what makes work meaningful. We discovered three, universal components of meaningful work that transcend industries. Work is meaningful when we:

1) Feel we're contributing to something that matters

2) Are given challenging opportunities to grow and improve our skills

3) Experience belonging as part of a community

Here are three things you can do to unlock productivity and increase your performance by embracing meaningful work:

1. FIND YOUR CONTRIBUTION

Contribution is the sense that your work adds value to your team, organization, customers, or something greater. In an ideal world, leaders would be better at connecting the dots between people's day-to-day work and the difference the organization is making in the world as a result. But "cognitive crafting" can be a powerful tool to find meaning in your work, even if you're several layers removed from those who benefit from your organization's existence. Cognitive crafting involves reexamining your perception of tasks to find their greater meaning.

Wrzesniewski and her colleagues coined the term to describe the mental shift the janitors made to see themselves as healers. By re-examining tasks to find their deeper meaning, a cashier might see their work as less about scanning groceries and more about helping people feed their families. Being a hairstylist might be less about giving haircuts and more about helping stressed-out people relax for a few hours.

Spend some time reflecting on the positive impact your work has on the world to infuse it with meaning.

2. CHALLENGE YOURSELF

When we're not being challenged to learn and grow, we quickly get bored. To find more meaning in your work, it's important to seize opportunities to grow and stretch your capabilities.

I love how author Alain de Botton puts it: "Work is most fulfilling when you're at the comfortable, exciting edge of not quite knowing what you're doing."

To infuse your work with more challenge, consider setting an ambitious "stretch" goal—one that will take some creativity and learning to accomplish. Volunteer to help with a project that's just outside of your comfort zone. Seek out opportunities to acquire new knowledge or learn new skills.

3. FOSTER COMMUNITY

Humans are wired to crave belonging, and, as such, a caring community is a crucial aspect of meaningful work. Work communities come in all shapes and sizes. Even freelancers and small startup teams can find a sense of community in their wider professional networks.

The only caveat for community is that it's built on authentic relationships. As you look to improve your sense of meaning in 2023, carve out time in your schedule for social connection, especially with those who share the same values.

When we find our work meaningful, we are energized and motivated to do our best work. To unlock productivity and performance in 2023, make work meaningful.

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