

Between Experience and Structure: A Critical Review of Meaningful Work Across Disciplines and Implications for Economic Geography

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Extended Abstract

Labour markets are conventionally analysed through wages, contracts and material working conditions. Yet workers' location decisions, retention behaviour and labour market participation are equally shaped by non-pecuniary dimensions of work, including meaningfulness, recognition, autonomy, interpersonal relationships or purpose. If what makes work valuable cannot be reduced to monetary compensation, then standard accounts of regional labour market dynamics, spatial sorting and place-based inequality remain incomplete. This paper addresses that gap through a critical, interdisciplinary review of meaningful work scholarship across organisational psychology, sociology, philosophy, labour economics and economic geography. The central argument is that this body of knowledge demands a reorientation of economic geography toward the spatial and institutional foundations of meaningful work.

Why Meaningful Work Belongs in Economic Geography

The case begins with evidence. Nikolova and Cnossen (2020), using three waves of the European Working Conditions Survey, show that intrinsic factors (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) explain approximately 60% of the variation in work meaningfulness perceptions, while extrinsic factors such as income, benefits and performance pay are comparatively unimportant. Crucially, relatedness, understood as feeling appreciated by colleagues and supervisors, emerges as the strongest individual predictor. Meaningful work also predicts absenteeism, skills training and retirement intentions, all of which carry direct economic significance for firms, regions and labour market policy. This is not a peripheral finding but it positions meaningful work as a core, measurable dimension of job quality that existing regional labour market models routinely omit.

Cnossen and Nikolova (2025) deepen this picture by developing a utility framework in which need satisfaction lowers the perceived marginal cost of effort and fosters meaningfulness, which in turn increases labour supply. Using Dutch panel data, they confirm that autonomy, competence and relatedness are positively associated with both meaningfulness and effort, with threshold effects suggesting that the positive effects of need satisfaction are disproportionately concentrated at higher levels. The implication for economic geography is direct: worker effort and attachment are not simply a function of wages or contract type, but of relational and psychological conditions that vary spatially and institutionally in ways that geography is uniquely equipped to analyse.

The scoping review by Hendriks and Cnossen (2025), covering 43 economics papers in top-quartile journals, confirms that the economics literature has engaged productively with compensating differentials and mission-alignment, but has largely failed to integrate insights from sociology, psychology or institutional theory. Notably, the relational dimension of meaningfulness (interpersonal recognition and belonging) is the least discussed in economic accounts, despite being the strongest predictor identified by Nikolova and Cnossen (2020). This omission reflects a broader disciplinary blindspot toward the social and spatial conditions under which meaningful work is produced, sustained or foreclosed.

Five Traditions, Three Critical Gaps

This paper reviews five disciplinary traditions with complementary contributions. Organisational psychology has generated rich knowledge about psychological antecedents and consequences of meaningful work, including job design, leadership, calling orientations, and need satisfaction. Self-Determination Theory provides the motivational backbone, positing that autonomy, competence and relatedness are essential to intrinsic motivation, wellbeing and meaningful work (Deci and Ryan, 2000). Yet this tradition has been criticised for individualising meaningfulness and abstracting it from power relations (Bailey et al., 2019; Lips-Wiersma and Morris, 2009). Sociology reveals that meaningful work is unequally distributed across occupational hierarchies, contract types and employment regimes, and that this inequality is structural rather than perceptual (Gallie, 2007). Labour process theory demonstrates that autonomy is not a design choice but contested terrain shaped by managerial control (Thompson and Smith, 2009). Labour economics shows that workers accept wage penalties for meaningful work (Maestas et al., 2023), creating exploitative dynamics in feminised caring occupations and transforming meaningful work into a luxury good that reproduces spatial inequality (Folbre, 2012). Philosophy clarifies that both subjective engagement and objective value are necessary for meaningful work (Wolf, 2010; Yeoman, 2014).

Three critical gaps run across traditions. First, insufficient integration of subjective experience and structural conditions leaves unexplained how institutional arrangements translate into experiences of meaningfulness or foreclose them. Second, limited attention to value pluralism obscures heterogeneity in what workers value. Much research assumes autonomy, growth and self-realisation are universal, when what constitutes meaningful work varies substantially across workers, occupations, regions and cultures. Cnossen et al. (2023) demonstrate empirically that meaningful work experiences differ significantly across Dutch regions even after controlling for occupational and sectoral composition: workers in Utrecht report higher autonomy, those in Twente stronger relatedness, and job satisfaction peaks in Delft and the Westland. These reflect place-specific institutional histories and social norms that standard models treat as noise. Third, inadequate theorisation of negotiation and voice neglects that meaningful work is co-constructed through dialogue, collective representation and contestation.

Implications for Economic Geography

Economic geography is distinctively positioned to address all three gaps. Four concrete implications follow from this review.

1. First, the discipline should integrate non-pecuniary job quality, and meaningfulness specifically, into its accounts of regional labour market dynamics. Labour shortages, low-wage traps and persistent out-migration in peripheral regions may partly reflect deficits in job quality dimensions that regional labour market research has not yet adequately mapped. Wage policies alone cannot correct structural deficits in autonomy, recognition or occupational dignity.
2. Second, economic geography should attend more carefully to regional and institutional variation in what makes work valuable. Cnossen et al. (2023) show that meaningful work experiences differ significantly across Dutch regions even after controlling for occupational and sectoral composition, suggesting that place itself matters. Local institutional histories and social norms shape what workers experience as valuable in work in ways that standard models treat as noise. Frameworks of regional resilience and transition need to incorporate meaningful work: deindustrialisation destroys not only jobs but valued occupational identities and communal senses of purpose that wage and employment statistics alone cannot capture.

3. Third, economic geography should analyse regional institutions and place-based partnerships as active sites where the conditions for meaningful work are shaped through collective action and social dialogue. Regional initiatives like Werk van Waarde in the Netherlands, which brings together employers, employee representatives, educational institutions and local government to collaboratively improve job quality in SMEs, represent the kind of institutional infrastructure whose effects economic geography is positioned to trace, evaluate and theorise. Ignoring these mechanisms leaves the discipline without an account of how regional labour market conditions can be actively transformed.
4. Fourth, spatial inequalities in access to meaningful work deserve explicit analytical attention. Urban-rural divides, the geography of precarious employment and global value chain dynamics produce uneven distributions not only of wages but of autonomy, recognition and occupational dignity. Workers in peripheral regions may face constraints on meaningful work that are irreducible to income: the occupational structures available to them, the thickness of local labour markets, and the presence or absence of institutions that support voice and representation all shape what kinds of work are even possible. Geographic mobility is often framed as the rational response to regional disadvantage, but moving erodes the community ties and relational infrastructure on which meaningful work substantially depends. These dynamics are difficult to capture through material indicators alone, which is part of why spatial inequality in job quality has remained undertheorised.

Conclusion

What makes work valuable cannot be read off from wages and employment rates alone. Meaningful work shapes wellbeing, effort, retention and spatial mobility in ways that material compensation does not fully capture. Its distribution is uneven, its determinants are relational and institutional, and its absence is a form of labour market disadvantage that regional science has largely left unmeasured. Other disciplines have mapped the psychological and structural dimensions of meaningful work, but its spatial variation and regional determinants remain underexplored. Economic geography, with its attention to place, institutions and uneven development, is well positioned to bring these questions into its account of job quality and labour market inequality, and in doing so to extend what regional science can see and say about the experience of work.

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