PURPOSE UNDER PRESSURE:

The Benefits and Risks of Meaningful Work

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Abstract

Demand for "meaningful" work has increased in recent years, particularly following the profound labor market shifts prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, even as workers increasingly seek jobs that provide purpose and improve job satisfaction (Cassar and Meier, 2018), meaningful jobs appear to be growing scarcer (Cotofan et al., 2023; Pelligra and Sacco, 2023). Moreover, the pursuit of meaning may entail important trade-offs: if meaning is not an inherent job attribute but must be earned continuously through effort (more working hours), workers could face heavier workloads and diminished leisure time. How individuals resolve the puzzle between the costs and benefits of meaningful work and why some workers are more inclined to pursue meaning-intensive jobs than others, remains only partially understood.

This study addresses that gap by examining three job-design-driven sources of job meaning: autonomy (control over tasks), competence (skill utilization), and relatedness (supportive interpersonal connections) (Burbano et al., 2024; Ryan and Deci, 2000). These three measures can explain around 60% of the variation in work meaningfulness perceptions of the workers (Nikolova and Cnossen, 2020). Autonomy includes aspects such as deciding how to organize tasks or exercising discretion over one's schedule; competence involves the extent to which workers feel they can apply and improve their skills in everyday tasks; and relatedness reflects the quality of social interactions with colleagues and supervisors (Cassar and Meier, 2018; Ryan and Deci, 2000; Nikolova and Cnossen, 2020). While existing literature documents the positive association of these factors with employee well-being and job satisfaction, it tends to overlook the possibility that, for example, greater autonomy or richer skill use might also increase job demands, such as raising stress levels or reducing personal and private time (risks). Our aim is to investigate whether workers themselves recognize these possible risks and to see how such beliefs align with real-life outcomes.

To gain a clearer picture of how workers perceive these trade-offs, we designed a novel online survey of 3,510 employees in Italy. The survey targets salaried employees aged between 18 and 60 years to capture a representative cross-section of the Italian workforce. The sample is stratified to reflect the population following the most recent data provided by ISTAT (Italian National Institute of Statistics). A key methodological feature of our study is the

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use of hypothetical scenarios to elicit subjective beliefs on how autonomy, competence, and relatedness each affect two main outcomes: job satisfaction (a perceived benefit of meaningful work) and work-life time conflict in terms of less private and family time (a perceived risk). We borrow this approach from the literature on subjective expectations, which has been employed in domains such as education choices and parental investments (Cunha et al., 2013; Boneva and Rauh, 2018; Conti et al., 2022). In this literature, respondents are presented with hypothetical situations and asked to forecast possible benefits or costs of a given scenario. We adapt this methodology to the employment context: we systematically vary whether a hypothetical job scenario is high or low in autonomy, competence, and relatedness, generating eight different "job profiles".

For each of the eight job scenarios, respondents are asked to imagine one hundred workers of the same age, living in their same region, and employed in their same job. Participants then estimate how many of these one hundred workers would, given the described job characteristics, (a) achieve a good level of job satisfaction and (b) have less private and family time (to proxy for more struggle with work-life balance). Our survey respondents entered their beliefs using a slider that allows selecting a number between 0 and 100, once for the benefit and once for the risk. By comparing how respondents' answers shift when one dimension (e.g., competence) moves from low to high while the other two remain constant in one of the job scenarios, we can pinpoint the perceived benefits and risks that workers attach to each job meaning characteristic (autonomy, competence, and relatedness).

Using this rich dataset, we first investigate the workers' average beliefs. Our findings indicate that, on average, workers believe that autonomy, competence, and relatedness positively contribute to job satisfaction (benefit). Although higher autonomy and relatedness correlate with lower perceived work-life conflicts (risk), competence emerges as a potential source of greater work-life time management tensions, having a positive impact on risks.

Second, we observe notable heterogeneities in these beliefs based on individual, family, job, and geographic characteristics. For instance, more educated respondents appear to value the benefits of autonomy especially highly, whereas those in specific geographical areas such as southern Italy show lower confidence in the protective effect of autonomy on work-life balance with respect to northern Italy workers. Additionally, we find evidence that men and women weigh competence differently, possibly reflecting distinct roles or social expectations in the household. In particular, men evaluate less the returns attached to this measure. Such differences matter for understanding why some workers might be more inclined to select high-meaning but high-demand jobs, while others may opt for less meaningful and less demanding roles. These differences mirror findings in previous research on gender and meaningful work (Burbano et al., 2024) and illustrate that beliefs about meaning are not purely a matter of individual preferences but can also reflect cultural norms and economic pressures in specific contexts.

In the next phase of the analysis, we examine whether these stated beliefs align with observed work-life balance and labor market actual outcomes. To do this, we use a polychoric principal component analysis (PCA) to construct three indices, one each for autonomy, competence, and relatedness based on detailed survey questions about the actual jobs of the respondents, following the methodology proposed by Nikolova and Cnossen (2020) and previously built in the European Working Conditions (EWCS) survey data. The results using actual and stated data reveal that greater autonomy is associated with higher job satisfaction and a reduced likelihood of seeking alternative employment, suggesting that control over one's work tasks can improve labor market stability. In contrast, while competence positively affects job satisfaction, it also correlates with longer working hours and increased psycho-

logical loads, such as frequently worrying about work outside working hours. Relatedness similarly positively correlates with higher job satisfaction.

These convergent findings between subjective beliefs and real-life outcomes imply that when workers report that competence carries both benefits and risks, they reflect observable patterns in the data. Likewise, when they say autonomy helps prevent burnout or work and private time conflicts, we see that average beliefs elicited through the scenarios approach are confirmed in actual data. We also observe a significant correlation between higher autonomy, more stable employment, and less job searching. By demonstrating this interplay of beliefs and actual behavior, our study contributes to a broader literature on expectations in economics, which emphasizes that people's decisions often hinge on how they perceive gains and general trade-offs. While many previous studies have focused on earnings expectations, academic returns, or parental activities, our work extends this reasoning into the domain of job meaningfulness and the psychological facets of work.

Overall, our findings demonstrate that although meaning at work brings benefits, it can also involve overlooked risks. Furthermore, we show that workers' beliefs on how job meaning affects job satisfaction and work-life balance are closely tied to observable labor market behaviors and time allocation, emphasizing the tangible impact of these subjective beliefs.

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