



Would you describe the work you do as a job, a career or a calling?

A sense of meaning is as important to the wellbeing of the individual as it is to the functioning of a team. Baumeister, R. F., & Vohs, K. D. (2002) describe the pursuit of meaning and purpose for individuals as “a basic human need”.

Kinds of meaningfulness

Schwartz (1994) highlighted that most people associate their work with one of three kinds of meaning. People tend to either see their work as a job, a career or a calling (or vocation).

People who view their work as simply a job are motivated solely by the financial and material rewards that the job offers. They derive little or no satisfaction from the work itself and so are likely to pursue their personal interests and passions in non-work related pursuits.

Those people who consider their work to be a career attribute meaning to their accomplishments and successes. They work to acquire opportunity, prestige and power. For them work is a means to achieve personal growth, recognition and advancement and they are motivated by promotion and recognition.

Finally, those people who consider their work to be a calling or a vocation are motivated by the meaning that they associate with the work itself. They find the work itself motivating, enjoyable and interesting, and it gives them a sense of profound purpose. They consider their work to be inherently fulfilling and they seek a greater good beyond the functionality of the role regardless of material rewards on offer.

The term calling originally had a religious connotation, but this is absent in the business sense, instead the term refers to someone that lives and breathes their work role.

Attitudes to work

Running parallel to these kinds of meaning are what Kelman (1958) describes as three relational attitudes to work: compliance, identification and internalisation.

Compliance can be said to occur when an individual is motivated by reward or conversely by the avoidance of punishment.

Identification describes someone that is committed to their work but only in relation to what they can get out of the situation (promotion or growth for example), this could be described as a kind of symbiotic relationship.

Finally, internalisation occurs when a person whole heartedly adopts the purpose and values of the organisation and they seek involvement and contribution. Their loyalty is unequivocal, and they embody the values and mission of the organisation. This attitude is associated with people who describe their work as a calling.

Benefits of meaningful work

The benefits of internalising one's work are considerable. Cameron (2012) describes an array of benefits for an individual including an increase in happiness and in sense of fulfilment, along with a reduction in depression and cynicism. A team of people that have internalised the organisation's values will display greater commitment, engagement, empowerment and effort and as a result the team are likely to be significantly more successful. Similarly, Wrzesniewski, A. et al. (1997) found that people who described their work as a calling reported higher life and work satisfaction rates, furthermore they also showed better health in that they missed significantly fewer days of work.

Work types and meaningfulness

It would be easy to assume that whether a person internalises their work is dependent on the type of work they do. Although what people value varies, there are certain types of work which tend to be universally recognised and valued such as work that involves helping, supporting and caring for other people.

Emphasising these universally valued aspects of work will tend to enhance the meaningfulness of the work for the people involved. (Cameron 2012).

However, the research indicates that the type of work is not the main determining factor in relation to the internalisation of the work. Any kind of work, even that which is physically, socially or morally tainted, can be internalised and conversely those engaged in universally valued work can perceive their work as nothing more than a job.

The key factor is the interpretation that the individual ascribes to the work rather than with the type or design of the work itself. Any kind of work, even that which is physically, socially or morally tainted can be internalised and conversely those engaged in universally valued work can perceive their work as nothing more than a job.

How to derive more meaning from your work

Try to connect with the value your work delivers, taste the fruits of your labour. If you are supporting or advising people engage with their thanks, listen to them when they describe the impact your support and advice has had on them. Notice their smile, their relief and their joy.

Reflect on a time when someone has helped you or supported you in a similar way and think about the impact it had. Reflect on the importance of the work you do in helping people to learn and on the impact that has on society.

Widen participation

MDX has positioned itself as a widening participation Institution. A widening participation strategy aims to address discrepancies in the take-up of higher education opportunities between different under-represented groups of students.

Students from disadvantaged backgrounds, lower income households and other under-represented groups may face barriers to entry to higher education. Widening participation schemes attempt to remove these barriers and improve access to education, progress within higher education and to improve graduate outcomes and employability.

Groups of people targeted by MDX in the drive to widen participation include:

- Young people from low-income backgrounds
- Young people from low-participation neighbourhoods (where very few people go on to higher education)
- Young people whose parents did not go to university
- Young people in or leaving care
- Young people living with a disability
- Young people from an ethnic minority
- Those returning to learning as mature students.



Middlesex is ranked within the top 100, and highest ranked in the UK universities in the world under 50 years old by the Times Higher Education Young University Rankings 2020. In 2017, Middlesex was awarded Silver by the Teaching Excellence Framework. The university has been awarded the Queen's Anniversary Prize three times and has twice received Queen's Award for Enterprise for its international work.

Faculty of Arts and Creative Industries

The Faculty of Arts and Creative Industries is a practice-led environment with teaching underpinned by creativity and interdisciplinary study. Student facilities are industry-standard, and staff are engaged in consultancy and collaborative research in the arts and creative industries. The Faculty is home to the Departments of Media, Performing Arts, Design and Visual Arts. In the 2019 National Students Survey, Middlesex University's BA Dance Performance received 97% for student satisfaction.

Faculty of Professional and Social Sciences

The Faculty of Professional and Social Sciences groups subjects from the Business School, Institute for Work Based Learning, School of Law, and School of Health and Education. With strong links with businesses and public sector bodies, the Faculty aims to provide real-world learning that prepares students to become 'change makers', and to both create and share their knowledge between the professional and academic worlds. In the 2016 National Student Survey, Middlesex University's Business School was rated as one of the top 5 business schools in London for overall student satisfaction.

Faculty of Science and Technology

The Faculty of Science and Technology brings together subjects including biomedical science, computer science, design engineering, telecommunications and computer engineering, mathematics and statistics, information systems and environmental science. Staffed by leading academics in their fields, the Faculty encourages students to challenge thinking and formulate approaches that are fit for purpose in our modern world. The Faculty is home to the Departments of Natural Sciences, Computer Science, Design Engineering and Mathematics, Psychology, and the London Sports Institute.



Tying the threads together

How aligned is your purpose as an individual, with the purpose of the team and with the purpose of the wider Institution?

If these things are aligned, then you will be able to internalise your work and you will be more likely to describe your work as a calling.

Reflect on the score you initially gave yourself in relation to the strength of your purpose. Think about the purpose statement you formed about yourself. Think about the purpose statement you formed for the team. Do the two statements share any words or themes?

The more aligned these things are, the happier you will be at work and bigger the difference you will make.

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