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Meaningfulness in the Work of Language Professionals[1]

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores the changes that a specific group of knowledge workers – language professionals in Finland – have undergone in their work and how they perceive the meaningfulness of their work as a result. The data presented in this article has been collected through group interviews and is part of a larger data set. To make sense of our data, we use thematic analysis and the framework of meaningful work presented by Rosso et al. For some of our research participants, the factors of meaningful work are present. For others, changes in work, such as platform work and outsourcing, have reduced autonomy and development possibilities. We conclude by discussing the implications of our findings.

KEYWORDS

Language professionals / work fragmentation / work meaningfulness

Introduction

According to Vallas et al. (2009, p. 291), major changes are taking place in the world of work. These include structural changes, where various types of work grow and decline, as well as the rise of 'non-standard' work arrangements, such as platform work. According to Bailey et al. (2019, p. 482), working life is becoming more precarious, as new forms of work emerge and organizations struggle with globalization and digitalization. However, Leppänen et al. (2021, p. 78) argue that while the discussion in the Nordics has focused on the threat these new forms of work constitute to the Nordic labor market model, we should instead explore whether platform work can support job quality and learning opportunities and serve Nordic values, such as equity and participation. According to Alsos and Dølvik (2021, p. 78), there is currently little evidence of a major upheaval in the Nordic working life in general, although the above changes are visible here, too.

In this article, we will explore the changes language professionals in Finland have encountered during their careers and how these changes have impacted the meaningfulness they experience at work. Language graduates from Finnish universities fall into two main groups: teachers and other language professionals. Teachers comprise a relatively distinct group, but other language professionals have a wide range of job titles and job functions (Selkälä et al. 2018). Most commonly, however, they work either as

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translators, in technical communication, or in various other communication roles, either in companies or in public sector organizations. The work life experiences of teachers have been studied extensively, including studies in the Nordics (see, e.g., Larsson & Löwstedt 2021; Berg 2013; Wall 2020). While there have been field-specific studies on the work environments of, for example, technical communicators (e.g., Rosselot-Merrit 2020; Spilka 2002) and translators (e.g., Abdallah & Koskinen 2007; Kujamäki 2021), limited information about the work life experiences of language professionals other than teachers exists in the Nordic context. From the perspective of other professionals, on the other hand, research exists on the meaningfulness of work, which has been investigated especially in care work (e.g., Bergman et al. 2017).

Bailey et al. (2019), Lysova et al. (2019), and Lepisto and Pratt (2017) suggest that while there is a growing interest in meaningful work and it is under review in various academic fields, there is a lack of consensus concerning what it consists of. Lysova et al. (2019, p. 375) point out that while reviews typically have included individual, job, organizational, and even societal factors, they have not integrated these into a cohesive framework that would explain how these factors relate to one another to create meaningful work (for a review of existing literature, also see Rosso et al. 2010). According to Laaser and Karlsson (2021, p. 2), the definitions of meaningful work usually focus either on the subjective or objective characteristics of meaningfulness. In this article, we take an inductive approach and investigate the experiences of meaningfulness through our data, which consists of group interviews of experienced language professionals.

Finland is a post-industrial welfare state in the north of Europe, and in countries like Finland, there are several reasons for the changes in work: an aging population, declining labor supply, increased mobility, increased awareness of social responsibility, and changing values and expectations of work, especially among younger generations (CGI 2019, p. 4; Järvensivu & Piirainen 2012, p. 87; Alasoini 2012 p. 109, Gillberg et al. 2021). Although Vallas et al. (2009, p. 296) suggest that the 'standard' work arrangement is actually a relatively recent construct, and despite the ongoing changes in the world of work, full-time, permanent work contracts are still the norm in Finland (Pyöriä & Ojala 2017, p. 48). In addition, the employment rate of University graduates is high (Kurlin et al. 2018). According to Breen (2019, p. 57), to enable individuals to pursue meaningful work, a public education system accessible for all should be in place. This is the case in Finland and across the Nordics (see, e.g., Blossing et al. 2014; Telhaug et al. 2006).

According to a survey by Sutela et al. (2019, p. 139), experiences of time pressure are increasingly visible in the changing Finnish working life. In the past, time pressures were experienced by people who were engaged in performance-oriented, industrial work, whereas in the 21st century, it is most commonly experienced by senior employees and employees doing demanding knowledge work. Significant problems related to well-being at work and coping are also found among groups of employees who have a high degree of control over their own work, such as senior white-collar workers.

There have also been positive changes in the Finnish working life. According to the survey by Sutela et al. (2019), for example, there has been a clear positive development in work engagement. More and more Finnish employees have experienced a sense of immersion in their work – a feeling of flow – as well as enthusiasm and energy. The experience of being absorbed in work is not linked to education or status; according to the above-mentioned survey, it is experienced by employees irrespective of their

education or status. Although Vallas et al. (2009, pp. 292–293) point out that many manual occupations have remained or even grown and many mundane white-collar jobs declined in the knowledge economy, for many, the nature of work itself has changed in post-industrial states. Knowledge work is becoming increasingly common, with characteristics that include general complexity, the ability to apply theoretical and analytical knowledge, and the ability to manage oneself (Bäcklander 2019; Drucker 1999; Jacobs 2017). The University-educated language professionals whose working life experiences we are investigating are engaged in knowledge work. In addition to field-specific skills, they need transferable skills, such as time management, task allocation, resource management, and prioritization (see also Sutela et al. 2019, p. 117) – they carry out the type of tasks which an employee's manager has traditionally handled.

In this article, our research questions are:

(1) What changes have occurred in the work of these language professionals during their careers?
(2) How have the changes affected the meaningfulness they experience at work?

Next, we will discuss some relevant background literature. We will then present our data and the methods we used to collect and analyze it. Finally, we will look at the findings of our study and the conclusions we have drawn based on the results.

Background

In this article, we investigate the experiences of meaningfulness in the work of language professionals in Finland. As discussed above, there is no clear consensus on what meaningful work consists of. Breen (2019, p. 52) defines meaningful work as work that 'facilitates and enhances our sense of self and broader personal life' and such is an important component of self-actualization. Organizations, on the other hand, see meaningful work as crucial in engaging their employees (Lysova et al. 2019). Rosso et al. (2010) argue that while 'meaning' and 'meaningful' are related terms often used overlappingly in the literature, meaningful work can be defined as work that is 'experienced as particularly significant and holding more positive meaning for individuals' (p. 95). In their review of existing literature in the field, Rosso et al. (2010) identified four main sources of meaningfulness in work: the self, other persons, the work context, and spiritual life.

Lepisto and Pratt (2017) conceptualize the potential sources of meaningfulness as (1) **realization**, realizing one's self through work, and (2) **justification**, being able to account for the worth of one's work. Since self-actualization, or the realization of one's full potential, is often regarded as the key to meaningfulness, the more possibilities the work offers for an individual to develop their potential towards a desired future self, the more meaningful the work will be (Bailey et al. 2019, p. 485; Rosso et al. 2010, p. 120). However, Lepisto and Pratt (2017) argue that by focusing on being able to account for the worth of one's work instead of self-actualization, it is possible to investigate issues such as the lack of meaningfulness in seemingly enriched work – such as knowledge work – and find new sources for fostering meaningful work (p. 116). Bailey et al. (2019, p. 490) also note that while meaningfulness arises in self-actualization, it is dependent on the context – the 'other' – for its realization. The external, objective context also

shapes what is considered 'meaningful' by the individuals involved in it (Bailey et al. 2019, p. 491).

Lepisto and Pratt (2017, p. 112) suggest that the realization perspective arose, at least in part, to help explain how certain changes in work – for example, the introduction of assembly line work – alienated individuals from the tasks they performed. They argue that the two conceptualizations of meaningfulness do not entirely compensate for each other, because professionals whose work conditions meet the prerequisites of meaningful work, such as autonomy and skill, can still lack meaningfulness (Lepisto & Pratt 2017, p. 110; p. 116). As a way to introduce meaningfulness into these types of settings, Breen (2019, p. 60; p. 66) suggests institutional reforms and recombining conception with execution so that individuals would gain responsibility over their own work.

Laaser and Karlsson (2021, p. 12), on the other hand, look at meaningfulness through three aspects of work: autonomy, dignity, and recognition. They argue that meaningful work happens when the organization of work, employment conditions, and social relations at work enable workers to engage in work that is characterized by autonomy, offers opportunities to learn and develop, features respectful and fair treatment, and offers employment conditions that give workers a sense of security. According to Laaser and Karlsson (2021, p. 8), these include both formal and informal workplace cultures and channels.

Breen (2019) focuses on freedom as an aspect of meaningful work, distinguishing between freedom as self-realization, freedom as autonomy, and freedom as non-domination. According to Breen (2019), for work to be meaningful, it must allow for personal development as well as the use of judgment – concepts which are interlinked – and be free from arbitrary interference by others, which is a pre-requisite for the other two types of freedom. Breen (2019, p. 59) also suggests that autonomous agency in work – the ability to set goals, plan how to meet them, and revise the course of action as needed – is a vital component of meaningful work. According to Breen, having this type of personal responsibility for the work activity is the opposite of the work form where work tasks are separated between those who plan the work and those who carry it out.

Rosso et al. (2010, p. 115; see also Lips-Wiersma & Wright 2012) propose a theoretical framework which brings the key dimensions of meaningful work – agency-communion and self-others – together. They argue that meaningful work exists along these dimensions. The **individuation** (self-agency) dimension includes factors such as autonomy, competence, and self-esteem, which define the self as distinguished and worthy. The **self-connection** (self-communion) dimension includes factors such as identity affirmation and personal engagement, which align the individual with the way they see themselves. The **contribution** (other-agency) dimension includes factors such as perceived impact and significance, which concern something greater than the self. The **unification** (other-communion) dimension includes factors such as social identification and interpersonal connectedness, which bring the individual into harmony with other individuals or principles. In the Findings and discussion section, we will use this framework to interpret our findings.

Working as a language professional

Language graduates other than teachers mainly work as translators, in technical communication, or in various other communication roles, either in companies or in public

sector organizations. They are engaged in knowledge work, where a high level of education and skills are needed and the use of information technology is an integral part (Drucker 1999; Pyöriä 2005).

Traditionally, the core of knowledge work has been seen as immersion in the topic at hand, getting to the bottom of something and creating something new based on existing knowledge (Drucker 1999; Toivanen 2018). According to Drucker (1999, pp. 83–84), innovation is part of knowledge work, the work requires continuous learning, and productivity is a matter of quality over quantity. Drucker goes on to point out that knowledge workers need to be treated as assets: they must want to work for the organization that employs them for the organization to reach its full potential (see also Deci et al. 2017). This requires employee understanding: the employer must understand which issues affect the employee's experience of meaningfulness (Luukka 2019, p. 119). Raeder et al. (2019) suggest that, especially in uncertain situations, open communication and employee support are the key tasks of management: although knowledge work is largely self-organizing, support and guidance are nevertheless needed. According to Sutela et al., managers are no longer expected to be particularly familiar with their subordinates' tasks, but rather to enable, support, and encourage them in their work (see also Drucker 1999, p. 85).

According to Chesley (2014), technology use increases the intensity of work through the faster pace, interruptions, and multitasking associated with it, but can also make it easier to reconcile everyday life and work. Karimikia et al. (2021, pp. 178–179) also found that technology use increases work strain, role ambiguity, and role conflict. Contradictorily, while digitalization increases the autonomy of the worker in the work community, it also increases their dependence on technology. According to Keyriläinen and Sutela (2018), digitalization not only improves work flexibility, but also causes stress through the need for constant learning (Drucker 1999, p. 84) and the frustration of dealing with dysfunctional systems. Professionals may also feel that they are losing control over their own work: according to Toivanen (2018), the nature of knowledge work has changed in recent years, and the core of one's own work is no longer always so easy to locate.

According to Holford (2019, p. 153), digitalization has been seen as a way to maximize efficiency and profitability, and the human-centeredness of organizations may have been side-lined in the process, while community support and knowledge sharing would, in fact, be essential ways to reduce the stress associated with knowledge work (Ipsen & Jensen 2012). However, Vinas-Bardolet et al. (2020) note that knowledge workers are a versatile group, some of whom enjoy independence and are committed to their work, while others experience techno-stress and work long hours in precarious jobs.

Laaser and Karlsson (2021, p. 15) point out that as digitalization gains ground, a key question in meaningful work will be if and how technology use limits the informal spaces of work that are central for the experience of meaningfulness, for example, in the case of platform work. Platform work, which is enabled by digitalization, is usually understood to cover, for example, transport services such as Uber (Glavin et al. 2021). However, platform work has also spread to areas of knowledge work, such as translation, where its impact is seen as twofold: on the one hand, it reduces the need to network on one's own, but on the other hand, the translator becomes dependent on the platform and must follow its rules (De La Vega et al. 2021; see also Rolandsson et al. 2019; Seppälä et al. 2021). According to Vallas et al. (2009, p. 296), platform work and other

newer work forms may benefit highly skilled experts, but individuals engaged in temporary, on-call, or contract work will generally suffer from poor quality of employment. Laaser and Karlsson (2021, p. 15) argue that understanding and supporting workers' struggle for meaningful work is important for all forms of work, but particularly so for new forms of work, such as platform work, which is currently not regulated.

As a result of digitalization, the concept of Digital Taylorism has been brought up in the translation industry: large translation agencies operating in the platform economy have divided translation tasks into small, well-defined parts, and translation processes have become tightly automated and monitored (Moorkens 2020). This development is visible in audio-visual (AV) translation, where translators create subtitles for, for example, TV shows. In AV translation, templates – subtitle files containing a time-coded transcription of the dialog to be translated into multiple target languages – have profoundly changed the work process. According to Oziemblewska and Szarkowska (2020), the use of templates has fragmented the work of AV translators and split it into several different roles, which translators themselves see as having a negative impact on the prestige of the field. Oziemblewska and Szarkowska (2020) point out that from the AV translation company's viewpoint, templates offer cost-savings as well as a higher level of standardization, and therefore quality, than each translator doing the work separately. From the AV translator's viewpoint, however, the effect is the opposite.

In the past, knowledge work has been conceptualized as work that requires different cognitive abilities, such as higher problem-solving skills and creative thinking, than work that consists of measurable routines (Jacobs 2017). According to Holford (2019, pp. 146–147; see also Nyckel 2020), in Digital Taylorism, knowledge work becomes an assembly line job where creative and intellectual tasks can be split into routine tasks, everything can be measured, and pay can be tied to performance. In addition, according to Moorkens (2020), translators have traditionally worked on a freelance basis, which means that they have had less influence from the outset than salaried employees. Moorkens points out that the advantage of freelancing – flexibility and independence – is lost in Digital Taylorism, where it is replaced by a collection of routine, fragmented tasks. According to Breen (2019, p. 54), the detailed division of labor associated with Digital Taylorism can be seen as the opposite of meaningful work: it does not allow for creativity, seeing the big picture, or focusing on one's key tasks.

Kujamäki (2021) has explored the current state of the translation field and concluded that it is possible to view translating simultaneously as a highly skilled profession and as a low-status job with little power: the field is fragmented and various realities exist within it. Research on translator prestige in cross-national contexts is scarce (Ruokonen & Svahn 2021, p. 12). However, in the study by Ruokonen and Svahn (2021), which investigated translator prestige in Finland and Sweden, Finnish translators had higher rankings in overall status, whereas Swedish translators were more committed to translation as a profession (Ruokonen & Svahn 2021, p. 14).

In addition to translating, technical communication is a prominent field for language professionals. Technical communicators create user documentation for various technology products and have faced precarious working conditions for decades. They are often university-educated, but many of the jobs in the field are routine, low-skilled, and low-pay, with little prospects. The contracting firms that came into play in the 1990's further commoditized the field (Virtaluoto 2015; Wilson 2001). The situation in different countries varies, however; for example, in Finland, there are multiple academic programs for

technical communicators and the field is relatively stable, whereas in Denmark there is currently no education available, which affects the prestige of the field (Bro-Rasmussen 2021).

Changes in work similar to Digital Taylorism have also been experienced by technical communicators. In technical communication, the tools of the trade have evolved to XML-based systems for structured documentation, developed specifically for the needs of technical communication. These content management systems (CMS) allow working with texts as small components rather than complete, static documents, and are seen as increasing efficiency and cutting the costs associated with technical communication (Batova 2018, p. 309). However, these systems have been perceived to deprive technical communicators of autonomy over their work and to isolate them from users (Batova 2018; Dubinsky 2015; Virtaluoto 2015). Target group thinking, customer orientation, and feedback are not realized in this work process, although they are seen as the cornerstones of high-quality technical communication (Strimling 2019; Virtaluoto 2015).

According to Holford (2019, p. 152), Digital Taylorism leads to lack of motivation, job exhaustion, or the disappearance of jobs altogether, for example, through artificial intelligence. This development has been seen as a threat to technical communication since the early 2000s: according to Slattery (2007), distributed organizations and the systems designed for technical communication only will de-skill technical communicators and turn their work into assembling documentation rather than writing it.

Data and methods

The data we use in this article was collected as part of our alumni project, which has been running since 2017. In this project, we qualitatively study the career experiences of the language alumni of a university in the north of Finland. In the early stages of the project, in 2017–2019, we collected survey and group interview data.

We conducted four group interviews: in the first two, we interviewed teaching staff, and in the second two, we interviewed other language professionals. In addition, we conducted two individual interviews, as the scheduling of the group interviews did not suit these research participants. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The latter two group interviews and one of the individual interviews constitute the data for this article. During the project, we have previously published two articles: Selkälä et al. (2018), based on the survey data, and Selkälä and Virtaluoto (2020), based on the interview data. In the first article, we looked at the career paths of language alumni. In the second article, we focused on the experiences teachers and other language professionals had had with digitalization in their work.

In the present article, we will focus on the working life experiences of language professionals who are not working as teachers. All of the research participants had been working as language professionals for a long time, with up to 40 years of experience. They had versatile experience and had witnessed a variety of changes taking place, which is why they were chosen to participate. At the time of the interviews, our research participants were working either as freelancers, self-employed entrepreneurs, or language professionals working in-house in different companies. While their jobs differed significantly, they all shared an educational background: they were language graduates from a single university in the north of Finland.

The interviewees signed a consent form giving us permission to conduct the research. The collection, management, and subsequent destruction of data on the interviewees and the interviews themselves were carried out in accordance with the guidelines for research ethics of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (https://tenk.fi/en).

In the interviews, the questions dealt first with basic background information, after which we moved to topics related to the work itself: changes in work, job descriptions and workloads, as well as what hopes the interviewees had for their future careers. On average, each interview lasted 2 hours. The interviews were conducted in Finnish, and the excerpts we present in this article were translated from Finnish into English by the first author.

The anonymity of the interviewees is protected by pseudonyms. In addition, we do not disclose any information about the interviewees that could link them to their employer. The details of the interviewees can be found in the table below. In the table, we have included the main career points that the interviewees listed themselves: as they all had extensive work experience, they all had held multiple posts.

Table 1 List of interviewees with occupations and work experience in years

Participant	Occupation(s)	Work experience, years
Linda	Technical writer, team leader	30
Maria	Investor relations assistant, marketing coordinator, communications coordinator, communications marketing specialist, Communications and marketing manager	30
Minerva	Translator, interpreter, entrepreneur	20
Nadia	Technical writer	20
Oliver	Translator, entrepreneur	30
Paula	Technical writer, translator, team leader, teacher, entrepreneur	40
Teresa	Team leader, communications specialist	10

The interviews we conducted were semi-structured: they were relatively free-flowing except for some set questions and some clarifying questions by the interviewers (cf. Puusa 2020, pp. 111–112). According to Hopf (2019, p. 350), the aim of semi-structured interviews is to allow interviewees to bring up themes that the interviewers could not have anticipated. The benefit of semi-structured interviews is that they provide information from the interviewees' personal perspective on the subject under study (Hopf 2012, p. 350), i.e., their own voice is heard (Dufva 2011, p. 134). The data collection method can also be described as a hybrid of group interview and group discussion (Valtonen 2005, pp. 223–224), as the boundary between free discussion and pre-prepared prompts was often blurred: the interviewees spontaneously engaged in discussions on certain topics even before the related questions were asked. The purpose of the group interviews was to collectively form different perceptions and descriptions of changes in working life (cf. Pietilä 2017, pp. 88–89) and the semi-structured interview model worked well in this respect.

We then used thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006, 2012; Mayring 2015) to analyze the interview data. This method allowed us to systematically search for,

interpret, and organize the threads of meaning we found in the data and use them to form broader themes. Our approach was mainly inductive: we searched for the themes from the data rather than from a particular theoretical premise (Braun & Clarke 2012, p. 58).

We used six-step model by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2012) to conduct the analysis. According to Braun and Clarke, the steps of thematic analysis are as folllows: (1) exploring the data, (2) coding the data, i.e., marking points of interest, (3) searching for broader themes, (4) evaluating and making a final selection of themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) writing the research report. Naturally, the analysis process is not as straightforward and does not take place as chronologically as outlined here, but the steps overlap throughout the process.

As the first step of our analysis, we listened to the interviews multiple times to familiarize ourselves with the data. We then individually coded the data and looked for preliminary themes. Coding is a key part of the analysis process, and there are many ways of doing it. We chose the basic forms of data interpretation presented by Mayring (2015, pp. 65–66): classification, contextualization, and categorization. According to Mayring (2015, p. 30), the evaluation of the themes found through coding is based on a hermeneutic analysis, which aims to identify, interpret, and understand the themes discovered in the data.

After we had individually coded the data, we arranged two workshops to compare our initial perceptions about the possible themes in the data and to evaluate and choose the themes we would concentrate on. We decided on the themes and proceeded to write the report, constantly going back and forth between our initial perceptions and the final themes, to keep the analysis as close to the data as possible. We conducted steps 1–3 individually and steps 4–6 collaboratively.

Findings and discussion

In this section, we will first discuss the themes we discovered in the data which supported the meaningfulness of work for our research participants, followed by a discussion on the themes which were seen to diminish the meaningfulness of work. We discovered two main themes: (1) freedom and support from the work community, and (2) fragmentation of work and time pressure. We used the framework presented by Rosso et al. (2010) to interpret the themes through the four dimensions of meaningful work: **individuation**, **self-connection**, **contribution**, and **unification**.

Factors increasing meaningfulness

Rosso et al. (2010, p. 120) state that much of the existing research in the field assumes that individual agency is the determining factor for meaningfulness. In our data, **individuation**, **self-connection,** and **unification** were the main factors increasing meaningfulness: the majority of the positive changes that had taken place were related to these factors. These included development tasks, decision-making power, flexibility, personal engagement, and support of the work community – characteristics which are generally associated with doing knowledge work (e.g., Drucker 1999).

For example, digitalization was seen as having a positive impact through the development of tools, which increased autonomy (**individuation**) and personal engagement (**self-connection**). Technical communicators have often had a positive attitude towards technology and digitalization from the outset, because the field is so closely linked to technology:

1) Nadia: Everything is in the cloud, you can access data from anywhere, it's great. You need to be a bit techie, a bit nerdy, to be a tech communicator.

The same goes for people doing other communication tasks:

2) Teresa: We are working with bits and not papers these days. I'm probably just a person who has a positive outlook on digitalization, so I'm always the first to take in and use everything. And when we have applications for our customers, I'm happy to be one of the first to test them.

As discussed above, digitalization can increase work strain in terms of fragmentation and applications and channels to learn. Nevertheless, those working in communications were positive about digitalization and felt that it has made many tasks easier. Excerpt 3 presents an example of **individuation**: an employee's autonomy increased when they were able to develop their expertise, which both improves self-esteem and makes it easier to contribute to the wider community:

3) Maria: And also, of course, learning in the sense that you can understand and manage large entities and things so then your responsibilities grow and the management sees that you can handle developing things from many perspectives.

In the past, training paths had been particularly important in developing our interviewees' work and employers had provided support for this. The training paths had been long-term and extensive, providing a sense of belongingness (**unification**):

4) Paula: Then I went into the [name of company] training program, […] They were huge, they were wonderful training programs. I once calculated that I was in training for three months in a year. And at that time, they said that you train people for what the company needs for the next ten years. So, you had to think about what you wanted to do when you grew up and then some knowledgeable HR person helped you build a training path.

The same goes for support from the work community, which was seen as especially important when an individual's work tasks were changing (Sutela 2021, p. 28). Excerpt 5 shows **unification** as interpersonal connectedness:

5) Nadia: Now I'm part of the marketing team and a big part of my job is communications, writing press releases and web pages, making videos. I didn't study marketing for a day during my studies, so I had to learn it on the job. The marketing people in the marketing team are great, they help me out.

In our data, **individuation** and **unification** seem to be interlinked concepts; you need autonomy and competence to experience interpersonal connectedness in the work community:

6) Paula: There is always someone you can ask for help. It has a lot to do with the attitude that you go and ask.

For translators, the new forms of work discussed above have introduced a translation agency between the translator and the customer. For example, in the public sector, texts are tendered centrally, which means that the translator does not have to do marketing or personal branding, which can be seen as difficult (Vallas & Christin 2018), and can instead concentrate on translating, which is their core task (see Drucker 1999). This had increased the translators' sense of autonomy (**individuation**):

7) Minerva: The tasks haven't changed, but now the translation agency is in between. It's not a bad change in itself, because it makes life easier, instead of having to recruit customers myself, now I just click on an email to accept an assignment. So the work is offered through these big companies. I don't think it's a bad thing at all.

Our data shows that flexibility, versatility, and freedom to decide increase meaningfulness (Wheatley 2017, pp. 320–321; see also Drucker 1999; Deci et al. 2017; Martela et al. 2021) for entrepreneurs as well as other knowledge workers through **individuation**. This also applies to time management (cf. Wheatley 2017, p. 321).

8) Teresa: It is liberating to be able to organize your own working time.

   Paula: Liberating is a good word. I can control myself, and I can control stress, but I can't control external factors.

Personal engagement – an example of **self-connection** – was also brought up by our interviewees:

9) Minerva: I love interpreting, I would do it for 8 hours a day for half pay – if you talk about a vocation, that's it. It's a feeling of "I can do this job and this is so great".

Some of the other changes in work organization for our interviewees had been mergers and outsourcing to low-cost countries (see Virtaluoto 2015). According to Sutela et al. (2019, p. 77), outsourcing has increased in Finland, and this trend is also reflected in our data. Outsourcing has often been studied from the perspective of cost development (e.g., Ali-Yrkkö 2006; Junnila et al. 2012) or from the perspective of resource management (e.g., Mubaraz 2021). Our findings suggest that it would be important to look at the experiences of the remaining employees, too. While outsourcing has traditionally been used to achieve efficiency and cost savings, our interviewees say it is an advantage to have in-house translators, for example, because it increased their **individuation**:

10) Teresa: It's a huge advantage in terms of efficiency to have your own [translators] in-house because you can negotiate with them, so that this one is really urgent, get this done quickly, and this one is not so urgent, you can leave this for later.

Next, we will look at the factors which diminished meaningfulness for our interviewees.

Factors diminishing meaningfulness

In addition to the above-mentioned factors, which increased meaningfulness, our interviewees had experiences which diminished meaningfulness. Here, the changes in work had mainly diminished **individuation** – factors related to autonomy, competence, and self-esteem – and, correspondingly, the meaningfulness of work. The reasons behind these changes were organizational and the individuals had little control over them. One such change was the emergence of platform work, as discussed above:

11) Oliver: This can be seen in AV translation so that instead of the same translator creating the template and then translating it, the template is made in a cheaper country, and they are clearly made by students who simply don't even know English yet, they are kind of pretending to be scripts, but you can't use them because they are full of mistakes. So you have to listen carefully to the audio or ask for a real script. So, the rhythm of the text, which is an essential part of the translation process, is done on the cheap and then they send me a template that I have to correct myself.

According to one interviewee, the lack of appreciation for the translator's work is also reflected, for example, in the employer's comments during salary negotiations. This diminishes **individuation** as self-esteem:

12) Oliver: When I was still a fiction translator, I once talked to my employer and said, "I understand you respect me, and I've been doing this for a long time. I thought it was time to discuss rates", and after ten years of knowing him, he just said that "well, there are quite a few people queuing behind the door". My wife, who does the same work as me, was told that "this is a bit of a vocation".

For one of our interviewees, XML-based structured documentation systems had been introduced in the 1990s, and the motivation of technical communicators had subsequently decreased (Batova 2018). This resulted in diminished **individuation** as well as **self-connection** to the point that employees involved had left the company:

13) Paula: XML came quite early, and that's when the editors lost interest, when you can't design anything yourself anymore, your training is wasted because you can't use your skills anymore. All the best ones left, they didn't want to do automated work. They left because they had been doing user-centered instructions and the organizations changed so that they did a generic product.

For technical communication professionals, the changes that had happened had reduced the 'old meaningfulness' they had experienced at work; **individuation** and **contribution**, which had previously made work meaningful, had disappeared:

> 14) Paula: It was the old meaningfulness that was lost. That was the old way of being close to the customer and responding directly to their needs, that brought that meaningfulness into it. When we went too high on the level of abstraction, the content of the work started to fade and that took the meaningfulness away. Being close and making it concrete, the fact that you can see for yourself – some of our writers went to install the equipment themselves, and based on their own experience, rewrote the instructions and removed statements like "easy to carry" or "possible to carry". The fact that you can see the content being used was important. And if they had got that meaning back, they would have stayed in the house.

Like translators and technical communicators, other communication professionals have also had to learn to use a variety of channels and applications as a result of digitalization. For them, the strain they experience arises from the constant need to learn (cf. Karimikia et al. 2021, p. 178; Drucker 1999). In these cases, there is an increased need to produce content for different output channels, and the pressure comes from outside, not as personal development by the individual:

> 15) Maria: I think maybe they [the different applications] have added strain in terms of learning, maybe more from the perspective that there are just more of them, that it is no longer so that when you send a newsletter, you send it to one or two places, but now you have to take into account that you update it there, you update your website, you update your social media, so the number has increased, and as the number of things to do and channels to keep an eye on has increased, you have to manage many channels at the same time and follow them and respond to them.

As discussed above, outsourcing has increased in Finland. For our interviewees, these changes had diminished **individuation** as well as **unification**:

> 16) Linda: It was the outsourcing that brought about the changes, but originally, language professionals were highly valued, there were translators and philologists in the technical writing teams, and engineers highly valued having someone who took care of the "tedious" documentation work! But then, little by little, it started to change so that the outsourcing took most of the technical communication professionals outside the company, and that brought its own kind of contradictions, its own challenges, it didn't work so smoothly when the writer was further away from the SMEs [subject matter experts] and the products.

Organizational changes which resulted in outsourced functions being carried out far away from the customers and from our interviewees' own teams had contributed to the fragmentation of work they experienced. In the past, the interviewees had had overall

responsibility for their work (see Drucker 1999), but after outsourcing, several different people contributed to the same entity. In addition to outsourcing, work had also become fragmented because of mergers, reducing **individuation**:

17) Nadia: The workload has increased, and when you're just an employee, you have to take on everything. In a team with colleagues from all over the world, in different time zones, things can often take a long time. If something is done, it has to be accepted by someone in California so that we can go forward. There is always a delay of at least a day, it is tiring and stressful. Now there is a lot of decision-making power far away, it is tiring. We used to be able to do it ourselves, now it's ten different people each doing a little bit of a big thing.

Organizational changes were often driven by the need to cut costs. For those in technical communication, this was not only reflected in the shift towards a generic work process and outsourcing, but also in diminishing training opportunities. This affected the ways in which they were able to develop their work, reducing **individuation**:

18) Paula: The feeling of doing something new and trying something new, moving forward – that's a really good feeling. You get to study, you get to try, you get to do – then somehow the rug was pulled from under your feet, you can't do anything, there's no money to develop anything.

For our interviewees, work seemed fragmented because they had to do many different tasks simultaneously, the work was divided between several different people, the work was often interrupted, and they felt it was impossible to concentrate properly. The interviewees felt that they had been deprived of the core of their work (Toivanen 2018), because they no longer had overall responsibility for the work and were not able to independently decide how to organize it – traditionally seen as an important aspect of knowledge work (Sutela et al. 2019, p. 117; Deci et al. 2017; Drucker 1999; Martela et al. 2021).

In addition to the fragmentation of work discussed above, there had also been changes in the amount of work. The interviewees said that they were constantly working under time pressure (cf. Sutela et al. 2019, p. 139). According to the interviewees, the pressure came from the company's marketing department, salespeople, or customers. The work of a technical communicator, for example, takes place at the end of the product development process, where time pressures accumulate. Translators had also experienced an accelerated pace of work: there was simply too much work and too little time to do the work (cf. Oziemblewska & Szarkowska 2020). Another reason for translators experiencing time pressures was the customers' lack of understanding of translating in general, which reduced **individuation**:

19) Minerva: "If I wrote this page of text in an hour, about a topic I know everything about, how can it take you two hours to translate it?"

According to our data, translators are under pressure from the marketing department, who need to get the book out in multiple languages on the same date:

20) Oliver: It seems like the marketing department sets the pace for the book. The book is published in 30 different countries at the same time. And all of them have to have the marketing material out on the same day. Another translator had once asked a publisher why the books were in such a hurry. The publisher said that it's not the books that are in a hurry, but the marketing department.

Because their work tasks had been split into smaller chunks that were connected to the work of various other people, there was a sense of loss of control, and this also increased the time pressure the interviewees were experiencing. As many of their tasks overlapped, there was no 'breathing space':

21) Linda: The pace increased all the time, the operating environment changed because there were subcontractors, […] Everything took longer to do. There was no longer that overall responsibility, there was always someone else who had to do something somewhere else. There was never that kind of breathing space where you could enjoy your achievements, you had to be already starting the next project. In the early days you had more power, a better sense of control.

In our data, the changes in work that had reduced meaningfulness were mostly related to the loss of control over one's work tasks, reduced **individuation**. As discussed above, self-actualization is often regarded as the key to meaningfulness, which means that the more possibilities the work offers for an individual to develop their potential, the more meaningful the work will be (Bailey et al. 2019; Breen 2019). Laaser and Karlsson (2021) also argue that meaningful work happens when workers are able to engage in work that is autonomous and offers opportunities to learn and develop. These factors of meaningfulness were present for some of our interviewees, especially those working in communications.

For many of our interviewees, however, meaningfulness was not present in the current work environment, although they were engaged in knowledge work, which is often seen as enriched. As discussed above, Lepisto and Pratt (2017) suggest that the two perspectives into meaningful work – realization and justification – do not compensate for each other fully. In other words, simply enriching an individual's work tasks is not enough: the individual must also be able to articulate why and how their work is valuable to the wider community. Lepisto and Pratt (2017, p. 108) argue that the perception of one's work as meaningful or meaningless depends on the degree to which the individual believes that their work has value beyond the self: the sense of having made a worthwhile contribution is vital for meaningfulness. For some of our interviewees, especially those working as translators or technical communicators, changes in work, such as outsourcing and platform work, had reduced autonomy and development potential while making the work more fragmented and the employment conditions more precarious. For these interviewees, moving towards the 'old meaningfulness' they had experienced prior to the organizational changes would have resulted in more meaningful work: a better sense of **self-connectedness** as well as **contribution** and **unification**. As a way to introduce meaningfulness into contexts where it is lacking, Breen (2019) suggests institutional reforms and recombining conception with execution, so that individuals would gain responsibility over their own work. Laaser and Karlsson (2021, p. 15) stress that supporting workers' struggle for meaningful work is important in general but especially

for new forms of work, such as platform work. However, reforms may be difficult to realize in situations where the traditional employer and employee roles and responsibilities have shifted.

Conclusion

In this article, we explored the work changes experienced by language professionals and the effects these changes have had on the meaningfulness of their work. Our research questions were:

(1) What changes have occurred in the work of these language professionals during their careers?
(2) How have the changes affected the meaningfulness they experience at work?

Based on our analysis, the common factors of meaningfulness discussed in the literature of the field – such as autonomy, freedom, and the sense of having made a worthwhile contribution – were visible in the work of some of our research participants. For others, however, digitalization and organizational changes had resulted in the fragmentation of work tasks as well as in new forms of work, such as platform work, which was seen as a benefit by some and as a drawback by some of our research participants. While drastic changes in the entire Nordic work life model have not yet been witnessed, for some of our research participants, meaningful work was an elusive concept. As the factors of meaningful work were heavily influenced by the work community and the decisions made by the employer, employers should involve professionals in decisions that have a direct impact on their work. This is crucial for organizations to thrive.

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