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25. The Vocational Meaning and Fulfillment Survey: a new tool for fostering employees' work–life balance and career sustainability

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MEANINGFUL WORK, WORK–LIFE BALANCE, AND SUSTAINABLE CAREERS

In the field of work and organizational psychology, as well as career psychology, although meaningful work is regarded as a key determinant of work–life balance, studies of the relationship between the two have yielded mixed findings. Some scholars have conceptualized meaningful work as an *antecedent* of work–life balance and provided evidence for this (Bragger et al., 2019; Johnson & Jiang, 2017). In other studies, meaningful work has been conceptualized as a *mediator* – for example, between customer misbehavior (Loi et al., 2018), public service motivation (Zheng et al., 2020), decent work (Kashyap & Arora, 2022), and work influencing private life. Recently, Mostafa (2021) argued that meaningful work can also act as a *moderator* that suppresses the harmful effect of work–life conflict and helps to mitigate job exhaustion. Together, these studies seem to support the view that meaningful work and work–life balance are positively associated, and may together foster career sustainability.

To go beyond these currently existing research findings and produce a new understanding of this relationship, we approach these phenomena from the perspective of the process model of sustainable careers. According to De Vos et al. (2020, p. 1), “Careers form a complex mosaic of objective experiences and subjective evaluations, resulting in an enormous diversity in terms of how careers can take shape and a major variety of individual reflections regarding whether one’s career is sustainable or not.” Career sustainability is important because it consists of: (1) *happiness*, such as life satisfaction and career

success; (2) *health*, both mental and physical; and (3) *productivity*, for example in the form of job performance and employability. Therefore, employees' happiness, health, and productivity are considered key indicators of a sustainable career, as they contribute to both employees' and organizations' shared goal of not just surviving but also flourishing in today's fast-paced employment market, society, and global economy.

Meaningful work positioned in the core of the process model of sustainable careers (De Vos et al., 2020) can be defined in various ways. Here, we rely on a definition from Allan et al. (2019, p. 502), according to whom meaningful work is “the global judgement that one's work accomplishes significant, valuable, or worthwhile goals that are congruent with one's existential values.” There are also many definitions of *work–life balance*, and we see this as a construct that constitutes *both* specific dimensions and an overall work–life fit experience simultaneously. Accordingly, dimensions which, when combined, give a particular form to an individual's work–life balance experience are: (1) *work–non-work conflict*, defined as incompatible and bidirectional role demands and pressures between these life domains; (2) *work–non-work enrichment*, defined as bidirectional, beneficial effects, and shared resources between these life domains; and (3) *work–non-work balance*, defined as an overall positive evaluation of one's satisfaction, performance, and adequate involvement in all life domains (Jones et al., 2006; Kinnunen et al., 2023). Note that here we have substituted the term “family,” as used by Jones et al. (2006) and Kinnunen et al. (2023), with the term “non-work,” to cover all possible relationships, activities, and responsibilities that workers have outside of work, irrespective of their family status.

In this chapter, we aim to combine the perspectives of work and organizational psychology by focusing on concepts of meaningful work (Allan et al., 2019; Peterson et al., 2017) and career psychology and on models of sustainable careers (De Vos et al., 2020) and career decision making (Sampson et al., 2004) in order to advance our understanding of how we can support employees' balance and functioning across life domains and the life course.

THE RESEARCH AIM AND QUESTIONS

Previous research shows that both meaningful work (Allan et al., 2019) and work–life balance in their various forms (e.g., overall appraisal, conflict, and enrichment perspectives; Jones et al., 2006; Kinnunen et al., 2023) are positively related to many sustainable career indicators (e.g., high life satisfaction, low job exhaustion, and high work commitment). However, although an employee's sense of their work being *both* meaningful and compatible with their personal values and private life needs is perceived as highly relevant from the perspective of sustainable careers (De Vos et al., 2020), the relationship

between meaningful work and work–life balance has remained understudied. Only a few studies have focused on this relationship (see our short overview above) and even fewer have examined meaningful work, work–life balance, and multiple sustainable career indicators simultaneously, which was our specific research aim when producing empirical findings for this chapter.

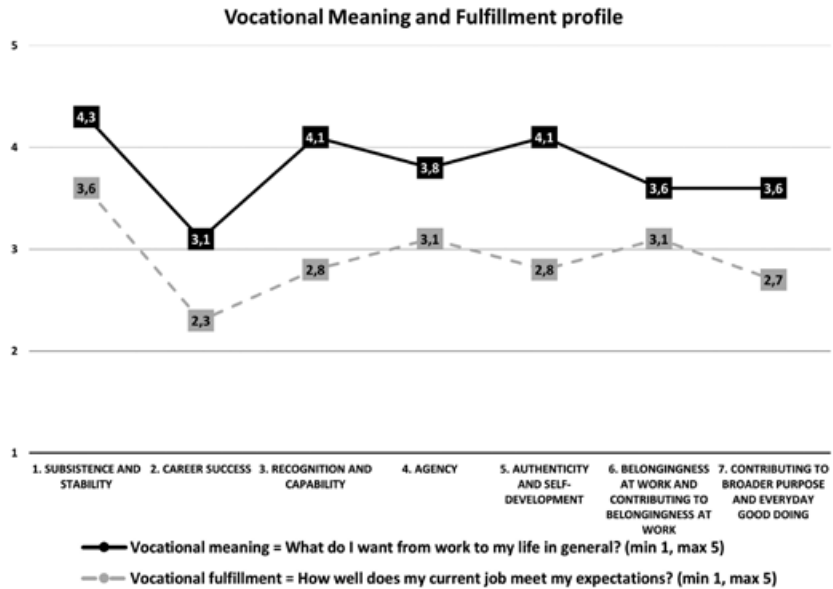
More specifically, based on previous research (Allan et al., 2019; De Vos et al., 2020; Peterson et al., 2017), we considered meaningful work – experienced when desired values, goals, and expectations in an employee’s current job are met – to be one of the key determinants for work–life balance and sustainable careers. To confirm this claim, we addressed two research questions. First, we investigated which kinds of sustainable career profiles, including the experience of work–life balance, could be identified in a sample of employees in various sectors. Second, and more importantly, we examined whether the profiles identified differed in terms of fit versus misfit across the dimensions of the Vocational Meaning and Fulfillment Survey (VMFS). Before we present our findings, the VMFS is briefly introduced in the following section.

THE VOCATIONAL MEANING AND FULFILLMENT SURVEY

To help employees make conscious and well-considered career decisions and enhance their work–life balance and career sustainability, Peterson et al. (2017) have developed a practical assessment tool to identify the potential underlying factors which lead employees to experience a lack of meaningfulness in their work. The VMFS is based on the cognitive information-processing theory used in career counselling (Sampson et al., 2004). According to this theory, individuals who have a clear picture of their own values, interests, skills, and employment preferences (i.e., self-knowledge) are more likely to engage in crafting in their job and other life domains (see Chapter 26 in this volume) and be better prepared to make decisions that can enhance their career sustainability.

Rantanen et al. (2022, 2023) have continued developing the VMFS, which currently enables employees, together with professionals, to explore fit versus misfit between their individual expectations (i.e., vocational meaning: “What aspects of work are especially important to me?”) and the realization of those expectations (i.e., vocational fulfillment: “How well does my current employment meet my expectations of my work?”) across seven dimensions. We present these seven dimensions of the VMFS in Figure 25.1, together with the graphical profile that can be generated for respondents at the levels of individual employee, work unit, and organization. Multidimensionality and inspection of the vocational meaning–fulfillment ratio are the two fundamental features of the VMFS instrument. This potentially also makes it a useful instrument for employees themselves, as well as for career counsellors, human resources

professionals, and managers to decide where to focus energy, resources, and attempts to improve the situation, and more useful than one-dimensional measures of meaningful work. A full description of the VMFS dimensions and information about the psychometric properties of the VMFS can be obtained from the first author.



Note: A full description of the VMFS dimensions and information about the psychometric properties of the VMFS can be obtained from the first author.

Figure 25.1 An example of the VMFS profile based on the experiences of respondents with low career sustainability

RESULTS FOR CAREER SUSTAINABILITY AND VOCATIONAL MEANING–FULFILLMENT FIT

Our results are based on workers in various sectors ($n = 1\,086$). The mean age of the participants was 44 years, 70 percent were women and 63 percent senior white-collar workers, and the data were collected in Finland in winter 2021 and spring 2022. Within this sample, we identified five internally homogenous subgroups when analyzing the simultaneous perception of work–life balance (five items; $\alpha = 0.70$), wellbeing (six items; $\alpha = 0.92$), burnout symptoms (12 items; $\alpha = 0.86$), job embeddedness (five items; $\alpha = 0.87$), and turnover

intentions (two items; $\alpha = 0.69$) (Lo-Mendell-Rubin adjusted likelihood ratio test p -values were 0.000, 0.028, 0.002, 0.022, and 0.609 for the two-, three-, four-, five-, and six-group solutions, respectively, and the method of analysis was latent profile analysis; Lubke & Muthén, 2005). These five subgroups represent various kinds of sustainable career profiles and differed as follows.

High career sustainability group ($n = 355$, 33 percent) showed the highest work–life balance, wellbeing, and job embeddedness combined with the lowest burnout symptoms and turnover intentions, while *low* ($n = 167$, 15 percent) and *extremely low* ($n = 4$, 0.4 percent) *career sustainability groups* showed the exact opposite profile. Both the *fair* ($n = 325$, 30 percent) and *contradictory* ($n = 235$, 22 percent) *career sustainability groups* were located between the high and low career sustainability groups in terms of experiencing moderate work–life balance, wellbeing, and burnout symptoms. The difference between the fair and contradictory groups was that the former reported rather high job embeddedness and lower turnover intentions, while the opposite was true for the latter group.

In answering our second research question, we found that the career sustainability groups presented above varied significantly on the meaning–fulfillment fit versus misfit ratios across the seven dimensions of VMFS (the method of analysis was multivariate analysis of covariance, $F(28) = 13.44$, $p < .001$, and included covariates were age, gender, and occupational status; extremely low career sustainability group was excluded from the analysis due to its very small size). As is clear from Figure 25.1, on each VMFS dimension the mean score for vocational meaning can be subtracted from the mean score for vocational fulfillment to obtain the vocational meaning–fulfillment fit versus misfit ratio. Near-zero values indicate fit, whereas below-zero values describe misfit in this meaning–fulfillment ratio of VMFS dimensions.

Overall, the largest difference was observed between high and low career sustainability groups, with the former showing good fit and the latter a substantial misfit on every VMFS dimension, as illustrated in Figure 25.1. Accordingly, the VMFS dimension misfit ratios ranged from -0.66 to -1.31 for the low career sustainability group. The fair career sustainability group in turn showed a moderate misfit (ratio range from -0.17 to -0.52) while the contradictory career sustainability group showed a relatively strong misfit (ratio range from -0.46 to -1.05) across the VMFS dimensions. Furthermore, the contradictory career sustainability group was very close to the low career sustainability group in its strong misfit on four of the seven VMFS dimensions (i.e., career success, agency, sense of belonging and contributing to it at work, and contributing to a broader purpose and doing good for others).

Finally, when the largest differences between all four career sustainability groups were considered simultaneously across the VMFS dimensions, “recognition and capability” and “authenticity and self-development” showed the

highest significance. In other words, at the level of the whole sample, these two VMFS dimensions perhaps serve as the best precursors for sustainable career experiences including good work–life balance when these issues are considered from the perspective of different mechanisms and sources for meaningful work.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

We observed very clear differences in vocational meaning–fulfillment fit versus misfit between the high, fair, contradictory, and low career sustainability groups across the seven VMFS dimensions. Overall, the low career sustainability group exhibited the highest misfit across all the dimensions (see Figure 25.1) in comparison to the other groups. Nevertheless, of these four groups, perhaps the most intriguing was the contradictory career sustainability group, since despite their moderate experiences of work–life balance and wellbeing and not particularly high incidence of burnout symptoms, the employees in this group expressed relatively low commitment to both their current work organization and their vocational field. Our further investigation revealed that the reason for this may lie in the fact that the employees in this group experienced as high a vocational meaning–fulfillment misfit in four out of seven VMFS dimensions as participants in the most disadvantageous low career sustainability group. The participants in both of these groups, in their current jobs, therefore longed for more career success, support for their agency, a stronger sense of community, and more possibilities to contribute to both doing good for others as well as building a better society and world through one’s work.

Overall, these results support the validity and usefulness of the VMFS as a comprehensive tool for screening employees’ experiences of meaningful work and identifying the areas – either at the group or individual levels – that merit attention when aiming to improve career sustainability in terms of a better work–life balance, general and work-related wellbeing, and organizational commitment. Based on the present study, two dimensions of the VMFS are particularly useful for differentiating employees in favorable versus adverse career sustainability situations: recognition and capability, and authenticity and self-development. This means, firstly, that employees appear to derive a sense of meaning from the extent to which they receive strong positive feedback and validation that their work and talents are being noticed, and also being perceived as contributing to the organization’s mission (i.e., “I am a valued member of my team”). Secondly, the experience of personally meaningful work is also triggered by the extent to which employees feel they can pursue values and interests that are highly important to them through their work and that their work enables them to develop their personal capabili-

ties and knowledge (i.e., “I am not stagnating in this job”). Future research using the VMFS could be directed toward investigating the extent to which knowledge and understanding of the VMFS results affect *individual career decision making* both in terms of identifying ways to enhance meaning in current employment or whether to seek new employment opportunities, as well as *organizational decision making* regarding interventions to provide a more meaningful work environment for employees.

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