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Managers' perceptions of meaningfulness in the future work

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Abstract

Purpose – Meaningfulness at work means experience of work as important, satisfying and valuable. It is a key factor in promoting individual growth, strengthening the belief in one's own abilities and supporting a sense of belonging and commitment to the organization. In this paper, we explore managers' perceptions of meaningful work in the future, focusing on managers' talk about meaningful work and its promotion in their organizations.

Design/methodology/approach – The data for the study consists of 25 stories of future working life collected from Finnish managers in spring 2022, using the empathy-based method.

Findings – From managers' stories of future working life, we identified two overarching perception categories of meaningful work: (1) Perceptions of contexts underlining the experience of meaningfulness: evolving technologies, developing expertise and demands and change in working life values and (2) Perceptions of management practices determining meaningful work: leader-centered, distant and technical management practice versus participatory and interactive management practice.

Originality/value – The research produces a new and detailed understanding of the ways in which managers talk about decreasing and increasing meaningfulness at work and management practices related to it. As the research is qualitative in nature and based on a small dataset, its results cannot be generalized. Instead, it strengthens and sharpens the previous understanding of meaningful work and the future of work.

Keywords Meaningfulness, Meaningful work, Well-being, Leadership, Change, Working life

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Major trends, such as increased competition, aging populations, early retirement, digitalization, and various crises challenge societies to constantly change. In the evolving landscape of the workplace, several changes have become evident. Now and in the future, these changes include a shift to more knowledge-intensive work, increasing demands for problem-solving and creative tasks that can be mentally taxing, and a rise in cognitive load (World Economic Forum, 2020). Effective management in this context involves making the values associated with these changes apparent. When employees perceive new practices or job roles as aligning with their personal values, they are more likely to embrace and commit to these changes (Neves and Caetano, 2009). Furthermore, beyond the value perspective, the engagement and motivation of employees, facilitated through their active involvement in the change process, are now recognized as crucial elements for successful change implementation (e.g. Burnes and Jackson, 2011). In this evolving work environment, the central focus is on experiencing work as meaningful and valuable (Martela and Steger, 2016). Work is not solely viewed as a means to earn a paycheck; instead, it is increasingly seen as a

way to contribute value and discover personal meaning (e.g. Lysova *et al.*, 2023). The meaningfulness of work, characterized by the sense that work serves a higher purpose, is increasingly recognized as a critical factor in organizational outcomes (Zeglat and Janbeik, 2019). This sense of meaningfulness contributes to individual growth, reinforces self-belief, and fosters a sense of belonging and well-being. In organizational psychology, meaningfulness is deeply rooted in subjective experiences (Steger *et al.*, 2012). Crucial to meaningfulness research is the exploration of why work is considered worthwhile (see Lepisto and Pratt, 2017). Researchers have highlighted that meaningfulness is one of the most significant themes in organizational research within the ever-changing world of work (Bailey *et al.*, 2019a; Podolny *et al.*, 2005). Meaningful work studies usually concentrate on the job rather than the worker. Scholars advocating a "worker-centric perspective" acknowledge employees' active role in shaping their sense of meaningfulness (De Boeck *et al.*, 2019). Instead of being inherent to the job, meaningful work is viewed as something actively crafted by the employee (Lips-Wiersma and Morris, 2009; Pratt and Ashforth, 2003).

Doing meaningful work is not only important for individual employees, but it is linked to the policies and practices of the work community and thus to organizations and their management (Lysova *et al.*, 2019). Whether employees perceive their work as meaningful is also important for the management, motivation, and creativity at work (Bailey and Madden, 2016; Lysova *et al.*, 2022; Riivari *et al.*, 2020). In addition, a sense of meaningfulness has been found to be essential for individuals' sense of well-being at work (Arnold *et al.*, 2007; Soane *et al.*, 2013). From a management perspective, meaningfulness has typically been examined based on different leadership styles. For example, transformational leadership (Chen *et al.*, 2018; Ghadi *et al.*, 2013; Pradhan and Pradhan, 2016), relational leadership with a strong leader-employee relationship (Tummers and, Knies, 2013), and support from a supervisor (Gloria and Steinhardt, 2016) have been found important to the perceived meaningfulness of work. However, the research on meaningfulness and its management has focused mainly on the theoretical development of the concept and the modeling of the phenomenon rather than on individual experience and empirical analysis (see, Lips-Wiersma *et al.*, 2018; Steger *et al.*, 2012). Weaknesses have generally been observed in the study of meaningfulness, starting from the fragmented and incomplete definition of the concept (Bailey *et al.*, 2019b) and the methodological one-sidedness: existing research emphasizes quantitative methods even if it would be possible to get to the role of experientiality and cultural context in more detail specifically by means of qualitative research (Barreto *et al.*, 2023). Researchers have called for the need to examine meaningful work through the experiences of people at work, across different industries, in different contexts and to study its temporal nature (e.g. Bailey *et al.*, 2019b; Lysova *et al.*, 2023). The study of meaningfulness in time and context is also central because people constantly renegotiate what they consider worthwhile at work and how unfavorable situations are transformed into meaningful ones (Barrett and Dailey, 2018; Florian *et al.*, 2019; Lysova *et al.*, 2023; Mitra and Buzzanell, 2017).

In this study, based on the qualitative methodology, we examine managers' perceptions of meaningful work, focusing on managers' talk about meaningful work and its promotion in the future. Our research is based on the idea of meaningfulness as an individual experience, to which several management challenges are attached. In the theoretical part, we present this approach as well as previous research on the management of meaningfulness, the challenge related to the management of an experiential phenomenon, and the reasons why the study of managers' perceptions is an important starting point for understanding meaningfulness and, on the one hand, for the development of practices that support it. We describe the study's participants, the empathy-based method we used in collecting the data, the implementation of the qualitative analysis, and the five findings outlined through the analysis. Finally, we summarize the results and discuss them in relation to previous literature, future research needs, and practical applicability.

Future work – meaningful work?

In recent years, organizational and management researchers have become increasingly interested in examining the meaningfulness of work (Blustein *et al.*, 2023; Dobrow *et al.*, 2023; Laaser and Karlsson, 2022). This is primarily due to changes in work and the future prospects of the working life, which present both new opportunities for the working-age population to gain benefits beyond economic gains and potential threats to individual well-being and capabilities. In general, future work has been defined as a forecast of how work, labor, workers, and workplaces will evolve in the coming years from the perspectives of various societal actors, influenced by technological, socio-economic, political, and demographic changes (Lynn *et al.*, 2023). The discussion on the future of work is recognized by many authors as a contextual factor that could make it more complicated to understand. Lysova *et al.* (2023) categorize the future of work into four dimensions: (1) technological dimension, which encompasses the emergence of new forms of work (e.g. gig work, platform work, telework), digitalization, and innovation, (2) social and demographic dimension, that addresses issues affecting individual workers, such as burnout and work-nonwork conflict, and emphasizes broader societal imperatives, including corporate social responsibility, and considers challenges faced by vulnerable workers, such as immigrants, minorities, and older workers, (3) economic dimension, which focuses on aspects like wage inequality, (un)employment, and job precarity, and (4) political or institutional dimension considering factors like industrial relations, trade unions, and the structure of the labor market.

In organizational research, meaningful work has been studied from the perspectives of leadership, empowerment, job design, and identity construction, among others (Riivari *et al.*, 2020). Research on work meaningfulness has grown dramatically in recent years, increasing steadily since the 1990s, while studies related to well-being at work, work ability, and job satisfaction have also been on the rise (e.g. Laine and Rinne, 2015). Researchers are quite unanimous in their view that the meaningfulness of work is not only about individual well-being at work but also about the functioning and outcomes of the organization more broadly (Riivari *et al.*, 2020), as the well-being of individuals, groups, and employees in the organization is key to work productivity (Lysova *et al.*, 2019; Lysova *et al.*, 2022).

However, there is currently little consensus in research on how meaningful work is defined: some researchers define meaningful work as purposeful work, the compatibility of an individual's work and personal beliefs, or as a characteristic of certain professional groups (Bailey *et al.*, 2019b). In this study, we approach meaningful work based on the to the view developed especially in the field of psychology where meaningfulness has been approached as an experiential phenomenon, defining it broadly as an *internal experience of the value of work for oneself* (e.g. Martela and Steger, 2016). The idea of meaningfulness as a subjective experience is broad and includes several dimensions (Duchon and Plowman, 2005; Lips-Wiersma, 2002; May *et al.*, 2004; Steger *et al.*, 2012). According to Barreto *et al.* (2023), the most comprehensive models offer an integrative framework that include elements of inner-directed experiences, such as inner self development or self-expression, and externally driven experiences, such as belonging and servicing others (Lips-Wiersma and Morris, 2009; Rosso *et al.*, 2010). Martela and Steger (2016) describe that meaningfulness means three things to people: *coherence, purpose,* and *significance*. According to them, coherence means a sense of comprehensibility and one's life making sense; purpose means a sense of core goals, aims, and direction in life; significance is about a sense of life's inherent value and having a life worth living. The experience of the work's value is the umbrella concept built from the three themes described above. Work, on the other hand, is a context in which these themes can be realized. Thus, the experience of meaningfulness is "a general assessment of work in terms of how valuable it is in itself and worth doing" (Martela and Pessi, 2018, p. 1). In the current study we see meaningful work as a construct, and the future of work serves as a research

framework or context. In theory, this implies that they should be able to share information with each other and do so without redundancy (Lysova *et al.*, 2023).

Five perspectives have been identified as challenges to future meaningful work, both from a research and practice perspective, for which there is currently no unambiguous answer or understanding (Bailey *et al.*, 2019a). The first perspective relates to the satisfaction of individuals' personal needs and includes the threat of excesses, such as working too much and accepting poor working conditions, and thus experiencing negative emotions rather than a sense of meaningfulness. The second perspective relates to the subjective experience of meaningfulness and dependence on the "other." Previous research has shown that meaningfulness at work is both individual and dependent on others, for example in the form of belonging (Lips-Wiersma and Morris, 2009). A third perspective relates to the subjective and objective nature of meaningfulness. In addition to the subjective assessment, the external, objective context that shapes and legitimizes the meaningfulness individuals experience is essential to the meaningfulness of work. The fourth perspective relates to the meaningfulness of work and agency. To what extent is meaningfulness defined and experienced by the individual, and to what extent can employees' experience of meaningfulness be regulated or managed through, for example, job design, human resource management, organizational values and culture, and leadership? The fifth and final perspective relates to meaningfulness as an individual's perception and evaluation of the value of work, as well as the linkage of meaningful work to the space, time, and material contexts. In this respect, how often and how intensively must meaningfulness be experienced to talk about meaningful work? (Bailey *et al.*, 2019a) To address these perspectives, it is essential to further explore the experiences of meaningfulness and to make visible how meaningfulness is produced and managed in workplaces (Bailey *et al.*, 2019a).

Promoting meaningfulness at work: focusing on managers' perceptions

The experience of meaningfulness is personal and subjective, and many things influence its formation. Thus, it creates a challenge for management work in organizations. Previous research has tried to find factors that promote meaningfulness at work. In their review Tan *et al.* (2023) found three main factors supporting meaningful work: (1) job design and related factors, (2) perceived leadership styles and organizational support, (3) individual psychological traits. Lysova *et al.* (2019) report the results of a multilevel review on the factors that contribute to workers' experiences of meaningful work and discuss how these factors are related to each other to enable the experience of meaningful work in ways that organizations can promote. Their review suggests that to enable individuals to move beyond satisfying their basic needs by constructing their own sense of meaningful work, organizations should build and maintain work environments characterized by (1) well-designed, good-fitting, and quality jobs that provide opportunities to job craft, (2) facilitative leaders, cultures, policies and practices, and high-quality relationships, and (3) an access to decent work. From an individual need's perspective, factors such as freedom, autonomy, and interaction (Martela and Riekki, 2018; Yeoman, 2014), the opportunity to fulfill oneself at work, and the experience of the benefits of one's work for others (Martela and Stegers, 2016) have been described as factors that increase meaningfulness in working life.

Recent studies have therefore focused on the factors that increase work meaningfulness, such as job design, interpersonal relationships, and organizational culture (Lips-Wiersma *et al.*, 2018; Michaelson *et al.*, 2014; Pratt and Ashforth, 2003). However, research on enhancing and enabling the experience of meaningfulness through organizational practices and management is still scarce (Bailey *et al.*, 2019b; Lips-Wiersma *et al.*, 2018). Approaching meaningfulness as an individual experience, it becomes a complex and challenging management task: the idea of good management of meaningfulness is based on the

assumptions of what personnel perceive as meaningful. This assumption is probably based on what kind of experiences managers themselves find their work valuable and, on the other hand, on what kind of thoughts and views the personnel have brought to them, for example through feedback. Managers' own experiences and perceptions strongly guide their actual actions in organizations (Treviño *et al.*, 2000). Thus, it could be expected that the awareness and way of understanding the phenomenon of meaningfulness at work mirrors the way in which its promotion is made possible. Thus, an examination of managers' perceptions (Breuer *et al.*, 2020) - that is, the content and approaches they bring up and use when talking about the meaningfulness – appears to be a key to understanding the reality in which managers live and to highlighting the roles and practices that managers believe promote meaningfulness at work. When managers talk about their ideas, fears, and scenarios *for the future*, they reflect on their own experiences, the past and present state of their organizations and the ideas that underpin them.

Therefore, in the current study, by examining managers' perceptions about the future, we can gain access to the imagination they believe will happen, but above all to the reality they have experienced. Thus, the aim of our research is to make visible the ways managers approach meaningful work and its promotion in their organizations when talking about future working life. The following research question was set for the study: *What kind of perceptions managers bring up about meaningful work and its promotion in the future of their organizations?*

Data, methods and analyses
The context of our research is knowledge work, wherein problem-solving and development-oriented tasks are commonplace. We have chosen knowledge work as the specific context because it is typically continuously changing and is often quite autonomous (Collin *et al.*, 2018; Lemmetty, 2020). Thus, knowledge work can be assumed to generate the experience of meaningfulness, but also to be intellectually demanding and emotionally taxing (World Economic Forum, 2020). In Finland, which is the societal context of our study, future working life has been described by change scenarios that include changes in ways of thinking and acting, technological change, demographic change, and climate change (Kokkinen *et al.*, 2020). Future working life changes are also linked to aspects relating to the flexibility of working life and the changing understanding of working times and places. For example, in the future, remote working and hybrid working opportunities may facilitate the reconciliation of work and family life (Hilbrecht *et al.*, 2013). This was seen, for instance, in the working life experienced in Finland in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, when it is estimated that almost 60% of Finnish workers worked remotely. According to a research report by Blomqvist *et al.* (2020), remote workers feel more efficient when many of the factors that cause disruption and interruptions in the office are absent. Nonetheless, especially over extended periods of time, remote working is also perceived as exhausting and stressful. In addition, workers' perceived energy and enthusiasm for their work tasks decreased during this period of stress (Blomqvist *et al.*, 2020). Additionally, studies have found that attitudes towards remote working also depend on whether remote working is an individual's choice or an external requirement (Beauregard *et al.*, 2019).

The study involved 13 adults enrolled in the Executive MBA program at a Finnish university, who were working in demanding managerial or executive positions. The study was conducted with students from one course who were at the same level in their Executive MBA studies and mostly held similar managerial positions. Therefore, the number of participants in the study was 13. Of the participants, 7 worked in the private sector and 6 in the public sector, representing a wide range of industries. Most participants (9) had a university degree, 2 had secondary education, and 2 had a postgraduate degree.

The research was carried out using the empathy-based method (see Wallin *et al.*, 2019). This method has been described as based on imagination and writing and is aimed at understanding the variations in human behavior in different contexts. Essential to this empirical method is narrativity, which enables contextual analysis and the generation of rich and varied data (Wallin *et al.*, 2019). In a study using the empathy-based method, participants write stories based on a framing story (the so-called "orientation") produced by the researcher. A framing story refers to an initial setting, such as a situation in which the participant has to live, that is created by the researcher. The participant then writes a story based on his or her experience, reflecting, for example, on what happened in the situation or afterward, or what factors led to the situation presented in the framing story (Wallin *et al.*, 2019). Although in this study the participants were asked to live in a fictional, future situation, the starting point of the empathy method is the idea that the participant mirrors the situation through his or her own experience. Thus, the future scenarios produced are ultimately a reflection on what has already been experienced, and a placing of these in a new context - that of future work.

Typically, there are at least two variations of the framing story, wherein the story changes a single, but relevant factor to the research question. Variation is essential; it distinguishes the empathy-based method from other qualitative research methods, as it produces a setting similar to experimental research that highlights the specific characteristics of the phenomenon (Wallin *et al.*, 2019). Different variations of the framing story can be given to different participants to answer, or the same participants can be asked to answer both variations (Posti-Ahokas, 2013). The empathy-based method is well suited to exploring the future as it allows for imagination, although stories are typically formed from the participant's own past experiences or present thoughts. Thus, this method can be used to elicit participants' views, scenarios, beliefs, fears or hopes (Wallin *et al.*, 2019).

The data for this study consisted of 25 stories written in spring 2022 by managers working in a professional context, 13 of which were negative and 12 were positive stories of meaningfulness at work. We constructed one framing story for the study, from which we created two variations, described below. The participants in the study were given the choice of writing one or two stories. Prior to the data collection, the framing story and its variations were tested with a group of adult students, who wrote the corresponding stories as an activating lecture task. Based on this testing, we decided on the temporal placement of the framing story in the future. The framing story is set in 2035. The framework varied as to whether personnel experience of the meaningfulness at work is declining (framing story variation 1) or increasing (framing story variation 2):

Framing story, variation 1. Let's imagine that we are living in the year 2035. Finnish working life – both in public and private organizations – has become increasingly technology- and information-intensive. At the same time, experiences of your organization's personnel about the meaningfulness of work are decreasing. Live this imagined situation and tell about it in more detail. Describe the reasons for the decrease in the personnel's experiences of meaningfulness. Tell us also about your organization's practices in this imaginary situation.

Framing story, variation 2. Let's imagine that we are living in the year 2035. Finnish working life – both in public and private organizations – has become increasingly technology- and information-intensive. At the same time, experiences of your organization's personnel about the meaningfulness of work are increasing. Live this imagined situation and tell about it in more detail. Describe the reasons for the increase in the personnel's experiences of meaningfulness. Tell us also about your organization's practices in this imaginary situation.

The story data was analyzed using qualitative content analysis (see Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). All the stories produced by the participants were compiled into files so that the stories based on frame story 1 were in one document and the stories based on frame story 2 were in a

separate document. We first carefully read the material a few times and took notes during the reading process. After a preliminary review of the data, a more detailed analysis phase was initiated. The stories in frame 1 were analyzed by examining the descriptions of meaningfulness and the reasons for the decline in the experience of meaningfulness. The findings were tabulated by first highlighting the description of meaningfulness, the reasons for it, and the expressions related to organizational practices. The stories in frame 2 were then analyzed using the same logic. Finally, all the stories were cross-checked, looking for similarities and differences. At this stage, the tabulated descriptions, supported by the entire original story data, were revisited in search of similarities and differences between the stories written, based on the different variations. This led to the formation of five main categories (similarities).

Findings

In the stories written by the managers, they approached meaningfulness by highlighting the different contexts for meaningful work in the future and different kinds of management practices which determinate the meaningfulness. In the stories, the key contexts that managers referred to behind the experiences of meaningfulness were constantly evolving and deployable technologies, developing expertise and demands for it and changes in values in working life. In reflections on the future, managers described the increase and decrease in meaningfulness also related to different management practices: leader-centered and distant practice versus participatory and interactional practice. Next, we will describe these findings in more detail.

Technology reshaping meaningfulness of work by blurring boundaries and granting freedom

In managers' future stories, technology was observed to reshape both the way work is performed and the dynamics of workplace communities. Key themes included hybrid work, remote work, online interaction, multi-location work, flexibility driven by technology, robotics, and the digitalization of information flows. These changes profoundly affect how people interacted within the workplace, with customers, and other stakeholders. The data highlighted evolving work modes, such as the prediction that "In 2035, knowledge-intensive organizations will commonly adopt multi-location work" [Future story, T10]. However, concerns arose about a potential loss of meaningfulness in work due to busyness, hectic schedules, and blurred work-life boundaries, especially in the context of online interactions and digital workplace practices:

> The lack of technology seems to me to be the main reason for what has happened [. . .] Our employees have functional devices at home and completely flexible working hours. However, we expect them to be reachable by phone full-time. We expect a very independent approach to work [. . .] More employees have a skills gap with technology at home because there is no one nearby to help them. [. . .] There is also a certain sense of loneliness and isolation that takes over when staff work remotely. [Future story, T5]

The stories explored the underlying reasons for the mentioned decline in meaningfulness. One significant future concern was the potential rise in system inefficiencies and technical issues, which could exacerbate the problem. Additionally, the decentralization of information and increasing technological complexity were anticipated to increase workloads, demanding more specialized skills. On the flip side, there was a fear that technology might replace the work of experts, transforming jobs into more data management and analysis roles, which could become monotonous and unappealing. However, a major recurring theme in these narratives was the apprehension that technology and devices might substitute human interaction. This shift, where humans interact more with machines than with each other,

would give rise to experiences of loneliness and isolation, eroding the sense of meaningfulness derived from a sense of belonging and community.

> The e-commerce focus and the decline in physical customer contact have contributed to the decline in well-being at work. Work is not perceived as meaningful as it used to be because of fewer genuine customer encounters. Artificial intelligence and robotics are replacing the work that used to be done with human resources [. . .] Today, the salesperson's job is to monitor customer behavior and the customer process in an online store and only intervene in the experience if a chatbot encounters a problem. Sellers are frustrated that they cannot influence the buying process and that their job is merely to hand [the product] over to the customer. [Future story, T4]

Constant technological change was also described as contributing, at worst, to the personal experience of inability and inadequacy, as it is demanding and burdensome to keep up with developments and adapt one's own activities accordingly.

The participants in the study described technology and the change it brings also as an opportunity in the future. In this case, the potential was seen as an *increase in the sense of meaningfulness in the context of evolving technologies,* that comes from work flexibility, increased freedom, and collectivity. From this perspective, in the future, meaningfulness was seen as being generated by the possibility to focus on meaningful and suitably demanding work tasks, with technology taking care of the routine work. Technology was also seen to reduce human error, thus saving staff time and resources.

> A significant proportion of routine work is done using AI, which allows experts to focus their time on developing activities and conducting experiments and pilots [. . .]. The widespread adoption of AI and technological information tools that reduce human error has increased productivity [. . .] The success of the practical implementation of multi-site work and the increased degree of freedom given to employees in planning and organizing their work has enabled tailor-made implementation solutions, which has improved job satisfaction and resilience. [Future story, T18]

In the stories where technological change was viewed positively, there was strong emphasis on technology being a tool for the future, rather than an end. The prevailing hope was that organizations would purposefully, strategically, consistently, and timely employ technology to yield tangible benefits. It was believed that this approach could enhance meaningfulness at work. This increased meaningfulness was thought to arise from teams and communities adopting clear, functional, and collaborative technological practices, while also maintaining face-to-face interactions. The concept of multi-location work, which offered flexibility while fostering a sense of community, was considered meaningful. Clarity was identified as a crucial value that not only facilitated work in technology-driven environments but also improved the comprehension of current organizational issues. This emphasis on clarity extended to digital communication and information sharing within the organization.

Demands for deep expertise and diversifying skills framing the meaningfulness of work
The stories addressed the evolving demands for expertise in three main areas: deep specialization, data and analytics proficiency, and technology expertise. These narratives primarily revolved around the notion of an expanding and diversifying skill set requirement in both jobs and professional life in the future.

Collaborative learning, learning integrated into daily routines, and ongoing education were recurring themes in these stories. The participants used frame stories to describe the factors produced by the change in expertise that decrease or increase the experience of meaningfulness at work.

> Knowledge-intensive work requires an increasingly deeper specialization, both in terms of content and in acquiring the software and technical skills needed to process and analyze information. [Future story, T6]

Regarding expertise, the loss of meaningfulness at work stemmed from several factors, including a decrease in motivation, various limitations related to learning at the individual, environmental, and community levels, a lack of a sense of belonging to a community, and feelings and thoughts about one's own professional incompetence or low level of competence. Additionally, the fear of making mistakes, which can be a significant obstacle to developing expertise and engaging in experimentation, could also diminish the overall sense of meaningfulness in one's job.

> Professionals spend increased time searching for and combining various kinds of scattered knowledge. Advanced technology is available, but it is made too complex and demanding to use. Only some professionals can use technology at full scale without a strong personal stake or training [. . .] This is directly reflected in the attraction and pull of individuals at work and, in the long term, also on their well-being at work and the sense of meaning they experience through their own professional growth. [Future story, T1]

The factors affecting meaningfulness, as described earlier, had diverse underlying reasons in the stories. The limitations in learning were primarily attributed to a future scenario where community and social interaction were lacking, leading to a deficiency in tacit knowledge and difficulties in accessing assistance. The simultaneous demand for a wide range of competencies, including substantive, data analytical, and technological skills, combined with the fragmentation and busyness of work, was viewed as a threat to the sense of meaningfulness in one's own work. Moreover, the influx of information and the growing necessity to consistently and effectively filter and assess various types of information in the future were also perceived negatively in these narratives.

> The lack of socially interactive face-to-face meetings has led to a reduction in the number of common, shared experiences that contribute to building organizational culture, which has had a detrimental effect on the experience of community, which is essential for maintaining and developing organizational culture. [Future story, T5]

Participants also highlighted how evolving expertise can enhance the sense of meaningfulness in work. In this context, meaningfulness was depicted as emerging through the recognition of several factors: the establishment of a sense of community, the promotion of interdisciplinary and multi-professional collaboration, a heightened sense of control, increased motivation, and a growing awareness of one's own abilities and competencies: "The sense of meaningfulness of work is increasing as a result of a strong professional role, competence, and decision-making ability" [Future story, T13].

The stories consistently emphasized several factors contributing to the increasing sense of meaning in the evolution of expertise. Anticipating future competency needs and proactive planning, along with a focus on developing core skills, were fundamental. Participants stressed the importance of experimenting with various methods to advance both their own abilities and those of their colleagues. Informal learning was viewed as a natural and essential part of daily work and organizational processes, enriching the sense of meaning. Trust and mutual appreciation within teams and communities played a central role in understanding the collective and individual strengths of expertise. These elements were seen as prerequisites for effective multi-professional collaboration, enabling high-quality work even in challenging situations, thus creating a profound sense of meaningfulness. Personal career development opportunities also emerged as significant contributors to this sense of meaning.

> The breadth of the organization's network of partners and stakeholders, and its connections, allow for job rotation beyond the organization. The learning organization is thus extended through networking and partnerships, and synergies and knowledge sharing take place on both sides, which also motivates the staff of our knowledge-intensive organization. [Future story, T18]

Changing values, goals and attitudes of organizations guiding meaningfulness of work
Changing working life values were strongly reflected in the organizations' strategies, attitudes, goals, and expectations. These changes were described as playing a pivotal role in shaping the overall sense of meaningfulness for both individuals and communities in the future. In their narratives, managers outlined various factors resulting from these evolving values that either detracted from or bolstered the sense of meaningfulness at work.

> One factor that influences workers' experience of meaningfulness in work is the different attitudes of millennials towards work itself and the employer organization compared to previous generations. For millennials, work is not an end, but rather, the experience of it is created for them. Do the values and mission of the employer company correspond to their own value base? [Future story, T6]

The diminishing sense of meaningfulness amid changing values was closely linked to several things, including conflicts in values between individuals and the organization, feelings of frustration, perceptions of unfairness, cynicism, and other negative emotional experiences. Additionally, conflicts in values could contribute to staff turnover, affecting individuals' commitment to the organization and their willingness to stay engaged.

> The requirement that more (patients) need to be treated remotely has led to frustration among employees. Clients and staff feel the need to see the person whose health is at stake. [. . .] staff need to achieve numerical targets for the care of people, e.g., number of remote contacts rather than measure qualitative outcomes. The disappointment is great. [. . .]. [Future story, T2]

The stories portrayed potential threats to the changing values when organizations (and society at large) orient their expectations, goals, and strategies solely towards performance, financial gains, efficiency, and growth, while neglecting the human and well-being perspective. In this concerning scenario, work objectives are primarily measured using quantitative and economic metrics. This simultaneous lack of humanity and an overemphasis on individualism were seen as conflicting and were feared to result in diminished motivation, a weakened sense of community, and, over time, emotional states such as cynicism and indifference.

> Work is done purely in the light of performance-based indicators, and there is no focus on employee well-being. This is evident, for example, in team meetings and in written communication, where the participants do not know each other or understand each other's needs in terms of communication. Negative conflicts escalate when the backgrounds or motives of the interlocutors are not understood. [Future story, T10]

The narratives that discussed an increase in meaningfulness within the framework of changing values placed significant emphasis on how individuals perceived the value of their own work. Specifically, they highlighted the human or social significance of work. Meaningfulness was also linked to commitment and a sincere desire to contribute through one's work. Furthermore, within the context of shifting values, the presence of a supportive community was recognized as a factor that, when fostered, could lead to the creation of meaningful experiences.

> We have also shared profits with our staff, which has increased their sense of appreciation for the work they do and made them more committed to our company. Skilled staff are a prerequisite for our operations. We have made working more flexible and given responsibility for assigning tasks to staff. [Future story, T17]

In the context of changing values, the stories highlighted certain values that were instrumental in fostering increased meaningfulness. These values centered around people, well-being, and community. While productivity and efficiency were not disregarded, they were perceived as outcomes of acting upon these human-centric values. Consequently, the narratives acknowledged that, at their best, these softer, human values could also drive

competitiveness. The stories emphasized that investing in the well-being of individuals or communities was not contradictory to achieving economic goals; on the contrary, it was seen as complementary. Moreover, the shift in values was linked to a growing emphasis on proactive organizational practices, providing individuals with opportunities for long-term employment and a sense of a brighter future. In these narratives, strategies grounded in this value system prioritized the employee experience, with a central focus on well-being and meaningfulness.

> The vision, strategy, and policies are clearly defined, and everyone has internalized their own roles and responsibilities and the roles and responsibilities of others in the company. People are committed to their work, their workplace, and their customers. Engaged employees are actively involved in activities and development, and they are enthusiastic. Senior management has a strong influence on the safety and performance of the whole company. There is a culture of respectful leadership; each employee is valued as an individual, and diversity is seen as an asset [. . .] People are led by their strengths, which improves engagement and productivity. [Future story, T21]

Meaningful work fades under distant and leader-centric management
In the worst-case scenarios depicted in the stories, the advent of technology led to a situation where management became distant, devoid of face-to-face interaction, and resulted in staff struggling to establish a normal, trusting relationship with their managers and supervisors. This lack of personal interaction also raised concerns about diminished transparency in decision-making processes. Furthermore, as staff participation and influence in decision-making become more technology-driven, there was a fear that this might hinder genuine and meaningful participation, instead creating a superficial sense of empowerment. Additionally, the stories pointed out that the absence of adequate support for the development of technological competencies by management could further contribute to a decline in the overall sense of meaningfulness, as employees found themselves grappling with increasingly complex technologies without sufficient guidance and assistance.

> Management is distanced. We have required staff to stretch themselves in using innovative technology, as well as ever newer and more sophisticated information systems, and, unfortunately, the systems do not always work in practice. I can understand the decline in staff well-being and their sense of the meaningfulness of their work. No wonder, because instead of people, we are dealing with information systems, machines, and equipment [. . .] In this situation, staff feel that management does not listen, does not understand, and does not care. [Future story, T3]

> The more the work environment has become technology-mediated, the more the company tries to identify the needs of different individuals within the group. Through active conversations, management has identified the motivations of individuals and is having ongoing discussions and engaging teams to offer different solutions to support innovation and well-being. Technology is harnessed by constantly looking for novel solutions to improve communication and the remote working experience [. . .] For example, performance work that does not require interaction is directed to remote working, and low-threshold support channels for problem-solving are provided. Developmental work is provided in a dedicated environment and a sense of togetherness, increasing team spirit. Teams are motivated, know what they need to do, and there is consistency in the way they complete tasks. [Future story, T23]

Also, within the framework of changing expertise, there was a perceived threat stemming from a shift in leadership style toward a more distant approach, coupled with a deficiency in emotional intelligence and related skills. These factors were seen as potential contributors to the decline in the overall sense of meaningfulness. Additionally, in the context of evolving expertise, meaningfulness could also be compromised when trust between a leader and employees or teams was not sufficiently established, leading to a lack of psychological safety.

The stories depicted situations where managers hesitated to place enough trust in experts, often shaping their roles in ways that limited trust-building. These trust issues were suspected to result in heightened conflict within the community, eroding psychological safety, inhibiting group learning, and impeding access to support. Ultimately, these challenges could hinder the development of expertise and, consequently, the experience of meaningfulness.

> The management culture is primarily concerned with the self, which contributes to conflicts in the work community. Influence is exerted through fear, creating a climate of mistrust in which people emphasize power and authority. Communication is very conflict-sensitive [. . .]. The workplace is not psychologically safe [. . .]. There is a fear of making mistakes, so the work community is afraid to ask for help, and thus the sense of community does not develop, and learning does not take place for fear of making errors. [Future story, T8]

Within a value system that prioritizes results at the expense of humanity, the stories depicted management practices evolving towards a more leader-centric approach. In this scenario, there was a growing neglect and disregard for the perspectives and involvement of staff, accompanied by a diminishing understanding of the crucial connection between human well-being and organizational performance. In this context, the stories detailed efforts to enhance organizational performance through structural changes to meet specific requirements. However, these structural changes were perceived as likely to falter due to low staff commitment. The presence of conflicting interests and an excessive focus on efficiency were identified as factors contributing to escalating disagreements between managers and staff, exacerbating divisions among different levels of staff. Consequently, these conflicts could have a detrimental impact on individuals' experiences of meaningfulness within the organization.

> The workplace has a very results-oriented culture, as employees are lured to work by pay and rewards. As a result, everyone closely monitors euros and performance. There is no time for development and brainstorming because the culture supports efficiency and high billing rates. The lack of a sense of community contributes to a lack of culture of innovation and a lack of commitment to the workplace and work. Management is expected to provide clear tasks, and it is the job of supervisors to strictly monitor process compliance and billing rates. [Future story, T8]

Meaningful work thrives under interactive and participatory management
In their optimistic stories, managers outlined solutions to counteract the decline in meaningfulness within various contexts. These solutions were attributed to effective management, which manifested in the establishment of well-defined and suitable remote and hybrid working practices, as well as the provision of high-quality support, as mentioned earlier. Moreover, promoting human experiences within management practices, especially through consistent interactions at different levels (departmental, team, and individual), and fostering personalized encounters, were recognized as key drivers of meaningfulness in a technology-driven work environment.

> Technology has made it possible for each employee to be involved in his or her own work, thereby empowering and making work more meaningful [. . .] Management has become more about coaching. Technology enables employees to be self-directed, and in management, the importance of looking after people's well-being has become more important, and there is thus little need for actual supervision and control of work. [Future story, T22]

The positive narratives related to changes in expertise were associated with a leadership style characterized by knowledge-based coaching. These stories emphasized the importance of anticipating the organization's competence profiles and taking proactive steps based on this understanding, highlighting it as a valuable management practice that should be further emphasized in the future. Future organizational structures that promote learning and

expertise development were envisioned to be rooted in multi-disciplinary partnerships and teamwork. Such structures were seen as ideal for fostering multi-professionalism and knowledge sharing among various stakeholders. This approach also bolstered individuals' sense of competence. Furthermore, promoting constructive feedback was deemed essential in cultivating strong manager-employee relationships. This feedback served as a valuable tool for employees to better understand their own skills and expertise, enabling them to identify areas for improvement and ultimately contributing to a more meaningful work experience.

> We have invested in the training of professionals, and there is extensive cooperation between different fields of study from the very beginning of their studies. Traineeships also take place in cooperation, allowing professional roles to develop together, along with increasing understanding and appreciation of the other's profession. The basics of technology and the use of information are part of one's career path. Finland has invested in the best talent and is moving forward in a planned way. [Future story, T13]

In a work environment grounded in human values, leadership was envisioned as being people-oriented, respectful, and collaborative. Leadership practices placed a strong emphasis on participation and commitment, with these principles integrated into various organizational levels and activities, ranging from value creation to strategy development and goal setting. Well-being was regarded as a fundamental strategic objective, actively promoted in all management activities. Local management practices were characterized by a focus on well-being, allowing for adequate autonomy, and valuing the contributions of individuals without overwhelming them or placing undue burdens on them. The enhancement of well-being was also seen as part of a proactive approach, occurring within the context of everyday interactions at the individual level. Human values served as the foundation for providing individuals with the autonomy that contributes to a sense of meaningfulness. However, this autonomy was seen as contingent on having well-defined roles and practices within organizations, established collaboratively, and aligned with a shared strategy and vision to which individuals could strongly commit based on their personal values.

> Our company recognizes that well-performing, enthusiastic, competent, and motivated staff are a prerequisite and key to our success. We enable this through excellent well-being management, which is one of the priorities of human resources management in our company. By this, we mean creating and managing opportunities to promote the success, performance, health, and safety of our employees in a planned and goal-oriented manner, based on our strategy [. . .] Managing well-being at work involves day-to-day management, proactive personnel risk management, and improving employee productivity, which we implement through coaching and good leadership. [. . .] Our company's manager is a courageous promoter of well-being at work, who leads gently but intervenes firmly. [Future story, T23]

Discussion and conclusions

This study explored managers' perceptions of meaningful work in the future, focusing on managers' future stories about meaningful work and its promotion in their organizations. The findings can be divided into two overarching perception categories of meaningful work: (1) Perceptions of contexts underlining the experience of meaningfulness: evolving technologies, developing expertise and demands, and change in working life values, and (2) Perceptions of management practices determining meaningful work: leader-centered, distant, and technical management practice versus participatory and interactive management practice. Each of the change contexts (technology, expertise, and values) can have both positive and negative consequences for the experience of meaningfulness, but in the end, managers believe that management practices determine a lot of the formation of the experience of meaningfulness (see Figure 1).
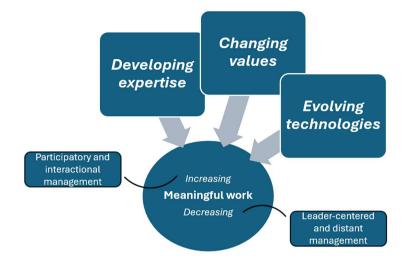
From the managers' stories, it can be observed that the different contexts are closely related to each other. The change in values is seen as a wider context that also provides the basis for technological and expertise-related changes. Typically, the stories described values as defining how the role and relationship between technology and people is perceived. In the human perspective, technology is approached more strongly as an element supporting people's work, with the purpose of promoting human activity and interaction (see Abeliansky *et al.*, 2020; World Economic Forum, 2020). Stories that emphasize efficiency describe how a strongly performance-focused organization is more prone to see technology as a cost-saving measure and thus tends to use it as a substitute for human resources. However, technological change was described as affecting the value systems of organizations. In some of the stories, technology was seen as a factor driving the organization away from humanity and community, even unconsciously. Equally, values were described as driving the change in expertise, as an organization that values its staff and their well-being was seen as offering more opportunities for development. In addition, the stories described talent, competence, and well-being as key strategic and value-based starting points for the organization. The technology and expertise contexts are also interlinked, as it was often the technological expertise that was seen important in future.

The themes that cut across the different contexts of change, and which produced a positive outlook for meaningfulness, were self-directedness, communality, and predictability. In contrast, the scenarios that painted a threatening picture described views of loneliness, individuality, and reactivity. These narratives highlight the simultaneous individual and communal nature of meaningfulness, and they link to the previously presented perspectives of meaningful work (cf. e.g. Bailey *et al.*, 2019a). The results show the paradox of meaningfulness in work in general: development is innovative and creates opportunities for increased meaningfulness, but it can also be stressful, complicating social relations and emphasizing individuality over community. Issues of individuality and community have been identified as important aspects of meaningful work in previous research (e.g. Bailey *et al.*, 2019a; Lysova *et al.*, 2019; Lysova *et al.*, 2022), and the results of our study confirm this finding. Furthermore, our results suggest that emotional experience is an important determinant of future job meaningfulness. Meaningfulness is fostered by positive emotions, such as the experience of being valued for

one's work, feeling in control, being treated as a human being, and being accepted. On the other hand, negative emotions are identified as risk factors for relevance, such as the lack of psychological safety, incompetence, unfairness, and the neglect of employees.

In this study, the stories were produced according to two frame stories including the "negative scenario" and the "positive scenario." However, the stories described that people could influence the direction in which change will take working life. Management practices were seen as having the potential to influence the consequences of change. The stories suggest that management practices related to employee engagement, such as proactive skills development, attention to individual needs at work, and personal career paths will enable meaningful work experiences in the future, for example through individualized and competent job design and proactive skills management. Among the management practices associated with work environments that promote well-being at work, the stories identified flexible ways of working, multi-location and multi-disciplinary working, and incentive and fair rewards as contributing to job meaningfulness. Our findings also suggest that management practices that support meaningfulness at work emphasize participation and open interaction, while remote management, lack of support, and leader-centeredness were seen as undermining meaningfulness in the future. In practice, emphatic role of managers, meaning putting themselves in the position of personnel and trying to see things from the perspective of others (Arghode *et al.*, 2022) would be the starting point for managers in workplaces to develop practices that promote experiences of meaningfulness. The other starting point in supporting meaningfulness is to become aware of the manager's own thoughts and their effects on the practices. Together, these starting points form a framework for the manager, through which they could understand meaningfulness and find the right means to promote it.

As a practical contribution, this study reinforces the perspective that meaningful work can be influenced in organizations through leadership in three broad areas: action based on human values, purposeful utilization of technology, and awareness of the downsides of technologies, mitigating their effects. Additionally, it emphasizes supporting the development of employees' skills by providing resources within the framework of growing learning requirements. In leadership education, highlighting the role of leaders in shaping employees' experience of meaningfulness is crucial, given its significance for both well-being and, ultimately, productivity.

The narrative and empathy-based approach (Wallin *et al.*, 2019) used in the study produced some interesting, and sometimes paradoxical, findings on meaningfulness and its management. This approach provided a chance to understand the participants' beliefs about the future, their own previous experiences, the ways they mirror those experiences with the future, and their assumptions about their personnel views. However, the study has some limitations as well: the qualitative research with a relatively small dataset, it is important to understand that the scientific contribution of the study is particularly focused on the detailed and in-depth description it provides of meaningful work in the context of future work. Nevertheless, it adds novelty through identifying which of the already known contextual trends of future work are particularly prominent in the discourse of the managers who participated in this study with a larger data set collected from different contexts, it would be possible to understand a wider range of change contexts. Due to the small size of the data set and the qualitative nature of the study, the results are not transferable and generalizable as such. However, by combining the results with existing and previous knowledge about the issue of work change (from the perspective of all three change contexts), it can be reliably concluded that the study strengthens the understanding of future change work trends and the positive and negative outlooks associated with them.

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