

Unlocking the power of meaningful work: elevating engagement and satisfaction in the realm of decent jobs

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Abstract

Purpose – Sustainable development must address the challenge of ensuring decent work for all (SDG 8) and promoting good health and well-being (SDG 3). This study aims to assess the relationship between decent and meaningful work and their impact on work engagement and job satisfaction among adult workers. Decent work goes beyond mere employment, encompassing standards for a fulfilling life, including fair compensation and workplace security, while fostering personal development and social integration. Following the psychology of working theory (PWT), decent work is a prerequisite to the attainment of meaningful work, viewed as a positive belief system about one’s work and its potential positive impact on life and the world.

Design/methodology/approach – A sample of 276 adult workers, aged 21–70 years ($M = 43.55$, $SD = 11.76$), was surveyed to explore the association between decent and meaningful work and the following impact on work engagement and job satisfaction. Structural equation modelling was employed.

Findings – The study identified meaningful work as a crucial mediator between decent work and the outcomes of work engagement and job satisfaction.

Practical implications – The findings highlight the importance of cultivating meaningful work experiences to enhance workplace well-being. Organisations should prioritize interventions to promote both decent and meaningful work to align with sustainable development goals and improve employee satisfaction and engagement.

Originality/value – Our findings emphasize the pivotal role of decent work and, consequently, meaningful work in shaping employees’ well-being.

Keywords Decent work, Meaningful work, Job satisfaction, Psychology of working theory, Sustainability, Work engagement

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1. Introduction

In the pursuit of global sustainability, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) stand as a beacon, outlining key areas for collective action. Central among these goals is SDG 8, which underscores the imperative of ensuring decent work for all. In tandem, SDG 3 highlights the interconnectedness of promoting good health and well-being, recognising that these pursuits are intricately linked. Understanding what contextual conditions and psychosocial attitudes and processes can promote well-being at work is an imperative that psychology must pursue. Several socio-economic conditions limit access to decent and meaningful work. COVID-19, for example, highlighted all the vulnerable aspects of the world of work and aggravated already precarious conditions for many workers. The spread of informal employment, the failure to regulate domestic work, ongoing discrimination, and the continued presence of child labour in many areas of the world are just some critical aspects of the labour market. A recent report by the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the International Labour Organisation (ILO) documents the death of almost 3 million people each year from work-related accidents or illnesses (ILO, 2023). This data highlights the importance of analysing and understanding the fundamental aspects that structure people's work experience so that interventions can be created to improve it.

The psychology of working theory (PWT; Blustein, 2006) draws attention to the various factors that can influence the achievement of a positive and satisfying work experience, explaining that people with unfavourable socio-economic conditions have less access to positive work tools and opportunities. According to this theory, decent work is achieved by guaranteeing all workers' employment with minimum requirements that support them (Blustein *et al.*, 2023). The antecedents of decent work can be divided into three macro-categories: social factors, aspects of the work environment and individual characteristics (Blustein *et al.*, 2023). The positive intersection of these factors means that decent work supports the satisfaction of basic needs, those of relationships, self-determination and independence, increasing the perceived satisfaction and meaningfulness of the work experience and general well-being (Deci *et al.*, 2017; Blustein *et al.*, 2020). In contrast, economic constraints, marginalisation and reduced career choice reduce the possibility for individuals to experience a full and meaningful work life (Blustein *et al.*, 2023).

Recognizing the increasing importance of cultivating positive work experiences, especially within the framework of decent work, the present investigation aimed to clarify the relationship between decent work and meaningful work. Subsequently, we intend to find out how the aforementioned variables influence work engagement and job satisfaction, as indicators of employee well-being (Nielsen *et al.*, 2017), and outcomes linked also with productivity (accountability) and exit (intention to leave; Daley, 2017).

1.1 Decent work

Defined by the International Labour Organisation (ILO, 2015), decent work goes beyond mere employment, encompassing essential standards for a fulfilling life, including fair compensation, workplace security, and social protection, while fostering personal development and social integration.

Recent changes in the labour market framework have led the ILO to collaborate with scholars and policy-makers to understand the factors that make work decent and ensure fair, sustainable, and safe working conditions overall. According to PWT, which as anticipated focuses on the role of contextual factors in achieving decent work, this is composed of five components: (1) protected working conditions; (2) opportunities for rest; (3) family-friendly organisational values; (4) proportionate wages; and (5) access to adequate health benefits (Douglass *et al.*, 2017). Decent work has been analysed from different perspectives: both from a macro-level perspective and one that has favoured the psychological aspects related to work. On the one hand, the macro-level perspective has focused on economic and social factors, emphasizing the central role these play in the search for decent work. For example, the study of

Baranik *et al.* (2022), involved 37 countries in a study on work-related values, explaining that the jobs obtained often do not coincide with those desired by several individuals with socio-economically disadvantaged conditions. On the other hand, the psychological perspective connects individual experience to social psychology issues, because decent work is a multidimensional construct encompassing individual and social aspects. Indeed, the issue of social justice is deeply linked to the concept of decent work, as a society that promotes it can guarantee its members a fair, inclusive and sustainable working environment (Blustein *et al.*, 2023; ILO, 2008). Decent work and social justice aim to promote greater opportunities by counteracting poverty and inequality. A recent study (Cooke *et al.*, 2019) includes a critical review of the achievement of decent work in the Chinese context, explaining that promoting decent work is the first step towards positive and fulfilling social relations. Discussing the difficulties of securing decent work also in the European context, Conigliaro (2021) describes the relationship the decent work construct has with social sustainability, a concept that encompasses the development and quality of individual and collective well-being. Also, according to Sabbath (2019), the guarantee of decent work reflects a positive social experience, as work shapes the individual and social well-being of individuals.

1.2 Work meaning

Meaning is considered one of the most important and sought-after aspects in defining one's work (Cascio, 2003). Work meaning is about having a positive belief system about one's work, perceived as being able to improve one's life and have a positive impact on the world. Meaningful work is defined as "personally meaningful and useful work" (Lysova *et al.*, 2019, p. 375). According to Steger *et al.* (2012), meaningful work consists of three components: the psychological meaning inherent in the work, the creation of meaning through the work activity, and the positive higher purposes associated with the occupation. Martela and Pessi (2018), also identify other fundamental dimensions of meaningful work: (1) meaningfulness, i.e. the general evaluation of the work experience, (2) higher purpose, i.e. the perception of pursuing a greater good, and (3) prosocial goals, which connect the person to society.

Research that has analysed meaningful work has encompassed several fields, including social psychology. Picking up on the PWT framework, which places great importance on contextual factors, the longitudinal study by Allan *et al.* (2020) showed positive correlations between decent work and meaningful work, also noting the role of social factors, such as connection with others, sense of belonging to the community and desire to help others, as key mediators of this relationship. The work of Martela *et al.* (2021) places charity and prosocial actions among the antecedents of meaningful work, as they contribute to an increased sense of autonomy, connectedness, and competence. These examples show the importance of meaningful work in promoting mutual respect and cooperation, elements that can contribute to a more just and equitable society (ILO, 2022).

1.3 Decent work and meaningful work

Decent work and meaningful work are related but different concepts. The first, decent work, encompasses fundamental workplace conditions that are considered essential entitlements for all employees; in contrast, meaningful work is more aspirational, signifying a deeper sense of significance and purpose associated with one's job (Blustein *et al.*, 2023).

Following the PWT framework (Duffy *et al.*, 2016), decent work is an antecedent of meaningful work, because it acts as a foundational threshold that must be satisfied for individuals to subsequently experience meaningful work. Given the infrequent integration of research on decent work and meaningful work (Blustein *et al.*, 2023), we aimed to establish an empirical bridge, seeking an understanding of their relationship and their impact on positive work outcomes. In their directions for future research, Blustein *et al.* (2023) indicate that it would be important to study which outcomes of decent work and meaningful work should be studied to make the two concepts relevant for managers and organisations. Among these, we

argue that job satisfaction and work engagement could be relevant because they are strongly related to job performance (e.g. [Jalagat, 2016](#); [Corbeau and Iliescu, 2023](#)). Therefore, our first hypotheses is:

- H1.* Higher levels of decent work would significantly predict levels of meaningful work, indicating a positive relationship between the constructs.

1.4 Decent work and work outcomes: work engagement and job satisfaction

Among the work outcomes, work engagement and job satisfaction stand out as particularly relevant constructs and are strongly related ([Mazzetti et al., 2023](#); [Zammitti et al., 2022](#)). The review by [Bakker et al. \(2018\)](#), explains that for organisations, work engagement is of equal importance to job satisfaction as this is positively associated with team performance, greater creativity and better financial feedback/results.

On the one side, according to [Schaufeli et al. \(2002\)](#), work engagement can be defined as: “the positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterised by vigour, dedication and absorption”. Engagement can also be seen as a state of mind that is not focused on a specific object, event, individual, or behaviour ([Saks, 2006](#)). Work engagement is related to life satisfaction (e.g. [Shimazu et al., 2012, 2015](#)) and is positively linked to flourishing ([Erum et al., 2020](#)).

The construct of decent work is related to that of work engagement: several studies show that aspects of decent work, including access to health care, fair compensation and opportunities for personal development, can play the role of predictors of work engagement ([Xu et al., 2022](#); [McIlveen et al., 2021](#); [Ma et al., 2021](#)). The work of [Graça et al. \(2021\)](#) analysed the perception of decent work and work engagement in a study involving teachers and researchers, confirming the positive relationship between these two constructs and suggesting that the promotion of more opportunities for personal growth, inherent in the concept of decent work, have a positive influence on perceived levels of work engagement.

Conversely, “*job satisfaction coincides with a pleasant or positive emotion resulting from the evaluation of one’s work or work experiences*” ([Locke, 1978](#), p. 1304). Based on this conceptualization, [Hulin and Judge \(2003\)](#) observed that job satisfaction comprises multidimensional psychological responses with cognitive, emotional and behavioural components. Several researchers have analysed the relationship between decent work and job satisfaction, arguing that decent work may be an antecedent of job satisfaction ([Chen et al., 2020](#); [Galván-Vela et al., 2022](#); [Ariani and Mugiastuti, 2022](#)). In particular, [Wan and Cao \(2022\)](#) found that decent work positively predicts the well-being and satisfaction of young Chinese employees, with satisfaction of the need for self-determination playing a particularly important mediating role. Therefore, our second hypothesis is:

- H2.* Higher levels of decent work would significantly predict higher levels of work engagement and job satisfaction, indicating a positive relationship between the constructs.

1.5 Meaningful work and work outcomes: work engagement and job satisfaction

The body of the literature on work meaning and work outcomes has shown interesting results. It is well-established that meaningful work is directly associated with work and organisational outcomes, such as employee withdrawal behaviour ([Rurkkhum and Detnakarin, 2024](#)), turnover intentions ([Gopalan et al., 2023](#)), work engagement (e.g. [May et al., 2004](#); [Jacobs et al., 2014](#); [Williamson and Geldenhuys, 2014](#)), job satisfaction (e.g. [Wrzesniewski et al., 1997](#); [Duffy et al., 2014](#); [Steger et al., 2012](#); [Gopalan et al., 2023](#)), and different dimensions of personal well-being such as life satisfaction and flourishing ([Magnano et al., 2022](#)) and healthy lifestyle ([Gopalan et al., 2023](#)).

It is widely known that meaningful work is intricately connected to work engagement. Nevertheless, conflicting perspectives exist on the directional relationship between work

meaning and engagement. Researchers have explored work engagement as both an antecedent to the perception of meaning in work and as a consequence of finding meaning in work. On one hand, during periods of work engagement, employees may appreciate the significance of their roles more deeply. Employees might actively shape the structure of their jobs by selecting tasks, negotiating job content, and attributing meaning to their responsibilities (Bakker and Leiter, 2010). The results of Tan *et al.* study (2021) show that work engagement has a positive correlation with meaningful work and psychological capital, proposing that work engagement enriches the perception and value of work activity. On the other hand, proponents argue that recognizing meaning in work is an intrinsic motivational factor that predicts various facets of work engagement (May *et al.*, 2004). For example, studies propose that meaning in work precedes work engagement, indicating that employees' perceptions of meaning positively forecast their subsequent work engagement (Mendes and Stander, 2011; Ghadi *et al.*, 2013; Albrecht *et al.*, 2021). Perceiving work as a calling implies the feeling that one was placed on earth to engage in these specific work-related tasks (Parry, 2006). People in this category obtain a sense of fulfilment from those activities (Wrzesniewski *et al.*, 1997). Beukes and Botha (2013), conducting a study among a group of nurses, found that nurses who view their work as a calling were more engaged in their work.

The relationship between work meaning and job satisfaction has been demonstrated by several authors (Aziz *et al.*, 2021; Loan, 2020; Negri *et al.*, 2022) who argue that job satisfaction is a key aspect not only for scholars but also for those involved in human resource management, as it is strongly correlated with commitment to the organisation, performance, and perceptions of meaningful work.

Based on this literature review, the pivotal role of meaningful work was hypothesized to serve as a critical mediator, illuminating the pathways through which decent work influences the key outcomes identified:

- H3. Meaningful work positively mediates the relationship between decent work and both work engagement and job satisfaction, such that higher levels of decent work lead to increased perceptions of meaningful work, which in turn result in higher levels of work engagement and job satisfaction.

2. Methods

2.1 Participants

Before proceeding with data collection, we calculated the minimum sample size for the study. This was determined *a priori* using Soper's Software (2023) for Structural Equation Models. Assuming an acceptable alpha error of 0.05, aiming for 80% power, considering 15 latent variables and 39 observed variables, and considering an effect size of 0.30, the minimum sample size was found to be 268.

Our cross-sectional quantitative study involved 276 adult workers (167 identified as males, 103 identified as and 6 preferred not to identify with a gender), aged 21–70 years ($M = 43.55$, $SD = 11.76$), who chose to participate in the online survey completely voluntarily and anonymously, after having expressed their informed consent regarding research objectives and methods, with the knowledge that they could abandon the research at any time they wished. The participants' educational levels were distributed as follows: 1 participant had an elementary school certificate, 22 participants had attended lower secondary school, 168 had a high school diploma, 45 had a bachelor's degree, 30 had a master's degree, 8 individuals had a postgraduate specialisation, and 2 preferred not to respond. Concerning their working positions: 66 participants were employed by a public organisation, 189 by a private organisation, 6 worked as freelancers, 2 were trainees, and 8 held another job position. Concerning the type of contract, 224 had a permanent contract, 34 had a fixed-term contract, 3 had an apprenticeship contract, and 15 had another type of contract. Moreover, regarding person-carrier fit, 37 participants stated that they were doing a job consistent with their

interests and 72 with their skills; 137 stated that they were doing a job consistent with both their interests and skills, and 30 did not indicate any option.

The study was conducted between June 2023 and August 2023. The duration of data-gathering efforts ranges from 10 min to 15 min for participants to complete the survey. Data was collected and processed by EU GDPR 679/2016 on the protection of sensitive and personal data.

2.2 Measure

Decent Work Scale (DWS; [Duffy et al., 2017](#); Italian validation by [Di Fabio and Kenny, 2019](#)). This instrument aims to assess the achievement of decent work among employed adults using 15 items with a Likert scale response from 1 (completely disagree) to 7 (completely agree). The scale is subdivided into five dimensions that assess five different aspects of the perception of having a decent job through three items each: physical and interpersonal working conditions, access to health care, adequate compensation, hours allowing for leisure and rest, and organisational values that are complementary to family and social values. Examples of items are: “I feel emotionally safe interacting with people at work” (measure of physical and interpersonal working conditions); “I have a good healthcare plan at work” (measure of access to health care); “I am adequately rewarded for my work” (measure of adequate compensation); “I do not have enough time for non-work activities” (measure of hours allowing for leisure and rest); “The values of my organization match my family values” (measure of organisational values that are complementary to family and social values). The decent work variable was normally distributed ($W = 0.995$, $p = 0.431$). For this sample, Cronbach’s alpha for the total score was 0.83.

Work and Meaning Inventory ([Steger et al., 2012](#); Italian validation by [Magnano et al., 2022](#)). This measure consists of 10 items with a 5-point Likert scale from (1) absolutely untrue to (5) absolutely true. The scale measures three factors: Positive meaning (PM; sample item: “I understand how my work contributes to my life’s meaning”), Meaning-making through work (MM through work; sample item: “My work helps me better understand myself”), and Greater-good motivation (GG; sample item: “I know my work makes a positive difference in the world”). The meaningful work variable was not normally distributed ($W = 0.982$, $p = 0.002$). For this sample, Cronbach’s alpha for the total score was 0.90.

Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9; [Schaufeli et al., 2006](#); Italian validation by [Balducci et al., 2010](#)). This is a questionnaire developed in 2003 by Wilmar Schaufeli and Arnold Bakker consisting of 9 questions that the subject had to answer on a 7-point Likert scale, from 1 (never) to 7 (always). The items of the questionnaire were intended to measure the three dimensions of engagement: vigour (sample item: “At my work, I feel bursting with energy”), dedication (sample item: “My job inspires me”), and absorption (sample item: “I feel happy when I am working intensely”). The work engagement variable was not normally distributed ($W = 0.972$, $p < 0.001$). For this sample, Cronbach’s alpha for the total score was 0.92.

Job Satisfaction Scale (JSS; [Judge et al., 1998](#); Italian validation by [Di Fabio, 2018](#)). This scale, consisting of 5 items, aims to assess the subject’s perception of their job in terms of satisfaction, enthusiasm and agreeableness. Responses are on a Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). An example of an item is “Most days I am enthusiastic about my work”. The job satisfaction variable was not normally distributed ($W = 0.968$, <0.001). The Cronbach’s alpha for the study sample was 0.80.

2.3 Data analysis

In analysing the data, we proceeded following two steps: preliminary analysis and structural equation modelling.

Preliminary analysis. The preliminary analysis of the data was carried out using the SPSS 25. First of all, we verified the reliability of the measures, through Cronbach’s Alpha index (α). Good internal consistency is indicated by a minimum Cronbach’s Alpha (α) value of 0.60 ([Di](#)

Nuovo, 2014). Subsequently, we calculated the normality of the data, using the Shapiro-Wilk test of normality. Data were not normally distributed for three dimensions (Shapiro-Wilk was significant with $p < 0.05$), so we calculated the correlations between the dimensions through the Spearman coefficient (ρ). High values in the correlations ($r > 0.60$) may suggest a problem of multicollinearity between the dimensions (Farrell, 2010). In this case, it is necessary to calculate the average variance extracted (AVE) and the correlation squared of the two constructs. The average variance extracted (AVE) should be greater than 0.50 and more than the correlation squared of the two constructs to support discriminant validity. Multicollinearity is absent if discriminant validity is supported (Kamariah and Sentosa, 2008).

Moreover, given that all variables were measured simultaneously, there is a potential risk of common method bias. To address this concern, we performed a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) using Harman's single-factor test (Kline, 2013).

Structural equation modelling. During the second phase of the analysis, we tested the hypothesised SEM using the diagonally weighted least squares (DWLS), using R software to conduct the analyses. This method provides more accurate parameter estimates when the variables are not normally distributed (Mindrila, 2010). For the model evaluation, we considered the following indices and cut-off criteria: the ratio of chi-square to degrees of freedom (χ^2/df), which should fall between 1 and 3; the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) which should be less than 0.08; the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), which should exceed 0.90 (Little et al., 2013).

Mediation effects were tested using the bootstrap procedure, generating 1,000 bootstrap samples from the original dataset through random sampling (Lau and Chang, 2012). If the 95% confidence interval corrected for bias (BC) for the mediation effect does not include zero, the indirect effect is considered statistically significant at the 0.05 level.

3. Results

3.1 Preliminary analysis

The descriptive characteristics and Pearson correlations between the variables are found in Table 1.

The dimensions showed moderate correlations. Furthermore, a strong and positive correlation was found between work engagement and meaningful work and between work engagement and job satisfaction.

To exclude a problem of multicollinearity, the discriminant validity for these dimensions was assessed by calculating the average variance extracted (AVE). The analysis carried out showed that the AVE for work engagement (AVE = 0.60), meaningful work (AVE = 0.56) and job satisfaction (AVE = 0.58) exceed the recommended AVE value of 0.50; furthermore, the squared correlation between work engagement and meaningful work ($\rho^2 = 0.41$) and between work engagement and job satisfaction ($\rho^2 = 0.47$) was lower than the values of the average variance extracted (AVE), suggesting that multicollinearity in this study is not a concern.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and Spearman's ρ correlations

	M (SD)	Shapiro-wilk test (p)	1	2	3	4
1. Age	43.51 (11.66)	–	–			
2. Decent work	4.25 (0.97)	0.995 (0.431)	0.13*	–		
3. Meaningful work	4.25 (1.26)	0.982 (0.002)	0.10	0.38**	–	
4. Work engagement	4.95 (1.21)	0.972 (0.000)	0.11	0.46**	0.64**	–
5. Job satisfaction	4.60 (0.98)	0.968 (0.000)	0.08	0.50**	0.51**	0.69**

Note(s): * $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$

Source(s): Authors' own work

To assess potential common method bias, we compared the hypothesized model with a single-factor model, where all items were loaded onto one factor. The results indicated that the hypothesized model demonstrated a significantly better fit ($\chi^2 = 1569.573$; $df = 696$; $CFI = 0.949$, $RMSEA = 0.067$) compared to the single-factor model ($\chi^2 = 2133.594$; $df = 702$; $CFI = 0.916$; $RMSEA = 0.086$). A statistical comparison of the models revealed a significant difference in χ^2 values and degrees of freedom ($\Delta\chi^2 = 573.02$; $\Delta df = 6$; $p < 0.001$). These findings confirm that common method bias was not a concern in the dataset.

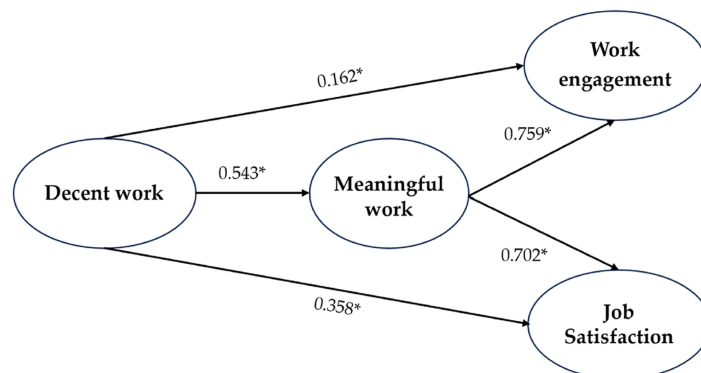
3.2 Structural equation modelling

The hypothesised model provided the follow fit index: $\chi^2/df = 2.24$ ($\chi^2 = 1569.573$; $df = 696$), $CFI = 0.949$, $RMSEA = 0.067$ (C.I. 90% = 0.063 – 0.072). As illustrated in Figure 1, the beta coefficients for the relationships between decent work and meaningful work ($\beta = 0.543$, $p < 0.001$, confidence interval: lower limit = 0.463; upper limits = 0.602), decent work and work engagement ($\beta = 0.162$, $p < 0.001$, confidence interval: lower limit = 0.145; upper limits = 0.332), decent work and job satisfaction ($\beta = 0.358$, $p < 0.001$, confidence interval: lower limit = 0.265; upper limits = 0.451) were positive and significant. Also, the relationships between meaningful work and work engagement ($\beta = 0.759$, $p < 0.001$, confidence interval: lower limit = 1.004; upper limits = 1.269) and meaningful work and job satisfaction ($\beta = 0.702$, $p < 0.001$, confidence interval: lower limit = 0.598; upper limits = 0.806) were positive and significant.

The indirect effect of meaningful work between decent work and work engagement (with a β of 0.412) was significant (see Table 2). The bootstrap analysis highlighted that the bootstrap BC confidence interval for the indirect effect between decent work and work engagement through meaningful work was between 0.510 and 0.700. This indicates that the mediation effect is significantly different from zero.

The indirect effect of meaningful work between decent work and job satisfaction (with a β of 0.316) was significant (see Table 2). Analysis showed that the bootstrap BC confidence interval was between 0.308 and 0.439. This indicates that the mediation effect is significantly different from zero.

The total model effect was significant both for work engagement ($\beta = 0.574$, BC confidence interval: lower limit = 0.736; upper limit = 0.951) and job satisfaction ($\beta = 0.619$, BC confidence interval: lower limit = 0.633; upper limit = 0.829).



Note(s): * $p < 0.001$

Source(s): Authors' own work

Figure 1. Hypothesised model with direct estimate coefficients

Table 2. Indirect effects through SEM analyses

Antecedent variable	Mediating variable	Outcome variable	β	C.I. lower limit	C.I. upper limit
Decent work	Meaningful work	Work engagement	0.412	0.510	0.700
Decent work	Meaningful work	Job satisfaction	0.316	0.308	0.439

Note(s): C.I. = confidence interval
Source(s): Authors' own work

4. Discussion

This research wanted to contribute to bridging the empirical gap identified in [Blustein et al. \(2023\)](#) whereby decent work and meaningful work are often not studied in an integrated manner and wanted to study their relationships with the relevant work and organisational outcomes of job satisfaction and work engagement.

Overall, the results of SEM analyses suggest that the significance of work (WAMI), could act as a mediator in the relationship between decent work (DWS) as antecedent and work engagement (UWES) and job satisfaction (JSS) as outcomes. This relationship is partially mediated, meaning that: a) there are direct effects of decent work that are independent of the perception of work meaningfulness (decent work directly influences engagement and satisfaction even in the absence of a strong sense of meaning associated with one's work), and b) work meaningfulness amplifies the positive effects of decent work on engagement and job satisfaction. For instance, in an organisation where employees benefit from fair wages, access to health care, coherence with organisational values, and safe working conditions (decent work), those who perceive their work as meaningful-such as contributing to a greater-good motivation or feeling meaning-making through work-are more likely to experience greater job satisfaction and overall well-being. Moreover, the relative importance of meaningful work becomes evident when compared to non-meaningful work: while decent work provides the foundation for positive outcomes, the presence of meaningful work could amplify these effects, acting as a catalyst in transforming decent working conditions into heightened workers' engagement and satisfaction.

Regarding hypothesis [H1](#), our results suggest a positive and significant correlation between decent work and meaningful work. This is in line with the results of other authors that suggest that enhanced meaning in work could reduce the percentage of disengaged employees ([Ghadi et al., 2013](#); [Allan et al., 2020](#); [Ferraro et al., 2020](#); [Kashyap et al., 2022](#)). In alignment with Fletcher and Robinson' recommendations (2016), fostering a sense of meaningfulness for seemingly trivial tasks is recommended as a strategy to motivate employees, encouraging improved and more efficient task performance.

Furthermore, hypothesis [H2](#) proposes that decent work could be an antecedent of work engagement and job satisfaction. Based on the data obtained, it is possible to state that the perception of doing a decent job is positively associated with the person's physical, emotional and cognitive engagement and perceived satisfaction. These findings are shared by several authors, including [McIlveen et al. \(2021\)](#), whose study provides evidence of the correlation between decent work, job satisfaction, work engagement and turnover in Australian working adults. These data suggest that organisational practices that promote fair, safe and inclusive working conditions have a positive impact on employee engagement and satisfaction.

Finally, hypothesis [H3](#) states that meaningful work may act as a mediator in the relationship between decent work, work engagement and job satisfaction. This hypothesis is confirmed by the SEM results, which show the role of meaningful work as a mediator and antecedent in the relationship with the other constructs. Several authors agreed with the findings of this research. [Albrecht et al. \(2021\)](#) points out that meaningful work, together with job variety, development opportunities and autonomy, can improve employee engagement. Furthermore, other

researchers (Ghislieri *et al.*, 2019; Choi *et al.*, 2021) have found that higher levels of perceived meaningfulness are associated with greater job satisfaction, higher organisational commitment and stronger organisational identity. Promoting meaning and purpose in the workplace, therefore, can increase employee engagement and satisfaction. These findings highlight the importance of meaningful work as a psychological construct that unites different aspects of people's work experience.

5. Conclusions

This research contributes to the synergy between research and practice by illuminating the intricate relationships between decent work, meaningful work, work engagement, and job satisfaction. Our findings emphasize the role of meaningful work as a mediator, underscoring its importance in shaping employees' well-being. Practically, decent work alone, while necessary, may not fully achieve its potential without feeling meaningfulness at work. These findings align with the objectives of SDG 8 and SDG 3, highlighting the creation of decent and meaningful work as integral to fostering a sustainable future for workers.

The present study comes with a series of limitations. Firstly, the use of self-report instruments may have introduced a risk of response set bias. Secondly, the convenience sampling method employed, rather than probabilistic sampling, may have constrained the representativeness of the participants and the generalizability of the results. Thirdly, the cross-sectional research design may hinder the ability to establish causal relationships among the variables, as cause, effect, and mediation are measured at a single point in time, making it difficult to ensure the accuracy of estimates for processes that unfold over time.

Future studies could overcome these limitations by employing a longitudinal research design and utilizing probabilistic sampling. Regarding directions for future research, from an individual-centred perspective, further studies could empirically examine the factors that mediate and moderate the relationships between decent work and meaningful work (Blustein *et al.*, 2023), in addition to the already identified social factors, such as connection with others, sense of belonging to the community, and desire to help others (Allan *et al.*, 2020). For instance, qualitative studies in the future could delve into the behaviours and practices individuals adopt to cope with indecent working conditions that may undermine their work experience as meaningful, and consequently, their work engagement and life satisfaction. Additionally, from a multisystemic and multidisciplinary perspective, other studies could investigate whether and how economic, political, historical, and social factors influence the relationship between decent work and meaningful work. For example, considering the risks associated with being in relatively poorer work conditions that migrant long-term care workers often face (for a transnational study, see Charlesworth and Malone, 2022), future studies could explore how these conditions influence their ability to experience meaningful work and its subsequent impact on work engagement and job satisfaction, which are outcomes also linked in new working contexts sometimes characterised by flexible conditions such as smart working (Zammiti *et al.*, 2022).

As implications for practice, to enhance workplace well-being and align with sustainable development goals, interventions should prioritize cultivating meaningful work experiences. Foster work meaning can be beneficial for both individual and organisational outcomes (Bailey *et al.*, 2019; Allan *et al.*, 2019; Magnano *et al.*, 2022). As an implication for policy reform, governments should prioritize the implementation and reinforcement of laws and regulations that guarantee decent working conditions, as this study highlights that perceiving one's work as decent can foster a sense of meaningful work and enhance employee well-being. Given their role as employment regulators, funding and bargaining agents, market managers, and care regulators (Macdonald and Charlesworth, 2021), governments are uniquely positioned to drive changes towards corporate social responsibility initiatives and more sustainable societies.

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