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Review Article

Meaningful Work and Employee Well-Being: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract

Meaningful work is widely assumed to support employee well-being, yet empirical studies rarely test the two constructs as distinct variables. This systematic literature review examined how meaningful work relates to employee well-being, which of its dimensions are involved, which workplace factors condition the relationship and where evidence is lacking. Following PRISMA 2020, a search of Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect and SpringerLink identified 186 records; after 37 duplicates were removed and titles, abstracts and full texts were screened, 51 articles were retained and appraised with a five-item checklist (32 high, 17 moderate and 2 low quality). Thematic synthesis showed that only 14 articles addressed meaningful work, well-being or closely related constructs. Seven studies that measured meaningful work linked it positively with effort, engagement, career satisfaction and loyalty, and longitudinal evidence identified autonomy and beneficence as its antecedents. Only one study measured employee well-being directly, and it treated meaningful work as one dimension of workplace spirituality; none tested meaningful work as a separate predictor of employee well-being. Supervisor and co-worker support, workload and work–life balance appeared mainly as correlates of engagement and job satisfaction. Direct and preferably longitudinal tests of meaningful work and multidimensional employee well-being are needed.

Keywords: Meaningful work; Employee well-being; Work engagement; Job satisfaction; Systematic literature review.

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1. Introduction

Changes in technology, workplace regulation and task volume have raised the demands placed on employees, who must meet targets while managing work pressure, relationships with supervisors and the boundary between work and private life. These demands affect employees' emotions, mental health and satisfaction with their work. In an analysis of TIMSS 2019 data from 46 countries and benchmarking entities, a heavier workload was associated with lower teacher

job satisfaction in most education systems, whereas leadership support and student discipline were associated with higher satisfaction [1]. Organisational success cannot be judged by output alone, because the condition of the people who produce that output also shapes how work is sustained.

Meaningful work refers to the experience that one's work is significant, worthwhile and connected to a purpose beyond income [2]. Self-determination theory explains this experience through the satisfaction of the needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness, to which beneficence, the sense of contributing to others, has been added as a fourth pathway [3]. In a three-wave study of Chilean workers, autonomy and beneficence predicted later meaningful work, whereas competence and relatedness did not once baseline levels were controlled [3]. Dutch panel data link need satisfaction with work meaningfulness and work meaningfulness with higher self-reported effort [4], and five studies with 1,099 participants show that group rituals increase the meaning that members attach to their work [5]. Meaning at work can arise from individual needs as well as from shared activity with colleagues.

Employee well-being describes how employees fare at work, in life generally and psychologically. Elshaer et al. measured it through well-being in life, well-being at work and psychological well-being, the last of which reflects positive relationships with others, purpose in life, self-acceptance and personal growth, and found that workplace spirituality predicted employee well-being among 373 faculty members at four public universities in Riyadh [6]. Workplace spirituality in that study combined meaningful work, sense of community and alignment with organisational values, so the specific contribution of meaningful work was not estimated. Other studies connect meaningful work with engagement among 319 service employees in India ($\beta = 0.816$; $p < 0.01$) [7] and with career satisfaction through job embeddedness among 1,137 accountants in Thailand [8], while psychological well-being has been examined as a mediator between engagement and organisational trust without any measure of meaningful work [9].

Earlier reviews have mapped the antecedents and outcomes of meaningful work [2], but the empirical link with employee well-being remains dispersed across studies that measure engagement, job satisfaction, psychological empowerment or workplace spirituality instead of well-being itself [7], [6], [9]. This dispersion makes it difficult to distinguish direct evidence from supporting evidence. The present review synthesises the retrieved studies and classifies them according to whether they measure meaningful work, employee well-being or an adjacent construct, using the three components of employee well-being as a frame [6]. Four questions guided the review: (RQ1) what prior research shows about the relationship between meaningful work and employee well-being; (RQ2) which dimensions of meaningful work are associated with employee outcomes; (RQ3) which workplace factors strengthen or weaken the relationship; and (RQ4) which aspects remain under-researched.

2. Method

Review Design

This study used a systematic literature review that followed the guidelines of Kitchenham and Charters [10] and reported the selection process according to PRISMA 2020 [11]. A review design suited the research questions because they concern the pattern of evidence across published studies rather than new primary data. The procedure consisted of searching, removing duplicates, screening titles and abstracts, assessing full texts, appraising quality, extracting data and synthesising findings, and the mapping of topics, methods and variables drew on the guidance for systematic mapping studies [12].

Search Strategy

The search covered Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect and SpringerLink and was conducted from 1 to 10 November 2026. Six terms, namely meaningful work, meaning of work, employee well-being, psychological well-being, job satisfaction and workplace well-being, were combined into the five Boolean strings shown in Table 1. Each string paired meaningful work or meaning of work with an outcome term so that the retrieved records addressed both sides of the research question.

Table 1. Search strings

No.	Search string	Focus
1	"meaningful work" AND "employee well-being"	Meaningful work and employee well-being
2	"meaning of work" AND "employee wellbeing"	Meaning of work and employee well-being
3	"meaningful work" AND "psychological well-being"	Psychological well-being
4	"meaningful work" AND "job satisfaction"	Job satisfaction
5	"meaningful work" AND "workplace well-being"	Well-being at the workplace

Source: Authors' search protocol (2026).

Eligibility Criteria and Study Selection

Articles were eligible when they examined meaningful work (I1), employee well-being (I2) or a related construct such as psychological well-being, job satisfaction or work engagement (I3), reported their aims, methods and results (I4) and provided findings that could be examined for direct or supporting relationships (I5). Articles were excluded when they did not address these constructs (E1), reported no analysable results (E2), duplicated another record (E3) or failed other selection requirements (E4).

The database search identified 186 records. After 37 duplicates were removed, 149 records were screened by title and abstract and 72 were excluded, mostly because they examined performance, organisational culture or leadership without reference to meaningful work or employee well-being, or concerned the welfare of communities, students or tourists rather than employees. Of the 77 full texts assessed, 26 were excluded because they did not explain the relationship of interest, reported results unrelated to the review aim, described their method incompletely or examined a single variable without relating it to the others. The remaining 51 articles formed the review corpus (Figure 1).

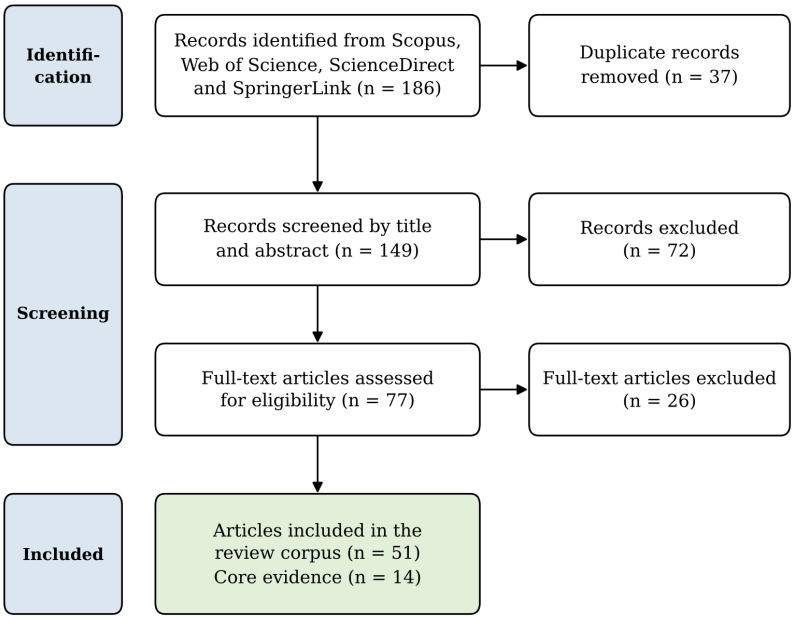


Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 flow diagram of article selection

Source: Authors (2026).

Quality Appraisal

Study quality was appraised with five questions adapted from Kitchenham and Charters [10]: whether the aim (Q1), the method (Q2) and the sample or data source (Q3) were clearly described, whether the results addressed the aim (Q4) and whether the conclusions were supported by the results (Q5). Each item was scored 1 when it was clearly reported, 0.5 when it was partly reported and 0 when it was not reported, giving a maximum of 5 per article. Articles that named their population but not their sample size received 0.5 for Q3. The Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) informed the choice of criteria for studies with different designs [13]; because the MMAT does not recommend a single overall score, the cut-offs in Table 2 are specific to this review.

Table 2. Results of the quality appraisal

Category	Total score	Articles (n)	Percentage (%)
High	4.1–5.0	32	62.75
Moderate	3.1–4.0	17	33.33
Low	0–3.0	2	3.92
Total		**51**	**100.00**

Source: Authors' appraisal of the 51 articles (2026).

Data Extraction and Synthesis

For each article, the authors, year, title, country, aim, design, sample, variables, theory and main findings were extracted into a matrix coded A01 to A51. Findings were analysed with thematic synthesis [14]: results related to meaningful work and well-being were coded, for example as autonomy, beneficence or job satisfaction; related codes were grouped into themes; and each theme was checked against the source articles. Themes supported by only one or two articles were reported with that limitation, and articles were classified by the construct they measured so that direct evidence was not conflated with supporting evidence.

3. Results and Discussion

Characteristics of the Reviewed Articles

The 51 articles were published between 2010 and 2026 and drew on samples from Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Europe, the Americas and Australia as well as multi-country datasets. Table 3 classifies them by the construct they measured. Seven articles measured meaningful work as a distinct variable, and five examined adjacent meaning constructs, namely psychological meaningfulness, the purpose of academic work, meaning in life and the meaning dimension of psychological empowerment. One article measured employee well-being directly and one measured psychological well-being. The remaining 37 articles examined workplace conditions and job attitudes or were unrelated to the review focus, so the core evidence for RQ1–RQ3 rests on 14 articles.

Table 3. Classification of the 51 reviewed articles

Category	Articles	n	Main focus
Meaningful work measured directly	A01, A03, A05, A06, A23, A27, A28	7	Effort, engagement, career satisfaction, loyalty, group rituals
Adjacent meaning constructs	A02, A14, A24, A25, A51	5	Psychological meaningfulness, empowerment, faculty purpose, meaning in life
Employee well-being measured directly	A26	1	Workplace spirituality, well-being and performance
Psychological well-being	A20	1	Engagement, psychological well-being and organisational trust
Workplace conditions and job attitudes	A04, A07–A13, A15–A19, A21, A22, A29–A40, A44–A50	34	Culture, leadership, workload, satisfaction and performance
Not related to the review focus	A41–A43	3	Student performance, religiosity and innovation, tourist satisfaction
Total		**51**	

Source: Authors' synthesis (2026).

The classification shows that research on meaningful work has concentrated on attitudes and behaviour at work, whereas well-being has rarely been measured. Job satisfaction expresses an evaluation of one's job and can be intrinsic, arising from the work itself, or extrinsic, arising from pay, supervision, co-workers and working conditions [15]; work engagement describes vigour, dedication and absorption, psychological well-being concerns psychological functioning, and employee well-being covers life, work and psychological states. Evidence on one of these constructs cannot be read as evidence on another, because each is defined and measured differently.

Meaningful Work and Employee Well-Being (RQ1)

None of the 51 articles tested meaningful work as an independent variable and employee well-being as an outcome in the same model. The closest study is A26, in which workplace spirituality predicted employee well-being ($\beta = 0.37$; $p < 0.001$) and employee well-being predicted individual work performance ($\beta = 0.49$; $p < 0.001$) [6]. Meaningful work entered that model only as one dimension of a composite construct, so the result supports a link between a meaning-rich workplace and well-being without isolating the contribution of meaningful work. Jena et al. found that psychological well-being mediated the relationship between engagement and organisational trust among 511 employees, but meaningful work was not measured [9].

Studies that measured meaningful work linked it with outcomes adjacent to well-being (Table 4). Meaningfulness of work was associated with engagement, with affective commitment

acting as a partial mediator [7]. Meaningful work related to career satisfaction directly and through job embeddedness ($\beta = 0.54$ and $\beta = 0.25$; $p < 0.01$), and supervisor support strengthened this indirect path [8]. Meaningful work also mediated the effect of performance management practices on loyalty among short-tenured, but not long-tenured, public employees [16] and was associated with higher self-reported effort [4]. Among 395 nurses, psychological meaningfulness mediated the relationship between workload and job satisfaction, and perceived organisational support moderated that relationship [17].

Table 4. Core evidence on meaningful work, well-being and related outcomes

Code	Study	Design and sample	Main finding
A01	Cnossen & Nikolova [4]	Panel survey; 2,142 workers, Netherlands	Meaningfulness relates to higher effort; autonomy, competence and relatedness relate to meaningfulness
A02	Al-Hakim et al. [17]	Cross-sectional; 395 nurses, China	Psychological meaningfulness mediates the workload–satisfaction link
A03	Kaur & Mittal [7]	Survey, SEM; 319 service employees, India	Meaningful work relates to engagement; affective commitment mediates partially
A05	Dechawatanapaisal [8]	SEM; 1,137 accountants, Thailand	Meaningful work relates to career satisfaction via job embeddedness
A06	Martela et al. [3]	Three waves; 631, 240 and 148 respondents, Chile	Autonomy and beneficence predict meaningful work
A14	Sinha et al. [18]	Two-stage survey; 324 executives, India	Psychological empowerment mediates culture–attitude links
A20	Jena et al. [9]	SEM; 511 employees, India	Psychological well-being mediates the engagement–trust link
A23	Anlesinya & Susomrith [16]	Survey, PROCESS; public employees, Ghana	Meaningful work mediates the effect of performance management on loyalty (short tenure only)
A24	Shaik et al. [19]	Cross-sectional survey; 456 faculty, India	Human resource practices relate to meaningful academic work and faculty purpose
A25	Barriga Medina et al. [20]	SEM; 1,114 teachers, Ecuador	Meaning in life relates to performance through motivation
A26	Elshaer et al. [6]	SEM; 373 faculty, Saudi Arabia	Workplace spirituality predicts employee well-being
A27	Kim et al. [5]	Five studies; N = 1,099	Group rituals increase the meaning of work
A28	Ahmed et al. [21]	PLS-SEM; 177 university staff, Malaysia	Meaningful work mediates the support–engagement link
A51	Fan et al. [22]	Survey, regression; sample size not reported	Empowerment, including meaning, relates to satisfaction and lower stress

Source: Authors' extraction (2026).

This pattern indicates that the expected link between meaningful work and employee well-being is plausible but inferred rather than demonstrated. Engagement, career satisfaction and loyalty describe how employees relate to their work and organisation, whereas employee well-being in A26 covers life, work and psychological functioning [6]. Treating the first group of outcomes as proof of the second would overstate the available evidence.

Dimensions of Meaningful Work (RQ2)

Six dimensions recurred in the core studies (Table 5). Autonomy and beneficence have the strongest support because they predicted meaningful work over time [3]. Competence and relatedness were associated with work meaningfulness in survey data [4] but did not predict

later meaningful work after baseline levels were controlled [3]. Relatedness also appeared in a social form: supervisor and co-worker support related to engagement through meaningful work [21], and group rituals with physical, psychological and communal features made tasks feel more meaningful than ordinary group activities [5]. Personal growth appeared in studies of human resource practices for faculty [19] and of career satisfaction [8].

Table 5. Dimensions of meaningful work in the core studies

Dimension	Description	Articles	Type of evidence
Meaning and purpose	Work is perceived as significant and worthwhile	A01, A02, A03, A23, A27, A28, A51	Cross-sectional and experimental
Autonomy	Freedom to decide how work is done	A01, A06, A51	Longitudinal (A06) and cross-sectional
Competence	Feeling capable of performing tasks	A01, A06, A51	Cross-sectional; not a longitudinal predictor in A06
Relatedness and social support	Positive relationships and support at work	A01, A05, A06, A28	Cross-sectional; not a longitudinal predictor in A06
Beneficence	Work benefits other people	A06	Longitudinal
Personal growth	Opportunities to learn and develop	A05, A24	Cross-sectional

Source: Authors' synthesis (2026).

These results are consistent with self-determination theory, in which work becomes meaningful when it satisfies basic psychological needs and allows people to contribute to others [3]. They point to job discretion, visible benefit to others and shared social practices as levers that organisations can influence. Evidence for competence and relatedness depends on study design and is less consistent than the evidence for autonomy and beneficence.

Workplace Factors that Condition the Relationship (RQ3)

Workplace factors were usually tested against job satisfaction, engagement or performance rather than against well-being (Table 6). Supervisor support strengthened the indirect path from meaningful work to career satisfaction [8], and supervisor and co-worker support related to engagement through meaningful work [21]. Perceived organisational support moderated the link between nursing workload and job satisfaction [17]. Workload was negatively associated with teacher job satisfaction in most countries, whereas leadership support was positively associated with it [1]. Work–life balance correlated with job satisfaction among 106 C-level employees in Saudi Arabia ($r = 0.647$; $p < 0.01$) [23], and an adhocracy culture predicted job satisfaction in Vietnam, whereas clan and market cultures did not [24].

Table 6. Workplace factors and the outcomes against which they were tested

Factor	Outcome tested	Articles	Direction
Workplace spirituality	Employee well-being	A26	Positive
Supervisor support	Job embeddedness; engagement	A05, A28	Positive; strengthens indirect path
Co-worker support	Engagement through meaningful work	A05, A28	Positive
Perceived organisational support	Workload–satisfaction link	A02	Moderating
Performance management practices	Meaningful work; loyalty	A23	Positive (short tenure)

Factor	Outcome tested	Articles	Direction
Workload	Job satisfaction	A21	Negative in most countries
Leadership support	Job satisfaction	A21	Positive
Work–life balance	Job satisfaction	A19	Positive
Organisational culture	Satisfaction, attitudes, performance	A07–A14, A29–A39	Depends on culture type

Source: Authors' synthesis (2026).

Findings on organisational culture differed across studies: some reported positive associations with satisfaction, whereas others found that only specific culture types mattered [24]. Differences in sector, country, occupation and the outcome measured are plausible explanations, and culture cannot be assumed to raise well-being in every setting. Taken together, the results place meaningful work within a set of job resources and demands, in which support and autonomy appear to sustain it and heavy workload threatens the satisfaction that accompanies it.

Research Gaps, Implications and Limitations (RQ4)

Four gaps emerged. First, no study tested meaningful work as a distinct predictor of multidimensional employee well-being. Second, most evidence is cross-sectional; among the 14 core studies only A06 was longitudinal, so the direction of effects remains uncertain. Third, half of the core studies were conducted in Asia and four involved academic or teaching staff, which limits generalisation to other regions and occupations. Fourth, autonomy, beneficence, supervisor and co-worker support and workload have not been tested together as mediators or moderators in a well-being model. Future studies could model meaningful work as the predictor, well-being in life, at work and psychologically as the outcome, and support and job demands as conditions, preferably with longitudinal or multi-source data.

For organisations, the evidence supports job designs that give employees discretion over their work, make the benefit of their work to others visible and provide supervisor and co-worker support, while workload and work–life balance are monitored. These measures are consistent with the evidence on engagement and satisfaction, and their effect on employee well-being still requires direct testing.

This review has several limitations. The search used four databases and five search strings, and studies outside these sources may have been missed. Three articles in the corpus (A41–A43) did not concern employees and were not used in the synthesis. Quality was appraised with a review-specific checklist and summed scores, and most primary studies were cross-sectional and self-reported, which restricts causal inference.

4. Conclusion

This review of 51 articles found that meaningful work is positively associated with work effort, engagement, affective commitment, career satisfaction and loyalty, but that no study tested its direct relationship with employee well-being as a separate construct (RQ1). Autonomy and beneficence are the dimensions with longitudinal support, whereas competence and relatedness have mixed support (RQ2). Supervisor, co-worker and organisational support and work–life balance are associated with more favourable outcomes and heavy workload with lower job satisfaction, although these factors were mostly tested against satisfaction or engagement (RQ3). The main gap is the absence of direct and longitudinal tests that link meaningful work with multidimensional employee well-being (RQ4). Organisations can foster meaningful work through autonomy, visible benefit to others and social support while research tests whether these conditions also raise employee well-being.

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Authors' contributions and responsibilities

Mimiasri: conceptualization, literature search, study selection, data extraction, writing – original draft. Ulfi Pristiana: supervision, methodology, validation, writing – review & editing. Both authors approved the final manuscript and are responsible for its content.

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Availability of data and materials

All studies analysed in this review are published articles. The search records, the extraction matrix and the quality appraisal scores for the 51 articles are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Ethical approval

Ethical approval was not required for this study because it is a systematic literature review of published articles and did not involve human participants or animals.

Declaration of generative AI use

The authors used a generative AI tool to assist with language editing and with checking the consistency of figures across the text, tables and flow diagram. All search, selection, appraisal and synthesis decisions were made by the authors, who reviewed the edited text and take full responsibility for the content of this article.

Additional information

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