



INTERVIEW WITH

YALE PROF. & FLI THOUGHT LEADER
AMY WRZESNIEWSKI ON MEANING@WORK

FEWER BOUNDARIES NEED MORE MEANING

TATIN INSTITUTE
FOR STRATEGY ACTIVATION

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HOW TO CREATE MEANING AT WORK?

We met Professor Wrzesniewski from Yale University to learn from her how meaning is created in work. Which factors kill meaning? Which factors create motivation and commitment? And what role in this context does the right leadership play in times of digitalization?



Prof. Wrzesniewski, what created the meaning at the beginning of your research career? The new exceptional research topic or the strong believe that your professor had in you and your topic?

That is a great question - and it's hard to say. You know if you imagine a map that you're unfolding and you think you have the whole map and then someone comes and says, shake this part out. And then a whole set of new dimensions comes out of the map, which you'll never knew. That someone shows you a new terrain and is in a position to tell you that you could hike this terrain. You know I was a first generation college student, so for me going to college was like going to Mars, going to get the PhD was like leaving the galaxy. But Paul Rozin made it believable for me.

You have been studying the meaning of work for almost ten years now. I am sure a lot of people would like to know the recipe for a meaningful job from you.

(laughs) Yes, sure. There was a newspaper article that I was interviewed for where an accounting firm did a campaign in which the people working there had to fill in what makes their work most meaningful. The company hoped this would boost productivity.

A meaningful job does boost productivity, doesn't it?

Yes, it does. People tend to work more hours, they tend to be absent less. And that is exactly the thing. That campaign was done in the service of trying to get more out of people who are not enjoying the work as opposed to helping them think about how they would do their work in a way that would permit it to be meaningful for them - which is a very different question.

What factors would then permit a job to get really meaningful?

The first step would be to give the people a license to control their job, or more flexibility in how they design the tasks and interactions that comprise their work. And though it may feel to managers like giving up control by understanding the persons and giving them the opportunity to build up something, I do think it is the important thing to allow the people to craft their jobs. Anything else is mass customization that comes from the top down.

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So a company can't create the meaning for the people,
it just has to provide the right framing?

Yes. The word meaningfulness means the same thing indeed. Meaningfulness to you is the same as meaningfulness to me. But what it is that makes something meaningful is completely different between individuals. It's not about trying to change their whole meaning system as to make work places amenable to them deriving the kind of meaning they want to make of their work, from their work in those organizations.

Regarding today's technological changes, the coming up of digitalization that creates a new economy world, where do you see the challenges in creating a meaningful job?

I think we're facing increasingly an economy where people move not only between organizations but create work lives that are disaggregated from any organizational structure at all because they work virtually for multiple firms or multiple contracts. Currently, I'm working on a paper with colleagues on what's consistent across people that work this way. We take that as a clue about what it is that is necessary for people to derive meaning that when so much of this has become either digital or temporary or virtual or just, unstructured. What we are getting from this paper is that this disaggregation puts even more pressure on the work, on the activity of the work and what it tells you about yourself, about the meaning of what you're doing.

So, because people are not close, have no close relationships to work the importance of the meaning of the work itself might go up, is that right?

Yes. I mean, in the study that we're doing, we're finding evidence that there is so much more pressure on understanding the meaning of what you're doing, if you can no longer locate it. There are fewer boundaries between the work and yourself which makes it even more important to know why you are doing it.

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URSULA LEIBL
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Ursula Leibl has been dealing professionally with effective leadership for many years, in particular with the process of building trust between managers and employees.

She studied Marketing and Sales in Vienna and International Business and Export Management in Krems an der Donau (Austria) and the USA. Most recently she worked for an international FMCG company in brand management. Thanks to her insights into various industries and her experience in marketing, she is an expert for target group-specific analyses and individual solutions.



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