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Outcomes of Meaningful Work with a Focus on Asia: A Systematic Review

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Most of the existing literature on meaningful work has come from North America and Europe. Despite an increasing interest in the area in the recent years among scholars and practitioners, there is still a lack of review articles synthesizing meaningful work outcomes, especially studies from Asia. To address this gap, this paper reports a contemporary systematic review from 2000 to July 2020 on meaningful work outcomes by including studies in Asia. The authors focus on answering the question "What are the outcomes when employees experience meaningfulness in work?" A systematic review approach was employed in which material, including gray literature, was gleaned from five online databases. Using specific key search terms, the authors independently evaluated the abstracts and selected literature pertinent to the review question. Further discussion was done to resolve any disagreement on specific items. After selection, the materials were extracted and synthesized. The result revealed that Asian studies affirmed meaningful work outcomes in work-related and personal aspects. The findings suggest that meaningful work is a promising workforce solution in the modern era, as it yields numerous positive outcomes to employees and organizations. Meaningful work should be applied in an integrative way; employees find or craft it in a proactive manner, while organizations manage meaning at all levels at the workplace. Essentially, the authors propose two key elements for effective implementation: integration and balance. Suggestions for future research include further exploration about meaningful work from different stakeholders. Practical implications for individuals and organizations are also discussed.

Keywords: meaningful work, organizational behavior, systematic review, career development, Asian context

Work is a significant dimension of life, as it consumes most of the waking hours of adults, and continues over a course of decades. With the digital era's accelerating speed and globalization in recent years, it has placed more pressure on employees. Increasing challenges and competitions at work have caused heavy stress, emotional exhaustion, and physical fatigue among workers worldwide, to the point that they begin to question why they have to work so hard. As a consequence, many employees today are increasingly interested in meaningful work. Older workers near retirement may be looking for work that is more fulfilling inside, even if it is less economically rewarding. Meanwhile, the desire for meaningful work also seems attractive among younger people (Michaelson, 2010). Fairlie (2011) has also noted that the centrality of work to people's lives has declined over time in North America and Europe. This emerging trend attests that external rewards are inadequate to make people fulfilled. They also need *meaning* in the work they do every day. So, why does meaning matter?

Over the decades, a great number of theories have been advanced to explain how people make sense of their work. In Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* (1946), he

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stated that meaning in work has an intimate relationship with meaning in life. It means that meaningful work is not merely desirable, but one of the fundamental human needs (Yeoman, 2014). In a review of more than 320 studies, Batthyany and Russo-Netzer (2014, as cited in Devivere, 2018) determined that meaning can be seen as an essential psychological resource for pursuing a worthwhile and valuable future. If work lacks meaning, it can cause boredom and hinder workflow, which increases burnout (Moss, 2020). By the way, what is *meaningful work*? Fairlie (2010, as cited in Fairlie, 2011) defined it as "a job and other workplace characteristics that facilitate the attainment or maintenance of one or more dimensions of meaning." (p. 510). In a subjective sense, it refers to the work that is meaningful in the eyes of a performer, not in the eyes of others (Michaelson, 2019). When employees experience meaningfulness in their work, it can elicit a more profound sense of one's existence, in terms of such as purpose in life, self-esteem, self-efficacy, autonomy, and dignity, in response to intrinsic needs. Therefore, meaningful work has become a source of personal fulfillment and a protective factor against those negativities in work (Simonet & Castille, 2020).

Due to work dissatisfaction, growing stress, and challenges from modern working culture, meaningful work has thus attracted the attention of scholars and practitioners in recent years. In fact, meaningful work is not a nascent topic, but has been in a focus of scholarly attention in the humanities for centuries (Bailey et al., 2019), ranging from economics, business, psychology, ethics, to spiritual searching (e.g., Autin & Allan, 2020; Azeez & Genty, 2018). The heightened interest in the past two decades is likely due to the influence of positive psychology (Seligman & Csikzentmihalyi, 2000), as evidenced by meta-analyses that showed that the majority of empirical studies have occurred after 1998 (Lysova et al., 2019). Although the concept has been investigated for a long time, there have been few review articles on studies of meaningful work outcomes (Bailey et al., 2019; Hu & Hirsh, 2017b; Rosso et al., 2010). Some of them focused on just a single occupation, such as schoolteachers (Fouche et al., 2017). Among these studies, only Bailey et al.'s (2019) and Hu and Hirsh's (2017b) works thoroughly reviewed studies of meaningful work outcomes, whereas others merely mentioned it. However, both researcher teams included only empirical studies that left gray literature unreviewed. With rigorous attempts to comprehensively study meaningful work having been done but only a few summaries available on its outcomes, the literature on the topic has still not provided a solid message to practitioners on deploying this concept with confidence, especially in Asian studies. For instance, in the more than 70 reviewed papers by Bailey et al. (2019), only one-seventh are Asian studies. Another example is Rosso et al. (2010), which addressed important outcomes in organizational studies, but only from North America and Europe. Besides the abovementioned study, another among schoolteachers in South Africa was done by Fouche et al. (2017). It could be said that so far there has been no literature review on outcomes of meaningful work that places an emphasis on the Asian context equal to that of North America and Europe. Without a bold synthesis of meaningful work outcomes from studies in Asia, its applications according to different cultural values may not be fully utilized (Schwartz, 1999).

In response to the research gap, the authors aim to present the findings of a systematic review on meaningful work outcomes with a focus on Asia, which includes gray literature to reduce publication bias, in order to extend the results from previous studies that were largely conducted in North America and Europe (Bailey et al., 2019). This study addresses the question: "What are outcomes when employees experience meaningfulness in work?" With this focus, the findings present an overview of meaningful work outcomes over both western and eastern contexts, which can represent an empirical compass for practitioners and employees in practice. This paper also informs desirable and realistic outcomes for

meaningful work that may be derived and the best practices that should be applied. For researchers, this review provides thought-provoking guidelines for future research to further explore the concept in a contextualized way.

Method

To conduct this synthesis, the procedure by Edoardo and Alan (2014) described in their series *Systematic Review, Step by Step*, was adopted through the six steps of: review question and inclusion criteria, searching for studies, study selection and critical appraisal, data extraction and synthesis, interpretation of findings, and recommendations to guide practice.

Inclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria to select relevant literature are (a) the main focus of the study being on the outcomes of meaningful work in various contexts based on behavioral sciences, (b) either quantitative or qualitative studies, (c) published in peer-review journals and gray literature, including online articles, book chapters, white papers, and theses/dissertations, (d) papers, articles, or reports written in English and non-English language (Thai), which is the authors' native language, (e) participants were workers in a particular setting in the given context of the study, such as "workers" in organizations, "physicians" and "nurses" in hospitals, "teachers" and "educators" in schools, etc., (f) conducted between 2000 and July 2020 and either published or unpublished in major databases, and (g) not specific to any population group or geographic region.

Exclusion Criteria

Studies were excluded where, based on the abstract or full paper, the subject of the study did not match the objective of this review article.

Literature Search Strategy

To answer the review question, "What are outcomes when employees experience meaningfulness in work?" the process was begun with an initial search of major databases—namely, *Science Direct*, *ProQuest*, and *Google Scholar*—and the global leading management online resource, *Harvard Business Review*. For this, the following search terms were used: "meaningful work outcomes," "meaningful work benefits," and "meaningfulness in work outcomes." The search term "meaningful work" was used in the *Harvard Business Review* database due to the scarce results that appeared when using the terms mentioned earlier. This integrative review included quantitative and qualitative research. The search also targeted gray literature or unpublished studies (i.e., online articles, book chapters, theses/dissertations) to minimize the risk of publication bias, as published studies are more likely to submit positive outcomes than negative or insignificant findings. Non-English literature, such as *ThaiJo* (*Thai Journal Online*), was also included to embrace local examinations and obtain a more comprehensive and contextualized synthesis. As stated above, the search targeted articles published between 2000 and July 2020.

Critical Appraisal

The first author reviewed original research published in peer-review journals and unpublished papers. Potentially relevant articles were identified by both authors reading the

topic and the abstract. Then, both authors read through and evaluated the same number of articles independently. For the items that either author evaluated against another author, both would discuss their decisions to reach a consensus. The process was continued until both authors agreed on the number of the included articles. Of 122 potentially eligible items, 33 were selected for critical appraisal; of these, 31 were included in the systematic review of outcomes of meaningful work on Asia. Two studies were excluded because the findings did not primarily focus on outcomes of meaningful work. Ultimately, 31 studies were included in the review: 19 quantitative studies (two were meta-analyses), three qualitative studies, five review articles, one conceptual paper, and three gray works (a book chapter, a white paper, and a doctoral dissertation). The critical appraisal included studies focusing on evidence of meaningful work outcomes in improving either work-related attitudinal and behavioral outcomes, performance-related outcomes, or individual outcomes.

Data Extraction and Synthesis

The variables assessed were those counted for outcomes of meaningful work at either the individual or organizational level. The reviewed literature's objective was to investigate outcomes when employees experience meaningfulness in work, which can be positive, neutral, or counterproductive. After reviewing the literature of meaningful work outcomes, the authors classified the data based on the study objective, following the paper of Bailey et al. (2019) They proposed three categories of meaningful work outcomes: (a) work-related attitudinal and behavioral outcomes, (b) performance-related outcomes, and (c) individual outcomes. The authors further discussed putting all included studies into these three categories and laying out the content flow. To organize the data, they developed detailed summary tables providing a comprehensive overview of the studies in response to the review question (Table 1).

Table 1
A brief summary of the included literature of meaningful work outcomes: Western vs. eastern

Study origin	Work-related attitudinal and behavioral outcomes	Performance-related outcomes	Individual outcomes
Western	Absenteeism↓[1] A feeling of accomplishment↑[2] Citizenship behaviors↑[2] Emotion tension![3] Intrinsic motivation↑[2] Intrinsic reward↑[2] Job enjoyment↑[2] Job Satisfaction↑[2,4,15,24] Job security↑[2] Positive affective disposition↑[2] Positive self-concept↑[2] Organizational Commitment↑[2,4] Organizational	Counterproductive behaviors↓[2] Cyberloafing ↓[13] Efficacy↑[2] Individual performance↑[2,14] Productivity↑[15] Skills training↑[1] Working hard↑[15] Existential labor![16]	Hope↑[2] Overall life satisfaction↑[2] Self-sacrifice![19] Well-being↑[20,21,22]

Table 1 *(Continued)*

Study origin	Work-related attitudinal and behavioral outcomes	Performance-related outcomes	Individual outcomes
	identification↑[2] Depression↓[4] Morale↑[2] Retirement intention↓[1] Stress![2,3] Turnover intention↓[2] Teaching students with special needs↑[5] Work engagement↑[2,4,6,7] Work relationships↑[2]		
Eastern	Intention to continue working after retirement↑[8] Low salary acceptance↑[9] Self-centralism![10] Turnover intention↓[11] Work engagement[12]	Contextual performance↑[17] Org., job & personal resources↑[18] Task performance↑[17]	Psychological capital↑[23]

Note. [1] = Nikolova & Cnossen (2020); [2] = Hu & Hirsh (2017b); [3] = Muller et al. (2019); [4] = Allan et al. (2019); [5] = Brunzell et al. (2018); [6] = Fouche et al. (2017); [7] = Hoole & Bonnema (2015); [8] = Doan et al. (2020); [9] = Hu & Hirsh (2017a); [10] = Pattnaik & Jena (2020); [11] = Tan et al. (2019); [12] = Mekhum & Jermsittiparsert (2019); [13] = Usman et al. (2019); [14] = Wingerden & Stoep (2018); [15] = BetterUp (2018); [16] = Bailey et al. (2017); [17] = Ling (2014); [18] = Nawrin (2018); [19] = Dempsey & Sanders (2010); [20] = Keyes (2007); [21] = McKnight & Kashdan (2009); [22] = Wallace (2019); [23] = Tan (2018); [24] = Pratt & Ashforth (2003). ↑ means that meaningful work tends to *increase* a particular behavior/ mental state; ↓ means that meaningful work tends to *decrease* a particular behavior/ mental state; ! means that meaningful work can cause a *reverse* outcome of a particular behavior/ mental state.

Results

From the empirical studies, including both western meta-analyses and research in eastern contexts, the authors found that work/employee engagement had the strongest association with meaningful work (Allan et al., 2019; Demirtas et al., 2017; Fouche et al., 2017; Hoole & Bonnema, 2015; Mekhum & Jermsittiparsert, 2019; Tan, 2018; Tan et al., 2019). Other outcomes that had large correlations with meaningful work referring meta-analyses were organizational commitment (Allan et al., 2019; Hu & Hirsh, 2017b; Jung & Yoon, 2016) and job satisfaction (Allan et al., 2019; BetterUp, 2018; Hu & Hirsh, 2017b; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). In addition to those top three outcomes, meaningful work was found to make several positive contributions to workers and organizations that were divided into three dimensions as follows.

Work-Related Attitudinal and Behavioral Outcomes

Bailey et al. (2019) proposed positive outcomes of meaningful work similar to those mentioned above. They also posited many other meaningful work benefits, such as job enjoyment, intrinsic motivation, job security, intrinsic reward, a feeling of accomplishment or growth, positive self-concept, organization identification, and morale. What the present systematic review differs from their summary are citizenship behaviors (Hu & Hirsh, 2017b), intention to continue working after retirement (Doan et al., 2020), low salary acceptance (Hu

& Hirsh, 2017a), meaning in life (Allan et al., 2014; Hu & Hirsh, 2017b), mental health (Allan et al., 2019), positive affective disposition (Hu & Hirsh, 2017b), positive emotions (Dik et al., 2015), psychological capital (Tan, 2018), the relationship between corporate social responsibility and organizational identification (OI) (Akdogan et al., 2016), and teaching students with special needs (Brunzell et al., 2018). The included literature provided evidence that these outcomes are the positive contributions of meaningful work. Moreover, several studies found negative correlations with meaningful work: absenteeism (Nikolova & Cnossen, 2020), counterproductive behaviors (Hu & Hirsh, 2017b), cyberloafing during working time (Usman et al., 2019), depression (Allan et al., 2019), retirement intention (Nikolova & Cnossen, 2020), and turnover intention (Tan et al., 2019), which helped improve employees' quality of work-life and organizational performance. However, Azeez and Genty (2018) did not find meaningful work to be associated with organizational citizenship behaviors. Unexpectedly, in Muller et al.'s article *Meaningful work at a distance: A case study in a hospital* (2019), they found that employees are likely to have emotional tension when putting too much effort into rendering their work more meaningful. This study informed us that experiencing imbalanced meaningfulness in work may cause adverse work outcomes.

What Asian studies brought in terms of different outcomes from western ones were new variables corresponding to current workforce challenges such as the high turnover rate of young workers (Doan et al., 2020; Tan et al., 2019). In addition, Asian researchers have sought new ways to understand how meaningful work impacts employees in different perspectives from North America's and Europe's common variables in the human resource development field. Examples of ways in which meaningful work could be understood in a fresh way through an Asian lens include psychological capital (Tan, 2018), the relationship between corporate social responsibility and organizational identification (Akdogan et al., 2016), and self-centrism (Pattnaik & Jena, 2020), which it is assumed could occur when people experience a significant degree of meaningfulness in work.

Comparing the reviewed studies from North America, Europe, and Asian regions, the authors found the interesting insights that can be rationalized by the theory of cultural value orientations (Schwartz, 2006). The underlying distinction between western and eastern studies in work-related attitudinal and behavioral outcomes is that most of the results from North America and Europe reflected the positive feeling toward one's self (Dik et al., 2015; Hu & Hirsh, 2017b) and self-efficacy (a feeling of being competent) (Hu & Hirsh, 2017b), which represent their *autonomy* cultural value orientation (Hu & Hirsh, 2017b). Meanwhile, most Asian studies' findings inclined to *embeddedness* cultural values (i.e., Akdogan et al., 2016; Doan et al., 2020), which refer to the cultures that people are viewed as entities embedded in the collectivity (Schwartz, 2006). The growing body of literature in Asia informs that experiencing meaningful work would make employees feel good about work (Tan, 2018), be willing to do something for other people (Ling, 2014), and be compliant to social expectations (Akdogan et al., 2016). However, this understanding should not be taken in the sense that western employees are likely to care for other people less than the eastern are. In fact, they have a heart for others too (Brunzell et al., 2018; Hu & Hirsh, 2017b), but accomplishment and intelligence tend to be more valued in their societies (Schwartz, 2006).

Performance-Related Outcomes

Performance-related outcomes might be what organizations care about most, as it regards their bottom line. Positive associations were found between meaningful work and the

following performance-related outcomes: contextual performance (Ling, 2014); less cyberloafing (Usman et al., 2019); efficacy (Hu & Hirsh, 2017b); individual performance (Hu & Hirsh, 2017b; Wingerden & Stoep, 2018); working hard (BetterUp, 2018); organizational, job, and personal resources (Nawrin, 2018); productivity (BetterUp, 2018); skills training (Nikolova & Cnossen, 2020); and task performance (Ling, 2014). The only negative performance-related outcome that meaningful work was found to cause was existential labor evidenced in Bailey et al. (2017). *Existential labor* refers to a counterproductive reaction from employees who perceive organization efforts to foster meaningful work as inauthentic or misaligned with what they find meaningful for them. Leidner (2006, as cited in Bailey et al., 2017) noted that employees often respond with mistrust, using irony, cynicism, and guile.

What the reviewed Asian studies highlighted were, contextual performance (Ling, 2014) or discretionary extra-role behavior that employees are willing to go the extra mile for the organization. This reflects *embeddedness* and *hierarchy* culture orientations according to Schwartz's theory (2006), which meaning in the life of people, who live in the societies where signify these values, comes largely through social relationships with an order, respect, obedience. Other interesting findings in Asia were by Nawrin (2018) from Bangladesh and Usman et al. (2019) from Pakistan. Nawrin (2018) found that the relationships between organizational, job, and personal resources and work engagement were partially mediated through meaningful work. It could be explained that Asian employees feel more engaged in work when they feel supported by the organization and significant people around them. Furthermore, Usman et al. (2019) studied a novel variable, cyberloafin*g*, that fits circumstances in most workplaces today. They found out that meaningful work helps minimize online loafing behavior, the variable that has been overlooked in earlier literature. In summary, performance-related outcomes that would occur when Asian employees experience meaningfulness in their work motivated them to do more for others and organizations (Ling, 2014; Nawrin, 2018), whose behaviors are valued by social norms. Whereas, western employees would instead put more effort to make their performance better (BetterUp, 2018; Hu & Hirsh, 2017b; Nikolova & Cnossen, 2020).

Individual Outcomes

Besides contributing positive outcomes in a work-related dimension, meaningful work benefits to employees as individuals. Hu & Hirsh's meta-analysis (2017b) found positive correlations between meaningful work with hope and overall life satisfaction. In the light of its benefits, meaningful work does not only cultivate positive affections as mentioned earlier, but it also enriches well-being to individuals (Keyes, 2007; McKnight & Kashdan, 2009; Wallace, 2019). In Bailey et al.'s review (2019), they presented some different outcomes, such as work as a calling and work-life enrichment. One qualitative study by Pavlish and Hunt (2012) found the emerging themes: connection, contribution, and recognition from 13 nurses interviews about the perception of meaningful work. Nevertheless, meaningful work does not affect workers only positively. Contrary to their hypothesis, Dempsey and Sanders (2010) uncovered that meaningful work can have troubling underpinnings centered on self-sacrifice and underpaid or unpaid labor at the expense of health, family, and other aspects of life.

One distinction that can be pointed out between western and eastern studies in individual outcomes of meaningful work is *work as a calling*; the Christianity term which means the belief that occupations can have spiritual significance on individuals (see Duffy et

al., 2011, for more). By its definition, meaningful work links to this transcendental summons as a pathway to actualize it. For the fact that most Asian countries have religious traditions of Islam, Hinduism, or Buddhism, the work as a calling concept thus has not yet been prevalent in the eastern societies as it does in the western. Overall, most studies that found individual outcomes from experiencing meaningful work were derived from western countries. As most Asian studies have just advanced since 2014, its primary focus on the explorations thus would be work-related dimensions, rather than personal aspects. Therefore, comparing western and eastern studies in this section would be not distinct as it does in the two sections earlier.

In reviewing the empirical evidence base and gray literature for meaningful work outcomes, most of the research found that meaningful work was positively associated with several positive outcomes. Its contributions impact work and personal dimensions for workers and organizations, whose performance-related outcomes influence organizational performance. However, this does not mean that meaningful work has only positive effects. It also has potential harms when applied carelessly, or out of balance (Allan et al., 2020; Dempsey & Sanders, 2010). The practice implications will be further discussed in the later section. According to the included studies in eastern contexts, it can be summarized that Asian studies found positive outcomes in both work-related and personal dimensions, similar to those in western societies yet in different variables.

Discussion and Conclusion

The literature review revealed that meaningful work has several positive impacts on individuals as workers and persons, and on the organizations in which they work. When synthesized with studies in Asia, the overall outcomes seemed more positive than in a western review alone in terms of confirmation of outcomes and the addition of new variables (e.g., intention to continue working after retirement, psychological capital). The results from studies in Asia extended the territory of meaningful work outcomes beyond that which western scholars have marked. As a result, its combinations were even more informative and beneficial for future research in meaningful work outcomes.

Review Question: What are outcomes when employees experience meaningfulness in work?

The evidence shows that meaningful work induces many positive behavioral changes (Bailey et al., 2019; Hu & Hirsh, 2017b; Rosso et al., 2010). Meaningfulness in work encourages individuals to feel closer to their job and consequently put more effort into their work (Allan et al., 2019; Demirtas et al., 2017; Fouche et al., 2017; Hoole & Bonnema, 2015; Mekhum & Jermsittiparsert, 2019; Tan, 2018; Tan et al., 2019) and continue working for a long time (Doan et al., 2020; Nikolova & Cnossen, 2020). Having good feelings about work naturally minimizes the intention to quit (Hu & Hirsh, 2017b; Tan et al., 2019) because the worker feels satisfied and fulfilled (Allan et al., 2019; BetterUp, 2018; Hu & Hirsh, 2017b; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). Likewise, meaningful work makes people see themselves as more capable (Hu & Hirsh, 2017b) due to work-related development (Nikolova & Cnossen, 2020). When people experience an intimate connection to their work (Allan et al., 2019; Demirtas et al., 2017; Fouche et al., 2017; Hoole & Bonnema, 2015; Hu & Hirsh, 2017b; Jung & Yoon, 2016; Mekhum & Jermsittiparsert, 2019), they recognize and enjoy its positive aspects (BetterUp, 2018; Hu & Hirsh, 2017b), which leads to better productivity and performance (Hu & Hirsh, 2017b; Ling, 2014). Positive changes relating to meaningfulness in work also extend to one's personal life in regard to decreased burnout (Hu & Hirsh, 2017b), greater

well-being (Keyes, 2007), and mental health (Allan et al., 2019), which provides hope (Hu & Hirsh, 2017b), and meaning in life (Allan et al., 2014; Hu & Hirsh, 2017b). In short, meaningful work brings out the best in people, which nurtures happiness and enhances productivity. The happier people are, the better they work, which consequently yields better results.

When considering inputs from Asian studies, they suggest that meaningful work does not only make positive contributions to common organizational behaviors, e.g., absenteeism, performance, or productivity, but it also makes employees stick with work for the short term (Usman et al., 2019) and the long term (Doan et al., 2020). Meaningful work seems to be a comprehensive solution for organizations, at least in the USA, that are struggling with high turnover, costing almost double in the past ten years (Mahan et al., 2019). Moreover, meaningful work also yields contemporary benefits, as Usman et al. (2019) reported reduced cyberloafing activities when employees experience meaningfulness in their work. What is most interesting about meaningful work is that it varies based on societal and cultural values, which shape individuals' perception and interpretation about meaning in work. In Vu (2020)'s qualitative study of how the contextual constraints of a particular political change in Vietnam shaped the way people perceived meaningfulness in work, they found out that social factors, such as institutional constraints, influenced employees' distinctive view of the qualities of meaningful work. From 60 in-depth interviews, aspects that emerged of what is considered as meaningful work for Vietnamese were jobs that are pragmatic, reflexive, self-transcendent, and ethical, meaning in work that are distinct from the western perception, such as contributive (Allan et al., 2018), episodic, and poignant (see Bailey & Madden, 2016, for more).

After presenting a wide variety of positive meaningful work outcomes, this review seeks to inform best practices in the workplace of how to foster meaningful. According to the included literature, meaningful work is an experienced phenomenon that is raised subjectively within individuals, yet simultaneously influenced externally by multilevel factors (Fremeaux & Pavageau, 2020). The authors derived two key points in fostering meaningful work in the workplace. The first one is *integration*. Several integrative models of meaningful work (Bailey & Madden, 2016; Lysova et al., 2019; Rosso et al., 2010) asserted that a holistic experience of meaningfulness in work requires a combination of work-related factors, including tasks, people at work, and organization, and a non-work factor, such as society. In an integrative sense, employees and organizations should collaborate to create meaningfulness in work. Employees should seek meaning in work and then proactively craft what their dream job would look like (Berg et al., 2013), while organizations should build on an ecosystem of meaningful work in which job design, work systems, leadership, and the organizational culture are aligned to enable employees to experience meaningfulness in their work, no matter what position they are in.

The second point is that this collaboration between employees and organizations needs to be implemented with *balance* in mind to avoid meaninglessness (Chalofsky, 2003). In other words, neither should the organization push too hard, nor should the employees pull back too much in this equation. For organizations, forcing or managing meaningful work without contextualization may result in existential labor. In addition, a job that does not allow employees to work to their highest potential would render them underemployed. Indeed, individuals have a right to speak out if they believe they can contribute more, depending on whether they will do so or not. While it may sound quite challenging to make this practical, open communication comes into play as a key enabler. However, there is no perfect recipe for

making this happen all at once. Fostering meaningful work is about continuous co-creation, where inputs from every part matter. However, this should be deployed while keeping in mind the risks presented above.

Since studies in meaningful work in Asia have not yet been as prevalent as in North America or Europe, additional insights they can provide may be limited. Much as in studies of other far-reaching concepts, more time is needed to make meaningful work a generally known and accepted idea. What meaningful work studies inform us so far is that, in Asia, it seems to interface with societal factors that influence how employees perceive their work as meaningful more than in western cultures (Akdogan, et al., 2016; Allan et al., 2018; Nawrin, 2018; Vu, 2020), in which people are more likely independent (Schwartz, 2006).

Implications for Practice

The authors offer practical implications in two broad senses: individual-based and meaning management.

Individual-Based Implications

Attaining the positive outcomes of meaningful work discussed in this review requires employees, regardless of employment type or industry, to begin by proactively cultivating meaningfulness in their work. Rather than simply working day after day, they should explore and gain sufficient self-understanding to know what their work means to them or what meaningful work looks like to them as individuals. They may spend more time on self-reflection about personal values, beliefs, and certain experiences that influence work orientation. With clarity, they can then find or craft a job that has meaning to them. No one can prescribe meaningful work for others; everyone must make this happen through their own endeavors. As Michaelson has noted, “career choice is an ethical choice and a comparative luxury that would be a shame for those who have it to waste” (2010, p. 13). For Asian people, whose cultural values influence the perception and interpretation of meaning more than western cultures (Schwartz, 2006), they should be aware of how other people around them or social norms shape meaning in work. Without self-awareness, they might internalize those external forces, which may eventually lead to inauthentic meaningfulness in work.

Autin and Allan (2020) suggested that members of a group with higher social status are more likely to report meaningfulness in work than those belonging to a lower social status. This is both unfortunate and instructive of the reality that fulfilling fundamental needs is a priority for everyone. However, this does not mean that employees of a low social status cannot experience meaningfulness in work. Instead, they can experience it if they can find ways to make money for a life with personal meaning. If employees indeed cannot find meaning in their work, they may experience it through a second job or hobby. Among the many opportunities that exist, it has become easier in recent times for people to do what they love even if it is non-profitable or temporary. In the digital era, people have more practical flexibility to cultivate meaningfulness in work.

Meaning Management Implications

In spite of the longstanding debates within political theory suggesting that meaningfulness may equally have objective dimensions (Bailey et al., 2019), practically,

managing meaningfulness in work can be done in parallel with individual-oriented deeds. Organizations can foster meaningful work as a typical practice in-house. In an actionable sense, communication within an organization should clearly support employees in deriving meaning from work and in re-designing their jobs to match what they really want to do. According to the surveys (Xinghui, 2019), most Asian companies' work culture remains demanding employees to work extremely hard, to the extent that workaholism is valued and workers are expected to comply. Regarding the organizational culture, organizations actually hold power to reshape how people work in "less-is-more" ways. The organizational culture and work systems should allow autonomy while promoting challenges to keep employees intrinsically motivated and eliminating time-wasting tasks. Leaders and supervisors are key persons who help cascade meaningfulness in work into daily practice by perceiving meaningfulness in their job first. Without perceiving meaning in their own job, there is no way they can sincerely point out any meaning for others. Managing meaning in work involves various factors. Bailey and Madden (2016) proposed four elements of the ecosystem that foster an integrated sense of holistic meaningfulness for employees. This proposition aligned with Rosso et al.'s (2010) suggestion that employees are more likely to experience meaningfulness when connecting to diverse meaningfulness sources rather than merely one.

Regarding its applications, meaningful work can actually be used as a people management strategy in numerous ways. To tackle the high turnover rate of new generation workers, unlike older generations that emphasized security and loyalty, organizations can strategize ways of promoting meaningful work to retain and engage employees (Lysova et al., 2019). Individuality must also be embraced subjectively as much as it should be objectively managed by organizations. From an ethical perspective, organizations should promote meaningful work as a general quality of work, not as something that is unique to any particular group of people. In addition to cultivating meaningfulness in work, organizations should understand what makes work meaningless: powerlessness, disconnection, devaluation, and self-doubt. Among these four destructive factors, three of them are harnessed by organizations. Particularly, since Asian employees are more compliant to authority people due to cultural values (Schwartz, 2006), this could be an opportunity for organizations to encourage them to be autonomous, connected with co-workers, and seeing value in their work, in line with what Yeoman (2014) stated that meaningful work is a fundamental human need, not merely a luxury for a privileged group.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This systematic review posits a consensus in the existing literature regarding the positive contributions of meaningful work to individuals and organizations. However, there is little existing evidence of outcomes in other aspects, such as clients, colleagues, and society. Meaningful work may need to be further explored to address whether it is beneficial at all levels as a holistic experience. In addition, scholars may undertake to investigate how much and how frequently individuals need to experience meaningfulness, and how meaningfulness can be balanced with other life dimensions. Researchers may also gain insights into the impact of the cultural value of serving others when studying meaningful work through an Asian lens. Given the cautions remarked upon above, meaningful work is not solely positive. Employees and organizations must remain balanced in pursuing meaningfulness in work in order to keep from overflowing to the point of self-sacrifice. Consistent emotional check-ins in working teams or alerts of long work hours can be implemented to rebalance overwhelming meaningfulness in work.

This systematic review has undertaken a synthesis integrating more Asian studies than previous literature reviews (Bailey et al., 2019; Lysova et al., 2019; Rosso et al., 2010), yet it is still far from representing the complete picture of the topic worldwide. Furthering meaningful work in Asian countries requires clear and abundant empirical evidence to move organizations and employees toward it, as only few studies in Asia have been published about it since 2014.

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