

Abstracts

Changes in the Meaning of Work in Japan: A Cross-National Comparison between Developed Countries

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This study aims to clarify the meaning of work for the Japanese through a cross-national comparison between developed countries. We analyze a number of work-related subjective indicators using data from the World Values Survey and the International Social Survey Programme, such as work centrality, employment commitment, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction. The results indicate that, firstly, for the Japanese, work centrality was at the highest level among developed countries until the early 1980s; however, it declined thereafter, and recently the level of work centrality in Japan has been approximately in line with the level of affluence. We can state that the level of work centrality is neither high nor low; however, relative work centrality is at a slightly low level. Secondly, employment commitment (i.e., non-financial work orientation) was at a high level in the 1990s; however, it declined significantly thereafter and reached a low level in the 2010s. Conversely, financial/instrumental work orientation has remained consistently high. Thirdly, organizational commitment (effort) and job satisfaction are at consistently low levels, whereas organizational commitment (willingness to stay) is consistently high. Fourthly, the Japanese do not have a particularly diligent work ethic and place a high value on the comfort of workplace relationships. We discuss the changes in the meaning of working for the Japanese over the past 20 years.

Current Status and Issues of Research on the Meaning of Work: From the Psychological Standpoint of the Meaning in Life

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The meaning of work is an important factor in the meaning in life for the working generation. Research on the meaning of work or meaningful work has been increasing since around 2000, and the accumulated findings suggest that experiences of engaging in meaningful work are positively related to a variety of personal, social, and organizational benefits. However, the debate over its definition and issues to be considered is continuing. This paper reviews current research and issues in meaningful work, with a focus on its relation to the meaning of life, a concept that encompasses it. First, the relationship between psychological research on the meaning in life and meaningful work is discussed. Next, the definitions and theoretical models of meaningful work are reviewed, and then, the findings revealed by research in this area are summarized along with the theoretical framework of the meaning in life. Finally, promising directions for future research are discussed, including the need to examine the interaction of factors at various levels and the dark side of meaningful work as remaining challenges.

The Meanings and Protection of Work: Making Decent Work Sustainable

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With the advent of the digital economy, how is it possible to envision a society in which all people can enjoy decent work in the future? Section I of this paper argues that decent work is work that has both meaning and protection. Section II clarifies that the meanings of work that motivate us from within are the enjoyment of exercising our abilities and the feeling of contributing to society. Section III discusses the social protection that supports work from the outside. In Western Europe, poor laws have been in continuous existence since just after the Reformation, and became the foundation of the welfare state. Section IV shows that the meanings of work are in crisis in Japan, based on an analysis of ISSP2015 data. Section V introduces the predictions that not only will informal employment increase with the rise of the gig economy, but also artificial intelligence and telemigration may cause the core of formal employment to disappear. Finally, Section VI envisions policies to make decent work sustainable for the second half of the century. In order to overcome the crisis of work, a combination of basic income and social investment is needed.

The Social Meaning of Work in Modern Organizations: A Historical Overview

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The significance of paid work is largely taken for granted in everyday life, societal debates, and labor research. While the concrete realities of work experience and working conditions have been subjected to critical scrutiny, the view that work itself is fundamentally important for a person as an individual and as a member of society remains a widely shared perspective. This paper outlines various attempts that have been made to provide modern organizational work with positive meanings that serve to build and sustain its scheme. Historically, the value of work has often been framed in a religious context. By the time considerable numbers of workers began to be employed in modern organizations, the cultural ideal of the individual had become an important reference point against which work's significance would be evaluated. Various early twentieth-century developments in the United States, which led in the formation of an industrial/consumer society at an unprecedented scale, pointed to challenges that, it was thought, must be met: that is, defining the meaning of organizational work in terms of its relation to workers' individual selves, to their opportunities in life, and to larger purposes. Focusing on Japanese examples, this paper argues that later attempts to construct positive meanings in modern organizational work can be viewed as recurring attempts to meet these challenges. The discussion includes a number of implications of these attempts, a recent trend that effectively deprives work of meaning, and the future of the meaning of work.