

Work that matters: knowledge worker employee engagement – insights for leaders and organizations

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to investigate the lived experience of knowledge workers, motivation and meaning, and examines how these factors shape their engagement in the workplace. Insights into this phenomenon can inform organizational leaders, who play a pivotal role in influencing employee engagement. This study provides an in-depth understanding of factors that influence knowledge worker engagement at work.

Design/methodology/approach – The research design is a multi-sector qualitative phenomenological study conducted with participants from primarily USA based organizations, including for-profit businesses, higher education, municipal and federal government, non-profit organizations, health care, primary and secondary education and medical research. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 16 participants to explore the research question: what is the knowledge worker's lived experience of engagement in the workplace?

Findings – Findings identify multiple factors that influence knowledge workers' engagement experience. This paper focuses on intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, the impact of meaningful work and the interrelationship between motivation and meaning.

Originality/value – Employee engagement is a multifaceted construct that bridges organizational science, leadership and management. When treated solely as an organizational strategy, however, engagement risks being conceptualized in ways that exclude employees' lived experience. This research is grounded in the importance of understanding the individual experience and the factors that influence engagement, both as an individual psychological phenomenon and as an organizational construct. In addition, deepening insight into this phenomenon can equip leaders and organizations with a more nuanced appreciation of their role in shaping employee engagement.

Keywords Employee engagement, Workplace, Knowledge worker, Meaning, Motivation, Flow

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

What is employee engagement? While it is widely recognized that engaged employees affect business and financial performance (Frank, Finnegan, & Taylor, 2004) and employee retention (Chib, 2019), employees themselves also have a stake in their own engagement, aspiring to express their “preferred self” in the workplace (Kahn, 1990). Multiple stakeholders are interested in employee engagement, including employees, human resource management professionals, organizational leaders, managers, private consultants and



academic scholars. Among these stakeholders, leaders hold a particularly pivotal role in shaping the conditions that either facilitate or constrain employee engagement.

This article draws on a qualitative phenomenological study examining the influence of motivation and meaning on employee engagement among knowledge workers. Recent phenomenological investigations have similarly examined the lived experiences of knowledge workers' workplace engagement (Hart, 2024), reinforcing the value of centering the employee perspective in engagement research. Findings from this study indicate that knowledge workers' engagement emerges from a complex and dynamic constellation of factors, among which motivation and meaning feature prominently. While the present research privileges the employee experience, it is purposefully designed to inform organizational leaders and deepen their understanding of engagement within a workforce whose contributions are primarily cognitive and knowledge-based rather than manual or physical in nature.

Literature review

Employee engagement has long been recognized as one of the “greatest challenges facing organizations this decade and beyond” (Frank et al., 2004, p. 15). Knowledge workers actively contribute their cognitive power to the workplace in our modern “knowledge economy” or “knowledge-rich economy” (Muzam, 2023), versus contributions to physical labor. While there is not a single agreed upon definition, it is recognized that Drucker first coined the term “knowledge worker” in the 1950s (Surawski, 2019), their added value in the workplace is to create, distribute and apply knowledge by engaging in complex problem solving and tasks using the cognitive medium (Surawski, 2019). Muzam (2023) highlights that “human capital is becoming the main asset and core of modern organizations’ competitive advantage” (p. 1642). Thus, sustained attention to this workforce sector is imperative for the viability of today’s organizations – and for competitiveness in the emerging future.

A lack of consensus on a working definition of employee engagement poses a challenge to stakeholders, including organizations, leaders, managers, employees and academic scholars. Although definitions vary widely, each contributing its own perspective, it is critical to consider the psychological framework of employee engagement, as it is central to shaping employees’ lived experience. This is particularly salient for knowledge workers, whose engagement is deeply rooted in cognitive, emotional and meaning-making processes.

This study adopts Kahn’s (1990) definition of employee engagement as its theoretical framework, given his emphasis on the psychological processes underlying engagement. Kahn (1990) defines personal engagement as “the harnessing of organization members’ selves to their work roles” (p. 694), in which individuals employ and express themselves physically, cognitively and emotionally during role performances.

In addition, Kahn’s definition highlights three psychological conditions of employee engagement: meaningfulness, safety and availability. These are factors integrated in the larger study, including meaning and a more contemporary reflection of safety in the context of psychological safety. These factors serve as the rationale for selecting Kahn versus an alternative working definition of employee engagement from researchers such as Shuck & Wollard (2010) or Schaufeli, Salanova, González-romá, and Bakker (2002). This definition emphasizes the active, multidimensional nature of engagement – distinguishing it from more passive or attitudinal constructs such as job satisfaction or organizational commitment. While constructs such as job involvement, job satisfaction and organizational commitment are conceptually related to engagement, this research focuses specifically on employee engagement itself, with particular attention to the roles of motivation and meaning in shaping engagement outcomes.

Employee engagement: the psychological perspective

[Kahn's \(1990\)](#) framework assumes that when work is challenging and meaningful, the social environment is psychologically safe and personal resources are sufficiently available, the core needs for meaningfulness, safety and availability are met – conditions under which engagement is most likely to occur ([Schaufeli, 2014](#), p. 16). Kahn's framework recognizes that personal engagement includes an individual's expression of their "preferred self"; personal presence across the physical, cognitive and emotional domains; and the capacity for active, full role performance ([Kahn, 1990](#)). This psychological framework is particularly relevant for knowledge workers, whose work demands sustained cognitive investment, intellectual creativity and the integration of personal expertise with organizational objectives. Referring to the experience of "self-in-role," Kahn identifies that people continuously bring forward and withhold different dimensions of themselves throughout their workday ([Kahn, 1990](#), p. 693), highlighting the ongoing variability in engagement based on the task and context. This factor adds further nuance to the question: Are my employees engaged – and under what conditions?

This research aims to build on Kahn's framework to deepen understanding of employee engagement for the contemporary knowledge worker population. For the purposes of this phenomenological study, engagement is operationalized through participants' lived experiences of moments when they fully invest themselves – cognitively, emotionally and physically – in their work roles, experiencing a sense of personal presence, connection to purpose and active contribution. Conceptually, this study considers how contributions from organizational behavior – specifically the factors of motivation and meaning – shape the lived experience of engagement in the workplace for knowledge workers.

Organizational behavior: consideration of motivation and meaning

It is essential to consider contributions from the field of organizational behavior when examining employee engagement in the workplace, specifically with regard to the factors of motivation and meaning. Understanding what enhances individuals' experiences of motivation and meaning – and how these factors contribute to engagement – is central to this inquiry. A key goal of this research is to empower leaders and organizations to create opportunities that cultivate intrinsic motivation (such as by enabling conditions for flow) and to better understand what brings knowledge workers a sense of meaning in their work.

Motivation and employee engagement

A well-recognized theory of human motivation is Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs. In the 1943 article *A Theory of Human Motivation*, Maslow's hierarchy outlines motivational factors ranging from basic human needs to self-actualization. As individuals move upward through the hierarchy, their motivation shifts from deficiency-based motivation to growth-oriented motivation ([Youssef-Morgan & Bockorny, 2014](#)).

Contemporary considerations of Maslow's theory provide a valuable reevaluation for 21st century application. [Ghaleb \(2024\)](#) proposed incorporation of factors such as social and economic factors, cultural adaptability and expanding the scope of needs to include technological influences such as online belonging and digital connectivity in relation to motivation. [Saepudin & Rahmayanti \(2025\)](#) examined the theory from the lens of contemporary organizations and references the relevance of self-actualization in today's workforce. With the diverse intergenerational workforce, Saepudin references Millennial and Gen Z generations' focus toward personal growth and meaning of work provides insights for leaders such as the importance of training, work flexibility and having the opportunity to be involved in opportunities for innovation and contribute to decision making.

Ghaleb (2024) and Saepudin & Rahmayanti (2025) both question the rigid nature of Maslow's hierarchy, advocating for a more flexible and adaptive application. Maslow's work and contemporary extensions of the theory provide a theoretical framework for considering human motivation.

Regarding intrinsic motivation, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's landmark text *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (1990) examines flow experiences as an expression of internal motivation. When describing flow, Csikszentmihalyi notes that during these states, "thoughts, intentions, feelings and all the senses are focused on the same goal. Experience is in harmony" (1990, p. 41). He describes flow as producing sheer enjoyment and heightened self-confidence, identifying it as highly disciplined yet seemingly effortless mental activity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). In the workplace, flow experiences occur during tasks that offer challenge and skill: "[...] the more time a person spent in flow during the week, the better was the overall quality of his or her reported experience" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 158).

The experience of flow has been actively integrated into this research, with participants reflecting on instances of flow during their engaged workplace experiences. The inclusion of flow serves as a representation of internal motivation and offers an additional lens for examining the lived experience of engagement among knowledge workers.

Consideration of hygiene factors is a meaningful addition to the review of influences on engagement in the workplace. Herzberg and colleagues developed the Motivator-Hygiene theory, also known as the two-factor theory, in the 1960s. The theory identifies factors that shape job satisfaction and dissatisfaction. Consideration of hygiene factors provides an opportunity to examine external motivators, including salary, working conditions, fringe benefits, job security and interpersonal relationships in the workplace (Miner, 2005). Motivator factors, which are more intrinsic in nature, include meaningful work, a sense of achievement and opportunities for personal growth (Miner, 2005).

Saepudin & Rahmayanti (2025) also examined Herzberg's theory as applied to contemporary organizations stating, "the main advantage of Herzberg's theory in the modern context is its ability to encourage the redesign of work to be more meaningful and challenging" (p. 343). Saepudin's work references the importance of this in the contemporary workplace that requires increased levels of innovation, collaboration and creativity. Saepudin cautions organizations to maintain focus on both hygiene and motivator factors.

Meaningful work

Meaningful work is recognized as having a significant influence on employee engagement and is widely identified as a multilevel construct (Bailey, Madden, Lips-Wiersma, & Yeoman, 2018; Lysova, Allan, Dik, Duffy, & Steger, 2019). Lysova et al. (2019) identified three levels of factors that influence meaning. These factors include individual-level factors such as intrinsic motivation and identifying work that connects with the employee's identity; organizational-level factors, which include "leaders as architects of meaning" (Lysova et al., 2019, p. 377); and societal-level factors, including "access to decent work" (Lysova et al., 2019). Together, these levels reveal the dynamics of meaningful work and underscore the particular relevance of individual-level factors to the lived experience of knowledge workers.

Further exploring meaningful work at the individual level, Chalofsky (2010) states, "[...] (work we identify with) is the performance of our values, beliefs, moral philosophy and personality. Work is the very essence of the human condition, one of the major roles we play on the world stage during our lifetime" (p. 25). Chalofsky's comments regarding meaningful work closely align with Maslow's discussion of values and self-actualization.

Regarding meaning as an organizational-level factor, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development's Kingston Employee Engagement Consortium Project identifies meaningful work as an organizational strategy for engagement. Recognizing "meaningfulness" as one of the primary drivers of engagement, the report notes that "the extent to which employees find meaning in their work has a substantial impact on how they feel about their working life in general" (Kingston Employee Engagement Consortium Project, 2010, p. 23). Organizational strategies for fostering meaningfulness in employees' work include "regular communication" about the organization's vision (Cheney *et al.*, 2008; Lysova *et al.*, 2019).

In summary, motivation and meaningful work have been identified as antecedents of employee engagement (Wollard & Shuck, 2011). Considering these themes and their impact on employee engagement reinforces the rationale for examining employees' lived experiences. This further underscores the value of viewing employee engagement as more than merely an organizational strategy, but also as a dynamic dialogue between the organization and its employees, recognizing the individualistic nature of the people who comprise the workforce. This dialogue can inform employees about factors such as intrinsic motivation, flow and meaningful work, while simultaneously informing organizational leaders about employees' lived experiences, thereby strengthening organizational and leadership strategy.

Methodology

A qualitative phenomenological research design was used to investigate the lived experiences of knowledge workers and to develop a comprehensive understanding of the factors, drivers and barriers that shape their engagement in the workplace. The targeted population for this research, identified as "knowledge workers," comprises individuals whose primary contributions are cognitive and specialized rather than physical in nature.

Conducting this study as a qualitative inquiry foregrounded the individual meaning participants attribute to the complex construct of employee engagement. Phenomenology provides a structured approach to examining the "essences of experience" (Moustakas, 1994), enabling the elicitation and analysis of rich, detailed descriptions of participant experiences. Accordingly, phenomenology served as a logical choice for this study.

The study was conducted with approval from and in accordance with the University of Southern Maine ethical standards and was approved by the Institutional Review Board for working with human research subjects (Study Number: IRB-2023-94, Approval Date: 09/22/2023). All participants reviewed and signed the IRB informed consent form and were provided an opportunity to ask questions before participating in the study. Research participants were recruited using convenience and snowball sampling through social media and through the graduate student body of the researcher's institution. The goal was to interview 10–15 participants; ultimately, 16 individuals participated. Inclusion criteria required participants to self-identify as knowledge workers after reading a provided definition. Participants represented several industry sectors, including for-profit, higher education, municipal government, federal government, non-profit organizations, healthcare, primary and secondary education and medical research. Participants ranged from early to late career professionals.

Research participants were viewed as co-researchers and recognized as equals in the interview process. Semi-structured interviews were used to provide both structure and flexibility. Two primary questions formed the core of the interview protocol, accompanied by content-focused follow-up questions. The first interview question prompted participants to reflect on a specific position, project or initiative in which they felt particularly engaged in their work. This reflection anchored subsequent questions. In addition, antecedents to engagement were explored using a visual of Wollard & Shuck (2011) individual-level and

organizational-level antecedents of employee engagement to elicit participants' reflections on factors that resonated with their engaged experiences. The second primary interview question and related prompts explored motivation and meaning in relation to workplace engagement, including intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivators and meaning.

Moustakas's (1994) process of phenomenological reduction was used to analyze the data. This included ongoing consideration of epoché, assessing data from multiple angles, repeatedly engaging with transcripts and applying horizontalization to treat all data and emerging themes as possessing equal value, ultimately identifying the core themes of the experience.

Interviews were recorded, transcribed and analyzed to identify key themes. An audit trail was maintained throughout the research process, including interview transcripts, researcher journaling during interviews and data analysis, correspondence with participants for member checking and a codebook documenting the evolution of codes. Member checking was used to assess transcript accuracy from participants' perspectives. After transcripts were cleaned, each participant received their transcript to verify accuracy, clarify meaning, correct misinterpretations or request redactions to protect privacy.

Through reflexivity and bracketing, the researcher worked to identify and reduce potential biases. Reflexivity, bracketing and epoché occurred during and following interviews, during coding and throughout data analysis. These processes were supported through open-ended questioning, journaling during and after interviews, journaling during analysis, checking code consistency across participants and engaging in active and purposeful reflection. The researcher's positionality as a knowledge worker informed their interpretation of the phenomenon, reinforcing the importance of systematic bracketing.

Line-by-line coding using the analytic method of concept coding was applied to each transcript. NVivo qualitative data analysis software was used to code transcripts and identify key themes. Initial coding involved reading transcripts and developing content codes for substantive statements made in response to interview questions. As coding progressed, content codes were revised iteratively. Through this process, a codebook was developed to represent key themes through inductive coding. NVivo enabled coding at multiple levels, combining and revising codes without losing finer-grained distinctions and allowing for searches across participants.

Regarding inter-rater reliability, the researcher engaged in repeated cycles of code comparison and refinement to ensure analytic rigor. Through phenomenological reduction, coding and analysis, the essence of the experience was identified and key themes emerged from the participant's narratives highlighting common key features which emerged in the data. Saturation was reached at the sixteenth interview, as consistent patterns emerged and few new observations were identified.

For coding transparency, Table 1 provides an example of the evolution of the coding process. The table includes direct quotes from research participants and identifies the coding process from open codes to focused codes and ending with the final codes.

Findings

Findings highlight the impact of motivation and meaning on employee engagement for knowledge workers within the workplace. The data reported here is part of a larger study investigating factors that influence employee engagement among knowledge workers. When describing the position, project or initiative in which participants felt particularly engaged, they offered powerful descriptors, including "enlightening," "perfect blend of autonomy, agency and impact," "ownership," "potential for impact," "thrive" and "I can show up authentically." Heightened levels of intrinsic motivation and meaning were attributed to

Table 1. Evolution of the coding process

Data examples	Open codes	Focused codes	Final codes
“Oh, I experienced hours and hours and hours of it (flow) absolutely (laughter)...I love my data, and I love to write, and I love to think about how to pull things together and present them”	Motivation Experiencing flow Intrinsic enjoyment of work	Employee motivation Intrinsic motivation Flow experience	Flow/intrinsic motivation
“I get excited about curriculum, assessment, and instruction and seeing kids learning”	Satisfaction from student learning Significance Teaching and learning	Meaningful work	Involvement in meaningful work

participants’ engaged workplace experiences as reflected in the interviews. The interrelationship between motivation and meaning is notable. This finding is further bolstered by participants identifying the individual-level antecedent “involvement in meaningful work” as one of the top-rated antecedents influencing their engagement.

Regarding saturation, no new themes emerged at the sixteenth interview. While the final interview contributed a rich level of contextual maturity, the data indicated that the study had reached thematic saturation.

Motivation

Research participants identified multiple influences on their motivation when reflecting on their engaged workplace experiences. Ultimately, intrinsic and extrinsic motivators were diverse, providing evidence that motivation – both intrinsic and extrinsic – varies across individuals.

Participants were asked to define intrinsic motivation and offered a variety of characterizations, including motivation informed by personal experience, personal strengths, the desire to make an impact and a personal sense of being highly motivated. When discussing intrinsic motivation, several participants referenced a strong personal drive that they bring to the workplace. One participant from higher education expressed curiosity about whether others experience the same level of drive at work.

The experience of flow represents one aspect of intrinsic motivation within this research. Recognizing flow as a physiological and psychological phenomenon during which an individual experiences a heightened integration of the self (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), research findings suggest that positive relationships between instances of flow can also meaningfully enhance engagement (Liu, Lu, Li, van der Linden, & Bakker, 2023). Research participants described wide-ranging experiences of flow in the workplace, ranging from engaging in research to rapidly responding to stakeholder questions in meetings. Participants used language such as “riding the elephant,” “almost like a high,” “being in the zone” and “when the magic happens in your work” to describe their flow experiences.

The frequency of flow experiences varied substantially, ranging from weekly to “a couple of times a week” to “with some frequency” and even to hours at a time. As one participant from medical research shared, on a difficult day, they might experience flow for an hour, while on a productive day, they might experience flow for six to eight hours. Being interrupted was a commonly voiced barrier. Some participants identified taking on large projects outside work hours to accomplish tasks and experience flow. To maintain flow,

participants used strategies such as turning off notifications, “chunking” their schedules and designating work-from-home days as project-focused.

One remote participant in non-profit international education noted that working from home increased their ability to experience flow compared to past roles in which they were physically present in the workplace. A participant working in a hybrid healthcare environment described how greater autonomy in scheduling and self-directed project navigation contributed to more frequent flow experiences. A participant in higher education described the experience of being deeply present during flow states while working directly with students:

[...] everything I’m not thinking about [...] I’m not thinking about employees, I’m not thinking about budgets, I’m not thinking about anything else. I’m just there with those students in that moment as they figure out how to solve this problem. It’s lovely because [...] I feel like a lot of the time I go through life distracted all the time, because there are always other things I need to be thinking about, always the bigger picture to keep in mind.

Regarding extrinsic motivation, study participants identified several external motivators, including receiving positive feedback, meeting timelines and deadlines and adhering to budgets and program outcomes. Several of Herzberg’s hygiene factors were also present in the participant interviews, including pay, working conditions and other external factors. At times, these references surfaced humorously – “[...] and they paid us like a vocation (laughter)” – while other comments reflected frustration: “It’s a profession and I wouldn’t do it just for the altruistic reasons.” One participant from higher education referenced benefits, societal structures and personal health: “[...] I’m here and do my work because ultimately, we live in a society which requires us to live and make a livelihood. I need a salary. I need housing. I need health insurance. My motivation ultimately comes from my own personal well-being and all of that.”

A participant from non-profit international education reflected on motivation, meaningful work and hygiene factors, stating, “I fundamentally feel for the world as a whole that we are producing more compassionate, empathetic students who will go out in the world and take that with them,” then added, “[...] if you asked me ten years ago, I’d be like it’s not about the money, but the reality is, you’ve got to earn money too and I like making a reasonable salary when you do meaningful work.” The inclusion of hygiene factors is a valuable addition to the dialogue regarding motivational influences.

Meaningful work

The importance of being involved in meaningful work is a strong bellwether for the population of knowledge workers. The impact of meaningful work has been researched extensively (Kahn, 1990; Bailey & Madden, 2017; Lysova et al., 2019; Kingston, 2010; Chalofsky, 2010; Schaufeli, 2014) and is identified as an integral part of knowledge workers’ experience of work and the workplace.

Research participants identified finding meaning in their work in diverse ways, connected to themes such as student development among higher education professionals, staff collaboration in secondary education, pharmaceutical development and its impact on patients and contributing to the effective functioning of municipal government. These findings underscore the wide range of ways in which knowledge workers derive meaning from their roles.

Regarding involvement in meaningful work as an individual antecedent (Wollard & Shuck, 2011), one participant in for-profit construction expressed fear after taking a job in a new organization, voicing concern that she was “just a number.” She later reflected on her growing awareness of the for-profit organization’s impact:

[...] and suddenly I felt that the work that I was doing was just this tiny piece of a puzzle that was keeping our region running [...] and that really shifted that I'm not a number, this is not just a clicking buttons (job), this is helping to facilitate stuff that did not stop when COVID started, it kept going because it was necessary.

A participant in healthcare connected motivation and meaningful work with personal values: "It's a part of my personality that I need to be doing something that's meaningful to me and that the work that I'm doing aligns with my values."

A participant in healthcare human resources with over thirty years of experience emphasized the high value they place on meaningful work: "[...] at this stage of my life [...] I have to be doing work that makes a difference [...] I've got to be able to say, yes, this is important."

Participants resonated deeply with the concept of meaningful work and how it manifested in their engaged work experience, which was a key finding of this research.

Interrelationship between motivation and meaning

A critical finding is the interrelationship between motivation and meaning, specifically that intrinsic motivation is often intertwined with a sense of meaning for knowledge workers. The impact of past experiences was repeatedly referenced, serving as an intrinsic motivator and enhancing participants' sense of meaning in their work.

A participant from higher education who identified as a first-generation student – and now directs a program supporting first-generation students – stated: "Intrinsically, I'm motivated because I never felt those things in college [...] academics are important, yes, but I think they also need to have that safety and that feeling of belonging." This participant also expressed motivation to "shake up the higher Ed. system" and improve conditions for future students.

Another participant in healthcare reflected on their motivation and sense of meaning in work aimed at improving employee experiences after previously working in a negative workplace environment: "Having the opportunity to focus on the employee experience and how we can make a difference in employees' work lives."

A participant from the medical research field shared a profound story about the memoir of a man who took the first medication their team developed: "[...] and he takes that for a year or so, and it gives him a very good quality of life and time to actually see his child born and say goodbye to his wife." Encountering this memoir served as confirmation of the real-world impact of their work. Additional intrinsic motivators for this participant included their personal history as a cancer survivor, as well as alignment between the work and their strengths.

A participant from the federal government expressed strong intrinsic motivation and meaning in their role supporting employees in the entry-level position they once held. They voiced a deep desire to make positive, impactful change for employees whose experience they understood firsthand.

These rich narratives from participants collectively illustrate the interrelationship between motivation and meaning in their engaged workplace experiences. Many articulated intrinsic motivations and a sense of meaning in their work, often tied to making an impact on others and feeling deeply connected to the purpose of their work.

Figure 1 provides a visual framework of factors that influence knowledge worker engagement. The visual illustrates both key factors of meaning, motivation and highlights the interrelationship between the two factors.

Discussion

Research findings highlight the role of motivation and meaning in employee engagement for the knowledge worker sector and address the question: what is the knowledge worker's lived

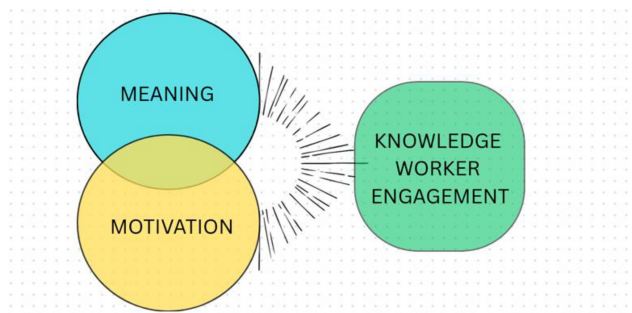


Figure 1. Factors that influence knowledge worker engagement

experience of engagement in the workplace? With an understanding that employee engagement is more than an organizational strategy, the outcomes of this research inform organizational leaders about factors shaping the lived experience of knowledge worker engagement in the workplace. The factors of motivation and meaning explored in this article are part of a larger study focused on the influences on employee engagement.

The findings of this research study are bounded by factors such as the sectors in which participants were employed and the specific workforce sector of knowledge workers. In addition, while several participants worked for international organizations, all research participants resided in the continental USA, which may limit the applicability of findings beyond these parameters.

The factors of motivation and meaning have a strong influence on the experience of engagement in the workplace for the knowledge worker sector. Research participants characterized their engaged workplace experience as “enlightening,” “ownership,” “potential for impact,” “thrive,” “I can show up authentically” and “perfect blend of autonomy, agency and impact.” Each participant’s engaged workplace experience was unique and varied, highlighting the distinctly individualized nature of engagement for this population.

Theoretical contributions from this research build on existing work focused on employee engagement and highlight the lived experience of the knowledge worker population, explicitly focused on motivation and meaning. Theoretical implications can serve to advance organizational understanding and integrate the topic of engagement into the annual evaluation. Unique in their contributions to the modern workplace, knowledge workers contribute primarily through cognitive, knowledge-based work; thus, theoretically, strong engagement may enhance the viability of knowledge-based organizations across sectors. This research contributes to a gap in the current literature examining the interrelationship between intrinsic motivation and meaning in relation to employee engagement for knowledge workers. A rich dialogue emerged from the data regarding intrinsic motivation and meaning. Participants articulated a strong sense of intrinsic motivation influenced by past experience which appeared to enhance a strong sense of meaning, ultimately highlighting the interrelationship between the two factors. This suggests the importance of past experience and their impact on the employee experience as it relates to engagement.

Additional research findings align with and expand upon existing studies on employee engagement and the influence of motivation and meaning. Chalofsky & Krishna (2009) explored meaningfulness, commitment and engagement as they relate to intrinsic motivation, suggesting that meaningfulness is a deeper form of intrinsic motivation and identifying a connection between meaningfulness, employee engagement and commitment.

While this research articulates motivation and meaning as separate concepts, there is a similar connection identified between meaningful work and employee engagement for the knowledge worker population.

Considering literature on intrinsic motivation and flow, the meta-analysis by [Liu et al. \(2023\)](#) on the antecedents and outcomes of flow in the workplace found that “the overall cumulative effects of flow on work engagement [...] were significant and large” (p. 11). This aligns with the positive relationship between experiences of flow and engagement observed in this qualitative study, in which all participants described instances of flow when reflecting on the project or position where they felt most engaged.

Regarding implications for practice, with employee engagement often being viewed as an organizational strategy, leaders and organizations are challenged to expand the paradigm and view the construct as both an organizational strategy and a psychological phenomenon that impacts the individual employee experience. The reframing is significant and will serve to transform how employee engagement is both defined and the work is practiced in organizations. When considering recommendations for leaders and organizations, the reflective question is: to what extent do leaders and organizations communicate with knowledge workers about their experiences of engagement, motivation and meaning? Several actionable strategies emerge from this research that organizations can use to enhance knowledge worker engagement. These strategies focus on building organizational awareness and integrating discussions oriented toward motivation, meaning and their impact on employee engagement. By applying the recommendations from this research, leaders can build awareness of where knowledge workers derive motivation, thereby advancing both leaders’ and employees’ understanding of workplace engagement.

Research outcomes support the themes and topics of the actionable strategies and the author’s advanced knowledge, experience and training inform their execution and framework. The first strategy focuses on developing a community of practice (COP) to advance organizational awareness and foster shared understanding among organizational leaders. The COP provides an opportunity for leaders to develop a greater appreciation of the knowledge worker population, including what they bring to the workplace and the key factors that contribute to engagement. A key aspect of the COP features leader-based training and work groups aimed at building awareness of factors that influence knowledge worker engagement. In addition, the COP would serve as a forum for leaders to discuss strategies and share practices for communicating with staff about engagement.

The second actionable strategy focuses on integrating engagement into the annual review process. This provides an opportunity for leaders and knowledge workers to discuss contributions to the workplace through a different lens – beyond productivity or outcomes – by centering conversations on the factors that shape their personal experience of engagement. To support meaningful dialogue, sharing questions before the meeting is recommended. Questions focusing on motivation and meaning as they contribute to engagement might include: do I experience flow in my work? What does that look like, and are there opportunities for more? What barriers might I experience? Where do I find a sense of meaning in my work? What resonates with me, and am I making the impact I intend? These questions create an opportunity for knowledge workers to highlight aspects of their work that bring meaning and motivation, thus contributing to their overall employee experience.

Regarding recommendations for implementation, it is recommended organizations begin with a particular division or unit with a goal of demonstrating success and can be replicated in the larger organization. Initial steps will be to initiate the development of a training curriculum, and engage leaders in establishing a COP with the integration of engagement discussions into the annual review to follow. With respect to barriers to the actionable

strategies identified, organizational buyin is critically important. Regarding the integration of engagement into the annual review process, a lack of trust between the leader and the knowledge worker may undermine the likelihood of a productive and meaningful conversation. In such cases, an alternative approach would be to emphasize the knowledge worker's self-reflection, allowing engagement to be explored in a way that may feel more authentic, less evaluative, and more conducive to honest insight.

Limitations and directions for future research

Limitations of this research include the use of self-reported data, which carries the potential for self-bias, given that participants' firsthand experiences served as the primary data source. While a qualitative phenomenological methodology is advantageous for generating deep insight into participants' lived experiences, considerations around the limitations of self-reported data are relevant. In addition, participants' reports were retrospective in nature and considered a limitation of this research. As participants represented heterogeneous sectors, this factor also limited the transferability of results to any single sector.

Regarding sampling strategy, convenience and snowball sampling were used and may not adequately represent the broader knowledge worker population, introducing potential sampling bias. Thus, transferability is limited, and further research is warranted.

Regarding implications for future research, this body of research serves to expand contemporary literature on employee engagement for the knowledge worker population from a psychological phenomenon perspective, specifically regarding motivation, meaning and the interrelationship between intrinsic motivation, meaning and its impact on employee engagement. Suggestions for future research are twofold. First, the field will benefit from future research further exploring the interrelationship between intrinsic motivation and meaning as it relates to employee engagement. The influence of past experience bolstered a sense of intrinsic motivation which enhanced a strong sense of meaning for participants. Further exploring this dynamic would serve to build the discussion. Second, there is limited existing literature on knowledge worker engagement as it relates to a sense of higher calling. Responses from participants were diverse, and reactions were emotionally strong when discussing experiences of higher calling through work. Further exploring the role of higher calling as it relates to knowledge worker engagement, past experiences, years of work experience and the potential for this sense of calling to be supported – or exploited – would offer valuable insight into how such experiences shape knowledge worker engagement.

Conclusion

Engaged employees impact business and financial performance (Frank et al., 2004) and employee retention (Chib, 2019) and are strongly connected to the vitality of organizations. When the outcomes of business and financial performance are the primary focus, the lived experience of employees is often overlooked. This research expands the literature on the lived experience of the knowledge worker population and the factors that contribute to their workplace engagement.

This research addresses the question of what the knowledge workers' lived experience of workplace engagement entails and identifies key themes of motivation and meaning that shape that engagement. While consensus was not reached on the foundational elements of engagement, the study highlights the deeply personal and individualized nature of how engagement is experienced and conceptualized among knowledge workers. In addition, this study reinforces that there is not a "one size fits all" approach to knowledge worker engagement. This understanding must be paired with purposeful conversations between leaders and knowledge worker employees about their experiences of engagement. Those best

positioned to lead this work are individuals in leadership roles who work directly with knowledge workers. However, it is first essential that leaders receive education and support, with recognition that they hold a pivotal role in shaping the conditions for engagement.

As knowledge work increasingly defines the modern economy, understanding how these workers experience engagement has become essential. By examining the lived realities of knowledge workers – their motivations, challenges and sources of meaning – organizations can move beyond generic engagement metrics toward genuine insight. This deeper awareness creates a foundation for meaningful action: targeted development programs, collaborative communities of practice and authentic dialogue about the factors that truly shape workplace engagement. By investing in a genuine understanding of their knowledge workers, organizations can foster the quality of engagement that catalyzes innovation and a foundation for long-term competitive advantage.

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