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Meaningless Work Threatens Employees' Job Performance

Employees show a significant decline in exerted effort when they are informed about the futility of a task already done. As the results of an experiment conducted by Sabrina Jeworrek from the Halle Institute for Economic Research (IWH) and co-authors show, meaningless work causes anger and disappointment, and can negatively affect employees' later motivation. However, employees seem to “forgive” their employer for cancelling a project if another and still valid purpose is credibly communicated.

Knowing about the meaninglessness of a job already done significantly threatens employees' motivation for future tasks. This is the conclusion of a recent study conducted by IWH economist Sabrina Jeworrek and her fellow researchers Adrian Chadi and Vanessa Mertins. It has long been well-known that employees' attitude and workplace behaviour are sensitive to whether they perceive their current tasks to be meaningful. “However, efforts most often turn out to be meaningless in retrospect. Imagine a software development team that finds out that their painstakingly written code will soon be made fully obsolete by a new operating system,” Jeworrek points out. Since empirical research on the influence of such occurrences was not available within the previous literature, the IWH economist and her fellow researchers decided to carry out an experiment under most realistic circumstances without individuals being aware of the experimental conduct.

The economists' data reveal that the meaning of a previous task strongly impacts workers' motivation to perform in the future. However, employees seem to forgive their employer for cancelling a project if another purpose is credibly communicated. “Individuals work hard not only for money but also because they want their personal investment in the work to be meaningful. And obviously, they do accept a change away from its original meaning,” states Jeworrek. The economist thus urges supervisors to take the importance of adequately communicating a project's meaning into consideration: “Supervisors may be well advised to accept short-term losses by finding another use for work already done. Those might be lower than the potential costs resulting from demotivated employees in the long run.” IWH president Reint Gropp emphasizes the relevance of the results: „This research is very important because it systematically shows for the first time that communication from managers to staff has first order effects on staff productivity, in particular in difficult situations.“

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In addition to workers' motivation, Jeworrek and her fellow researchers also investigated the effects of task meaning on employees' emotions. "Those who got to know that their work was futile turned out to be significantly more disappointed, shocked and upset. They also tend to feel more replaceable than their colleagues," says the IWH economist. However, these emotions do not seem to be in a clear relationship with the motivation to perform well.

An unexpected cancellation of a previous project had enabled Jeworrek and her co-authors to study the connection between meaninglessness of work and employees' job performance. The researchers hired 140 workers for a one-time half-day job to collect inventory data on business reports. One week after the end of the inventory, they invited the workers to take part in an online survey and assigned each worker to one of three groups. One group was reminded that their previous task had been meaningful. The second group was told the archive had been dissolved after its completion. The third group was informed their efforts had become meaningless with regard to their stated purpose, but would further be useful for research in the field of personnel economics. In order to eliminate the influence of monetary incentives, all workers received a fixed payment for answering the survey, independent of performance.

Publication

Chadi, A.; Jeworrek, Sabrina; Mertins, V.: When the Meaning of Work Has Disappeared: Experimental Evidence on Employees' Performance and Emotions, in: [Management Science](#), Vol. 6, 2017, 1696-1707.

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