

Cultivating meaningful work for early-career professionals



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Orientation: The concept of meaningful work has gained considerable attention in research, yet limited focus exists on early-career professionals' workplace experiences.

Research purpose: This study explored how organisations can cultivate meaningful work for early-career professionals and how these professionals perceive and derive meaning from their work.

Motivation for the study: Understanding early-career professionals' perceptions of meaningful work is essential for fostering engagement, satisfaction and retention within organisations.

Research approach/design and method: Eleven early-career professionals participated in semi-structured interviews using purposive-convenience sampling. Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis, identifying five themes.

Main findings: Early-career professionals derive meaningful work through personal growth, impact, supportive relationships, values alignment and resilience, enabled by organisational support, feedback, mentorship and proactive strategies amidst workplace challenges. An interplay of factors shapes early-career professionals' perceptions of meaningful work, highlighting the need for targeted support, mentoring and coaching.

Practical/managerial implications: Organisations should adopt leadership and management practices supporting early-career professionals' development and meaningful work experiences. Structured interventions, such as mentoring and coaching, contribute to improved job satisfaction and organisational commitment.

Contribution/value-add: This study contributes to meaningful work literature by focusing specifically on early-career professionals, providing actionable insights for organisations to enhance employee engagement and retention within this crucial group.

Keywords: meaningful work; meaning; graduates; early-career professionals; careers.

Introduction

The pursuit of meaningful work has garnered significant attention from scholars, practitioners and policymakers (Bailey et al., 2019a; Blustein et al., 2023; Lysova et al., 2019) and is considered a critical factor in enhancing individual well-being, organisational success and societal impact. For early-career professionals, meaningful work is especially vital, influencing their engagement, retention and career trajectories (Van der Marel et al., 2023). As workplaces evolve because of technological advancements, hybrid work models and shifting workforce demographics, understanding how early-career professionals experience meaningful work has become increasingly relevant (Arora & Garg, 2024; Coetzee et al., 2023), and early-career professionals remain relevant in organisations (Dhanpat et al., 2019).

This study investigates the factors that contribute to cultivating meaningful work experiences for early-career professionals, including their perceptions, the role of organisational culture, career development opportunities and personal values while also exploring strategies and interventions to enhance these experiences and providing actionable recommendations for HR practices. Moreover, meaningful work is a cornerstone of personal and professional fulfilment (Bailey et al., 2019a), significantly influencing employee engagement (Geldenhuys et al., 2014; Kahn & Fellows, 2013), retention (Oprea et al., 2022) and overall organisational performance (Hasan et al., 2022). Research has highlighted the numerous benefits associated with meaningful work, including higher job satisfaction (Bailey et al., 2019a), greater engagement (Faisaluddin et al., 2024), enhanced mental health outcomes and improved overall well-being (Steger et al., 2012). This study aims to shed light on how early-career professionals perceive and sustain meaningful work.

Background to the study

The concept of meaningful work has gained significant attention from scholars, practitioners and policymakers because of its demonstrated benefits for individual fulfilment, organisational effectiveness and societal well-being (Bailey et al., 2019b; Blustein et al., 2023; Lysova et al., 2019). Defined as work that provides a sense of purpose and serves a greater societal goal beyond monetary gain, meaningful work is intrinsically linked to individuals' sense of calling and professional fulfilment (Steger et al., 2012). Theoretical frameworks such as self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), job crafting (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001) and social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) highlight the role of autonomy, relatedness and competence in fostering meaningfulness at work.

Zeglat and Janbeik (2019) highlight how meaningful work motivates employees to focus on organisational goals and align their personal values with professional pursuits. However, despite its critical role in organisational success, meaningful work remains a complex and multifaceted construct requiring deeper exploration to address theoretical and empirical gaps (Tan et al., 2023). While existing quantitative studies have predominantly focused on measuring correlations between meaningful work and outcomes such as job satisfaction (Allan et al., 2018), engagement (Albrecht et al., 2021) and performance (Van Wingerden & Van de Stoep, 2018), these approaches have provided limited insight into the underlying mechanisms, contextual factors and subjective experiences that constitute meaningful work. Early-career professionals are described as being in the 'exploration and establishment' phases of their careers (Stumpf, 2014) and face distinct challenges in finding meaningful work. This group navigates a critical period of exploration and self-discovery while attempting to establish their professional identity and lay the foundation for future career success (Nyström, 2010). The transition from academia to the workforce can be daunting, marked by the realities of adapting to organisational cultures and aligning personal aspirations with professional expectations (Faisaluddin et al., 2024).

The evolving nature of work in the 21st century is shaped by technological advancements (Stofile et al., 2023) globalisation, and shifting socio-economic trends further complicates the pursuit of meaningful work. Traditional career pathways are increasingly replaced by non-linear trajectories, necessitating a re-evaluation of conventional notions of success and fulfilment (Faisaluddin et al., 2024).

Despite growing academic interest in meaningful work, the experiences of early-career professionals remain underexplored. Few empirical studies examine how personal values, organisational factors and targeted workplace interventions shape their perception of meaningful work (Charles-Leija et al., 2023; Coffey et al., 2021; Stumpf, 2014). Addressing this gap is crucial for advancing theoretical understanding and informing practical strategies to enhance the work experiences of early-career professionals.

While research has often overlooked the unique difficulties early-career professionals face, such as aligning personal values with organisational roles, insufficient support and constrained growth opportunities (Bailey et al., 2019b; Björklund et al., 2023), effective workplace support systems are essential in helping them navigate these challenges and capitalise on development opportunities (Anderson et al., 2021). These challenges lead to disengagement, low confidence and unmet expectations, hindering their ability to find purpose and value in their work (Cao et al., 2023). Organisations struggle to implement tailored evidence-based strategies to foster meaningful work for early-career professionals. Poor onboarding processes, lack of inclusivity and minimal organisational support exacerbate feelings of fear and disconnection, reducing their potential to thrive and contribute meaningfully (Björklund et al., 2023).

The main objective of this study is to investigate how early-career professionals cultivate meaningful work experiences by examining their perceptions, identifying contributing factors and exploring the roles of organisational culture, career development opportunities and personal values, with the aim of providing actionable HR strategies to enhance meaningful work.

Literature review

Definition and conceptualisation of meaningful work

Several researchers have defined meaningful work (Bailey et al., 2019a; Bailey et al., 2019b; Charles-Leija et al., 2023; Weeks & Schaffert, 2019). Meaningful work has been conceptualised as the degree to which individuals perceive their work as purposeful and valuable, enabling them to contribute to a greater good (Steger et al., 2012). It represents work that is regarded as important, positive and fulfilling (Rosso et al., 2010).

While some scholars conceptualise meaningful work as a unidimensional construct focused primarily on the subjective experience of purpose and significance (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009), others propose multidimensional frameworks that encompass distinct but interrelated facets such as positive meaning (Rosso et al., 2010), meaning-making mechanisms and greater-good motivations (Steger et al., 2012). Specifically, Steger et al. (2012) identify three dimensions of meaningful work such as psychological meaningfulness, meaning-making and greater-good motivation. Psychological meaningfulness pertains to how individuals perceive the value of their work. Meaning-making refers to how people derive meaning and purpose in life. Greater-good motivation involves the desire to create positive change and contribute to a larger societal benefit (Faisaluddin et al., 2024).

Historically, work has played a significant role in individuals' lives by shaping their identities, showcasing their abilities and motivating them to strive for success (Ghadi et al., 2015).

Scholars have consistently regarded meaningful work as a topic of interest. For instance, May et al. (2004) argue that meaningful work enhances employee performance, yields personal and professional benefits and fosters engagement and commitment to the organisation. Similarly, Ghadi et al. (2015) suggest that many people dedicate their lives to their work because it offers a sense of self-worth, purpose and financial freedom. As such, managers must understand employees' perceptions of their work to create environments that motivate and engage their workforce effectively.

However, these established conceptualisations may not fully capture the unique experiences of early-career professionals, who face distinct challenges. Unlike established professionals, early-career individuals may prioritise different dimensions of meaningful work, such as learning opportunities, skill development and alignment with personal values over traditional markers like autonomy or impact. Yet it remains unclear whether these benefits manifest similarly for early-career professionals who may still be developing their professional identities and understanding of what constitutes meaningful work in their specific context.

Importance of meaningful work experiences for early-career professionals

Meaningful work has been associated with improved wellness and engagement in the workplace (Albrecht et al., 2021; Bailey et al., 2018). Bailey et al. (2018) also demonstrate its role in enhancing motivation and performance. Studies reveal that employees increasingly seek purpose and meaning in their work, leading to greater happiness, engagement and reduced turnover (Charles-Leija et al., 2023; Kun & Gadanez, 2023). Similarly, Steger et al. (2012) highlight the positive relationship between meaningful work and job satisfaction, well-being and other beneficial job outcomes. Allan et al. (2019) identify meaningful work as a predictor of engagement, life satisfaction and overall well-being. Early-career development cultivates meaningful work by enabling young professionals to align their skills and values with organisational roles. Structured support like mentoring enhances this sense of purpose, boosting engagement (Kulkarni et al., 2018), while its absence often leads to disengagement (Chang et al., 2021).

Factors contributing to meaningful work experiences

Meaningful work experiences emerge from a combination of individual and organisational factors, each contributing to how employees perceive purpose and value in their professional lives. At an individual level, the subjective interpretation of work's meaning is deeply personal and shaped by career values, motivations, personal goals and aspirations (Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012). Wong et al. (2017) highlight the intrinsic connection between career motivations and employee commitment, which can be understood through frameworks such as Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943). Similarly, Barhate and Dirani (2022) found that early-

career professionals often blend personal and professional aspirations, prioritising work-life balance and inclusivity as significant elements influencing meaningful work.

Organisational factors also play a critical role in shaping meaningful work experiences. Organisational culture, structure and leadership profoundly influence employee engagement and commitment (Antonacopoulo & Georgiadou, 2021; Lasardo & Kasseem, 2021). Employees derive meaning when their work is embedded in a supportive and inclusive organisational culture that fosters a sense of belonging and self-worth (Warrick, 2017). A dynamic and inclusive atmosphere reduces turnover while enhancing employee dedication and performance. Career development opportunities further amplify meaningful work experiences by providing avenues for growth and skill enhancement, directly benefiting both individuals and organisations (Lee et al., 2019). These opportunities, when strategically aligned, promote retention by supporting employees' professional aspirations and reducing turnover rates (Modaou et al., 2018). Leadership support emerges as another crucial factor, with supportive leaders improving morale, boosting engagement and fostering meaningful connections within the workplace (Frémeaux & Pavageau, 2022; Mehrad et al., 2020). When employees perceive their leaders as invested in their growth, they are more likely to find purpose and fulfilment in their work roles.

Individual-level and organisational-level interventions

Meaningful work can be cultivated through targeted individual-level and organisational-level interventions. At the individual level, strategies such as goal setting and self-reflection are critical. Dhanpat et al. (2021) emphasise that setting challenging goals fosters creativity, proactivity and determination among employees, enabling them to achieve career objectives. This process is underpinned by self-regulation, defined as a deliberate series of cognitive, emotional and behavioural activities aimed at goal attainment (Margaryan et al., 2013). Self-regulation incorporates critical elements such as self-monitoring, reflection and adaptation, all of which contribute to individual growth and knowledge expansion. These strategies align with self-management approaches (Dhanpat et al., 2021), which have been shown to enhance innovative skills and workplace performance (Unsworth et al., 2016). Combining self-regulatory techniques with organisational interventions, such as training programmes, allows employees to align their behaviours with organisational goals while fostering their professional growth (Dhanpat et al., 2021).

Job crafting offers another significant avenue for fostering meaningful work. Employees play a central role in reshaping their job roles to better align with their skills and aspirations, ultimately contributing positively to organisational outcomes (Dhanpat, 2019). When employees identify misalignments between their roles and capabilities, they can make proactive changes to their tasks or work

environments, thereby increasing engagement and creating more fulfilling experiences (Sanchez-Cordona et al., 2020). Research suggests that granting employees autonomy in job crafting enables them to construct meaningful and inspiring work experiences, fostering a deeper sense of purpose (Berg et al., 2013).

At the organisational level, interventions such as employee development programmes and work design strategies play a vital role (Daniels et al., 2017). Employee development programmes enhance employees' skills and capacities, contributing to retention and organisational success (Nda & Fard, 2013). These programmes are often shaped by factors such as globalisation, competition and organisational change, which influence the career experiences sought by employees (Pinnington et al., 2022). Similarly, work design and job redesign are effective strategies for improving job quality. By modifying job characteristics, organisations can address employee needs and align tasks with organisational objectives (Daniels et al., 2017). Whether initiated by managers (top-down) or employees (bottom-up), redesigning work fosters engagement and satisfaction. Oldham and Fried (2016) suggest that structuring duties and activities to suit both organisational goals and employee strengths are integral to creating meaningful work experiences.

Research design

Research approach

A qualitative research approach was adopted in this study, suitable for generating detailed descriptions of social phenomena (Nguyen et al., 2021). The study focused on meaningful work for early-career professionals, aligning with qualitative research strengths in capturing experiences (Jackson et al., 2007). Qualitative research was particularly suitable here, offering clarity on participants' experiences, beliefs and organisational matters (Saunders et al., 2019).

Research philosophy

An interpretivist research philosophy was employed, detailing two research assumptions, namely ontology and epistemology. Ontology examines the nature of reality and influences what researchers study (Mauthner, 2020; Saunders et al., 2023). This study focused on uncovering the subjective reality of meaningful work for early-career professionals and its implications. Epistemology concerns how knowledge is acquired and evaluated (Mauthner, 2020). It defines how researchers understand and assess data quality (Saunders et al., 2023). Here, epistemology sought to determine whether meaningful work exists for early-career professionals and how to identify it.

Population and sample

Early-career professionals from diverse industries were selected using a non-probability purposive-convenience sampling method. Purposive sampling was used to ensure participants met clearly defined inclusion criteria aligned

with the study's aim (Bakkalbasioglu, 2020) to explore how early-career professionals experience and make sense of meaningful work in the first years of employment. Convenience sampling was used to recruit participants who were accessible to the researcher and willing to participate, such as those referred through professional networks.

Participants were required to:

- Have between 1 and 3 years of full-time work experience, ensuring they were beyond the new entrant stage but still in the early-career phase;
- Hold at least a university diploma or degree, demonstrating foundational professional training and
- Be employed in roles requiring independent task execution and exposure to organisational processes.

This ensured that participants could meaningfully reflect on their roles, emerging professional identity and perceptions of work. Individuals such as students, interns without full-time employment or professionals with more than 3 years of experience were excluded to maintain a focused early-career sample.

Although the inclusion criteria allowed for some flexibility across sectors and roles, participants were selected to ensure variation in professional fields, job levels and graduate programme exposure, factors considered influential in shaping the experience of meaningful work. This blend of purposive and convenience sampling allowed for the collection of rich, relevant and diverse data.

Table 1 presents the biographical profiles of the participants. The group comprised predominantly African female participants (seven out of 11 participants) with ages ranging from 22 years to 35 years. Most participants (nine out of 11) had at least 1 year of experience within the organisation, with some having up to 3 years. Educational qualifications ranged from national diplomas to advanced degrees, with four participants having completed a graduate programme. The job levels varied from unskilled or junior to middle management, reflecting a range of organisational experiences.

Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews that included open-ended questions, allowing the interviewer to explore and compare participants' views. The semi-structured format allows researchers to clarify responses through follow-up questions (Kallio et al., 2016). A standardised interview guide was developed, and the questions developed were based on achieving the research objectives of the study. Participants were contacted through email via the researchers' professional networks. Participants were asked a series of questions to explore their experiences of meaningful work. These included questions such as: What elements or aspects of your job make it feel meaningful to you? How have your expectations regarding the meaningfulness of your work changed since you started your career? What factors do you

TABLE 1: Biographical profile of participants.

Participant number	Age (years)	Gender	Race	Level	Tenure (years; month)	Qualification	Part of graduate programme
1	25	Female	Black African person	Junior	3 ; 0	National Diploma in Public Relations and Communications	No
2	27	Male	Black African person	Graduate Intern	1 ; 8	BA in Human Resource Management	Yes
3	26	Female	Black African person	Entry Level	1 ; 10	BA in Human Resource Management	No
4	33	Female	Black African person	Junior Manager	1 ; 9	BTech in Human Resource Management	Yes
5	32	Female	Black African person	Junior Manager	0 ; 11	BTech in Human Resource Management	No
6	22	Female	Black African person	Junior Manager	0 ; 11	BCom in Business Management	No
7	26	Female	Black African person	Middle	3 ; 0	Advanced Diploma in Safety Management	No
8	34	Male	Black African person	Junior Site Engineer	1 ; 8	National Diploma in Civil Engineering	No
9	26	Female	Black African person	Middle	3 ; 0	Degree in Diagnostic Radiation	Yes
10	35	Male	Black African person	Middle	3 ; 0	Advanced Diploma in Human Resource Management	Yes
11	26	Female	Indian person	Junior	2 ; 0	Diploma in Human Resource Management	No

believe contribute most to your sense of meaningful work? All interviews were audio recorded, with video features disabled to ensure participant anonymity. Interviews lasted between 45 min and 60 min on average and were scheduled at times convenient for participants. Two researchers attended each interview: one facilitated the discussion, while the other documented field notes and provided additional support. Following the interviews, one researcher transcribed the audio recordings, and the other reviewed the transcripts while cross-checking with the recordings to ensure accuracy. Both researchers remained visible to participants throughout the process to foster engagement and transparency.

Data analysis and interpretation

Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This was considered suitable as thematic analysis systematically organises and interprets qualitative data to uncover patterns and themes (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Initially, we familiarised ourselves with the data through transcription, repeated review and note-taking to gain a deep understanding. In the second phase, data were systematically codified into categories by identifying key aspects across the dataset. Next, codes were grouped into potential themes and sub-themes, organising data into meaningful patterns. Themes were then reviewed and refined at two levels: firstly to ensure logical coherence and secondly to address inconsistencies and refine alignment with the data. Subsequently, themes were defined, named and examined for relationships or sub-themes to enhance clarity and comprehension. Finally, a comprehensive report was produced, linking themes to evidence and demonstrating their relevance to the research findings.

Ensuring quality in data

To ensure the quality of qualitative research data, trustworthiness was evaluated based on the criteria outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985): credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. These criteria provided a comprehensive framework to maintain data reliability and integrity. Credibility was established by ensuring that participants verified recorded data, ensuring an accurate representation of their input. An audit trail documented each step of the research process, enhancing transparency (Cope, 2014). Dependability, which addresses the consistency of

data, was reinforced through peer review, where researchers reviewed and approved the recorded information to confirm accuracy (Stahl et al., 2020). Transferability, reflecting the relevance of findings to other contexts, was supported by providing sufficient detail to allow readers to understand and relate to the research findings (Cope, 2014). Confirmability, which ensures objectivity, was achieved by presenting participants' responses verbatim, avoiding researcher bias, and clearly explaining the data analysis and conclusions (Amankwaa, 2016; Elo et al., 2014). These measures collectively ensured that the research findings were credible, reliable and applicable while maintaining a high standard of trustworthiness.

Ethical considerations

Adhering to ethical considerations is essential in research to protect participants and maintain data integrity (Arifin, 2018). The study followed rigorous ethical protocols, receiving approval from the University of Johannesburg's research ethics committee (ethical clearance number IPPM-2024-891(H)). Participants, through an informed consent, were informed about the study's purpose, objectives and voluntary nature, including their right to withdraw at any stage without repercussions. Consent was obtained from the individual participants through written forms detailing their rights and the study's scope. They were also briefed on the audio recording of interviews and given opportunities to ask questions or voice concerns.

Confidentiality was prioritised by anonymising participant responses and assuring them that their identities would remain protected. Participation had no bearing on their employment or organisational relationships. To further safeguard privacy, the recordings were stored in password-protected folders accessible only to the research team.

Results

The study aimed to explore how early-career professionals find meaning in their work. Through thematic analysis of the data collected, five key themes and 15 sub-themes were identified: perceptions and definitions of meaningful work, factors contributing to meaningful work, personal values and meaningful work, strategies and interventions for enhancing meaningful work and challenges with coping mechanisms. Table 2 summarises these themes and

sub-themes, offering a structured overview of the factors influencing individuals' experiences and interpretations of meaningful work.

Theme 1: Dimensions of meaningful work

This theme explores how early-career professionals cultivate meaningful work through their contributions, personal fulfilment and social connections in the workplace. The findings highlight three key processes: Creating Impact and Purpose, Experiencing Personal Growth and Fulfilment and Building Supportive Workplace Relationships.

Sub-theme 1: Creating impact and purpose

This sub-theme reflects how participants derive meaning from work that contributes positively to others, whether through client success, community development or workplace safety. Meaningful work is cultivated when individuals see their efforts leading to tangible outcomes and making a difference in their respective fields. Participant (1) shared:

'Meaningful, meaningful work, to me, means contributing positively to my client's success and making a tangible impact through communications.' (Participant 1)

Similarly, Participant 8 found meaning in work that improves community well-being:

'It's going to change the livelihood of the communities, it's going to make people get water, so it's my responsibility to make sure that I build them to the best of my ability.' (Participant 8)

Other participants highlighted the role of their work in shaping people's lives:

'I found meaningfulness in doing something like changing people's lives, for example being in a recruitment team, developing people in terms of providing training, customer service and also having interpersonal skills.' (Participant 5)

'What makes it meaningful for me is playing a part or a role in ensuring that people understand that we work in a hazardous environment, there are risks, and we have to be on our toes each and every single day.' (Participant 7)

Sub-theme 2: Experiencing personal growth and fulfilment

Participants cultivated meaningful work through a sense of personal growth, job satisfaction and alignment with their purpose. Work that fosters psychological well-being, skill development and a sense of accomplishment was considered meaningful:

'Doing work that I feel hore [*that*] it's adding a positive vibe or a positive feeling to myself. So, whatever that I'm doing, if it's adding to the level of excitement about my career, I think that is meaningful.' (Participant 2)

For Participant 3, meaningful work was about:

'Just being content with the work that you do, knowing that you're serving your purpose and feeling psychologically safe in your workspace and being fulfilled.' (Participant 3)

TABLE 2: Themes, descriptions and sub-themes related to meaningful work.

Themes	Sub-theme	Description
1. Dimensions of meaningful work	Creating impact and purpose	Employees find value when their work contributes to a greater good and aligns with personal and organisational goals.
	Experiencing personal growth and fulfilment	Meaning arises when work provides opportunities for self-development, learning and a sense of achievement.
	Building supportive workplace relationships	Interpersonal connections and a sense of belonging at work enhance perceptions of meaningfulness.
2. Organisational enablers of meaningful work	Supportive leadership	Leaders who inspire, guide and empower contribute significantly to meaningful work experiences.
	Organisational values and culture	A culture that aligns with employees' values fosters a deeper connection to work.
	Growth and development opportunities	Access to continuous learning and career advancement reinforces work meaning.
	Structured mentorship	Formal mentoring structures support professional growth and promote meaningful career journeys.
3. Core workplace values and professional conduct	Ethical principles in practice	Upholding integrity and ethical behaviour in daily work reinforces meaning and purpose.
	Trust and confidentiality	A workplace built on trust ensures psychological safety and respect for privacy.
	Responsibility and support for others	Being accountable and offering help to colleagues contributes to a positive and meaningful work environment.
4. Enhancing work meaningfulness through supportive strategies	Goal-oriented planning	Clear, purposeful planning helps individuals align their work with broader objectives.
	Skill development and growth	Continuous upskilling empowers employees and enhances their engagement.
	Constructive feedback and communication	Regular, clear and helpful feedback improves performance and strengthens work connections.
	Mentorship and networking	Building networks and receiving guidance from mentors promote long-term career fulfilment.
5. Overcoming challenges and cultivating resilience	Navigating organisational change and work-life balance	Balancing change and personal demands requires adaptability and support structures.
	Communication gaps and delays in data processing	Addressing breakdowns in information flow is key to sustaining effective and meaningful work.
	Adapting to challenges and developing coping mechanisms	Resilience is built through learning to handle difficulties and persevere through setbacks.
	Fostering personal and professional growth for meaningful work	Turning challenges into growth opportunities contributes to sustained work meaningfulness.

Others reinforced the link between meaningful work and job satisfaction:

'Meaningful work drives job satisfaction more than ever, meaning it is an important component of creating a better workplace.' (Participant 4)

'The confidence that I have now speaking in front of people, I didn't have it. So, one thing that my job helps me with on a daily basis is to build up the courage to be able to speak and to address people. And I really love it.' (Participant 7)

Sub-theme 3: Building supportive workplace relationships

Social interactions, teamwork and shared professional values were central to how participants cultivated meaningful work. Strong workplace relationships and collaboration provided emotional support, guidance and collective purpose:

'I initially expected my work to involve creative expression and relationship-building, but I didn't fully grasp how impactful public relations could be on a brand's success and reputation.' (Participant 1)

Participant 2 highlighted the role of shared professional commitment:

'To have a team that shares the same sentiments about the importance of the job or the career that we are in, so it is, I expected my colleagues to have the same sentiments, to have to treat it as important as I feel it is to me.' (Participant 2)

Similarly, Participant 11 found meaning in contributing to collective success:

'Helping the team to succeed and knowing that we contribute to an overall success of the organisation.' (Participant 11)

Theme 2: Organisational enablers of meaningful work

This theme highlights the organisational elements that contribute to meaningful work, encompassing five key sub-themes: Supportive Leadership, Organisational Values and Culture, Growth and Development Opportunities, Structured Mentorship and Workplace Relationships and Communication.

Sub-theme 1: Supportive leadership

Support from leadership plays a crucial role in shaping employees' work experiences and fostering a sense of meaningfulness. Participants highlighted how managerial support enhances confidence, performance and career progression. Participant 1 and Participant 6 shared:

'The support has shaped the work that I do in every way possible. I've gotten so much support I don't think I would be where I am without all of that support.' (Participant 1)

'The support I got from my supervisor or the court manager, it was very helpful.' (Participant 6)

Similarly, Participant 4 and Participant 7 emphasised the importance of an open-door policy:

'Currently in the organisation I am working at, I have received support from my superior in the aspects that I am not familiar with like skills development, and leave administration, they have an open-door policy to help me to grow in my career.' (Participant 4)

'Management have ... fostered an open-door policy whereby we are urged to report issues or challenges that we come across without fear.' (Participant 7)

Sub-theme 2: Organisational culture

Organisational culture shapes the way an organisation operates and influences how employees experience their work. A strong culture fosters inclusivity, psychological and financial well-being and meaningful work. Participants highlighted aspects such as teamwork, collaboration, innovative thinking, recognition and open communication as key contributors to a positive workplace culture.

Participant 3 and Participant 10 shared:

'So they actively encourage things like diversity and inclusion, psychological safety, mental and financial well-being.' (Participant 3)

'The organisational culture is very inclusive and supportive. There is a strong emphasis on teamwork and collaboration.' (Participant 10)

Beyond inclusivity, the culture also prioritises meaningful work:

'When it comes to fostering meaningful work, I feel like that's something that they prioritise a lot.' (Participant 1)

However, Participant 6 described the culture as overwhelming:

'The culture of the organisation I work in, like the way we do things, how we handle the public, how we deal with the justices, how we render support to the judiciary. It's, it's overwhelming, honestly, not in a bad way, in a good way.' (Participant 6)

Recognition and communication were also highlighted as crucial cultural elements that contribute to workplace satisfaction. Participants valued environments where their contributions were acknowledged and where effective communication was encouraged:

'I think the people, the culture, knowing that the ideas that I contribute are being taken into consideration and just being recognised for the work that I do.' (Participant 3)

'So, communication really goes a long way in the work that I do. So, it's such a huge factor for me to find good ways to communicate, also to allow people to be comfortable in communicating challenges that they come across that relate to their well-being, that relate to their safety and their health.' (Participant 7)

A supportive culture also fosters relationship building and work-life balance:

'Building relationships with colleagues, the other one I could say regular feedback and opportunities for professional growth and career advancement, having a balance between work relationships and personal lives to prevent burnout and also maintain overall well-being.' (Participant 5)

Additionally, Participant 11 highlighted the role of innovative thinking and taking initiative in making work fulfilling:

'There is a lot of encouragement for innovative thinking and taking initiatives, which adds value to our work and makes it fulfilling.' (Participant 11)

Sub-theme 3: Growth and development opportunities

Access to training and development programmes enhances employees' skills, confidence and long-term career prospects, making work more meaningful. Participants expressed the value of certifications and professional development.

Participant 1 and Participant 4 shared:

'Recently I completed an SEO certificate and completed a content marketing certificate.' (Participant 1)

'I have just received training on the PERSAL system I managed to get a certificate which is an advantage when you apply for jobs in government.' (Participant 4)

Participant 10 reflected on continuous professional development:

'The continuous professional development sessions have helped me stay updated with industry trends and improve my performance.' (Participant 10)

Participant 7 shared their experience of employer-sponsored education:

'They do have bursaries that are available for employees. The course that I said I'm currently doing ... it has been fully paid by the organisation.' (Participant 7)

Sub-theme 4: Structured mentorship

Guidance from mentors significantly influences employees' career trajectories and enhances their sense of meaning at work. Participants highlighted the benefits of structured mentorship programmes, including regular feedback and skill development. Participant 3 described their mentorship experience:

'I've been put through the HDI programme, so it basically analyses your brain and personality, and this has assisted me in understanding myself and as a result of that, I'm able to be a better service renderer.' (Participant 3)

Participant 8 shared how mentorship contributes to their work efficiency:

'I've been given a mentor. They conduct KPIs, like, on a three-month basis. They check the activities and tasks that I'm given, am I completing them in time, the software that I'm using, am I using them effectively and efficiently.' (Participant 8)

Participant 10 reflected on the impact of senior mentorship:

'A standout initiative was the mentorship programme that was paired with me, with my senior leader, who provided valuable guidance and insights that have greatly influenced my career growth and job satisfaction.' (Participant 10)

Theme 3: Core workplace values and professional conduct

The findings revealed that individuals' core values significantly influence their professional conduct and sense of meaningful work. Three key sub-themes emerged: Ethical

Principles in Practice, Trust and Confidentiality and Responsibility and Support for Others.

Sub-theme 1: Ethical principles in practice

Having strong ethical values, such as integrity and honesty, plays a crucial role in professional settings. These values ensure that individuals remain truthful about their capabilities, maintain ethical standards and produce high-quality work.

Participant 7 and Participant 10 emphasised the importance of integrity:

'There's that great value of integrity ... I have to uphold ethical standards and have to be honest and transparent in all my interactions at work.' (Participant 7)

'My personal values such as integrity, teamwork and continuous improvement closely align with my work.' (Participant 10)

Similarly, Participant 2 and Participant 6 highlighted honesty as a core value:

'My personal values, basically my personal values are I would say honesty and loyalty ... my job requires those values.' (Participant 2)

'I value more honesty and loyalty ... me being honest as one of my personal values really assists me in dealing with that aspect of my work.' (Participant 6)

Sub-theme 2: Trust and confidentiality

Trust and confidentiality are fundamental to maintaining a respectful and secure work environment. Employees who uphold these values are trusted with sensitive information and contribute to a culture of respect and professionalism.

Participant 6 and Participant 11 spoke about the significance of confidentiality:

'I have access to information that is of high confidentiality.' (Participant 6)

'With my personal value, I value more honesty and loyalty ... some information is very confidential.' (Participant 6)

'I always make sure that there is respect between the two of us as well as confidentiality ... I believe a lot in confidentiality.' (Participant 11)

Respect was also emphasised, particularly in relation to cultural values:

'In our black culture o tlhompha batho ba bagolo [*you respect the elders*]. When it also gets to the work environment, you, by all means, try to help the elderly people first.' (Participant 9)

Sub-theme 3: Responsibility and support for others

Taking responsibility for one's actions and providing support to others enhances both professional growth and job satisfaction. Many participants linked their personal values to a sense of duty towards others.

Participant 3 reflected on balancing discipline with compassion:

'The work that I do requires one to have a heart for people, but also to maintain discipline and follow the law and rules. So, that aligns greatly with my personal values of just being kind and dependable, but also being assertive and accountable.' (Participant 3)

Similarly, Participant 2 stressed the alignment between personal values and job expectations:

'So, with those personal values, they align perfectly because my job requires those values, for one to have those values. So, I would say they align perfectly.' (Participant 2)

Participant 5 connected integrity and honesty to the value of helping others:

'The first one is integrity and honesty. The second one, I would say it's helping others ... aligns more with my values in terms of helping other people to learn what was taught to me.' (Participant 5)

Lastly, Participant 7 highlighted empathy and compassion as essential workplace values:

'I care about the well-being and the safety of others ... sometimes I have to demonstrate empathy to people and compassion to people.' (Participant 7)

Theme 4: Enhancing work meaningfulness through supportive strategies

The findings on strategies and interventions for enhancing meaningful work highlighted four key sub-themes: Goal-Oriented Planning, Skill Development and Growth, Constructive Feedback and Communication and Mentorship and Networking.

Sub-theme 1: Goal-oriented planning

Setting clear goals and planning effectively offers employees a sense of direction and purpose, helping them stay focused on achieving their objectives. This sub-theme explored how goal setting contributes to finding meaning in work.

Participant 2 emphasised the importance of planning:

'I think planning the work, planning the work, and yeah, just always planning ahead. Always staying ahead of the curve, like making sure that everything plays out in a sequence, even though sometimes you can get interrupted in your rhythm of work, but always getting back to planning it, then you always get back on your path of doing well in whatever that you have been tasked.' (Participant 2)

Participant 5 further supported the significance of goal setting:

'First thing I would say is setting clear goals. Establishing a clear achievable goal which will help me to see the progress and understand the impact of my work.' (Participant 5)

Participant 6 shared a similar perspective on goal-oriented planning:

'I think it's my ability to be able to say, okay, this to deal with things according to the deadline. So, okay. If I put, okay, this is of

high importance. I have to deal with this first. So, it assists me in adding value to my job and it makes it easy.' (Participant 6)

Sub-theme 2: Skill development and growth

Training and development initiatives play a vital role in equipping individuals with the necessary skills to perform their work effectively. Participants highlighted the importance of continuous learning, particularly for early-career professionals.

Participant 4 expressed the need for training programmes:

'I think they should provide training to the new employees so that they can familiarise themselves with the new environment, the new culture in the department and also the policies. It can be maybe 2 to 3 weeks of training so that they can familiarise themselves with the new department or new organisation and their duties as well.' (Participant 4)

Participant 5 emphasised both technical and soft skills development:

'The other one I would say is training and development. This is by offering training programmes that will cover the technical skills as well as the soft skills. For example, Microsoft, Word, and Excel are relevant to their roles, ensuring that they are well-equipped and ready to perform their duties.' (Participant 5)

Participant 1 also stressed the importance of professional development:

'I think maybe create programmes that make it a point to ... develop you professionally, you know, like, especially because then you start those and not the things that you're thinking about ... within the first three months of your employment, there's something that you must have achieved, not just in terms of your role, meeting targets know, but in terms of developing yourself and your professional.' (Participant 1)

Sub-theme 3: Constructive feedback and communication

Effective feedback and communication are crucial for fostering engagement and building positive work relationships. This sub-theme explored how feedback and open communication enhance employees' sense of meaningful work.

Participant 5 highlighted the value of seeking regular feedback:

'The second one I would say it's seeking feedback. Regular feedback from colleagues or supervisors can help me see the value of my contributions in the organisation.' (Participant 5)

Participant 11 focused on the importance of communication in leadership:

'It's communication and leadership between HR manager and the team members.' (Participant 11)

Participant 7 echoed the sentiment about feedback:

'And also getting regular feedback, you know, from the team, acknowledging achievements, you know, we work so many hours and there hasn't been an incident, there hasn't been an injury. We have to applaud such achievements or targets.' (Participant 7)

Sub-theme 4: Mentorship and networking

Providing mentorship and networking opportunities is essential for supporting early-career professionals. This sub-theme focused on the benefits of mentorship and networking in fostering professional growth and connection.

Participant 3 and Participant 5 highlighted the value of networking:

'I think promoting cross-functional projects so that they can identify and encourage the unique skills that young professionals have to offer and also just providing people with networking opportunities.' (Participant 3)

'The other one I would say is network opportunities whereby creating opportunities for early-career professionals to connect with colleagues across the organisation through team building, social events.' (Participant 5)

Participant 2 suggested improvements for internship programmes:

'To properly induct employees in the workplace and put up better infrastructure for interns, like find out what would make the job easier for the interns and take whatever they have specified it would make their job easier and put it in place because it's different for every intern.' (Participant 2)

Participant 8 reflected on the importance of mentorship for career development:

'Young professionals need to get mentored, you know, I remember at first it was hard for me to, when I first got to site, it was hard for me to jell well in the team. So I believe proper mentorship is very important.' (Participant 8)

Theme 5: Overcoming challenges and cultivating resilience

This theme explores the challenges faced by early-career professionals in finding meaning in their work and the strategies they use to overcome these obstacles. It captures how personal and professional growth, effective coping strategies and adaptability play a crucial role in navigating workplace difficulties.

Sub-theme 1: Navigating organisational change and work-life balance

Organisational changes, particularly structural shifts like retrenchments, as well as the struggle to maintain a healthy work-life balance, emerged as significant challenges. Participants highlighted the emotional and psychological toll that changes in the organisation had on their sense of job satisfaction and meaning in their roles.

Participant 10 shared the following:

'Key challenges, like I indicated in my progression in terms of promotion, there was the section 189 whereby people were laid off. But I think the most key one was dealing with the organisational changes, like section 189 retrenchment. But managing work-life balance and occasionally feeling that the efforts were not fully recognised or impacted fully so.' (Participant 10)

Participant 1 mentioned:

'Key challenges at first was having clients who I feel like did not align with what I was doing, but that's not something that you have much control over because sometimes the company will pick up clients as they need to. Another key thing would be, key challenges to what?.' (Participant 1)

Participant 3 spoke about leadership challenges:

'I only have one which is kind of being under the leadership of someone who has an autocratic leadership style that can make it umm yeah, it's kind of difficult to manoeuvre sometimes. So, you feel unheard unrecognised at times.' (Participant 3)

Participant 7 highlighted administrative burdens:

'You know, sometimes the administrative part of the work that I do, you'd find that you can literally spend the whole day in an office because there's just too much admin work.' (Participant 7)

Sub-theme 2: Communication gaps and delays in data processing

Ineffective communication and delays in the receipt of critical data emerged as a significant barrier to meaningful work. Participants emphasised that waiting on information and dealing with unresponsive colleagues could diminish their ability to perform tasks efficiently, affecting their overall job satisfaction.

Participant 11 shared:

'Sometimes, lack of managers giving us our data on time like our inputs on time that would be one of the challenges that gives me less meaning in my work because then I'm literally waiting on a manager to give me my input and letting me know when someone started on time so I could be more prepared when I recruit a new employee. It makes me look incompetent in my job.' (Participant 11)

Participant 6 noted:

'The challenge that I find in finding meaning to my work is dealing with difficult clients, people who find it difficult to understand or to listen to the directives that I'm giving them. So, that is a challenge.' (Participant 6)

Participant 5 mentioned technological challenges:

'The key challenges that I faced in finding meaning in my work was the time when I was working as an HR practitioner. We were working on the Nasi Ispani project, which is the recruitment process. This is where the community had to register online in order to apply for a specific post. But sometimes, the system would just crash or send out an error message.' (Participant 5)

Sub-theme 3: Adapting to challenges and developing coping mechanisms

Participants shared a range of coping strategies they employed to overcome workplace challenges, such as maintaining open communication with superiors, focusing on professional development and taking proactive measures to address problems as they arose.

Participant 10 explained:

'I've managed them by seeking feedback. I always prioritise the task and I always maintain open communication with my superiors and the team. Additionally, I always focus on continuous personal and professional development, which helped me to stay motivated and finding this meaningful in work.' (Participant 10)

Participant 11 described her proactive approach:

'What I do is I would ask a manager in advance to send me an email with the history of the person's name and initials with their ID and then I will prepare all the induction documents in advance.' (Participant 11)

Participant 5 and Participant 9 shared how they adapted to unexpected challenges:

'So the first thing since the recruitment system crashed, we would move to the manual part, there we had to print out the Z83 form as well as the candidate CVs, those who did not have printing machines, we managed to print the CVs as well as Z83 to complete manually.' (Participant 5)

'With difficult patients, the aim is not to snap but to just smile and pretend as if you've got this under control.' (Participant 9)

Sub-theme 4: Fostering personal and professional growth for meaningful work

The pursuit of personal and professional growth was identified as a key factor in overcoming workplace challenges. Participants discussed how mentoring, self-care and developing positive relationships with supervisors played vital roles in maintaining job satisfaction and work meaning.

Participant 4 explained how mentorship contributed to her growth:

'I have managed to work with my superior to learn other HR functions like currently I am receiving mentoring on leave administration.' (Participant 4)

Participant 3 shared how building a positive relationship with leadership helped:

'I have tried to build a relationship with my leader. I avoid conflict. I just focus on my work, and I try to communicate with as much clarity as I possibly can.' (Participant 3)

Participant 1 spoke about self-motivation and mental health:

'For me, I've managed them personally, like I don't think the organisation played a role in me, you know? But umm, with me it involved a process of working on my mental health, working on my health, my health and well-being *mina self* [*myself*]. You know to be able to get to a point where I change my perspective and motivate myself, it's more especially because we are flexible, we are a hybrid company, motivating myself to keep that positive perspective and find meaning in the work that I do.' (Participant 1)

Participant 8 emphasised advice from a mentor:

'My mentor told me that I need to take it easy on me, get to know people and then eventually that fear will go away.' (Participant 8)

Discussion

Theme 1: Dimensions of meaningful work

The study reveals that early-career professionals cultivate meaningful work through three primary processes: creating impact and purpose, experiencing personal growth and fulfilment and building supportive workplace relationships. These dimensions align with contemporary literature on meaningful work and highlight its role in enhancing job satisfaction, engagement and well-being (Liona & Yurniardi, 2020; Rothausen & Henderson, 2019). The findings highlight the importance of work that contributes positively to others, whether through client success, community development or safety. Studies have indicated the significance of prosocial motivation in fostering meaningful work (Abid et al., 2018; Liao et al., 2022). Participants in this study noted the value of seeing tangible outcomes and the positive impact of their efforts, reinforcing the notion that meaningful work is derived from contributing to a larger societal or organisational goal (Bassi et al., 2013; Lysova et al., 2019).

Experiencing personal growth and fulfilment emerged as a crucial factor in cultivating meaningful work. Participants linked meaningfulness to job satisfaction (Bailey et al., 2019a), skill development and a sense of accomplishment (Rothausen & Henderson, 2019). It is known that work that promotes personal growth and psychological well-being leads to greater job satisfaction (Autin et al., 2020). Studies on psychological engagement suggest that meaningful connections with colleagues enhance one's sense of purpose and belonging in the workplace (Filstad et al., 2019; Maslach & Banks, 2017). The findings also support Wrzesniewski and Dutton's (2001) concept of job crafting, where individuals actively shape their roles to align with personal interests and strengths and in doing so find meaning in their work (Dhanpat et al., 2019).

The findings highlight that building supportive workplace relationships highlights the role of teamwork, social interactions and shared professional values. Positive relationships at work were found to foster emotional support and a sense of belonging (Waller, 2020). The importance of collaborative environments in cultivating meaningful work is also emphasised and suggests that social connections enhance both job satisfaction and work meaningfulness (Lysova et al., 2019). The satisfaction derived from meaningful work supports the view that it is inherently fulfilling and enhances overall job satisfaction (Allan et al., 2019; Kulkarni et al., 2018).

Theme 2: Organisational enablers of meaningful work

The organisational elements that foster meaningful work are pivotal in shaping employees' work experiences and their sense of purpose within the workplace (Asik-Dizdar & Esen, 2016). Findings of the study highlighted key enablers, including supportive leadership, organisational culture, growth and development opportunities, structured

mentorship and positive workplace relationships. These factors align with existing literature that highlights the significant role of organisational support in cultivating a meaningful work environment (Bhatnagar & Aggarwal, 2020).

Supportive leadership emerged as a significant factor, with participants emphasising how managerial support positively impacted their confidence, performance and career progression. Leadership behaviours significantly influence employee engagement and job satisfaction (Wirawan et al., 2020). Open-door policies and continuous support from managers enable employees to feel valued, fostering a sense of belonging and commitment (Waller, 2020). In line with Schein's (2010) work on organisational culture, the study also reveals that a supportive, inclusive and collaborative culture strengthens the meaningfulness of work by promoting psychological safety and work-life balance.

Moreover, opportunities for growth and development, particularly through training and professional development programmes, are crucial enablers of meaningful work (Budiadi et al., 2024; Duffield et al., 2014). Participants highlighted how certifications and continuous learning opportunities contribute to both personal and professional growth, reinforcing the positive relationship between skill development and work meaningfulness (Fletcher, 2019). The availability of structured mentorship programmes also played a significant role in providing employees with the guidance and feedback necessary to grow in their careers (Mcilongo & Strydom, 2021). Mentorship positively impacts career advancement and job satisfaction (Balinda, 2023), an idea echoed by participants who shared how their mentors helped them align their professional goals with organisational objectives. When organisations provide resources, guidance and feedback, they create an environment where meaningful work can flourish (Kulkarni et al., 2018).

Theme 3: Core workplace values and professional conduct

Core workplace values such as integrity, trust, responsibility and support for others are essential in guiding professional conduct and contributing to meaningful work experiences. Weeks and Schaffert (2019) suggest that when personal values align with organisational values, employees are more likely to find meaning in their work. This theme highlights the importance of aligning personal values with job roles, as employees who integrate ethical principles into their work are more likely to perceive their roles as meaningful. Values-driven employees are more engaged and find deeper meaning in their work because they can connect their personal principles to their professional responsibilities (Kolodinsky et al., 2018).

The emphasis on integrity, particularly honesty and transparency, was strongly reflected by participants who described how these values guided their professional conduct. The alignment between personal values and work has been well documented, suggesting that when employees perceive

their work as consistent with their core values, they are more likely to find it meaningful (Widodo & Suryosukmono, 2021). This alignment reinforces the idea that meaningful work is deeply personal and connected to one's identity and moral compass (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009; Steger, 2016).

Additionally, responsibility and support for others were found to significantly influence employees' sense of job satisfaction and professional fulfilment. Participants expressed that taking responsibility for their actions and helping colleagues were integral to their work experiences. These findings are consistent with Kahn's (1990) theory of engagement, which posits that employees who feel responsible for their actions and those of others are more likely to be engaged and find meaning in their work. The sense of duty and support for others enhances both individual job satisfaction and collective organisational well-being (Hennicks et al., 2022), fostering a collaborative environment where work becomes more fulfilling (Albrecht et al., 2021). Research suggests that such values-driven work fosters a deeper sense of purpose and satisfaction, contributing to overall job meaningfulness (Soren & Ryff, 2023).

Theme 4: Enhancing work meaningfulness through supportive strategies

The findings revealed that goal-oriented planning emerged as a foundational strategy for driving meaning in work. Participants consistently associated planning and clear goal setting with increased direction, alignment and motivation. This aligns with research suggesting that goal clarity promotes meaningfulness by linking daily tasks to broader organisational and personal objectives (Allan et al., 2022). When individuals understand the why behind their efforts, they are more likely to experience a sense of purpose. The importance of clear and achievable goals aligns with goal-setting theory, which posits that specific, challenging goals lead to higher performance and greater work meaningfulness (Dhanpat et al., 2021). Planning and organising work effectively also contribute to a sense of control and accomplishment, both of which are key to meaningful work (Dhanpat et al., 2021).

Skill development and growth were highlighted as other critical enablers. Participants emphasised the importance of onboarding, continuous learning and both technical and soft skill development. These findings resonate with recent calls for developmental job resources as a pathway to meaningful work (Albrecht et al., 2021), especially for emerging professionals navigating new roles (Martela & Riekkki, 2023). Opportunities to grow professionally not only enhance performance but also promote self-worth and long-term commitment to the organisation (Mackay, 2017).

Participants described how regular, appreciative feedback and transparent communication improved their awareness of impact and contribution (Lee et al., 2021). Literature supports this, noting that feedback mechanisms are vital for reinforcing employees' role significance and promoting

a sense of mattering at work (Bailey et al., 2019b). Open communication from leaders fosters psychological safety and connection, further anchoring meaningful work experiences (Paulus, 2023). Effective communication fosters transparency and trust, vital for creating an environment where employees feel their work is meaningful (Imran & Khattak, 2022).

Mentorship and networking were identified as further interventions that organisations can use to improve meaningful work. Participants advocated for formal mentorship structures, peer guidance and collaborative exposure. These strategies are consistent with findings that relational support enhances meaningfulness (Lin et al., 2021). For early-career professionals, mentorship serves both as a developmental and motivational resource (Kase et al., 2019), reinforcing a coherent professional identity (Simmonds & Dicks, 2018).

Theme 5: Overcoming challenges and cultivating resilience

The findings of the study highlight the complex realities early-career professionals face as they seek meaningful work amidst workplace adversity. The findings reflect the dynamic interplay between organisational structures, personal resources and adaptive strategies that contribute to resilience and purpose at work. In line with recent research, the experiences of participants show that cultivating meaningful work is not solely about job design or leadership but also about how individuals navigate and grow through challenges (Bailey et al., 2019a; Trevor-Roberts, 2020).

The findings revealed that navigating organisational change and work-life balance was cited as a source of disconnection from meaning. Structural shifts such as retrenchments, leadership tensions and administrative overload disrupted employees' sense of control and recognition. These sentiments resonate with prior findings that organisational instability and autocratic leadership can hinder the psychological conditions (Lepisto & Pratt, 2017; Schoel et al., 2015) needed for meaningfulness, such as autonomy, relatedness and impact (Bailey et al., 2019b). Moreover, the tension between professional demands and personal well-being echoes broader discussions on the need to support work-life balance to sustain engagement and meaning (Chalofsky & Cavallaro, 2019).

Communication gaps and delays in data processing emerged as practical, yet deeply consequential barriers. Delayed feedback, unresponsive colleagues and unreliable systems not only frustrated participants but also eroded their sense of competence and contribution. Meaningful work is often undermined when employees are cut off from timely, relevant information needed to perform effectively (Albrecht et al., 2023; Burghardt & Möller, 2023). Effective communication is not only a functional need but also a relational mechanism for signalling value and inclusion, needed for meaningful work (Robertson et al., 2020).

The findings revealed that resilience is actively cultivated through strategies such as proactive communication, task

reprioritisation and behavioural flexibility. These strategies reflect key elements of positive organisational behaviour, particularly job crafting and self-leadership, which help individuals shape their work experiences under pressure (Costantini & Weintraub, 2022). Participants' willingness to take initiative, seek feedback and learn from setbacks supports the idea that resilience enhances both individual well-being and perceptions of meaningful work (Kuntz et al., 2017; Mahmoud & Rothenberger, 2019).

The findings further revealed that mentorship, self-care and supportive leader relationships were key buffers against the stressors identified. Relational support and opportunities for self-development are central to sustaining meaning, particularly during challenging career transitions (Jakubiak & Tomlinson, 2020). Importantly, participants did not always rely on formal organisational support, indicating that self-directed growth and reflective practices are also essential in meaning-making processes (Valqueresma, 2024).

Implications for practice

To foster an environment where early-career professionals can thrive, HR practitioners must focus on enhancing the onboarding process to create a positive initial experience (Björklund et al., 2023; Jeske & Olson, 2022). This includes clearly defining expectations and responsibilities and aligning tasks with personal values, enabling employees to make a meaningful impact (Lysova et al., 2019). A supportive work environment tailored to their needs, coupled with structured mentorship, continuous learning and skill development opportunities, fosters personal growth and is an essential driver of work meaningfulness (McIlongo & Strydom, 2021). Line managers play a significant role in this developmental process. Their leadership style should emphasise support, mentorship, accessibility and fostering psychological safety to help employees navigate challenges with resilience. At the individual level, employees must actively engage with their roles and take ownership of their career development by seeking feedback, asking questions and immersing themselves in the organisation's activities. This proactive approach not only helps them adapt but also cultivates a sense of purpose, increasing job satisfaction and long-term retention (Lin et al., 2021; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Ultimately, HR practices that integrate job crafting and relational support contribute to a meaningful work experience, reinforcing engagement, satisfaction and retention of early-career talent.

Limitations and recommendations for future research

Several limitations require acknowledgement. This study examined early-career professionals across multiple industries, providing broad insights into their experiences. However, the diverse organisational contexts necessitate caution when interpreting and generalising findings.

Most participants held Human Resource Management qualifications, which may limit the broader applicability of

findings. Different professions may experience distinct drivers of meaningful work. Future research should examine other fields to understand how industry context influences these perceptions.

Although our sample provided valuable insights, future studies would benefit from greater demographic diversity to capture broader perspectives on meaningful work experiences. Future research could adopt a more targeted approach by examining early-career professionals within specific industries or organisational settings. Investigating, particular sectors, financial services, healthcare, technology or education, may reveal unique challenges and opportunities influencing meaningful work experiences. This focus would provide practitioners and managers with sector-relevant insights into fostering meaningful work.

While this study offers in-depth qualitative insights into early-career experiences, it does not establish causal relationships or statistically significant trends. Future research could employ quantitative methodologies to examine associations between meaningful work and key outcomes such as job satisfaction, organisational commitment or turnover intentions. Survey-based studies could quantify these relationships across larger, more diverse samples, enhancing generalisability and testing statistical significance.

Longitudinal research could investigate how meaningful work perceptions evolve as professionals advance their careers. Tracking changes over time would reveal how career progression or organisational changes influence meaningful experiences. Finally, as this study was conducted in South Africa, findings may reflect local contexts. Future research could explore how cultural and geographical factors influence meaningful work perceptions across different regions.

Conclusion

This study defines and measures early-career professionals' perceptions of meaningful work. It finds that these professionals perceive meaningful work as a sense of personal fulfilment and satisfaction in the workplace. The results highlight that meaningful work is shaped by factors such as personal fulfilment, organisational support and alignment with values like integrity and respect. Participants emphasised the importance of goal setting, training, feedback and mentorship in enhancing job satisfaction and fostering a sense of purpose.

Future research should investigate how industry-specific factors influence perceptions of meaningful work by comparing sectors such as healthcare, technology and engineering. This would assess the transferability of these insights across fields. Additionally, employing quantitative methodologies, including longitudinal studies, could deepen our understanding of how perceptions of meaningful work evolve over time and their effect on key employee outcomes such as job satisfaction and organisational commitment.

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Authors' contributions

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, N.D., upon reasonable request.

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