The Meaning of Work from the Nigerian Perspective

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Abstract

The concept of work is significant for a lot of people, considering the time that individuals devote to work in their lives, the numerous functions which it accomplishes for them and the fact that work is intertwined with other important aspects of daily life such as family, leisure, religion, and community life (England & Whiteley, 1990). This paper explores extant perspectives on the three patterns under the notion of work: a job, a career and a call (Wrzesniewski *et al*., 1997), and other conceptual perspectives on the meaning of work. It provides further valuable insights to understanding of how employees find and create meaning and meaningfulness in their work. It explores the work orientation of Nigerians from two prominent patterns of disposition to work. (*i.e deep work attachment and instrumental work attitude*). Findings from our review show that; lack of enthusiasm and deep work attachment permeates the work disposition of many Nigerians, who see their job as dull, toilsome, irritating, risky or dangerous. The care-free attitude of most Nigerian workers towards work has hampered human capital development in most organizations, considering the fact that poor quality work declines productivity and cripples development in all ramifications. In Nigeria, and most parts of Africa, most of the people clamor for gainful employment, but do not want to work. These categories of people are more interested in success without hard work, promotion without responsibility, result without process, and credence without work.

Keywords: Work, Self, Value, Orientation, Motivation, Belief

1. Introduction

The concept of work central in many cultures. It is important and significant for a lot of people, considering the time that individuals devote to work in their lives, the numerous functions which it accomplishes for them and the fact that work is intertwined with other important aspects of daily life, such as: family, leisure, religion, and community life (England & Whiteley, 1990). When one thinks of work, one often thinks of a job. But from the viewpoint of Morin (2004), work is far more than a job; Morin contends that, although work certainly provides for basic subsistence needs and decent living conditions, this is not its only function. Work is, above all, an activity through which an individual fits into the world, creates new relations, uses his talents, learn, grow and develop his identity and nurture a sense of belonging. To work is to exert effort in order to make something, to achieve something, to produce a desired effect. (Jankélévitch, 1980).

In specific terms, the work instinct is associated with the 'pleasure that provides the opportunity to achieve something, to surpass oneself, to exercise one's imagination and intelligence, to become a better person, to know oneself, to meet other people, to help people, to feel competent and powerful, to be effective. Thus, work is a major activity for human beings. It corresponds to the motivation to demonstrate one's existence, to transcend one's own death by leaving traces of one's existence'. (Morin, 2004:4). The notion of work has several definitions; however, they all bother on the idea of a *purposeful activity.* This notion in general terms refers to expending energy through a set of coordinated activities aimed at producing something useful (Morin, 2004).

Work is viewed from sociological perspective as a productive human activity that creates something of value, either goods or services (Andersen and Taylor, 2007). Work may take different forms. It may be paid or unpaid; it may be performed inside or outside the home, it may have physical or mental labour or both (Andersen and Taylor, 2007). Under the sociological definition of work, housework, though unpaid is defined as work. Thus, it is recognized as an important part of the concept of productivity of a society. Furthermore, work may be pleasant or unpleasant, and may or may not be associated with monetary exchanges.

European Journal of Business and Management
www.iiste.org
ISSN 2222-1905 (Paper) ISSN 2222-2839 (Online)
Vol.5, No.22, 2013

Generally, there are three patterns under the notion of work: a job, a career and a call (Wrzesniewski *et al.*, 1997). This paper will explore these patterns and other perspectives on the meaning of work.

2. The Meaning Of Work

2.1. Exploring The Meaning Of Work Through 'Self'

Self has been considered a major determinant of many kinds of behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs (Bandura, 1989) at workplace. Self as a meaning of work typically implies the self-concept (Bono & Judge, 2003), which is the totality of a person's thought and feelings that have reference to himself as an object (Rosenberg, 1979). Self as a source of the meaning of work is classified into three categories. These include: (1) values, (2) motivations, and (3) beliefs about work. The three categories of self are discussed below.

2.2. Values

Values are the products of cultural, institutional, and personal forces acting upon the individual, that in turn have consequences of their own (Brief & Nord, 1990). Work values, could be seen as 'the end states people desire and feel they ought to be able to realize through working' (Nord *et al*., 1990: 21). Work values vary amongst individuals, and it is also a reflection of the influence of social norms, interpersonal interactions, and work experiences (Locke & Taylor, 1990; Roberson, 1990). Individual work values can both shape and be shaped by their experiences at work (Locke & Taylor, 1990). On a similar note, work values are purported to have a 'mutually causal relationship with the meanings that individuals attach to their work' (Nord *et al.,* 1990), both resulting from the meanings societies attach to work and acting as a source of meaning individuals draw from in their work.

Considering the foregoing, value is seen as a source of work meaning and as a part of the mechanisms that depicts how work becomes meaningful. Values could be categorized into broad *intrinsic/extrinsic value orientation* (Roberson, 1990), and also to more *specific categories of values*, e.g., material outcomes vs. achievement vs. a sense of purpose vs. social relationships vs. self-concept enhancement and maintenance (Locke & Taylor, 1990), *to a single predominant cultural value system,* like the Protestant work ethic (Roberson, 1990).

In order to study work meanings, studies posits that individuals may self-select into occupations that align with their personal value profiles (Gandal *et al.,* 2005). On a similar note, Locke and Taylor (1990) suggest a cyclical process whereby values influence occupational choices, and the experiences of work in those occupations reinforce those values. Through the application of cross-cultural lens to the role of values in the meaning of work, the *Work Importance Study* (Super & Šverko, 1995) discovered that, the fulfillment of personal potential, or self-realization, was an important value for a majority of respondents. Thus values play a vital role in shaping the meanings people make of their work (Brief & Nord, 1990b).

2.3. Motivation

Hackman and Oldham (1976) defines internal work motivation as the degree to which an individual experiences positive internal feelings when performing effectively on the job. The Hackman and Oldham's (1976) job characteristics model helps us to highlight the relationship between meaning of work and motivation, by establishing as one *experienced meaningfulness of work* as one of the critical psychological states necessary to the development of internal work motivation.

In the job characteristics model, when employees experience their work as meaningful (i.e., significant, challenging, and complete), the tendency for that work to trigger internal motivation is high , because they feel their work matters (Hackman & Oldham, 1980). The work of Hackman and Oldham"s (1976) on motivation necessitated the development of a more general continuum of internally- to externally-driven motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985), with the most internally-driven form of motivation being intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation implies the desire to engage in an activity because one enjoys, or is interested in, the activity (Sheldon *et al.,* 2003). Various explanations have been proposed for what ignites intrinsic motivation. For example, one stream of research argues that intrinsic motivation results from the expected congruence between one's self-concept and a particular activity (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Consequently, intrinsic motivation is driven by perceptions of enjoyment, interest, or satisfaction in work. *Self-determination theory* has followed the above view of motivation, by suggesting that the purest forms of motivation exist when people experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness in their activities (Deci & Ryan,2000).

2.4. Beliefs.

Research on beliefs examines another medium through which the self can shape the meaning of work. The most prominent streams of research in this instance include: (1) job involvement and work centrality, (2) work orientation, and (3) callings. (Rosso, Dekas and Wrzesniewski, 2010)   First, research explores how employees' job involvement and work centrality shapes the meaning of their work. *Job involvement* examines the extent to which employees believe their jobs are central to their lives and reflects the congruence between one's needs and perceptions that the job can meet those needs (Kanungo, 1982). There is a practical evidence which reveals that the more involved one is with a job, the more difficult it is to dissociate oneself from that job, making that work more meaningful (Brown, 1996).

Scholars have also studied the influence of *work centrality*, or perceptions about how central work is to a person, compared to other activities of their life (e.g., family, leisure, religion, community involvement). Work centrality researchers argue that the meaningfulness of work will vary depending on the depth or strength of the relationship between an individual and the area of work. (MOW International Research Team, 1987). Individuals with stronger beliefs about work centrality (*i.e. deep work attachment*), are likely to perceive greater meaningfulness in their work, it is more devastating for such individuals to lose a job or retire from the workforce (Douglas & Carless, 2009; Price, 2000).

A research area, referred to as *the lottery studies*, examined work centrality by asking people whether they would remain in the work force if they could afford not to work. (Arvey, Harpaz, & Liao, 2004; Highhouse, Zickar, & Yankelevich, 2010) asked research participants this question: 'If by some chance you inherited enough money to live comfortably without working, do you think you would work anyway or not?'. Their findings revealed that a large majority of respondents indicate a preference to continue working (Arvey *et al.,* 2004). The inclination of respondents toward employment reveals how central work is in the lives of people across many cultures, thus, the meaning of work is often much more than strictly financial for most people.

3. Work Orientations: How Do People See Work?

The work orientation provides a way of characterizing the primary types of meanings people see in the activity of work, supported by the assumption that people can derive different meanings from most any job or occupation, but that these meanings are shaped or determined by the individual's perception about work in general. A person's work orientation therefore provides an insight into how they understand what their work means, how they are likely to carry out their jobs in accordance with these meanings, and why they work in the first place (Scott Morton & Podolny, 2002; Peterson, Park, Hall, & Seligman, 2009).

Theorists have introduced a tripartite model of work orientation, proposing that individuals tend to see their work primarily as: (1) a job, (2) a career, or (3) a calling – (Wrzesniewski *et al.***,** 1997). People with job *orientation* focus on the monetary rewards and other benefits of their work to the relative exclusion of other kinds of meaning and fulfillment. The work is primarily a means to a financial empowerment that permits them to enjoy their leisure time. Mostly, the interests and ambitions of those with job orientations are expressed outside the context of work (Wrzesniewski *et al.,* 1997), and these involve; hobbies and other interests. In contrast to the former, those with *career orientation* work for the reward that comes with advancement through organizational or occupational structure. For these people, the enhanced pay and status that comes with promotion and advancement are a major focus of work. Advancement attracts higher self- esteem, more power, and higher social placement (Bellah *et al*., 1985). Finally, those with *calling orientations* (e.g. Volunteers for charity works, priests etc.) do not work financial gains or for advancement, but for the fulfillment that come with the work. In this instance, the work is an end in itself, and is usually linked with the belief that the work contributes to the greater good and makes the world a better place for humanity.

Perspectives on work orientations further expound on the meaning of work by highlighting the core beliefs people have about work and the impact of these beliefs on various work behaviors and attitudes. It was revealed that not only do a person's work orientation shape the meaning they make of work (Wrzesniewski *et al*., 1997), but that it also influences the kinds of jobs they seek when they become unemployed (Wrzesniewski, 1999), as well as the general values they endorse in life and work (Gandal *et al*., 2005).

4. Other Meanings Of Work

Another stream in the meaning of work deals with how individual interactions and relationships with other persons or groups, both within and outside the workplace, influence the meaning of their work (Grant, 2008,

Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). Other factors that could influence on the meaning of work to include: (1) coworkers, (2) leaders, (3) groups and communities, and (4) family.

4.1. Coworkers

Dutton & Ragins (2007) admits that the workplace is an arena in which diverse arrays of interpersonal relationships are formed. Thus, workplace relationships can have a strong influence on the meaning of work (Wrzesniewski *et al.,* 2003). Theories offer some interesting pathways through which coworkers can influence the meaning of work. First, close interpersonal relationships with coworkers may have a positive impact on perceptions of meaningfulness if they provide opportunities for employees to showcase valued identities at work (Kahn, 2007). Others have theorized more generally about the influence of proximal coworkers. For instance, social information processing theory (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978) suggests that employees look to others in the workplace for cues about how to think and behave, and draw from these cues in constructing their own attitudes, interpretations, and meanings of work.

Contemporary theorists (e.g. Wrzesniewski *et al.,* 2003) also suggest that coworkers influence individuals' interpretations of the meaning of their work through an interpersonal sense making process, whereby employees draw cues about the meaning and value of their work from other persons in the workplace (through observations, conversations, etc.) Given the influence these cues have on how people perceive their own work and work roles, coworkers can play a critical role in the meaning of work.

4.2. Leaders.

Leaders also play a significant role in influencing the meaning of work. First, leaders frame the mission, goals, purpose, and identity of the organization for employees in ways that influence their perceptions of the meaning of their work. Researchers explore how certain leadership styles can influence the degree to which work is perceived as meaningful (Bono & Judge, 2003; Piccolo & Colquitt, 2006). For instance, when transformational leaders describe work in ideological terms, and focus on higher-order values such as high achievement as a value in and of itself (Burns, 1978), followers come to see their work as congruent with personally held values and thus as more meaningful.

4.3. Groups and Communities.

By virtue of their employment in work organizations, employees are members of many groups and communities, including work teams, unions, professional networks, and various social categories. Employees' connection to work groups of various types and sizes have been both theoretically and empirically linked to the meaning of work. In particular, research has shown that individuals' role and sense of identification with the groups of which they are a part have significant potential to impact the level of meaningfulness they perceive in their work (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003).

4.4. Family.

Aside interpersonal relationships developed at work, relationships with others outside of the work domain also influence the meaning of work (Brief & Nord, 1990). Most times, individuals most important non-work relationships are with their families. Whilst family relationships can occur in the work environment (for example, in the case of family businesses) it is more common that work and family represent relatively distinct, yet interconnected, domains of a person's life (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000). Brief and Nord (1990) further described how family might influence the meaning of work. First, family can put strain on one's work through demands for time, energy, and economic resources. Particularly, as financial demands from the family increase, economic rewards become more salient and work is likely to take on more of an economic meaning (George, Goodwin, & Link, 1995).On the other hand, family may also enhance positive meanings of work by offering a supportive and relaxing environment in which a person can recover from the demands of work (Brief and Nord, 1990).

5.   What Makes Work Coherent Or Meaningful?

The meaning of work can be also be explained as an effect of coherence between the subject and the work he does, the level of harmony or balance he achieves in his relationship to work. (Csikzentmihalyi, 1990). The meaning of work is defined as an effect of coherence between the characteristics sought by a subject in his work and those he perceives in the work he does (Morin, 2004). The characteristics of a stimulating or motivating job have given rise to a field of knowledge called job design. (Hackman & Oldham, 1980). The

characteristics of a meaningful job as advanced by Morin (2003) features six factors: (1) social purpose,(2) moral correctness, (3) achievement-related pleasure, (4) autonomy,(5) recognition, and (6) positive relationships.

Work is meaningful when it is done responsibly, not just in terms of its execution, but in terms of the products and consequences it engenders. This reinforces an important dimension in work organization known as: workplace ethics or moral correctness (Morin, 2004). Work is meaningful when it is performed in the contexts of established rules and duties, and when inspired by moral and spiritual values. (Morin, 2004)**.**

6. The Meaning of Work From The Nigerian Perspective.

The meaning of work in the Nigerian case is majorly influenced by the employees' perceptions of the Western (intrinsic) and traditional (extrinsic) leadership, motivation, recruitment and promotion in their cultural environment. In a comprehensive study of Nigerian workers, carried out by Iguisi (2009), he discovered that the type of leadership, the motivation patterns and decision styles are very crucial and important in employees' lives because the decisions taken by the leader and the motivation patterns chosen affect the employees' fate in the organization. In the study, employees were asked to talk about the meaning of their work. (i.e. *What employees feel about their work*). It is noteworthy to discuss the submission of some of the respondents below.

6.1. Respondent 1

'I have a positive attitude toward my work. I don't allow the idiosyncratic behaviors of management manifested in this organization to cloud my professional sense of judgment. If I allow this to happen, I will then be selling off the intellectual discipline I have inculcated from my profession. Despite what happens here, I do my work to the best of my knowledge. I put my best in the duties that my work entails. I tell you, my ultimate goal is to see that I contribute to the development of this organization and provide security of employment to us all. I am optimistic that things will change with time, if my professional colleagues would put their heads together. I feel very good about my work inspite of the many odds. I have been professionally trained to view work in that way. However, I also know the positive aspects in our traditional society and believe in that positive attitude to work and life' (Iguisi, 2009:286)

6.2. Respondent 2

'My work-world is fascinating. I feel good about it. I feel good about my work-world because I make legitimate living out of it. More over, my work has helped to lift me up from my poor background. At least my parents are indebted to me today for their good living. With my academic and professional qualifications, I would say that I have made it. I never thought I would live the type of life I am now enjoying. Thank God. I realize many unusual things happening in this modern work setting, but I have redefined the situation so that I can use it to my own advantage. (Iguisi, 2009:286)

6.3. Respondent 3

'To say that I feel good about my work would mean having the right attitudes to my work and management. I have to be frank with you and myself, I only feel good about practicing my profession. There are many managerial irregularities that de-motivate most employees here…which will make one who thinks he would one day belong and motivated look stupid. All that I am saying is that I am just hanging on. I know that if I have the opportunity to quit for another organization where management attitudes help brings about my motivation, I will surely quit. If opportunity does not come, I will continue hanging on. I have a wife and four children to maintain. Moreover, my parents are all old and poor. I need money. Once I am paid substantial money here to keep them going, though money is not all, I will keep working and not complain too much'. (Iguisi, 2009:286-287).

In general terms Iguishi (2008) also discovered the following attributes (amongst others) in Nigerian workers:

- Rather than working for the general development of the organization, Nigerian workers could at times decide to redefine the prevailing situation to meet their own private interests which, when viewed holistically, is tantamount to making money to satisfy the needs of their families.
- They prefer to make extra money (e.g. honorarium, passage allowance) from assignments outside their organizations (i.e. through attending workshops, seminars and conferences).
- The crave for an organizational system and structure, that is sensitive to Nigerian cultural values in the wider society is high.

- Majority of Nigerian workers see work as an opportunity to make money. Workers mostly need money for two purposes. First, they need money to maintain their families; second, they needed the money to raise their standard of living.
- Because jobs are difficult to get, employees decide to continue with the work, but their decision to continue with the work is not tantamount to satisfaction with work or the work organization, nor does it demonstrate the willingness to comply with management ideology.

7.   The Nigerian Culture And Its Influence On People's Attitude To Work

Nigeria consists of over three hundred ethnic group (Nnoli, 1980). Thus, a multicultural nation like Nigeria cannot have a uniform national culture. Given the cultural diversity of Nigeria, Aluko (2003) contends that the three major ethnic group: Ibo, Hausa and Yoruba, are often considered whilst discussing perspectives on culture in relation to Nigeria. The influence of culture on people's attitude to work is discussed below.

7.1. The Yorubas

Aluko (2003) noted that Yoruba is a largely collective society. They respond to work according to the need and dictates of the situation. However, there is a tradition of hard work and excellence. This is evidenced in the popular Yoruba saying– 'Ise *loogun Ise'* meaning ; 'work is the antidote of poverty'. Idleness is seen as an aberration and a lazy man is looked down upon with disregard and contempt.

7.2. The Hausas

The structure of authority amongst the Hausa places emphasis on deference to authority, loyalty, obedience and sensitivity to the interests, opinions, views and demands of one's superiors. (Nnoli, 1980) The Hausa custom strongly favors qualities of servility, respect for authority, loyalty to management or leaders, and submissiveness. Furthermore, culturally the Hausa hardly query authority except on matters relating to their religion or traditional rulers (Aluko, 2000).

7.3. The Ibos

According to Aluko (2003) Ibo culture is generally receptive to change, individualistic, result oriented, and it also accord due respect to age and traditional values. Ibos are known to be ruthless in their determination to succeed. Consequently, an aggressive spirit is expected in organizations where Ibos are working. The Ibo admires an industrious person who achieved greatness in his chosen career. Moreover, they despise individuals who depend solely on superiors for their progress. It was observed amongst Ibos that subservience and unalloyed obedience at workplace signifies weakness and a lack of masculinity (Aluko,2000). The Ibos believes that a man must be self-motivated to work hard and to compete with and challenge the power his superiors (Aluko, 2003) .

7.4. Summary

The cultural disparities amongst the three major Nigerian ethnic group notwithstanding, Ahiauzu (1985) in his assessment of Nigerians, admitted that; when ordinary Nigerians are observed in traditional workplaces; such as village farms, local communal work organizations, and self-employment, they appear to be hardworking. However, when they are recruited into the public or private organization, their disposition to work (i.e work behavior) diminishes. Ahiauzu (1986) elaborated further on this observation by arguing that Nigerian workers bring to the organization, their traditional thought-systems, which they adopt in interpreting, constructing and ascribing meanings to things, organizational structure and processes. They then act and react to these on the basis of the meanings they ascribe to them, which then form part of their behavior in the workplace.

Other similarities in cultural disposition amongst the three ethnic groups as noted by (Afonja 1986; Aluko, 2000; Fashoyin 1980; Mohr 1986; and Olugbile 1997).are stated below.
- It was noted that collective tradition permeates all Nigerian cultures.
- Nigeria is a fatalistic society where people believe in divine intervention rather than hard work.
- Workers engage in some form of private practice (s).
- Religious values reflect in the work place.
- The level of commitment to materialism; that is the craze for wealth is high.
- The culture of corruption has been institutionalized in most of the work places.
- The desire for self-employment is high.
- Most Nigerian workers are not time-conscious.
- Nigerian workers are largely motivated by monetary rewards.

8.   Concluding Remarks.

This paper provides valuable insights to understanding of how employees find and create meaning and meaningfulness in their work. It is important to recognize the fact that the meaning of work is a subjective experience. Nonetheless, it is possible in the practical sense to understand the meaning that one experiences in one's work and set the conditions into the workplace to nurture it. This implies that it is possible to understand the manner in which individuals see work, and its values. Ciulla (2004) posits that the major requirement of a meaningful work is respect and dignity. Aside these, managers must play a key role in building healthy workplaces. It is important for managers to clarify expectations and to provide adequate supervision to employees in order to give work a sense of purpose and usefulness, and to make it meaningful. With respect to work orientation of most Nigerians, given our previous discussions, it is evident that there are two different patterns of disposition to work. Whilst the disposition of a section of workers is that of *deep work attachment.* The other one is *instrumental work attitude* (Iguisi, 2009). It is evident that both patterns recognize deviations from formalization of work processes, however, workers in different categories have differences in terms of their adaptation to prevailing work situations. The characteristics that permeates both dispositions are: 'professional discipline' and 'commitment to work' in spite of perceived odds.

On the overall, it is imperative for Nigerian workers to be more positive in their attitude towards work in order to attain a significant level of human development. Of note is the fact that lack of enthusiasm is very much evident in the work disposition of many Nigerians; who see their job as dull, toilsome, irritating, risky or dangerous. The care-free attitude of most Nigerian workers towards work has hampered human capital development in most organizations, considering the fact that poor quality work declines productivity and cripples development in all ramifications. In Nigeria (and most parts of Africa), most people clamor for gainful employment, but do not want to work. These categories of people are more interested in success without hard work, promotion without responsibility, result without process, and credence without work.

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