

Meaningful Work

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The least of things with a meaning is worth more in life than the greatest of things without it.

—Carl Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*

Work means different things to different people [1]. A position that one radiologist perceives as a mere job—a means of putting a roof over head and food on the table—may to another seem to be an important part of a lifelong career, and a third may regard the same position as an opportunity to answer a higher calling. Likewise, the same radiologist over time may experience changes in the meaning of work, moving back and forth between these different perspectives.

In attempting to understand the meaningfulness of work, it is important to recognize several facts. First, meaning is not correlated with the amount of money a radiologist earns, the number of weeks of paid time off a position provides, or the structure of an on-call schedule. Second, meaning depends on at least two factors: the nature of the work itself and how the radiologist perceives it. Third, by altering these two variables, work can be made more or less meaningful.

In thinking about how individuals can enhance the meaningfulness of work, researchers have introduced the concept of job crafting [2]. Job crafting has three components: task crafting, relational crafting, and cognitive crafting. Task crafting means changing the circumstances of work in ways that better comport with a radiologist's sense of identity. For example, radiologists who feel that they are being asked to work at too fast a pace might choose to slow down in the interests of quality.

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A key task-related shaper of the meaningfulness of work is how colleagues talk about it and the local culture in which radiologists work. In work environments that emphasize little more than productivity, revenue generation, and compensation, radiologists will tend to see their work as little more than a job, undermining their estimation of the meaningfulness of what they do every day. The same can be said for leadership that treats radiologists as mere tools for getting work done.

Radiologists are not mere image interpreters or procedure performers, nor are they merely the human capital that radiology departments, hospitals, and health systems use to generate resource-based value units. Whenever anyone talks or even thinks about radiologists in these terms, they are sowing the seeds of professional alienation and meaninglessness. Those who treat other human beings as tools only reveal their own blindness.

To counteract the tool mentality, radiologists need to play a significant role in shaping the work they do every day and know that they are part of an organization that believes in what they are doing. Work will seem meaningful to radiologists not when they feel they are being used but when they believe they are regularly called upon to exercise their best professional judgment and that patients, colleagues, and the organization believe in and prize the work they are doing.

Relational crafting involves the frequency and quality of interactions with other people, such as patients, referring physicians, and fellow radiology staff members. Radiologists who long for better relationships at work might, for example, seek out opportunities to serve as more effective educators. This might mean offering a class, preparing more thoroughly for in-services and multidisciplinary conferences, or simply taking more time to teach in day-to-day work.

One of the best ways to build better relationships is to demonstrate a genuine commitment to helping others do better work and find more meaning in the work they do. In addition to teaching, radiologists can organize events that promote more social interaction both at work and outside of it, make

a conscious effort to show appreciation for the good work that colleagues are doing, and simply take more interest in the lives their colleagues are leading.

The meaning of life outside of work deserves special emphasis. Radiologists inevitably perceive the meaning of their work in the larger context of the meaningfulness of their lives. This includes the degree to which time spent with family and friends and time spent at work exhibit conflicting or mutually reinforcing meaningfulness. If radiologists never talk about work with family or about family at work, such synergy is unlikely.

It is virtually impossible to do meaningful work without a sense that work is part of a meaningful life. On the other hand, however, work can play a significant role in enhancing the meaningfulness of life. As physicians, radiologists are fortunate not merely to earn relatively high incomes and enjoy a relatively high level of job security, but even more so because the work they do every day plays a vital role in fighting disease and advancing human health.

One means of promoting such an understanding is for radiologists to interact on a regular basis with the people who benefit from their labors [3]. At the top of this list are patients, and many radiology departments can take steps to provide more radiologist-patient interaction. One means of doing so is simply to begin sharing stories of the benefits that flow from interacting with patients, such as providing more accurate radiologic interpretations and a deeper sense of connection.

Another means is to bring together radiologists—and perhaps other radiology department staff members—to interact with a patient or a patient’s family on a regular basis. A department might hold a quarterly staff meeting at which a patient or patient’s family is invited to talk about the difference a radiologist’s contributions made in his or her care. In a surprising number of cases, even if eventual outcomes are poor, patients and families will express heartfelt gratitude.

It is equally important to connect with referring health professionals, who count on radiologists for help in ensuring that their patients get the best care. This can happen on a daily basis, by encouraging

face-to-face or at least real-time interaction. It can also be promoted through regular participation in forums such as inservices, multidisciplinary conferences, and grand rounds in which radiologists have opportunities to interact with physicians in other fields.

Cognitive crafting means seeking out new and more meaningful ways of understanding work. Consider a radiologist who has made a mistake, perhaps by failing to detect a lesion or offering an incorrect interpretation of a finding. One way of reacting to such an event is to regard it as a meaningless aberration and attempt to forget about it as quickly as possible. Another is to treat it as a learning opportunity, attempting to understand it better, and to share lessons learned with others.

Work is made meaningful in large part by the sense that we are contributing to some larger good beyond ourselves. In attempting to enhance the meaningfulness of work, therefore, it is important to shift the focus from how a particular radiologist feels about work to the larger purposes that radiologists serve. Radiologists need to take time to move beyond the immediate task at hand and think about the larger difference their work is making.

It is important to recognize that the meaningfulness and pleasantness of work are not necessarily correlated. People may willingly endure difficult experiences and even make sacrifices in the pursuit of work they find meaningful. Consider the military example of a soldier who witnessed the death of all his comrades in battle and endured 2 months of solitary hiding in enemy territory before finally escaping to safety.

Though this soldier endured extreme deprivation during a quite harrowing experience, he emerged with a clear sense of accomplishment, feeling more patriotic and dedicated to his country and its mission than ever before. Was his experience a pleasant one? No. Would we wish such an experience on anyone we cared about? No. But his adverse experience served to deepen his sense that he was doing important work in service of a noble cause.

The neighborhoods, towns, and cities of the United States are brimming with people who have benefitted from the work of radiologists. A screening examination detected their disease at an earlier and more treatable stage; a diagnostic examination resolved uncertainty and enabled a physician to provide definitive treatment for a life-threatening condition; imaging was used to diagnose and treat a lesion in a less invasive fashion with reduced risk and cost.

We spend too much time worrying about how much radiologists are paid, how many hours they work, and whether their jobs are secure and not enough imagining how their work could be made more meaningful to them. Although no work-units or dollars can be directly linked to the meaningfulness of work, it is in fact one of the most important topics to which radiologists can and should be devoting their attention.

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