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Remote Work and the Desire for Meaningful Work: The Unexpected Moderating Effects of Age and Childrearing

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REMOTE WORK AND THE DESIRE FOR MEANINGFUL WORK: THE UNEXPECTED
MODERATING EFFECTS OF AGE AND CHILDREARING

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ABSTRACT

REMOTE WORK AND THE DESIRE FOR MEANINGFUL WORK: THE UNEXPECTED
MODERATING EFFECTS OF AGE AND CHILDREARING

by Adriana Rae Meredith

The COVID-19 pandemic sent the world into lock down. Since then, organizations have been wrestling with how to navigate the many opinions, as well as research-backed advantages and disadvantages of in-office work, hybrid work, and remote work. In addition to shaking up the ways in which work is done, the pandemic shutdowns caused some to re-evaluate why they do the work they do. The current study aimed to examine the relationship between remote work and an employee's desire for meaningful work to increase understanding of how remote work can be used as a strategic element of job design rather than a reactive response to world events. Results of the study indicate that the relationship between remote work and desire for meaning may be moderated by a variety of factors. Age was found to moderate the relationship such that younger employees experienced less desire for meaningful work the more they worked remotely, while older employees experienced increased desire. Likewise, childless employees experienced less desire for meaningful work as they worked remotely while employees who were also parents experienced an increased desire for meaning. Implications for organizations as well as ideas for future research are discussed.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Introduction

As remote work grows in both popularity and availability, researchers have sought to identify the impact of remote work options on both the employee and the organization (Oettinger, 2011). Research suggests that both behavioral and psychological outcomes of remote work depend on a variety of individual and environmental factors (Mohamad et al., 2021). This means that the experience of remote work is challenging to generalize as it takes many different forms. In addition, there has been a recent push for researchers and organizations to get a better understanding of what makes work meaningful to their employees (Michaelson et al., 2014). There is a gap in meaningful work literature that has yet to be addressed, that is, it often assumes the desire for meaningful work is universal. There is evidence that meaningful work may not be top priority for all workers (Michaelson, 2011). As organizations navigate the complex modern work environment and make increasingly strategic decisions around in-person and remote work policy, more research is required to accurately account for what employees and perspective employees are searching for in their work. The purpose of the present study was to address the gap in current literature by assessing how remote work impacts employees desire for meaningful work.

History of Remote Work

Work from home, also known as remote work, telecommuting, or telework first entered the scene in 1976 when a U.S. scientist, Jack Nilles, proposed the use of telephones and computers to displace office work out of a traditional office building (Nilles & Gray, 1975). While there are many names given to the concept of remote work, Chiru (2017) defines teleworking as carrying out work responsibilities and office duties from home using

information technology. Past research regarding remote work is incredibly diverse and spans a plethora of disciplines: transportation research, urban planning, information science, organizational behavior, ethics, law, and sociology (Chiru, 2017).

In the quarter century following Nilles' proposition, the practice of working from home slowly increased in popularity and began to be seen as a solution to many organizational and social challenges. In 1979, when faced with skyrocketing gas prices, some began suggesting that people could save money by choosing to work remotely (Schiff, 1979). Telework was seen as a way to help organizations decrease real estate costs, respond to employees' needs for a healthy work-family balance, reduce air pollution and traffic congestion, and even as a tool to comply with the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act by allowing people to work in an environment more suited to their needs (Bailey & Kurland, 2002). By the end of the 20th century, 11.5 million people in the United States worked remotely (Bailey & Kurland, 2002). The rapid increase in the popularity of remote work was due in large part to the fact that the technology required to work from home was becoming cheaper and more available (Oettinger, 2011).

Prior to March 2020, 36 million wage and salary workers worked at home occasionally and only 15% of wage and salary workers had days where they worked entirely at home. Of those who worked remotely, the most popular reasons for people opting to work at home were personal preference (24%), to catch up on work (23%), and to coordinate their work schedule with personal/family needs (22%) (Burrows et al., 2023).

In March of 2020, the COVID-19 virus sent the world into lockdown. To control the spread of the virus, many countries imposed various restrictions such as curfews, stay-at-

home orders, lockdowns, quarantine requirements, travel restrictions, and social distancing (Toscano & Zappalà, 2021). For organizations, this meant having to transition an entire workforce to work from home practically overnight. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, 84% of remote workers worked from home voluntarily (Burrows et al., 2023). What made the pandemic such a turning point for remote work was its forced and abrupt adoption (Torres & Orhan, 2023).

Between 2019 and 2021, the number of people primarily working from home tripled from 5.7% (9 million people) to 17.9% (27.6 million people) (Burrows et al., 2023). Working from home quickly became a defining feature of the COVID-19 pandemic. Everything that was able to be done remotely was transitioned out of the office. The workforce was required to transition from the office to remote work overnight. Companies had to mass purchase technology to equip their employees with the tools needed to make the transition. Teachers had to find ways to keep students, who were sitting at home often in their bed, focused on conference calls that would last the length of a normal school day. Business professionals found themselves sporting the COVID-19 remote work uniform consisting of lounge wear or pajamas and a business appropriate shirt within arm's reach in the event they had to join a video conference call. Video calls were often interrupted by children, spouses, and pets as personal space became workspace. Personal wireless networks experienced overloaded bandwidth and technology supplies (e.g., laptops, mice, keyboards, monitors) were often sold out. People began to adhere less to the traditional 9 to 5 work schedule.

After two years of an intense worldwide lockdown, restrictions began to ease. A Gallup poll in June 2022 looked at the current working arrangement for those workers whose jobs

could be done remotely. They found that 5 in 10 workers were working hybrid, meaning part of their week they worked at home and the other part they worked on-line 10% to 100% remote, 3 in 10 worked exclusively remote, and only 2 in 10 working entirely on site. Research organizations such as Gallup anticipated that the prevalence of fully remote work arrangement would continue to decrease after most countries and organizations lifted their public health and safety mandates. It is anticipated that exclusively remote work will continue to make up about 2 in 10 of remote-capable workers in the long term, despite polls suggesting that 34% of those who worked remotely during the pandemic wanted to remain remote work. Furthermore, entirely on-site work is projected to remain at the 2 in 10 level in the long term, suggesting that hybrid work will become increasingly popular (Wigert & Agrawal, 2022).

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of telework research centered on the resources required to work from home as well as the circumstances that permitted remote work (Bailey & Kurland, 2002). Remote work was examined almost entirely from a logistical point of view. While telework was initially used as a logistics tool to maintain public health and safety in the face of a global pandemic, it also triggered a new generation of work. Employees became more accustomed to working from home and organizations began to get a better sense of the benefits and challenges associated with remote work. Following the pandemic, telework research moved away from just looking at the logistics and circumstances surrounding remote work and instead turned to examining the outcomes and experiences of remote work at both the individual and the organizational level.

Outcomes of Remote Work

The next section will explore some of the common behavioral and psychological outcomes of remote work that may be of greatest concerns to organizations both from an employee experience standpoint and when considering the bottom line.

Behavioral Outcomes

The following sections will explore the current research around remote work and how it relates to job performance, turnover, and counter productive work behaviors. The research around these outcomes is not necessarily conclusive, but rather highlights the importance of understanding the contexts in which remote work happens.

Performance. Despite job performance being one of the most valued success factors for organizations, research regarding the relationship between remote work and performance measures has not painted a consistent picture of whether working from home increases or decreases employee job performance. In a meta-analysis examining this relationship, Gajendran and Harrison (2007) found no demonstrable relationship between remote work and job performance when employees were asked to self-rate their performance. However consistent with past research conducted by Baltes et al. (1999), they identified a moderate positive relationship between remote work and supervisor evaluations of job performance. Other meta-analytic research suggests that remote work is indeed beneficial for job performance and productivity (Martin & MacDonnell, 2010). Every research study, and every meta-analysis seems to tell a slightly different story about how job performance can be impacted by remote work.

More recent research has attempted to understand why there may be a muddied relationship between remote work and job performance. Troll et al. (2022) found that remote work was positively related to job performance but only for employees who scored high in self-control as those employees were more likely to create a distraction-free environment, stick to goals and deadlines for themselves, and maintain a consistent schedule in a less regulated work environment. Mohamad et al. (2021) suggested that there was a relationship between remote work and productivity, but whether remote work increased or decreased productivity was highly dependent on the remote work context (i.e., children at home, age of children, worker characteristics, home workstation set up, and relationship with coworkers). Female employees, older employees, and those with higher incomes reported being more productive when working from home. While there are still questions around why age would be related to the productivity of remote workers, Mohamad et al. (2021) suggested that gender influenced the relationship such that women tended to be more productive when working remotely because it allowed them to better balance and manage work responsibilities with home responsibilities, whereas male remote workers tended to take on more household duties when working remotely and were consequently less productive.

Designated workspaces, separate from workspaces of other members in the household were associated with higher levels of productivity as they allowed for fewer distractions. Employees who had an infant at home were found to be less productive than those who did not, as infants often required more time away from the workstation to provide necessary care. Additionally, employees who had better relationships with their coworkers reported more

productivity as they were more willing to reach out for support and connection when working remotely.

Dutcher (2010) conducted an experiment to better understand how remote work impacts productivity, which he assessed by having participants perform creative tasks and dull tasks. They found that remote work increased productivity on creative tasks but had a negative impact on dull tasks. Remote work tends to be more flexible and less supervised, and when this is combined with the fact that employees tend to be more comfortable in their own home, it may give them more room to try new things when working on creative tasks. The flip side is that the less supervised nature of remote work may give employees more room to stall, procrastinate, or focus less on dull tasks.

Each of these findings further emphasizes that while there may be a relationship between remote work and job performance, the nature of this relationship may depend greatly on environmental factors, work content, or individual differences. Job performance and productivity are central to an organization's bottom line, but research suggest that there is not one-size-fits-all relationship between remote work and job performance.

Turnover. Remote work has been found to be negatively related to turnover intentions, the primary predictor of turnover such that the more an employee works remotely, the less they experience intent to leave the company (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007). Early research by Caillier (2012) suggested that public organizations might not see a substantial change in turnover after adopting a remote work option but noted that teleworking was still related to decreased turnover in the private sector. However, the support of remote work as a retention

tool in both the private and public sectors increased when Choi (2020) found that even public organizations with more remote workers experienced less voluntary turnover.

Caillier (2012) notes that while remote work may be related to decreased turnover intentions, the way in which an organization adopts a remote work policy may impact retention for groups that are not offered or denied the opportunity to work remotely. In other words, organizations with employees both in-office and at home may see reduced turnover intentions from remote employees but increased turnover intentions from those required to be in the office. This may be due to perceived "unfairness" or the fact that the employees required to work in-person may feel less autonomous (Caillier, 2012).

As the world transitions out of a global pandemic and organizations are redesigning their employee policies related to remote work, it is important to note that remote work may only be related to reduced turnover intentions for those who voluntarily work from home, not for those of whom it is required (Kaduk et al., 2019). While remote work can be an effective tool in decreasing employee turnover intentions, it is important for organizations to be savvy in how they formulate remote work policy.

Counterproductive Work Behaviors (CWB). While quite a lot of research has focused on behavioral outcomes of remote work such as productivity and job performance that are generally seen as desirable employee behaviors, there has been relatively little research into how remote work may influence unfavorable employee behaviors such as CWB. CWB refers to dysfunctional, voluntary behavior that threatens the wellbeing of employees and the organization (Candel & Arnăutu, 2021). CWB can often involve behaviors like absenteeism, impoliteness, sabotage, or even interpersonal aggression (Candel & Arnăutu, 2021). One of

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the few studies that has been done indicates that employees perceive remote work as being less structured and offering less accountability, which creates a more indulgent environment that facilitates employees' engaging in CWB (Candel & Arnăutu, 2021). While research has not yet explored a direct relationship between remote work and CWB, a remote working context may create an environment of unfavorable employee behaviors.

Psychological Outcomes

Not only does remote work impact the behaviors of employees, but it also has been found to have implications on psychological outcomes such as job satisfaction, engagement, and burnout. The following section discussed the various research into how remote work can impact the ways in which employees think about their work.

Job Satisfaction. Of all the potential outcomes of remote work seen in contemporary research, job satisfaction seems to relay the most consistent results, suggesting that remote work may be an effective way to increase job satisfaction. Results of Gajendran and Harrison's (2007) meta-analysis showed that remote work was related to increased job satisfaction, but that the relationship was mediated by perceived autonomy. In other words, employees experience more job satisfaction when working remotely primarily because the physical distance from teammates and managers allows them to feel like they have more of a say in how their work gets done.

Bae and Kim (2016) also found that remote work generally led to increased job satisfaction, but they also considered gender differences when remote work was or was not offered by a company. They found that women experienced the lowest levels of job satisfaction when their organizations offered a remote work program, but they could not

participate. On the other hand, male employees experienced lower job satisfaction when there was no remote work program offered to them than when it was offered but they could not participate. These findings suggest that men and women may have different perceptions of remote work due to a variety of factors, such as assumed home responsibilities and work-life conflict (Bae & Kim, 2016).

Overall, research seems to suggest that remote work may lead to increased job satisfaction, but it is presumed that this relationship is affected by other factors. For example, organizations that do not or are unable to offer remote work to all employees must consider the impact on those employees who are not able to participate.

Employee Engagement. Employee engagement has been defined as a motivation to engage and connect with work from a physical, mental, and emotional standpoint (Donovan, 2022). Much of the recent literature surrounding remote work and employee engagement centers around the COVID-19 pandemic and the corresponding lockdown policies put into play by many organizations. As a result, the relationship between remote work and employee engagement appears to be rather contextual. Giauque et al. (2022) looked at how remote work, when implemented involuntarily, was related to an increase in some positive psychological outcomes such as work autonomy and work-life balance but did not seem to affect employee's engagement levels. They suggested that while there are relationships between remote work and positive psychological outcomes, engagement levels might not be affected because employees who did not choose to work to work remotely experienced negative psychological effects such as decreased collaborations and job strain as they were

required to make adjustment to their home life, workstation set up, and schedule that they were previously unprepared for.

Similarly, Silva et al. (2022) examined the relationship between remote work and employee engagement and found that it was moderated by whether remote work was voluntary or involuntary. They found no relationship for those who voluntarily worked remotely, but that remote work was related to decreased engagement for those who did not choose to work remotely. This further supports the idea that autonomy and freedom are some of the most attractive components of remote work to employees. While much of the world is no longer facing mandatory lockdowns, it is important to consider how it may have impacted the overall experience of remote work.

While the relationship between remote work and employee engagement has certainly been impacted by environmental factors like the pandemic, research also suggests that individual circumstances can make a difference in engagement levels in a remote context. Donovan (2022) found that remote work was related to higher engagement levels for employees who scored high in conscientiousness, felt empowered, and received support from both their manager and the organization. They suggested that this might be because remote work allowed space for employees who were conscientious and felt empowered to have more autonomy and developed a sense of self-efficacy. Even though the relationship between engagement and remote work is not one-size-fits-all, research suggests that there are opportunities for individuals and organizations to make remote work an engaging experience.

Burnout. Burnout refers to chronic workplace stress that when not managed is associated with exhaustion and disengagement (Johnson & Mabry, 2022). Most research examining

remote work and burnout looks at how different aspects of remote work such as decreased boundaries between work and personal life, extended time on video conference calls, and reduced contact with colleagues impact burnout and its associated constructs such as work-life spillover, emotional exhaustion, and isolation. Choi (2020) found that remote work was related to greater work-to-family conflict, stress, and burnout. They further explained that remote workers with families might experience negative spillover between family stress and work-related stress. The overlapping effect that remote work has on work and family life is just one of the many aspects of remote work that could lead to burnout. Furthermore, they noted that remote workers often reported feeling isolated and less connected with their coworkers. This connection with coworkers acts as an important resource for employees to counter burnout (Choi, 2020).

Johnson and Mabry (2022) investigated the phenomenon of video meeting burnout, also known as "Zoom fatigue," faced by many remote workers. They found that remote workers were psychologically depleted from having to balance the work they had to do for their job with a high video meeting load. Many remote workers reported feeling like the video meetings they had to attend took away from the time they needed to do their work, and from their home responsibilities. The conclusion of this study was that the high volume of video meetings remote workers had to attend could lead to poorer well-being and emotional exhaustion. Work-home conflict, isolation, and video meeting load are all components of remote work that if not managed carefully, can lead to employee burnout.

As research seeks to improve understanding of both the behavioral and psychological impact of remote work on employees, organizations continue their efforts to attract and retain

talent by offering a variety of flexible work conditions. Some have critiqued the efforts of these organizations as being too reactive to the immediate demands of the workforce as opposed to taking a more strategic approach (Mortensen & Edmonson, 2023). The current demands of employees tend to be more reactive to what is going on in the world around them, for example, the call for increased pay in a time of recession, or the call for flexible work in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Critics argue that for flexible work to move from being seen as a perk into a strategic element of job design, organizations must take a more holistic view of how working remotely impacts the employee experience for different employees (Mortensen & Edmonson, 2023).

While much research has examined factors, both in the remote and in-person work contexts that contribute to why employees do the work they do, there is little research into the concept of meaning captured in that question, "why do employees do the work they do?" A better understanding of how remote work is related to an employee's experience of meaning would contribute to the overall effort to utilize remote work strategically, rather than reactively in organizational efforts to attract and retain talent. The next section introduces the concept of meaningful work and raises questions around assumptions made in most meaningful work research.

Meaningful Work

The concept of meaning was made popular in modern psychology by Viktor Frankl (1992), well known for his work entitled *Man's Search for Meaning*. Frankl believed that the most basic motivating human desire was the search of meaning and purpose. Since then, researchers have sought to define, explain, and measure this seemingly ineffable concept.

The existential cloud that surrounds the idea of meaning has led to a general lack of consensus around what it means and how to best measure it (Baumeister & Landau, 2018).

Reflecting on the history of meaning in psychological research, Baumeister and Landau (2018) have noted that while there is much discrepancy in its definition, meaning tends to involve a sense of purpose, mattering, and coherence. Research has also found that meaning in life, even when defined or measured differently, tends to be associated with an individual's physical and psychological wellbeing (Heintzelman & King, 2014). But despite growing research supporting the vital role meaning plays in individual's lives, scholars have critiqued the lack of research examining the role of meaning in societal flourishing (Routledge & FioRito, 2021). In other words, research around meaning tends to focus on the individual's experience of meaning, but little research has been investigated on how the individual's experience of meaning contributes to the collective. This may be in part because most research struggles to capture an agreed upon balance of individual/personal and collective/social dimensions of meaning (Baumeister & Landau, 2018). This distinction may be of particular interest to organizations that wish to understand the role individual meaning plays in collective organizational outcomes.

The ongoing academic conversation about what constitutes a meaningful life carries over into organizational study and practice as researchers and employers seek to understand why employees do the work that they do. Not only do people spend a large portion of their life at work, but they also tend to build parts of their identity around their job or work (Chalofsky & Cavallaro, 2013). This has led researchers and ethicists to argue that organizations can and

should provide meaningful work for their employees and that employees can and should try to create meaning in their work (Michaelson et al., 2014).

Just a quick Internet search of "meaningful work" or "meaning at work" yields page after page of articles, blog posts, and advice columns preaching to both employers and employees the value of meaningful work. But much like the research on meaning as a psychological concept, research on meaning at work has yet to reach a consensus as to how it should be defined, how it can be created, how it is experienced and perceived, and what outcomes individuals and organizations can expect from it (Weeks & Schaffert, 2019).

While no singular approach regarding the definition of meaningful work emerges from the vast body of literature, there are a handful of common threads that tie the research together. First, most research attempts to captures alignment as a component of meaningful work. In other words, it explores the "fit" between employee's needs and values and the work (Michaelson et al., 2014). Another common theme in meaningful work research is the extent to which an employee perceives their work to be purposeful or significant. That is, work is meaningful when employees feel their efforts lead to outcomes perceived to be worthwhile and significant either to themselves or to a larger cause (Michaelson et al., 2014). The third common thread in meaningful work research is a focus on the role of individual identity in an employee's experience of meaningful work. This vein of research investigates the role that work plays in an employee's sense of who they are (Michaelson et al., 2014).

While different studies define and examine these concepts in different ways, one thing that all researchers seem to agree upon is that, however it is defined, meaningful work includes an element of purpose or significance (Rosso et al., 2010). This refers to the extent

to which an employee perceives their work to be important to their own personal development and/or the greater society or community. This sense of purpose and significance has become the core focus of much of modern research, so much so that some of the more recent research on meaningful work has been conducted by theologians. Several researchers have even gone as far as to examine meaningful work as a personal calling where job tasks, even mundane or undesirable ones, and their outcomes are perceived as contributing to a higher personal or social purpose than people associate with the day-to-day elements of their job (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009).

After conducting a thorough review of meaningful work literature and exploring the various sources of meaningful work as well as the mechanisms through which work becomes meaningful, Rosso et al. (2010) attempted to distill the most prominent themes of this research, creating one of the first theoretical frameworks of meaningful work. Their model centered on two fundamental dimensions of the experience of meaningful work, arguing that meaningful work is most present at the intersection of these two dimensions. The first dimension explores the mechanisms by which meaning is created or maintained by contrasting one's pursuit of agency versus communion. The pursuit of agency refers to an individual's drive for self-expansion, mastery, and achievement, whereas the pursuit of communion refers to one's desire to relate to and connect with others (Rosso et al., 2010). For example, one may be driven by the desire to find personal fulfilment to "leave their mark" (i.e., the pursuit of agency), while others may be more motivated by the desire to connect and unite with a greater cause or a greater community (i.e., the pursuit of communion).

The second dimension explores the outcomes of meaningful work by depicting a continuum between self-directed versus other-directed action (Rosso et al., 2010). While both self-directed and other-directed action can be meaningful, they note that they differ in their impact. More specifically, people's experience of meaningfulness differs based on the extent to which they perceive their work to be either internal or external to themselves. For example, two individuals working in the same job could experience a similar level of meaning in their work, but one might find the work meaningful because they feel they are able to achieve their personal goals (i.e., self-directed action), while the other may find it meaningful because of the impact it has on the mission of the organization (i.e., other-directed action).

It should be noted that Rosso et al. (2010) acknowledged that the two dimensions of their model are very similar in that they hinge on the distinction between motivation and impact as well as the self and others. However, they maintain a distinction between the two, suggesting that the first dimension (pursuit of agency versus the pursuit of communion) captures more of the underlying drive for meaningful work, whereas the second dimension (self-directed action versus other-directed action) refers to the impact or outcome of meaningful work. However, the similarities and conceptual overlap of these two dimensions have caused other researchers to critique this model (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009, Weeks & Schaffert, 2019).

Steger et al. (2012) agreed with the overall framework developed by Rosso et al. (2010). However, they sought to tease apart the actual experience of meaningful work from concepts commonly associated with meaningful work. They noted that much of past research on meaningful work, including Rosso et al., tended to define meaningful work as a blurry

conglomeration of related and supporting concepts such as authenticity, engagement, identity, self-efficacy, and belongingness. Steger et al. did not argue whether these concepts were an accurate depiction of the processes that lead to meaningful work, but they attempted to simplify the literature and develop a more specific scale that measured just the experience of meaningful work without capturing the various mechanisms through which meaningful work is created.

Steger et al. (2012) took much of Rosso et al.'s (2010) work and tried to distill and tease apart the elements that best captured only the experience of meaningful work. Part of the model proposed by Steger at al. (2012) is taken from the second dimension of Rosso et al. (2010), self and other-directed actions. They pulled conceptually from this dimension but related these concepts to the experience of meaningful work as opposed to using them as sources of meaningful work. In doing so, they proposed three dimensions of meaningful work: (a) psychological meaningfulness, (b) meaning making through work, and (c) greater good motivations.

The first dimension, psychological meaning, refers to one's perception that their work has personal significance. In other words, an employee perceives their work to be important to their personal development or to a greater societal or communal cause. This general concept of an individual's evaluation of personal significance was included as a rudimentary but direct measure of meaningful work that had often been overlooked in previous research. The second dimension, meaning making through work, refers to the role that work plays in an individual's meaning in life as a whole. It addresses the overlap between one's work and one's life work, or greater purpose. The idea that there is a link between the meaning people

experience in their work and their broader life purpose is also reflected in the self-directed action component of the framework developed by Rosso et al. (2010). The third dimension put forward by Steger et al. (2012) is greater good motivation. This is similar to the other-directed action proposed by Rosso et al. (2010), suggesting that the desire to make a positive impact and contribute to the greater good is an important element of the experience of meaningful work. Employees may experience their work as more meaningful if it has a broader impact on others.

Desire for Meaningful Work

An assumption often made by those researching meaningful work is that all people desire to find meaning in their work (Weeks & Schaffert, 2019). However, although many have theorized and commented on the universality of the desire for meaningfulness (Frankl, 1992; Stillman et al., 2009), others question whether it is desired by all workers (Michaelson, 2011). For example, a poll conducted by McKinsey and Company found that 70% of employees reported that they defined their personal sense of purpose by their work (Smet et al., 2023). While this finding can be used to support the general sentiment that work may play a big role in an employee's sense of meaning and purpose, it should be noted that for 30% of the employees, their personal sense of purpose was *not* defined by their work. Polls such as this bring into question the general assumption made by those researching meaningful work, suggesting that not every employee cares whether their work is meaningful.

Workers experience a large variety of motivations to work, one of the most prevalent being material satisfaction: the desire to earn income or status (Michaelson, 2011). This is in

line with the suggestion of scholars who posit that in the modern job market, many people would trade meaningful work for higher pay (Maitland, 1989). Surveys have found that 9 in 10 employees would be willing to trade a percentage of their life earnings to experience more meaning in their work. While on its face this finding suggests that people desire meaningful work so much that they are willing to pay for it, it also suggests that 10% of employees value their salary more than the meaning they experience in their work (Reece et al., 2017).

Other research looking at people's willingness to trade salary for meaning note that there is still a need for further research around the influence of job, personal, and cultural factors on whether people will accept lower pay for more meaningful work (Hu & Hirsh, 2017). While much of the research in this space suggests that quite a few people are willing to trade money for meaning, there is still a subsection of the population that is often overlooked in this research, specifically those employees who may not value meaning above all else in their work. This further leads one to question the assumption that everyone desires meaningful work.

Remote Work and Meaningful Work

Despite a growing body of research on the employee outcomes of remote work, and a growing interest in meaningful work, there has been little research into how the remote work context is related to the experience of meaningful work. Given that working remotely can impact many of the psychological outcomes also considered in the experience of meaningful work, such as sense of belonging, inclusion, connection with coworkers and managers, and the opportunities to grow and receive support, the impact of remote work on meaningful

work merits further examination (Charalampous et al., 2019; Mann & Holdsworth, 2003; Tavares, 2017).

In their study on best practices for supporting the productivity and wellbeing of remote workers, George et al. (2021) took into consideration meaning in their assessment of wellbeing. While their definition of meaning stretches more broadly than just meaningful work by also including the sense of meaning in life, this was one of the first studies to consider employees' experience of meaning in a remote work environment. They found that despite the positive impact remote work had on productivity, participants reported a decreased sense of meaning in life and suggested that this might be due to the loss of boundaries between work and personal life (George et al., 2021).

One criticism of the research on meaningful work that is apparent in the work of George et al. (2021) is that most research operates under the assumption that people want meaningful work (Weeks & Schaffert, 2019). George et al. (2021) included this assumption in their measurement of wellbeing, but it is possible that not everyone wants meaningful work (Michaelson, 2011). With remote work becoming an increasingly strategic element of job design (Berg et al., 2018), understanding the extent to which an employee desires meaningful work may be critical to understanding trade-offs they are willing to make as they navigate a more flexible work arrangement.

As remote work becomes an increasingly strategic job design tool, and organizations and researchers alike attempt to paint a more holistic picture of why employees do the work they do, the lack of research around how remote work impacts meaningful work becomes more apparent. The muddied literature around the various outcomes of both psychological and

behavioral impacts of remote work suggests that it is still a need for a better understanding of the impact of remote work on employees.

Additionally, meaningful work literature often assumes that employees desire meaningful work, and while this may be the case for some, there is evidence that meaningful work may not be top priority for all workers (Michaelson, 2011). As organizations navigate the complex modern work environment and make increasingly strategic decisions around in-person and remote work policy, more research is required to accurately account for what employees and perspective employees are searching for in their work. The purpose of the present study was to quantitively assess how remote work impacts employees desire for meaningful work.

Research Question: Does remote work impact an employee's desire for meaningful work?

By examining the effects of remote work on employees' desire for meaningful work, organizations may be able to better leverage flexible work as a tool to both attract and retain talent.

Method

Participants

The participants of this study included adults over the age of 18 who were employed on either a part-time or full-time basis with remote, hybrid, or in-person working arrangements. There was a total of 172 recorded responses. To be eligible to participate in the study, participants had to be at least 18 years old and employed on either a full-time or part-time basis. Twenty-six responses were removed for not meeting these criteria. The sample included a total of 146 eligible responses and represented participants working either in-person, hybrid, or remote.

Participants were recruited using convenience, snowball, and purposive sampling. Many of the participants were reached through convenience sampling as participation was garnered via my personal and professional networks using social media such as Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn. Members of my network forwarded and shared the survey link with members of their network, resulting in a snowball sample. Lastly, participants were purposefully selected to meet certain criteria such as being 18 years or older and currently employed either full time or part time. There were no incentives given to those who chose to participate in the survey.

Participant demographics can be found in Table 1. For the final sample, 48.6% of participants identified as male, 49.3% as female,.7% as non-binary, and 1.4% as "other". The largest age group represented in the sample was 25-34 years old, representing 39% of the sample. The next largest age group was 45-54 years old and consisted of 27.4% of the sample. Most of the sample was married (65.1%) and over half reported having children

Table 1

Demographic and Background Characteristics of Participants (N = 146)

Variable	*n*	%
Gender		
Male	71	48.6%
Female	72	49.3%
Transgender	0	0%
Non-binary	1	.7%
Other	2	1.4%
Age		
18-24	11	7.5%
25-34	57	39.0%
35-44	18	12.3%
45-54	40	27.4%
55-65	14	9.6%
65+	6	4.1%
Marital status		
Married	95	65.1%
Widowed	1	0.7%
Divorced	5	3.4%
Never married	45	30.8%
Parental status		
Has children	79	54.1%
Childless	67	45.9%
Education level		
High school (or GED)	3	2.1%
Some college	9	6.2%
Technical certification	2	1.4%
Associate degree	6	4.1%
Bachelor's degree	43	29.5%
Master's degree	46	31.5%
Doctoral degree	37	25.3%
Income		
< $40,000	9	6.2%
$40,000-$80,000	23	15.8%
$80,001-$120,000	25	17.1%
$120,001-$160,000	12	8.2%
$160,001-$200,000	9	6.2%
$200,001-$240,000	16	11.0%
> $240,000	52	35.6%
Remote work intensity		
Less than 8 hours	56	38.4%
8-16 hours	27	18.5%
17-24 hours	13	8.9%
25-32 hours	9	6.2%
33-40 hours	19	13.0%
More than 40 hours	22	15.1%

(54.1%). Over 85% of the sample had obtained at least a bachelor's degree with 31.5% possessing a master's degree and 25.3% with a doctoral degree. Likely in line with the married vs. never married split, most household incomes were predominately concentrated in the $40,000-120,000 (32.9%) and greater than $200,001 ranges (46.6%).

For frequency of remote work, 38.4% worked less than 8 hours a week remotely suggesting their roles are predominately in person, while 15.1% worked over 40 hours a week remotely. For those whose reported hours consistent with a more hybrid style working environment, 18.5% worked 8-16 hours a week remotely and 13.0% worked 33-40 hours remotely.

Overall, the sample had good representation of gender, age, marital status, and parental status but did not get good distribution regarding education, and income. Additionally, the distribution of remote work intensity among participants indicates that most people either work predominately from home or predominately in the office, with some flexibility in either direction.

Measures

Remote Work Intensity

Remote work intensity, the predictor variable in the present study, was defined as the frequency of an individual carrying out work responsibilities and office duties from home using information technology (Chiru, 2017). As done in much of the remote work research, the current study measured remote work intensity using a single item, "How many hours do you work remotely per week?" and respondents responded with one of six options: Less than 8 hours, 8-16 hours, 17-24 hours, 25-32 hours, 32-40 hours, or more than 40 hours.

Participants were then grouped by remote work intensity as follows: high intensity for remote work greater than or equal to 25 hours per week, moderate intensity for anywhere between 8-24 hours of remote work, and low intensity for anyone working remotely less than 8 hours a week.

Desire for Meaningful Work

Desire for meaningful work, the outcome variable in the present study, was defined as the extent to which an individual wants their work to be important to their own personal development and understanding of the world and/or the greater society or community (Rosso et al., 2010; Steger et al., 2012). Desire for meaningful work was measured using a twelve-item scale that consisted of four subscales capturing various dimensions of the concept. Nine of these items came from Autin and Allan's (2019) adaptation of the Work as Meaning Inventory (WAMI) created by Steger et al. (2012). Autin and Allan (2019) adapted the WAMI to reflect a desire for work meaning as opposed to the experience of work meaning, for which it was originally made. An additional 3 items were added to capture how desire for meaningful work is affected by the presence of competing priorities. When taken together, the twelve total items used in the present study to measure desire for meaningful work indicated strong internal consistency ($\alpha = .87$).

Responses to all 12 items were indicated on a 5-point Likert scale that captured the degree to which the participant agreed with each item (1 = *Strongly Disagree*, 2 = *Disagree*, 3 = *Neither Agree nor Disagree*, 4 = *Agree*, 5 = *Strongly Agree*). Responses were then averaged between the three items associated with each of the four dimensions to create a

score for each dimension with a higher score indicating a greater desire for that aspect of meaningful work.

Positive Meaning. The first desire for meaningful work subscale captures one's desire for their work to have personal significance. In other words, it looks at to what extent an employee wants their work to be significant to their personal development. This dimension of meaningful work was measured using items such as "I desire work that contributes to my personal growth." Cronbach's alpha, an estimation of reliability of the scale items indicated good internal consistency for positive meaning items ($\alpha = .70$).

Meaning Making through Work. The second dimension of the desire for meaningful work attempts to capture an individual's desire for their work to contribute to their sense of meaning in life as a whole. This dimension of meaningful work was measured using items such as "I desire work that helps me better understand myself." Internal consistency for the meaning making through work items was good ($\alpha = .71$).

Greater Good Motivation. The third subscale measuring desire for meaningful work looks at an individual's desire for their work to contribute to a greater cause or have impact on the world around them. This subscale included items such as "I want work that serves a greater purpose," and had good internal consistency ($\alpha = .77$).

Tradeoffs. Generally, meaningful work is understood to be a positive thing that most people would want. This subscale sought to measure the extent to which an individual desires for meaning when compared with other competing priorities (i.e., salary). This was captured using items such as, "If I were to look for a new job, I would prioritize a job that I find

meaningful over a job with a high salary." Internal reliability for this subscale was good (α = .79).

Procedure

Participants were invited to participate in the study via social media posts to my personal and professional networks using platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn. The post included a brief description of the study's purpose, voluntary nature, and estimated time duration as well as an anonymous link to the survey. All survey responses were collected anonymously using the Qualtrics survey platform. When participants accessed the link, they were directed to an informed consent page. Participants who selected "Yes, I consent" were then directed to a new page. There, participants indicated to respond to a survey comprised of one item assessing remote work intensity, twelve items measuring desire for meaningful work, and six items to capture demographic information. Those who did not consent as well as those who were not employed on a full or part-time basis were immediately directed to a thank you note indicating the end of the survey.

The survey was open for a total of four weeks during which participants could complete the survey on a desktop, laptop, or mobile device. After the survey closed, data were cleaned and analyzed using the Statistical Packing for the Social Sciences (SPSS version 28).

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were calculated to assess the general distribution of item responses, identify errors, missing data, or outliers, and get a sense of preliminary response patterns and participant attitudes. Descriptive statistics were calculated in SPSS for each variable and can be found in Table 2.

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics for Measured Variables

Variable	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	*SD*
Remote work intensity	1.00	6.00	2.82	1.91
Desire for meaningful work – Positive meaning	1.00	5.00	4.41	.74
Desire for meaningful work – Meaning making through work	1.00	5.00	3.98	.78
Desire for meaningful work – Greater good motivation	1.00	5.00	4.40	.78
Desire for meaningful work – Tradeoff	1.00	5.00	3.40	.90
Desire for meaningful work -Overall	1.67	5.00	4.06	.62

N = 146

The mean score for remote work intensity, the predictor variable, was 2.82 (*SD* = 1.91) indicating that on average, participants worked between 16-24 hours working remotely a week. This mean score suggests that most of the sample experienced moderate intensity remote work, and that many of the participants were hybrid workers, meaning they engage in a combination of remote and in-office work.

For the overall outcome variable, desire for meaningful work, the average score appeared high (*M* = 4.06, *SD* = 0.62), suggesting that in general, participants had a high desire for meaningful work. The positive meaning dimension had an even higher average score (*M* = 4.41, *SD* = 0.74) as did the greater good motivation dimension (*M* = 4.40, *SD* = 0.78), suggesting that participants had high desire for work that they found personally significant

and impacted and contributed to a cause greater than themselves. The meaning making

through work dimension had a slightly lower average score ($M = 3.98$, $SD = 0.78$), showing

that while participants desired work that helped them make sense of their life and the world

around them, it was less important than other aspects of meaningful work. Lastly, the

dimension assessing tradeoffs participants may be willing to make for more meaningful work

showed an average score of 3.40 ($SD = 0.90$) suggesting that as much as people reported a

desire for meaningful work, if it requires accepting less pay, they did not consider it top

priority.

Pearson Correlations

Pearson correlations were computed to answer the research question posed for this study:

How does remote work impact an employee's desire for meaningful work? Correlations were

calculated using SPSS to evaluate the strength and direction of the relationships among the

variables measured in the study and can be found in Table 3. Pearson correlation coefficient

values were considered to mean no relationship or weak if they ranged from ±.00-.29,

moderate when ranging from ±.30-.49, and strong if ±.50 or greater.

Table 3
Pearson Correlations for Measured Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Remote work intensity	--					
2. Desire for meaningful work – Positive meaning	-.05	--				
3. Desire for meaningful work – Meaning making through work	-.05	.71**	--			
4. Desire for meaningful work – Greater good motivation	-.07	.52**	.64**	--		
5. Desire for meaningful work - Tradeoffs	-.04	.47**	.40**	.28**	--	
6. Desire for meaningful work - Overall	-.07	.86**	.78**	.82**	.71**	--

$N = 146$ * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Remote work intensity had a weak, negative, non-significant relationship with desire for meaningful for $r(144) = -.07$, p >. 05, suggesting that there was no direct relationship between the extent to which an induvial worked remotely and their desire for meaningful work. The calculated Pearson correlations coefficients also indicated weak non-significant relationships between remote work intensity and each of the individual dimensions of desire for meaningful work: positive meaning $r(144) = -.05$, p > .05, meaning making through work $r(144) = -.05$, p > .05, and greater good motivation $r(144) = -.07$, p >. 05., and tradeoffs $r(144) = -.04$, p > .05, suggesting that there was no relationship between remote work and whether an employee desired work that they found to be personally significant, that helps them make more sense of the world around them, and that they consider significant to a greater cause. There was also nothing to support a relationship between remote work and an individual's willingness to prioritize meaningful work above tradeoffs such as salary. In response to the research question this study set out to answer, there does not appear to be a significant direct relationship between remote work and an employee's desire for meaningful work.

Moderators

Given the vast body of remote work research suggesting that its impact depends significantly on a combination of personal, organizational, and environmental factors, as well as this study's discovery of a non-significant direct relationship between remote work and desire for meaning, hierarchical regression analysis was conducted to see if there were any moderating effects that were masking the direct relationship. Analyses were run for all six demographic items in the survey (gender, age, marital status, parental status, education level,

and income). Two of these variables, age and whether participants had children, appeared to

significantly moderate the relationship between remote work intensity and desire for

meaningful work.

Age

After considering direct effects, the moderation effect of age on the relationship between

remote work intensity and desire for meaning was entered in the second step of the analysis

(see Table 4). The interaction of age and remote work accounted for significant additional

variance above and beyond the direct effects of age and remote work intensity, $\Delta R^2 = .05$,

$F(1, 136) = 7.13$, $p < .01$. Therefore, the relationship between remote work intensity and

desire for meaningful work was moderated by age.

Table 4
Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis for Remote Work Intensity with Age as a Moderator

Steps		R^2	ΔR^2
Step 1	Remote work intensity Age	.00	.00
Step 2	Remote work x Age	.05	.05**

Note. $N = 137$. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .005$

Further linear regression analyses were conducted to analyze the nature and direction of

the moderating effect for younger employees (34 years old or younger) versus older

employees (35 years old and older). Figure 1 illustrates a negative relationship between

remote work intensity and desire for meaningful work for younger employees, while the

relationship appears to be positive for older employees. This suggests that the more a

younger employee worked from home, the less they desired meaningful work, whereas the

more an older employee worked from home, the more they wanted their work to be

meaningful.

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Figure 1

Moderating Effect of Age on the Relationship Between Remote Work and Desire for Meaningful Work
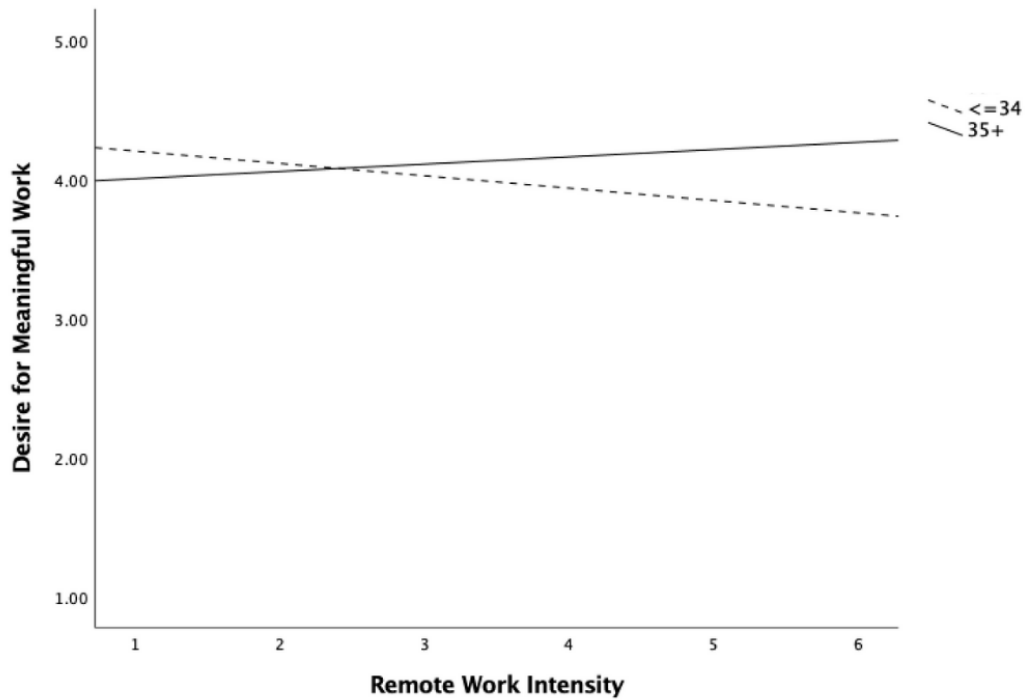
Parental Status

Direct effects of remote work intensity and parental status were entered in the first step of the analysis. The moderation effect of parental status on the relationship between remote work intensity and desire for meaning was entered at the second step. The interaction of parental status and remote work accounted for significant additional variance above and beyond the direct effects of parental status and remote work intensity, $\Delta R^2 = .06$, $F(1, 142) = 8.82$, $p < .005$. Therefore, the relationship between remote work intensity and desire for meaningful work was also moderated by parental status (Table 5).

Table 5

Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis for Remote Work Intensity with Parental Status as a Moderator

Steps		R^2	ΔR^2
Step 1	Remote work intensity Parental status	.00	.00
Step 2	Remote work x Parental status	.06	.06***

Note. N = 143. * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .005

      To understand the nature and direction of the moderating effect for childless employees and those with children, additional linear regression analyses were conducted. Figure 2 illustrates a positive relationship between remote work intensity and desire for meaningful work for employees with children, while the relationship appears to be negative for childless employees. This suggests that the more a childless employee worked from home, the less they desires meaningful work, whereas the more an employee with children worked from home, the more they wanted their work to be meaningful.

Figure 2
Moderating Effect of Parental Status on the Relationship Between Remote Work and Desire for Meaningful Work
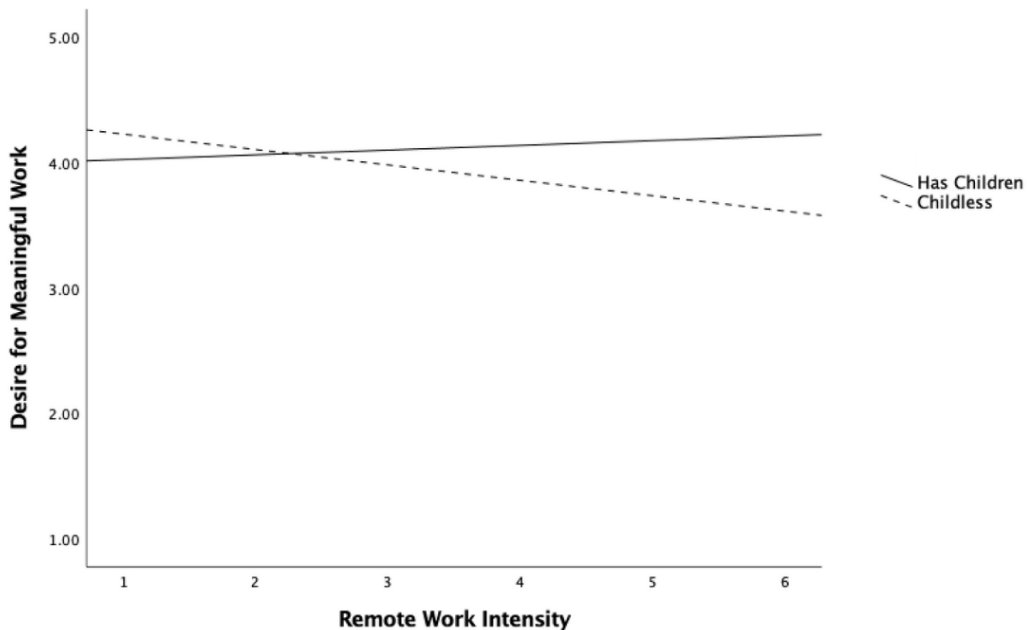
Discussion

In recent years, remote work has become an increasingly strategic element of job design. As organizations and researchers seek a more holistic picture of why employees do the work they do, the lack of research around how remote work impacts meaningful work becomes more apparent. The existing literature surrounding the various outcomes, both psychological and behavioral, of remote work suggests that there is still a need for a better understanding of the impact of remote work on employees' desire for meaningful work.

Research around meaningful work has leaned heavily on an assumption of the universality of the desire for meaning. However, while many may desire meaningful work, there is evidence that meaningful work may not be top priority for all workers (Michaelson, 2011). Organizations are faced with the challenge of navigating an increasingly complex modern work environment and making strategic decisions around in-person and remote work policy. The present study aimed to further explore how remote work impacts an employee's desire for meaningful work as a next step in understanding what employees and perspective employees hope to get out of their work.

Summary of Findings

The research question associated with the present study asked how remote work might impact an employee's desire for meaningful work. Analysis revealed that there was no direct relationship between remote work intensity and desire for meaningful work. The lack of a significant direct relationship was also the case for the individual dimensions of desire for meaningful work: positive meaning, meaning making through work, greater good motivation, and tradeoffs. This could suggest that the desire for meaningful work is related to the work

content itself as opposed to the modality of the work (e.g. remote, in-office, or hybrid). However, given that much of the research surrounding outcomes of remote work have inconsistent findings, I wanted to ensure that there were not significant relationships between remote work and desire for meaningful work that were being masked by moderating effects. As a result, I conducted exploratory moderator analyses using the demographic information collected as part of the survey and found two significant moderating effects with age and parental status.

Age was found to significantly moderate the relationship between remote work and desire for meaningful work. More specifically, a negative relationship was found between remote work intensity and desire for meaningful work for younger employees. These findings suggest that the more a younger employee can work from home, the less they desire meaningful work. It is possible that this indicates that younger employees value the freedom, flexibility, and autonomy associated with remote work more than they value the meaningfulness of their work. On the other hand, the relationship was positive for older employees, suggesting that the more an older employee works from home, the more they want their work to be meaningful. A possible explanation for this finding is that older individuals may be less familiar with the technologies that support remote work so they may desire more meaningful work so their efforts to adjust to a more virtual lifestyle feel worth it.

Parental status also appeared as a significant moderator of the relationship between remote work and desire for meaningful work. Results from the analysis illustrated a positive relationship between remote work intensity and desire for meaningful work for employees with children, suggesting that the more an employee with children works from home, the

more they want their work to be meaningful. This could be because as work life and home life are increasingly imposed on one another, those employees with children may experience more conflict between work and home life, thus putting a higher premium on work that they feel is worth their time. The relationship between remote work and desire for meaning was negative for childless employees. This suggests that the more a childless employee works from home, the less they desire meaningful work. Like the effects noted with younger employees, this relationship could be due in part to childless employees valuing the freedom, flexibility, autonomy of remote work more than finding meaning in their work. Additionally, a childless employee working remotely may have increased flexibility in where they work from and more ability to adjust their schedule, allowing them to work remotely when they want and where they want without also having to navigate parental responsibilities on top. This might allow childless employees to experience more freedom and autonomy while working remotely than a parent also working remotely.

Theoretical Implications

The results of the present study add to the current remote work literature by extending research of the various psychological and behavioral outcomes to one's desire for meaningful work. Not only is the desire for meaningful work an addition to a list of studied outcomes of remote work, but it also takes a step towards a better understanding of what employees seek to get out of their work experiences in a modern work environment, specifically when faced with an increased prevalence of flexible work. As remote work becomes less of a perk and more of a strategic element of job design (Berg et al., 2018), conducting research to better understand the extent to which an employee desires meaningful work may be critical to

understanding the trade-offs they are willing to make as they navigate a more flexible work arrangement becomes even more important.

The results of the current study help further the understanding of remote work as a strategic element of job design by shedding light on how it can impact an employee's desire for meaningful work. While there was not a significant relationship between these two concepts, the presence of moderating effects aligns with much of remote work research, suggesting that there are few guaranteed behavioral or psychological outcomes of remote work, and that most outcomes depend on other variables.

In addition to confirming what has been found to be true of many outcomes of remote work, the current study also adds to a newer, growing body of research surrounding meaningful work. Much of meaningful work research has operated under the assumption that everyone wants their work to be meaningful, despite some scholars have criticized this assumption (Michaelson, 2011). The current study sought to challenge the idea that the desire for meaningful work is universal. The results of this study support this idea by showing how the relationship between remote work and the desire for meaningful work may depend on factors such as age and parental status. The negative relationship between remote work and desire for meaningful work for younger employees and childless employees means that as they work more from home, they appear to experience a decreased desire for meaningful work. On the other hand, a positive relationship between remote work and desire for meaningful work was found for older employees and those employees with children, implying that the more they work from home, the greater their desire for meaningful work.

This highlights the impact of competing priorities on what employees hope to get out of their work experience.

Practical Implications

Many organizations roll out remote work policies in a tentative way, evaluating what works best for their employee population and having their policies change over time (Smite et al., 2023). This may be an appropriate approach, given research that suggests many outcomes of remote work are highly contextual. With that being said, it is equally important for organizations to implement and assess their remote work policies thoughtfully, considering the strategic advantages and disadvantages of offering various flexible work options rather than just adjusting them as an immediate reaction to workforce demands (Mortensen & Edmondson, 2023).

The results from this study, combined with previous remote work research, further the support the notion that when implementing remote work policies, organizations should expect a wide range of employee and organizational outcomes that depend on a variety of personal and environmental factors. In the case of this study, organizations should be mindful that the level of meaning younger employees and those without children want to get from their work is negatively impacted by the extent to which they work remotely. For both young and childless employees, the decrease in desire for meaningful work associated with higher intensity remote work, signals to organizations that these employees in these two demographic groups, that likely have a fair amount of overlap, may value the autonomy and flexibility of remote work more than they value the sense their work is meaningful.

Organizations tend to move quickly to find solutions to what appear to be people-related problems. Rather than assuming that a decreased desire for meaningful work is a problem to be solved, organizations should first look to assess the effectiveness, productivity, and performance of these employees. Young, childless employees may be meeting organizational performance standards, being productive in their work, but still choosing to find meaning and purpose from sources other than work. For example, the meaning that they find from non-work sources may be a key contributor behind their high performance. Instead of looking for ways to tie individual employee's sense of meaning more closely to that of the organization, it may be more beneficial for organizations to find ways to better support these employees' search for meaning outside of work. This could be through a variety of benefits and offerings such as sabbatical options, salary and bonus, educational support, wellness/fitness programs. While young and childless remote workers may be less inclined to connect with their organization through a shared sense of meaning, organizations may be able to establish and maintain connection with their remote employees by demonstrating that they too value the autonomy, flexibility, and freedom of their remote workers. This could be a strong demonstration of trust by the organization to its employees.

In addition to supporting young and childless remote workers who may have less of a desire for meaningful work, organizations should also consider the ways in which their remote work policies support an increased desire for meaningful work in their older employees and those with children. This could be done by providing increased personal and professional development opportunities, ensuring employees are recognized for their work and have visibility into the impacts of the work they do.

Additionally, as remote workers with children face an increasing overlap between their work and personal life, organizations should also be sensitive as this overlapping effect can lead to burnout (Choi, 2020). To help counter this and allow employees to have more opportunities to get a sense of meaning from their work, organizations may want to provide more home and family benefits specific to remote workers, like childcare, transportation, and scheduling support. This means that when designing remote work policies, organizations that consider how their remote work policies might impact their employee's desire for meaningful work may be able to help mitigate the impact of meaningful-work related burnout.

Strengths, Limitations, and Future Research

One strength of the present study was that it was the first time that remote work and desire for meaningful work have been studied together. There has been quite a lot of research on the various outcomes of remote work, but the studied outcomes are usually more practical, behavioral, and psychological as they relate to the employee experience. This study examined what could be considered a somewhat existential outcome of remote work. Additionally, this study addressed the underlying assumption that has been unquestioned in most meaningful work research that everyone desires work that is meaningful.

Another strength of this study is the inclusion of a subscale assessing the tradeoff dimension of the desire for meaningful work. While the other dimensions of the meaningful work scale captured various aspects of the experience of meaningful work, the tradeoff dimension sought to capture how an individual values meaningful work when positioned against other competing priorities. Responses to most of the desire for meaningful work items tended to skew positively as individuals indicated whether they wanted more meaning

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generally. The addition of the tradeoff dimension introduced a realistic component to the scale by looking at how people's desire for meaning is impacted by other competing priorities.

While this study had its strengths, it should be noted that some limitations exist that should be taken into account when approaching future research. The first is in the design of the scale measuring desire for meaningful work. The items were worded such that individuals tended to respond more positively, leading to less-than-ideal variability in responses. Future research should aim to improve scale development. This could include adding more reverse-coded items to the scale or rewording items to reflect desire without using the word "desire" or "want" as having these words at the beginning of an item may have primed individuals to respond more positively.

Additionally, the sample associated with this study consisted of a disproportionately high level of participants with advanced education. People often pursue advanced degrees because they are interested in and passionate about their area of study and work so they may be working in careers that are already more personally meaningful than the jobs that might be held by those with less education. Alternative recruitment strategies could be implemented in future research to achieve a more diverse sample.

Similarly, the increments used to capture income was not large enough, so the responses were very positively skewed. Those with higher income are likely able to meet their needs and address their wants more easily than those of low income. This could impact the way individuals respond to items measuring the desire for meaningful work because if other more

basic needs are not being met, meaningful work is likely not a top priority. This made exploratory moderation analysis challenging with this demographic.

The moderating effect of age on the relationship between remote work and desire for meaningful work is stands out as an area ripe for future research. There appears to be a common belief that younger employees are looking for more meaningful work, supported by polls indicating that younger employees value meaningful work above work flexibility when accepting a new position (Smet et al., 2023). This study's findings, however, suggest that as younger employees work more from home, they experience a reduced desire for meaning, while older employees who are working remotely desire more meaning.

This finding could be explained by individuals becoming slightly more reflective on their life and contribution as they age, or differences in how youth values and prioritizes freedom, flexibility, and independence. It could also be the case that it is more challenging for an older employee to adjust to a more virtual lifestyle, so they care more that the work they are adapting to is meaningful and worthwhile. While these are just some possible explanations, the discrepancy between the findings of this study and the results of polls conducted by various research organizations suggests that there is a need for more distinction in the research around generational difference and difference that are a product of age and life stage. This would require more longitudinal research to examine changes over time in what individuals seek to get out of their work.

Moderating effects were considered after the study design and approached in an exploratory way. This means that I were limited to the demographic variables collected in the survey when looking at potential moderating effects. Future research could expand and

consider other possible moderating effects that may be masking the direct effect that was not found between remote work and desire for meaningful work.

Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between remote work and an employee's desire for meaningful work. Study results indicated no significant relationship between remote work and desire for meaningful work. This is not surprising given past remote research indicating that the relationship between remote work and its outcomes is often moderated and contextual. Additionally, this study included an exploratory moderator analysis that found age and parental status moderated the relationship between remote work and desire for meaningful work, such that the more intensely younger employees or employees without children work from home, the more they experience a decrease in their desire for meaningful work. These findings assist researchers and organizations in their journey to leverage remote work as a strategic element of job design as they seek to attract and retain talent.

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Demographic Items

What is your current employment status?

What is your gender identity?

How old are you?

What is your marital status?

Do you have children?

What is your level of education?

What is your annual household income?

Scale Items

Remote Work

How many hours do you work remotely per week?

Desire for Meaningful Work: *Positive Meaning*

I want a meaningful career.

I desire work that contributes to my personal growth.

I search for work that has a satisfying purpose.

Desire for Meaningful Work: *Meaning Making Through Work*

I desire work that contributes to my life's meaning.

I desire work that helps me better understand myself.

I desire work that helps me make sense of the world around me.

Desire for Meaningful Work: *Greater Good Motivations*

I don't care if my work makes a difference in the world.*

I desire work that I know makes a positive difference in the world.

I want work that serves a greater purpose.

Desire for Meaningful Work: *Tradeoffs*

Finding work that is meaningful is something I consider to be top priority when searching for a job.

If I were looking for a new job, I would accept lower pay if it meant my work was more meaningful.

If I were to look for a new job, I would prioritize a job that I find meaningful over a job with a high salary.

* Indicates that survey items were reverse coded