

## The Impact of Meaningful Work on Employee Engagement: The Case of Mongolian Kindergarten Teachers

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### ABSTRACT

Numerous studies substantiate the correlation between meaningful work and its far-reaching impact on various aspects of employees' lives. This includes bolstering financial stability, improving physical health, nurturing relationships, and fostering a sense of community. Consequently, these positive outcomes ripple into elevated levels of job satisfaction, increased work engagement, and enhanced job retention. The primary objective of this study is to explore the relationship between meaningful work and employee engagement. The study utilized data from 149 employees across four private kindergartens in Ulaanbaatar city of Mongolia and conducted thorough analyses to evaluate the reliability and correlation of variables, employing covariance-based structural equation modeling (CB-SEM). The analysis revealed that the positive meaning has a significant and positive correlation with all three facets of employee engagement. Notably, positive meaning has moderate positive impacts on cognitive engagement ( $\beta = 0.531$ ), emotional engagement ( $\beta = 0.549$ ), and behavioral engagement ( $\beta = 0.546$ ) among the participants. Additionally, the research findings revealed that meaning-making through work displayed small yet statistically significant positive effects on various aspects of employee engagement among kindergarten employees. Specifically, meaning-making through work weak and positively influenced cognitive engagement ( $\beta = 0.479$ ), emotional engagement ( $\beta = 0.395$ ), and behavioral engagement ( $\beta = 0.408$ ). Furthermore, the research findings revealed that the greater good motivations had the strongest positive relationship with employee engagement among the three facets assessed. Specifically, greater good motivations showed substantially positive effects on cognitive engagement ( $\beta = 0.751$ ), emotional engagement ( $\beta = 0.859$ ), and behavioral engagement ( $\beta = 0.763$ ) among the kindergarten teachers.

**Keywords:** Positive meaning, meaning-making through work, greater good motivations, cognitive engagement, emotional engagement, behavioral engagement

## INTRODUCTION

The concept of meaningful work that fulfills employees' basic psychological needs and enhances their self-worth and personal empowerment is gaining increasing attention among human resource management (HRM) scholars and practitioners. There is a growing body of evidence in HRM research suggesting that meaningful work is a critical antecedent and driver of employee engagement. An extensive multitude of empirical studies confirms that employees who experience their work as meaningful tend to demonstrate greater job satisfaction, higher engagement, and stronger affiliation with their team or work unit [1, 2, 3]. Determining the causes that influence the meaning of work may have important contributions to increasing the meaning of life. Meaningful work is defined as when one's job makes a positive, significant contribution to their sense of meaning in life, as well as provides satisfaction from the work itself [4]. Moreover, by exploring and identifying the factors that individuals personally value in their workplace, key sources of meaning in a person's work can be uncovered. People want their careers and work to extend beyond mere financial compensation, encompassing greater meaning and value, which is increasingly prevalent. While organizational researchers have persistently explored the potential benefits of meaningful work, there remains a lack of consensus on its precise definition and conceptualization, indicating a need for further research in this area [5]. Additional rigorous inquiry is needed, particularly in the context of our country where limited research has examined this concept. Further investigation of antecedents, mechanisms, and outcomes related to meaningful work can clarify its impacts on key factors like engagement, retention, and performance for both individuals and organizations. Therefore, in this study, we aim to investigate the relationship between job meaning and employee engagement.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Meaningful Work

Scholars have indeed applied various definitions to the concept of meaningful work in their research, often using different terms interchangeably. A key distinction to note is between "meaning" as a broader, more abstract concept and "meaningful work" as a specific term related to the workplace [6]. Meaningful work is pivotal in enhancing the abilities of employees to effectively attain the goals and objectives set by their organization. Meaningful work can provide benefits for organizations and lead to positive work outcomes, including higher employee satisfaction, engagement, and commitment. Experiencing meaningfulness in one's work may also promote individual and organizational fulfillment, enhance productivity, and improve staff retention and loyalty [7]. The concept of "meaningfulness of work" refers to the degree to which individuals perceive their work as significant, purposeful, and fulfilling. In other words, the meaning of work can be defined as the perceived value created through the alignment of an individual's professional efforts with their expectations and standards [1]. The meaning of work is characterized by an individual feeling of receiving benefits from the investment of physical, cognitive, and emotional energy. It arises when an individual feels that their contributions are worthwhile, useful, and valuable [8]. It encompasses the sense of purpose and value that individuals derive from their professional activities. This subjective experience is often linked to the alignment of personal values, goals, and beliefs with the nature of the work they perform. When work is attributed value and significance, it becomes meaningful [1]. The essence of meaningful work is cultivated through a stable mindset within the context of a favorable alignment between the individual and the specific circumstances and nature of the work [6, 4]. Meaningful work refers to the extent to which an employee perceives

their work as personally valuable and well-matched to their interests and talents [5]. From the Psychology of Working perspective, meaningful work is identified as a fundamental human need that must be fulfilled for individuals to comprehend the world, contribute to society, assist others, and attain professional fulfillment [9]. Researchers like Mowday et al posited that the meaning of work can be defined as the positive and significant contribution that work makes to a person's life and the level of satisfaction that a person receives from work [10]. Shuck and Rose [11] believe that a positive relationship between the employee and the organization determines the level of meaningfulness of work. Meaningful work provides benefits at both the employee and organizational levels. At the individual level, meaningful work helps employees cope more effectively with daily work stress and reduces burnout. It also increases job satisfaction, intrinsic motivation, engagement, performance, career commitment, and overall well-being [12].

### **Employee Engagement**

Employee engagement is a human resources (HR) concept that refers to the level of enthusiasm, commitment, and involvement an employee feels toward their organization and job duties. Employee engagement is generally defined as the employee's heart and mind to their organization [13], which is reflected in the employee's attitude, behavior, and how much effort they invest in their work [14, 13]. Engaged employees tend to care deeply about their work, the overall organization, and its success. They believe their effort contributes to the performance and objectives of the organization. Rather than being motivated by solely a paycheck, engaged employees have made a deeper personal connection between their well-being, fulfillment, and their performance in bringing value to their organization. This level of psychological investment and sense of purpose drives engaged employees to strive for greater impact and the achievement of organizational goals. Employee engagement is manifested when employees feel a sense of dedication to their work and sustained commitment toward achieving the long-term objectives of the organization [15]. Fredricks et al. [16] identify three principal dimensions of employee engagement: behavioral, cognitive, and emotional. *Behavioral engagement* is centered on an employee's adherence to workplace norms, such as consistent attendance and an eagerness to engage in work activities. Additionally, it involves the conduct, active participation, and physical actions displayed by employees in their work environment. Employees with high levels of behavioral engagement are characterized by their proactive approach, including taking initiative, being accountable for their actions, and reliably meeting or surpassing performance targets. They collaborate effectively and can contribute extra effort when needed. *Cognitive engagement* entails a profound investment in one's work, coupled with a zest for addressing challenges. This dimension of engagement is characterized by a significant level of mental commitment, along with a willingness to exert extra effort in problem-solving and innovation. Cognitively engaged workers demonstrate high levels of proactivity in areas like problem-solving, process improvements, and innovation. Rather than shying away from challenges, they take the initiative to understand root causes and try new approaches. *Emotional engagement* includes experiencing positive feelings like enjoyment and developing a sense of belonging within the organization. Emotional engagement pertains to an employee's feeling of connection to their work, colleagues, and the organization as a whole. Employees exhibiting high emotional engagement typically demonstrate greater loyalty, productivity, job satisfaction, and willingness to invest effort. They are deeply committed to the organization's mission and vision, often going above and beyond in their roles to contribute to organizational success.

## **Meaningfulness of Work and Employee Engagement**

Meaningful work has been linked to enhanced psychological well-being [12], characterized by heightened commitment, satisfaction, and engagement [6, 2] and motivation in the workplace, as well as a reduced intention to leave the job [17]. Numerous studies have also established a correlation between meaningful work and employee engagement. In their research, May, Gilson, and Harter [1] demonstrated a strong connection between meaningful work and employee engagement. Making more work meaningful can lead to significant improvements in employee performance, effectiveness, value, engagement, competence, and organizational trust [18]. Researcher Albrecht [19] posited that employees who comprehend the value and purpose of their work exhibit greater energy, motivation, and activity levels in their professional roles. According to a study by Geldenhuys et al. [7], employees who experience their work as meaningful usually display greater well-being across various measures, including good health, affective commitment, and engagement. Meaningful work increases employee engagement and affective commitment [10]. A study by Han et al [20] found that meaningfulness at work has a positive relationship with both work engagement and in-role job performance. The findings highlight that as employees experience greater meaningfulness in their work, their engagement and performance on core job duties tend to rise. When an employee perceives his or her work as meaningful, they tend to experience greater emotional, psychological, and cognitive engagement, which can lead to improved work performance [21]. Based on the insights gathered from the aforementioned studies, the following hypotheses were proposed, predicated on the assumption that the presence of meaningful work enhances employee engagement:

- **H1a.** There is a positive relationship between the perception of positive meaning in work and cognitive engagement among employees.
- **H1b.** There is a positive relationship between the perception of positive meaning in work and emotional engagement among employees.
- **H1c.** There is a positive relationship between the perception of positive meaning in work and behavioral engagement among employees.
- **H2a.** There is a positive relationship between meaning-making through work and cognitive engagement among employees.
- **H2b.** There is a positive relationship between meaning-making through work and emotional engagement among employees.
- **H2c.** There is a positive relationship between meaning-making through work and behavioral engagement among employees.
- **H3a.** There is a positive relationship between greater good motivations in work and cognitive engagement among employees.
- **H3b.** There is a positive relationship between greater good motivations in work and emotional engagement among employees.
- **H3c.** There is a positive relationship between greater good motivations in work and behavioral engagement among employees.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

### **Data Collection and Sample Size**

The data for this study was collected from 149 employees across four private kindergartens in Ulaanbaatar city of Mongolia. The survey was conducted online using Microsoft Forms, an online survey platform, from 28 August 2023 to 18 September 2023. A total of 156

questionnaire responses were collected throughout this survey period. After screening, 149 valid questionnaires were used for analysis in the study.

### **Instruments and Data Analysis**

- Work as Meaning Inventory – WAMI: In our study, the Work as Meaning Inventory (WAMI) was employed, a measurement tool developed by Steger, Dik, and Duffy [5]. This instrument comprises 10 items distributed across three key dimensions: positive meaning ( $\alpha = 0.876$ ), meaning-making through work ( $\alpha = 0.839$ ), and greater good motivations ( $\alpha = 0.785$ ).
- Employee Engagement Scale – EES. Employee Engagement Scale, used by Shuck, Adelson, and Reio [22], was utilized in our research. This instrument comprises 15 items distributed across three key dimensions: cognitive engagement ( $\alpha = 0.909$ ), emotional engagement ( $\alpha = 0.927$ ), and behavioral engagement ( $\alpha = 0.885$ ).

The current study utilized a self-administered questionnaire comprised of closed-ended questions. A 5-point Likert scale was used, with 1 representing “strongly disagree” and 5 representing “strongly agree.”

The measures of sampling adequacy employed in this study, including Barlett’s test of sphericity ( $\chi^2 = 3426.15$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .001$ ), the diagonals of the anti-image correlation matrix (all  $> .805$ ), and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy (.914), collectively indicated that the data were well-suited for Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) [23].

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 23.0 and SmartPLS version 4.0.9.8, statistical software packages. To ensure robust analysis, tests of reliability and correlation were performed on the variables under investigation. Covariance-based structural equation modeling (CB-SEM), an advanced statistical technique, was utilized to examine the relationships between the variables and obtain the results.

## **RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Demographic Indicators**

When selecting the survey sample, a minimum confidence level or acceptable level of 95% was chosen, with a confidence interval of 5%. The target population consisted of 163 employees from four private kindergartens. The sample size was determined to be 115 participants. As the survey collected responses from 149 participants, it can be concluded that the sample was considered representative of the original population. A total of 149 kindergarten employees participated in the survey, comprised of 139 females (97.3%) and 4 males (2.7%), with ages ranging from 18 to 49 years. Of the respondents, 16.1% held a graduate degree, 57.7% had an undergraduate degree, and 26.2% completed high school. Regarding years of professional experience, 34.2% reported 1-5 years, while 23.5% had up to 1 year, 19.5% had 6-10 years, 14.8% had 11-15 years, and 8.0% had over 16 years. Concerning occupational roles, 38.2% of participants identified as teachers and 61.8% as teaching assistants.

### **Reliability Analysis of Variable**

A factor loading analysis was conducted to determine the correlation coefficients between measurement variables. Tests of internal consistency and reliability were also performed, including calculating Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability (CR), and average variance

extracted (AVE). Table 1 presents the results of these analyses to demonstrate the reliability and underlying relationships between the measures.

**Table 1: Results of Reliability analysis of variable**

| Variables                        | Number of questions | Factor loading | Cronbach's $\alpha$ | CR   | AVE  |
|----------------------------------|---------------------|----------------|---------------------|------|------|
| Positive Meaning -PM             | 4                   | .759-.849      | .876                | .876 | .640 |
| Meaning-Making through Work -MMW | 3                   | .788-.802      | .839                | .838 | .643 |
| Greater Good Motivations -GGM    | 3                   | .725-.772      | .785                | .771 | .537 |
| Cognitive Engagement-CE          | 5                   | .776-.854      | .909                | .888 | .619 |
| Emotional Engagement-EE          | 5                   | .808-.902      | .927                | .939 | .753 |
| Behavioral Engagement-BE         | 5                   | .740-.886      | .885                | .897 | .634 |

The analysis demonstrated strong consistency and reliability results across all factors and associated measurement variables. Specifically, the internal consistency values ranged from 0.725 to 0.902, indicating good consistency among the questionnaire items used to measure each factor. Cronbach's alpha coefficients spanned 0.785 to 0.927, surpassing the commonly accepted 0.70 threshold for adequate reliability [24]. Composite reliability ranged from 0.771 to 0.939, exceeding the guideline of 0.70 [25], and indicating high construct reliability. Finally, the average variance extracted (AVE) results ranged from 0.537 to 0.753. With these AVE coefficients surpassing the recommended threshold of 0.50 [26], they signify both practical significance and the ability to effectively discriminate between factors.

### Covariance-Based Structural Equation Modeling (CB-SEM)

The current study used CB-SEM to test the hypotheses. The correlation between independent and dependent variables was reviewed during the analysis. The results of the analysis supported all three assumptions and all the regression weight values were positive and significant ( $p < 0.01$ ). The results of the survey are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2: Research results in CB-SEM**

| Hypothesis | Path                 | Standardize Beta | Standard Error | T statistics | P value | Remarks   |
|------------|----------------------|------------------|----------------|--------------|---------|-----------|
| H1a        | PM $\rightarrow$ CE  | 0.531**          | 0.086          | 8.557        | .001    | Supported |
| H1b        | PM $\rightarrow$ EE  | 0.549**          | 0.080          | 6.920        | .002    | Supported |
| H1c        | PM $\rightarrow$ BE  | 0.546**          | 0.080          | 7.776        | .001    | Supported |
| H2a        | MMW $\rightarrow$ CE | 0.479**          | 0.122          | 9.965        | .000    | Supported |
| H2b        | MMW $\rightarrow$ EE | 0.395**          | 0.115          | 8.376        | .001    | Supported |
| H2c        | MMW $\rightarrow$ BE | 0.408**          | 0.116          | 9.705        | .000    | Supported |
| H3a        | GGM $\rightarrow$ CE | 0.751***         | 0.229          | 7.034        | .000    | Supported |
| H3b        | GGM $\rightarrow$ EE | 0.859***         | 0.169          | 5.686        | .000    | Supported |
| H3c        | GGM $\rightarrow$ BE | 0.763***         | 0.197          | 6.619        | .000    | Supported |

Note: \*\*\*:  $p < 0.001$ ; \*\*:  $p < 0.01$ ; \*:  $p < 0.05$ , significance levels are two-tailed

Variable definition: PM, Positive Meaning; MMW, Meaning-Making through Work; GGM, Greater Good Motivations; CE, Cognitive Engagement; EE, Emotional Engagement; BE, Behavioral Engagement.

Having established the validity and reliability of the measurement model, the next step was to test the hypothesized relationship by running the CB-SEM algorithm and Bootstrapping algorithm in PLS 4.0.9.8.

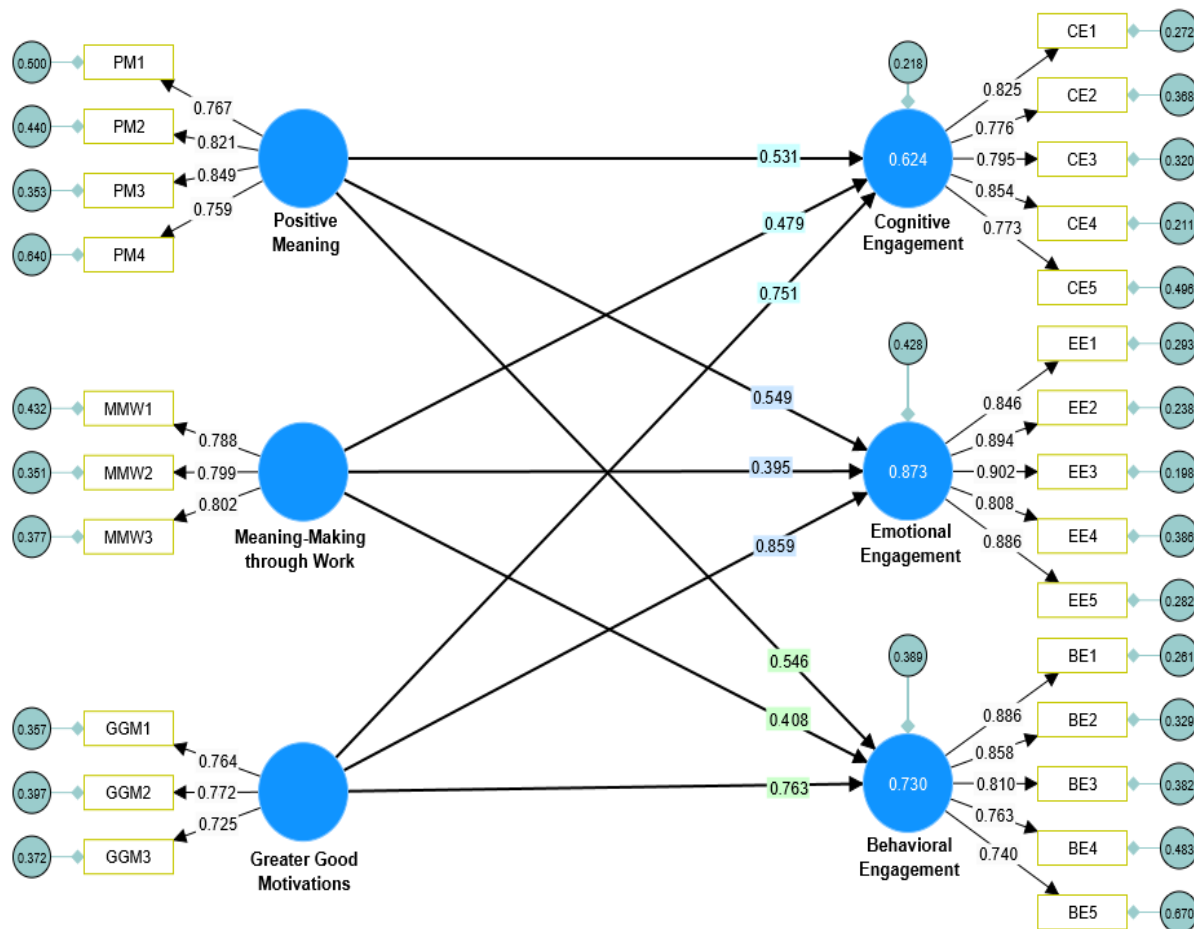


**Figure 1: Items loadings and path coefficient**

As depicted in Figure 1 and Table 2, the study's results confirmed all research hypotheses for the direct effect of Positive meaning (PM), Meaning-making through work (MMW), and Greater good motivations (GGM) on Cognitive engagement (CE), Emotional engagement (EE) and Behavioral engagement (BE).

According to the results of the analysis, the positive meaning dimension of meaningful work has a significant positive association with all three employee engagement outcomes. Specifically, positive meaning demonstrated moderately positive impacts on cognitive engagement ( $\beta = 0.531$ ,  $p < .001$ ), emotional engagement ( $\beta = 0.549$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and behavioral engagement ( $\beta = 0.546$ ,  $p < .001$ ) among participants. These findings indicate that deriving a sense of positive meaning through one's work is linked to heightened engagement across cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components.

Additionally, the research results indicated that meaning-making through work also positively impacts employee engagement, but with slightly weaker effects compared to positive meaning. Specifically, meaning-making through work demonstrated small, yet statistically significant

positive effects on cognitive engagement ( $\beta = 0.479$ ,  $p < .001$ ), emotional engagement ( $\beta = 0.395$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and behavioral engagement ( $\beta = 0.408$ ,  $p < .001$ ) among the kindergarten employees surveyed. Although not as influential as positive meaning, employees' ability to find purpose and meaningfulness through their work activities is still related positively to heightened engagement across facets.

Further analysis showed that the greater good motivations dimension of meaningful work exhibited the strongest positive relationship with employee engagement out of the three facets assessed. Specifically, greater good motivations demonstrated substantially positive effects on cognitive engagement ( $\beta = 0.751$ ,  $p < .001$ ), emotional engagement ( $\beta = 0.859$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and behavioral engagement ( $\beta = 0.763$ ,  $p < .001$ ) among the kindergarten teachers. Of note, the beta weights for greater good motivations were higher than both positive meaning and meaning-making through work, suggesting perceiving one's job as benefitting others or society relates strongly to strengthened engagement across facets.

Our study results supported all proposed hypotheses, confirming that meaningful work, as assessed through its three dimensions, significantly predicts greater employee engagement.

## Discussion

This study delved into the interplay between meaningful work and employee engagement in four private kindergartens in Mongolia, uncovering nuanced differences in how various facets of meaningful work influence engagement. The key findings are as follows:

1. **Positive Meaning and Engagement:** The study found that employees who perceive their work as having positive meaning, purpose, or prosocial impact show significantly higher levels of engagement. This discovery aligns with and extends previous theoretical propositions and research [8, 11] which suggest that meaningful work acts as a catalyst for employee engagement.
2. **Meaning-Making through Work and Engagement:** Furthermore, the research indicated that the process of meaning-making through work, while having a positive impact, exerts a relatively weaker influence on the various dimensions of employee engagement, including cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects. This finding contributes to the nuanced understanding of how employees derive meaning from their work and its subtler effects on engagement.
3. **Greater Good Motivation and Engagement:** The third significant revelation from the study is that among the facets examined, the perception of one's job as contributing to societal benefits or the greater good (i.e., greater good motivations) exhibited the most potent positive relationship with employee engagement. This suggests that when employees see their roles as aligned with broader societal or altruistic goals, their engagement levels are markedly enhanced.

These findings contribute valuable insights to the literature on meaningful work and employee engagement, emphasizing the diverse ways in which different aspects of meaningful work can influence employee engagement in educational settings, particularly in the context of Mongolia's private kindergarten sector.

## CONCLUSION

The study makes several significant contributions to the existing literature on meaningful work and employee engagement.

### Empirical Validation

Our research offers empirical evidence that substantiates the hypothesized positive relationships between various dimensions of meaningful work (i.e., positive meaning, meaning-making through work, and greater good motivations) and the different facets of employee engagement (i.e., cognitive, emotional, and behavioral).

### Methodological Rigor

By employing validated measurement instruments and robust Covariance-Based Structural Equation Modeling (CB-SEM) analysis in a sample of Mongolian kindergarten employees, the study provides a methodologically sound exploration of the relationship between perceptions of meaningful work and employee engagement.

### Comprehensive Examination

The findings demonstrate that perceptions of meaningful work positively predict employee engagement across cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions. This comprehensive approach to examining employee engagement provides a more nuanced understanding of how work-related meaning impacts various aspects of employee performance and attitude.

### New Insights

Specifically, the results reveal that the meaningful work dimensions of positive meaning, meaning-making through work, and greater good motivations each exhibit significant positive effects on engagement outcomes. This not only aligns with but also expands upon previous theoretical propositions, validating the idea that perceptions of meaningful work serve as a precursor to enhanced employee engagement.

### Highlighting Prosocial Motivations

The study introduces new insights, particularly highlighting the strong link between prosocial greater good motivations and heightened engagement across all facets. This underscores the importance of altruistic and societal values in fostering a highly engaged workforce.

In summary, this study not only reinforces the existing theories linking meaningful work and employee engagement but also adds new dimensions to our understanding by highlighting specific meaningful work facets and their varied impacts on different forms of employee engagement.

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

While this study makes several notable contributions, some limitations should be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional survey design prevents making definitive claims about the causal and temporal ordering of the observed effects.

Secondly, the sample consisted solely of kindergarten teachers and assistants in Mongolia. This narrow focus limits the generalizability of findings to the broader population. For example,

surveying employees from a range of public and private sector industries could reveal whether these relationships differ across job types and organizational settings.

Furthermore, the reliance on self-report surveys introduces the potential for response biases, influencing the accuracy of the gathered information. Future studies could incorporate more objective engagement indicators or data from additional sources like peer ratings. This could confirm effects beyond self-perceptions.

Addressing these limitations provides avenues for valuable follow-up research. However, the current results still markedly advance understanding of the meaningful work-engagement relationship and offer practical implications despite these constraints.

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### Interest Conflicts

The authors have no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

### Informed Consent

All study participants provided informed consent before involvement in the study, following the study protocol approved by the institutional research board.

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