

How Are Daily Work Experiences Crafted?
A Mixed Method Approach Exploring Employee
Perspectives



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Saskia Anna Clara Glaas
aus München

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Erstgutachter: Prof. Dr. Dieter Frey

Zweitgutachterin: Prof. Dr. Eva Lermer

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Der Mensch ist das Wesen, das immer entscheidet.

Und was entscheidet es?

Was es im nächsten Augenblick sein wird.

Viktor Frankl

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– Für Klara & Ernst.

Deutsche Zusammenfassung

„Wie werden tägliche Arbeitserfahrungen gestaltet?

Ein Mixed-Methods-Ansatz zur Erforschung von Mitarbeitendenperspektiven“

Deutsche Zusammenfassung

Tage prägen unser Erleben von Zeit, und sind auch in den meisten Berufen distinkte Einheiten, die die Gestaltung der Arbeit steuern (Sonnentag et al., 2024). Am modernen Arbeitsplatz sind Mitarbeitende täglich mit einer Vielzahl von Faktoren konfrontiert, die Einfluss auf ihre Erfahrungen, ihr Wohlbefinden und ihre Leistung haben (Dalal et al., 2014; Ilies et al., 2024; Sonnentag et al., 2024). Dabei sind sie jedoch längst nicht nur passive Rezipient*innen. Vielmehr können Mitarbeitende ihren Arbeitsalltag aktiv gestalten und selbst steuern, wie sie auf tägliche Ereignisse reagieren (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Dies wiederum bestimmt, wie sich die Erlebnisse am Arbeitstag auf sie auswirken (Bakker & de Vries, 2021). Beispielsweise können Mitarbeitende die Effekte positiver Arbeitserlebnisse durch Reflexion verstärken oder den Einfluss von Arbeitsstressoren durch Bewältigungsstrategien abschwächen (Bakker & de Vries, 2021; Ilies et al., 2024).

Die vorliegende Arbeit untersucht diese täglichen Erfahrungen am Arbeitsplatz. Sie gliedert sich in zwei Teile und konzentriert sich auf zwei zentrale Themen der organisationspsychologischen Forschung: *Führung* und das Erleben von *sinnstiftender Arbeit*. Dabei wird mit unterschiedlichen methodischen Ansätzen der Frage nachgegangen, wie Mitarbeitende ihre täglichen Erfahrungen selbst gestalten. Insbesondere werden *Bewältigungsstrategien* und *Sinnkonstruktion* als selbstbestimmte Mechanismen der Arbeitsgestaltung und Selbstregulation genauer beleuchtet.

Der erste Teil der Arbeit wendet ein quantitatives Tagebuchdesign an, um den Umgang von Mitarbeitenden mit Laissez-faire Führung zu untersuchen. Obwohl dieser Führungsstil in der Literatur oft als negativ betrachtet wird, zeigt diese Arbeit, dass die täglichen Bewältigungsstrategien entscheidend dafür sind, ob er auf täglicher Ebene negative oder aber gar positive Effekte auf die Mitarbeitenden hat. Es werden zwei Bewältigungsstrategien beleuchtet: die günstige Strategie der Arbeitsgestaltung (engl. job crafting) und die ungünstige Strategie des Arbeitsrückzugs (engl. disengagement). Somit wird

verdeutlicht, wie Individuen durch ihre Reaktionen negative äußere Einflüsse abschwächen oder gar ins Positive wenden können, was wiederum Effekte auf ihre tägliche Jobzufriedenheit und ihre Leistung hat.

Der zweite Teil der Arbeit wendet ein qualitatives Tagebuchdesign an, um zu erforschen, wie Individuen ihre täglichen Aufgaben in sinnstiftende Arbeit umdeuten. Auch wenn tägliche Aufgaben oft banal und bedeutungslos erscheinen, können sie dennoch sinnstiftend und Teil eines „größeren Ganzen“ sein (Carton, 2018). Dieser Teil der Arbeit zeigt auf, wie Mitarbeitende durch aktive Sinnkonstruktion ihren Aufgaben Bedeutung zuschreiben, beispielsweise indem sie in Aufgaben positive Auswirkungen auf andere sehen, oder persönliche Entwicklungsmöglichkeiten, eigene Bedürfnisbefriedigung, sowie das Empfinden, Leistung und Beiträge zum Organisationserfolg zu erbringen. Diese Erkenntnisse betonen, dass Individuen die Wahrnehmung ihrer täglichen Arbeit selbst gestalten können.

Teil I: Ein zweischneidiges Schwert: Wie Arbeitsgestaltung und -rückzug die Auswirkungen täglicher Laissez-faire Führung formen

[Engl. Titel: A Double-Edged Sword: How Job Crafting and Disengagement Shape the Effects of Daily Laissez-faire Leadership]

Laissez-faire Führung ist ein weit verbreiteter Führungsstil, der sich durch Abwesenheit und Desinteresse auszeichnet, erkennbar an verzögerten Rückmeldungen, ausbleibenden Entscheidungen und minimaler Interaktion der Führungskraft mit den Mitarbeitenden (Aasland et al., 2010; Bass & Avolio, 1994). Obwohl dieser Führungsstil nachweislich Zusammenhänge mit erhöhtem Stress bei Mitarbeitenden aufweist (z. B. Diebig & Bormann, 2020), ist wenig darüber bekannt, welche Strategien Mitarbeitende im Umgang mit diesem Führungsstil entwickeln. Gleichzeitig legen einige Studien nahe, dass Laissez-faire Führung unter bestimmten Umständen auch positive Assoziationen mit Leistung und Motivation der Mitarbeitenden haben kann (Fiaz et al., 2017; Jamali et al., 2022; Zareen et al., 2015; Zhang et al., 2023). Um diese unterschiedlichen Befunde zu verstehen, untersucht die

vorliegende Studie, wie Mitarbeitende auf täglicher Ebene mit Laissez-faire Führung umgehen und welche Strategien sich dabei als günstig oder als ungünstig erweisen.

Theoretischer Hintergrund und Hypothesen

Auf Grundlage des *transaktionalen Stressmodells* (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) und des *Arbeitsanforderungen-Ressourcen-Modells* (Bakker et al., 2014) postuliert diese Arbeit, dass tägliche Laissez-faire Führung sowohl positive als auch negative Assoziationen mit den Einstellungen und dem Verhalten der Mitarbeitenden aufweisen kann, abhängig von den täglichen Bewältigungsstrategien der Mitarbeitenden. Dafür untersuchen wir die Zusammenhänge mit Arbeitszufriedenheit als proximale, affektive Variable am Abend und Arbeitsleistung am nächsten Tag als Verhaltensvariable. Insbesondere gehen wir davon aus, dass tägliche *Arbeitsgestaltung* positive Effekte von täglicher Laissez-faire Führung hervorruft. Arbeitsgestaltung ist ein Prozess, bei dem Mitarbeitende ihre Aufgaben, Beziehungen oder kognitiven Vorstellungen der Arbeit so anpassen, dass diese besser zu ihren Bedürfnissen und Interessen passen (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Mitarbeitende, die an einem Tag Arbeitsgestaltung vornehmen, könnten Laissez-faire Führung als Möglichkeit sehen, ihre Arbeit selbst zu gestalten (Li et al., 2023; Chen et al., 2021), beispielsweise indem sie den Raum, den die Führungskraft lässt, nutzen, um an Aufgaben zu arbeiten, die ihren Interessen entsprechen. Hingegen nehmen wir an, dass täglicher *Arbeitsrückzug* negative Effekte von täglicher Laissez-faire Führung bedingt. Arbeitsrückzug beschreibt, dass Mitarbeitende Stressoren und die damit verbundenen Emotionen meiden und verdrängen (Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010). Da durch diese Strategie Laissez-faire Führung als Auslöser für die empfundene Unzufriedenheit nicht adressiert wird, kann sie die Effekte von Stressoren verstärken (Cheng et al., 2014; Day & Livingstone, 2001).

Methode und Ergebnisse

Es wurde eine quantitative Tagebuchstudie mit $N = 127$ Mitarbeitenden durchgeführt, resultierend in $N = 359$ Datenpunkten. Die Teilnehmenden wurden nach einer Erstbefragung

gebeten, während der kommenden Arbeitswoche (Montag bis Freitag) zweimal täglich (nach Feierabend und vor dem Schlafengehen) an kurzen Online-Umfragen teilzunehmen. Im täglichen Feierabend-Fragebogen wurden Laissez-faire Führung, Arbeitsgestaltung und Arbeitsrückzug erfasst. Vor dem Schlafengehen wurden die tägliche Arbeitszufriedenheit, und mit jeweils einem Tag Abstand die tägliche Arbeitsleistung gemessen.

Die Ergebnisse der Mehrebenen-moderierten Mediationsanalysen bestätigten unsere Hypothesen. An Tagen, an denen die Mitarbeitenden ein hohes Niveau an Arbeitsgestaltung aufwiesen, gab es eine positive Beziehung zwischen Laissez-faire Führung und der Arbeitsleistung am nächsten Tag. Diese Beziehung wurde durch die Arbeitszufriedenheit am selbigen Abend mediert. An Tagen mit niedriger Arbeitsgestaltung wurde hingegen keine signifikante Beziehung gefunden. An Tagen, an denen die Mitarbeitenden ein hohes Niveau an Arbeitsrückzug aufwiesen, zeigte sich eine negative Beziehung zwischen Laissez-faire Führung und der Arbeitsleistung am nächsten Tag über die Arbeitszufriedenheit am Abend. Umgekehrt zeigte sich ein positiver Zusammenhang an Tagen mit wenig Arbeitsrückzug.

Diskussion und Schlussfolgerung

Unsere Ergebnisse zeigen, dass Laissez-faire Führung ein „zweischneidiges Schwert“ sein kann, das sowohl positive als auch negative Effekte auf Mitarbeitende hat. Zudem zeigt tägliche Laissez-faire Führung Zusammenhänge mit dem Erleben und Verhalten der Mitarbeitenden bis zum darauffolgenden Tag. Unsere Ergebnisse stützen die theoretischen Annahmen, dass die täglich gewählten Bewältigungsstrategien der Mitarbeitenden eine zentrale Rolle darin spielen, wie sich tägliche Laissez-faire Führung auswirkt. Demnach ist es für Mitarbeitende empfehlenswert, tägliche Arbeitsgestaltung zu betreiben und Arbeitsrückzug zu vermeiden. Organisationen können von diesen Befunden profitieren, indem sie Laissez-faire Führung reduzieren, beispielsweise durch Maßnahmen zur Verringerung der Erschöpfung von Führungskräften (Courtright et al., 2014). Auch sollte Arbeitsgestaltung, wie die Vertiefung von Beziehungen am Arbeitsplatz und die Anpassung von Aufgaben an

die eigenen Fähigkeiten, gefördert werden, zum Beispiel durch spezielle Arbeitsgestaltungstrainings (Oprea et al., 2019) oder durch tägliche Ressourcen wie ausreichende Erholung und Schlaf (Hur & Shin, 2023). Zuletzt sollte Arbeitsrückzug verhindert werden. Dies kann gelingen indem ein Klima der sozialen Unterstützung am Arbeitsplatz etabliert wird und die persönlichen Ressourcen der Mitarbeitenden, wie Selbstwirksamkeit oder Anpassungsfähigkeit, gefördert werden (Collie et al., 2018; Goussinsky, 2012).

Teil II: Die Bedeutung des Alltäglichen: Eine qualitative Tagebuchstudie zur Erforschung der täglichen Sinnhaftigkeit von Arbeit

[Engl. Titel: The Meaning of the Mundane: Exploring Daily Meaningful Work Through a Qualitative Diary Study]

Sinnstiftende Arbeit ist Arbeit, die von Mitarbeitenden als bedeutsam und wertvoll angesehen wird (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). Wenn Arbeit als sinnstiftend empfunden wird, wirkt sich das positiv auf die Mitarbeitenden selbst und auf ihre Organisation aus (Allan et al., 2019). Dementsprechend ist die Förderung von sinnstiftender Arbeit ein Anliegen für Forschung und Praxis gleichermaßen (Bailey et al., 2019; Deloitte, 2017). Dennoch ist nach aktuellem Forschungsstand nicht vollständig geklärt, ob und wie Mitarbeitende in ihren täglichen Aufgaben Sinn erleben, da der Großteil der Studien eine den gesamten Beruf umfassende Perspektive einnimmt (z. B. Bailey & Madden, 2017; Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009). Um die positiven Auswirkungen der täglichen sinnstiftenden Arbeit nutzen zu können und das Konstrukt in seinen verschiedenen zeitlichen Dimensionen umfassend zu verstehen, ist es entscheidend, diese Forschungslücke zu schließen (Cai et al., 2024; Lysova et al., 2023; Meng et al., 2023).

Theoretischer Hintergrund und Forschungsfrage

Sinnstiftende Arbeit kann auf zwei Ebenen erlebt werden: als episodischer und fluktuierender Zustand sowie als stabile Denkweise (Tommasi et al., 2020).

Forschungsbefunde deuten darauf hin, dass diese unterschiedlichen Betrachtungsweisen verschiedene Auswirkungen auf die Mitarbeitenden haben können (Fletcher et al., 2018; Vogel et al., 2020). Unsere Studie baut auf der episodischen Wahrnehmung auf, indem wir das tägliche Erleben fokussieren. Basierend auf der *Construal-Level-Theorie* und dem Konzept der *psychologischen Distanz* (Trope & Liberman, 2010) nehmen wir an, dass das tägliche Erleben von sinnstiftender Arbeit konkreter und weniger abstrakt ist als stabile Überzeugungen über die Sinnhaftigkeit der eigenen Arbeit. Weiterhin stützen wir uns auf das Konzept der *Sinnkonstruktion*, welches besagt, dass Menschen den Sinn ihrer Arbeit selbst konstruieren, indem sie Umwelthinweise interpretieren und passende Narrative entwickeln (z. B. Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Darauf aufbauend erforschen wir, welche Bedeutung Mitarbeitende ihren täglichen Aufgaben beimessen und vergleichen dies mit bestehenden Motiven sinnstiftender Arbeit aus Interviewstudien (z. B. Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009). Unser Ziel ist es, folgende Forschungsfrage zu beantworten: Wie konstruieren und erleben Menschen sinnstiftende Arbeit in ihrem täglichen Berufsleben?

Methode und Ergebnisse

Die Forschungsfrage wurde mittels einer qualitativen Tagebuchstudie untersucht (z. B. Poppleton et al., 2008; Radcliffe & Cassell, 2015). An der Studie nahmen $N = 155$ berufstätige Personen aus verschiedenen Branchen und Firmen teil. Diese berichteten über eine fünftägige Arbeitswoche hinweg täglich über drei Aufgaben und den Sinn, den sie in diesen Aufgaben sahen, was in insgesamt $N = 579$ Tagebucheinträgen resultierte. Diese Einträge wurden anhand einer Schablonenanalyse in iterativen Runden ausgewertet (King, 2004). Dabei verfolgten wir einen abduktiven Ansatz, der zwischen Daten und Theorien iteriert (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009).

Die Analyse zeigte, dass die Teilnehmenden ihre täglichen Aufgaben als sinnvoll erlebten. Dies äußerte sich insbesondere dadurch, dass sie ihre Aufgaben als Möglichkeiten sahen, sich für andere Personen zu engagieren oder diese zu unterstützen. Weitere Aspekte

der Sinnstiftung waren das Erbringen von Leistungen und das Beitragen zum Organisationserfolg sowie die Erfüllung eigener Bedürfnisse und die persönliche Entwicklung. Zudem spielten in vielen Tätigkeiten andere Begünstigte, die von der Arbeit der Teilnehmenden profitierten, eine Rolle (z. B. Kolleg*innen, Kund*innen oder Patient*innen).

Diskussion und Schlussfolgerung

Die Ergebnisse legen nahe, dass auch alltägliche Aufgaben als sinnstiftend erlebt werden können. Die identifizierten Motive, die den Aufgaben Sinn verleihen, zeigen viele Parallelen zu bereits bekannten Motiven aus der Literatur, wie dem Dienst an anderen oder der Gemeinschaft mit anderen Personen (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009). Darüber hinaus wurden neue, tagesspezifische Motive identifiziert, wie beispielsweise die Einhaltung von Vorschriften. Im Abgleich mit bestehenden Studien, die sinnstiftende Arbeit mittels Interviewtechniken und als stabilen Zustand untersuchten, wurde zudem deutlich, dass die Erzählungen auf täglicher Ebene eine geringere psychologische Distanz aufwiesen. Dieses Ergebnis steht im Einklang mit der Construal-Level-Theorie (Trope & Liberman, 2010), die besagt, dass Individuen über kurzfristige Ereignisse konkreter und über weiter entfernte Ereignisse abstrakter nachdenken. Zusammenfassend bieten unsere Ergebnisse wichtige theoretische Implikationen, indem sie Einblicke in das tägliche Erleben sinnstiftender Arbeit geben. Sie stützen die Annahme, dass sinnstiftende Arbeit auf zwei Ebenen erlebt werden kann und legen nahe, dass die psychologische Distanz eine zentrale Rolle spielen könnte, um das tägliche Erleben von der stabilen Denkweise zu unterscheiden. Dies sollte in der Messung der täglichen sinnstiftenden Arbeit sowie in der zukünftigen Forschung, die die Unterschiede zwischen der dynamischen und stabilen Perspektive untersucht, berücksichtigt werden (z. B. Fletcher et al., 2018). Zudem liefern diese Ergebnisse Ansätze, das Sinnerleben in der täglichen Arbeit zu steigern, indem sie aufzeigen, welche Narrative Mitarbeitende nutzen können, um ihren täglichen Aufgaben Sinn zu verleihen.

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PART I

A Double-Edged Sword:

How Job Crafting and Disengagement

Shape the Effects of Daily Laissez-faire Leadership

**A Double-Edged Sword:
How Job Crafting and Disengagement Shape the Effects of Daily Laissez-faire
Leadership**

Saskia Glaas¹, Huong Pham², Angela Kuonath¹, and Dieter Frey¹

¹Center for Leadership and People Management, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität (LMU),
Munich

²Competence Centre for Diversity and Inclusion, University of St. Gallen (HSG), St. Gallen,
Switzerland

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Abstract

Although laissez-faire leadership has been shown to mostly have negative effects on employees, some findings suggest positive effects. To shed light on these mixed findings, we draw on transactional stress theory and the job demands-resources model. Building on a daily diary design, we aim to better understand the daily effects of laissez-faire leadership moderated by followers' coping styles. We argue that the effect of laissez-faire leadership on next-day performance via evening job satisfaction is positive on days that followers engage in job crafting, while it becomes negative on days that followers engage in disengagement coping. We collected data twice a day over one working week in an experience sampling study with 127 employees (i.e., after work and before bedtime; 359 data points). Our findings revealed a positive indirect effect of laissez-faire leadership on next-day performance via evening job satisfaction on days when employees engaged in high levels of job crafting. In contrast, a negative indirect effect was observed on days when disengagement coping was high. This study highlights the double-edged nature of daily laissez-faire leadership and how its downstream effects vary within individuals depending on their daily coping strategies.

Keywords: laissez-faire leadership, job crafting, disengagement, job satisfaction, performance

Introduction

Leaders delaying decisions, feedback, or rewards and exhibiting minimal interaction with their followers—defined as laissez-faire leadership—represent common leadership behaviors in organizations (Aasland et al., 2010; Bass & Avolio, 1994). Most past research characterizes laissez-faire leadership as a workplace stressor (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), as it contributes to increased role conflict, role ambiguity, and conflicts with coworkers (Skogstad et al., 2007) and thus often increases employees' stress-levels (Diebig & Bormann, 2020; Diebig et al., 2016). Accordingly, employee reactions to laissez-faire leadership are predominantly negative, resulting in, for example, reduced self-reported work effort or illegitimate absenteeism (Froome et al., 2012; Klasmeier et al., 2022).

Contrarily, another line of research suggests that laissez-faire leadership does not necessarily have to be negative, producing mixed effects. Under certain circumstances, employees may not be negatively affected by—or may even appreciate—laissez-faire leadership, such as when they perceive it as an opportunity for autonomy (Yang, 2015). Following this reasoning, some studies demonstrated positive associations between laissez-faire leadership and employee motivation (Fiaz et al., 2017; Zareen et al., 2015) as well as performance (Jamali et al., 2022). However, the reasons underlying these mixed effects remain largely unclear. To uncover these causes, in the present study, we focus on employees dealing with laissez-faire leadership on a daily basis. Leadership behavior can vary on a day-to-day basis and significant daily fluctuations also have been observed for laissez-faire leadership (Diebig & Borman, 2020; Zhang et al., 2023). We argue that these daily effects are particularly suitable for exploring the mixed results described above, as daily leadership allows for diverse interpretations. For instance, laissez-faire leadership may be interpreted differently by employees depending on employees' daily resources or needs for leadership (Tepper et al., 2018). Consequently, our investigation focuses on the mixed effects of daily

laissez-faire leadership, with particular attention to employees' daily coping styles as a crucial boundary condition.

Drawing from Lazarus and Folkman's transactional stress model (1984) and the job demands-resources model (Bakker et al., 2014), we theorize that depending on coping strategies, which can vary on a daily basis and be either adaptive or maladaptive (e.g., Bakker & de Vries, 2021; Heffer & Willoughby, 2017; Keng et al., 2018), laissez-faire leadership can positively or negatively affect follower attitudes and behavior. Specifically, we argue that daily job crafting—defined as employees changing tasks, relationships, and job perceptions to better align with their own needs and interests (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001) – serves as an important adaptive strategy that can derive positive effects from daily laissez-faire leadership. In contrast, daily disengagement coping—defined as employees trying to escape from stressors and associated emotions (Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010)—is a maladaptive response that reinforces resource loss (Bakker et al., 2023), resulting in negative effects from daily laissez-faire leadership.

To understand the downstream effects of daily laissez-faire leadership, we focus on daily job satisfaction as a proximal, affective outcome and next-day job performance as a more distal and behavioral outcome. We argue that the relationship of daily laissez-faire leadership with employees' job satisfaction depends on employees' coping strategies, which in turn predicts their next-day performance. Job satisfaction holds particular significance within organizational psychology literature, as it captures an internal evaluation of one's job (Judge et al., 2017). Given its role in shaping motivation and effort exerted at work, job satisfaction is closely linked to important behavioral outcomes such as performance (Judge et al., 2017; Katebi et al., 2022). Performance quantifies individuals' achievements and skills concerning the expected requirements, linking it directly to their goal attainment (Goodman & Svyantek, 1999). Thereby, it is a crucial behavioral outcome within the job demands-resources model (Bakker et al., 2023).

This study contributes to our understanding of laissez-faire leadership by closely examining its mixed effects and providing insights into when and for what reasons positive and negative effects arise. Accordingly, we make two key contributions to the existing research. Firstly, we deepen our understanding of laissez-faire leadership as a dynamic construct characterized by daily fluctuations (Diebig & Bormann, 2020; Zhang et al., 2023). Previous research has predominantly focused on average levels of laissez-faire leadership between different leaders (e.g., Skogstad et al., 2007), neglecting the possibility that the same leader can display varying degrees of laissez-faire leadership on different days (Zhang et al., 2023). The effects of laissez-faire leadership at the between-person and within-person level do not necessarily align (i.e., non-existent associations at the between-person level can exist at a within-person level and vice versa; Kelemen et al., 2020), which emphasizes the importance of examining intraindividual, short-term effects. Through our study, we demonstrate that these intraindividual effects on job satisfaction have meaningful implications for employee behaviors, such as performance on the subsequent day. Furthermore, the daily perspective is especially relevant to explore mixed effects, as daily leadership behavior may be especially ambiguous and interpreted differently by employees depending on the day.

Secondly, we examine coping styles as crucial boundary conditions that influence the interpretation of leadership behavior. By investigating two daily coping styles, we aim to provide a more nuanced understanding of why laissez-faire leadership may be perceived positively in some instances and negatively in others. The focus on changeable, within-person boundary conditions expands the current scope of evidence beyond stable, between-person moderators such as employees' relational self-concept, conscientiousness, or goal orientation (Hu et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2023), thereby providing a more precise insight into the dynamics of leadership interpretation. As both job crafting and disengagement coping have substantial state aspects (Costantini & Weintraub, 2022; Feinstein et al., 2017; Geldenhuys et al., 2021; Nielsen & Knardahl, 2014) and are open to change—for example, through

interventions such as individual training programs—we furthermore provide valuable starting points for practical implications.

Theory and Hypotheses

Laissez-faire Leadership as a Stressor and its Impact on Follower Job Satisfaction

According to Lazarus and Folkman's transactional theory of stress and coping (1984), people constantly monitor and evaluate their environment. When something is perceived as threatening or harmful (i.e., is a stressor), it causes distress. The job demands-resources model (JDR; Bakker et al., 2023) expands this idea to the work context. Within this framework, stressors are defined as job demands that require sustained physical, cognitive, and emotional effort and therefore result in physiological and psychological costs. In response to these stressors, individuals evaluate and deploy coping strategies by considering their initial appraisal of the stressor, available resources, situational variables, and familiar coping styles (Biggs et al., 2017).

There are numerous potential stressors in the workplace, such as workload, role ambiguity, and work pressure (Alarcon, 2011). Laissez-faire leadership may contribute to the emergence of several workplace stressors. Defined as a lack of leadership involvement (Bass & Avolio, 1994), it can provoke uncertainty and increased demands due to unclear goals, roles, and expectations; subsequently, it can heighten employee stress (e.g., Diebig et al., 2016; Diebig & Bormann, 2020; Skogstad et al., 2007; Skogstad et al., 2014b). Several studies have shown associations between laissez-faire leadership and impaired follower well-being and especially job satisfaction (e.g., Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Skogstad et al., 2014a; Specchia et al., 2021). Therefore, our study focuses on job satisfaction as a proximal, affective outcome, which captures individuals' feelings toward their job and plays a crucial role in shaping motivation and behavior.

However, followers' perceptions of their leaders' laissez-faire behaviors as well as their need for leadership can vary on a daily basis (Tepper et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2023).

While prolonged leader absenteeism might typically signal an overall lack of leadership commitment or ability, on a daily level, laissez-faire leadership may be seen as less disruptive, a strategic leadership choice, or even welcomed as an opportunity for autonomy (Yang, 2015). In line with the transactional stress model, appraisal and coping can determine which consequences daily laissez-faire leadership evokes (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Zhang et al., 2023). Thus, the impact of daily laissez-faire leadership may be positive or negative depending on the coping strategies employees use. Coping strategies are flexible and can vary over time and in different situations (Keng et al., 2018; Nielsen & Knardahl, 2014). Moreover, the effectiveness of coping responses varies, with certain strategies proving more beneficial than others (Rioli & Savicki, 2010). *Adaptive* coping strategies are those that generally yield better outcomes than *maladaptive* ones (Bakker & de Vries, 2021).

In this study, we explore two coping strategies as potential moderators for laissez-faire leadership: Job crafting as an adaptive coping strategy and disengagement coping as a maladaptive one. Both provide unique insights into the effects of daily laissez-faire leadership. Job crafting reflects proactive behavior, suggesting that employees may view laissez-faire leadership as an opportunity for autonomy. In contrast, disengagement coping is a reactive and passive response, representing conscious distancing behaviors and thereby offering additional insights beyond comparing higher and lower levels of job crafting behavior.

Laissez-Faire Leadership, Job Crafting, and Follower Job Satisfaction

Job crafting is a proactive strategy used by employees to make changes in their job tasks, relationships, and job perceptions to better align with their needs and interests (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Examples include introducing new tasks, making friends at work, or thinking about their work's impact on the community. We focus on job crafting due to its significance within the job demands-resources model and its prominent role as a proactive coping strategy (e.g., Harju et al., 2016; Vogt et al., 2016). Viewed as a behavioral

manifestation of self-leadership (Costantini & Weintraub, 2022; Liu et al., 2023), it has the ability to generate resources and can buffer the effects of stressors such as abusive supervision (Bakker & de Vries, 2021; Huang et al., 2020).

We argue that engaging in job crafting can facilitate positive effects of daily laissez-faire leadership on job satisfaction. This is because on days when employees engage in high levels of job crafting, they make bottom-up adjustments to their personal workplace experience (Demerouti, 2014). By doing so, they satisfy their needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Slemp & Vella-Brodick, 2013) and improve person-job fit (Li et al., 2023), which contributes to enhanced job satisfaction and performance (e.g., Chen et al., 2021; Li et al., 2023; Tims et al., 2015; Weseler & Niessen, 2016). Thus, on days characterized by high laissez-faire leadership, followers engaging in high levels of job crafting may not view these laissez-faire behaviors as a threat but as an opportunity for self-directed changes in their work that benefit them. Consequently, on such days, laissez-faire leadership is likely positively associated with job satisfaction.

Hypothesis 1a: Daily laissez-faire leadership and daily job crafting interact to predict employees' evening job satisfaction, such that the effect of laissez-faire leadership on employees' job satisfaction is positive when employees engage in high levels of job crafting.

Laissez-Faire Leadership, Disengagement Coping, and Follower Job Satisfaction

Disengagement coping is rooted in transactional stress theory (Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and has gained interest from scholars within the work context (e.g., Chen & Cunradi, 2008; Day & Livingstone, 2001). It involves attempts to escape from a stressor or related emotions and typically manifests in behaviors such as avoidance, denial, or wishful thinking (Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010)¹. Also, it shows substantial short-term variations (Finkelstein-Fox et al., 2019; 2020).

Given its passive nature, disengagement coping may be particularly prevalent in the context of laissez-faire leadership, where employees tend to mirror their leaders' behavior by reducing their effort and commitment (Buch et al., 2015; Robert & Vandenberghe, 2021). Consequently, passive coping strategies such as disengagement coping may play a key role in explaining the negative effects of laissez-faire leadership. This is because disengagement coping can perpetuate loss cycles, as it does not effectively address the stressor or its impact (Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010). Therefore, when employees engage in high levels of disengagement coping when confronted with daily laissez-faire leadership, they do not actively address the leader's behavior as a source for their dissatisfaction. Instead, they distance themselves from their job as a whole. This includes disengaging from aspects of work that typically increase job satisfaction, such as sense of meaning at work or the perception of organizational support (Allan et al., 2019; Riggle et al., 2009). In addition, disengagement coping can result in increased intrusive thoughts about the stressor and a worsening of negative mood and anxiety (Hong, 2007; Najmi & Wegner, 2008). Therefore, employees who engage in high levels of daily disengagement coping may ruminate on the negative effects of daily laissez-faire leadership. In line with this, research on coping in the workplace suggests that disengagement coping can intensify the negative effects of workplace stressors (Cheng et al., 2014; Day & Livingstone, 2001). Thus, we hypothesize that engaging in high daily disengagement coping results in negative effects of daily laissez-faire leadership on job satisfaction.

Hypothesis 1b: Daily laissez-faire leadership and daily disengagement coping interact to predict employees' evening job satisfaction, such that the effect of laissez-faire leadership on employees' job satisfaction is negative when employees engage in high levels of disengagement coping.

The Moderated Indirect Effect of Laissez-faire Leadership on Next-Day Performance

Diary research suggests that experiences during one day can significantly affect behaviors the following day (Fritz & Sonnentag, 2009). Accordingly, how employees feel about their job in the evening can have a substantial impact on their performance the next day (Rispen & Demerouti, 2016). We therefore propose job satisfaction in the evening to predict performance the following day. For instance, daily job satisfaction should trigger motivational processes that encourage reattachment to work and heightened work engagement in the morning (Sonnentag & Kühnel, 2016). Conversely, reduced job satisfaction resulting from daily laissez-faire leadership can impede recovery (Rodríguez-Muñoz et al., 2018), and thus negatively affect performance the next day (Binnewies et al., 2009; Volman et al., 2013).

Based on the previous line of reasoning, we argue that employees' daily coping strategies in response to daily laissez-faire leadership and their subsequent job satisfaction perception in the evening will in turn predict their performance on the following day. The proposed research model is illustrated in Figure 1.

Hypothesis 2a: Daily laissez-faire leadership and daily job crafting jointly and indirectly predict employees' next-day performance via employees' evening job satisfaction, such that the indirect effect is positive when employees engage in high levels of job crafting.

Hypothesis 2b: Daily laissez-faire leadership and employees' daily disengagement coping jointly and indirectly predict employees' next-day performance via employees' evening job satisfaction, such that the indirect effect is negative when employees engage in high levels of disengagement coping.

Figure 1*Hypothesized Study Model*

Level 1: Within-persons (day-level)

**Method****Sample and Procedure**

In June 2023, we conducted an online study through the German panel service provider Bilendi & ResponDi (see Neff et al., 2013). Participants were required to meet the following criteria for participation: (1) be of legal age, (2) be employed full time, (3) have an academic background (i.e., at least an undergraduate degree), (4) work under a supervisor with which they interact daily (i.e., a minimum of 6-15 minutes of contact in a typical work day; Kuonath et al., 2017), (5) have the possibility to work remotely.² We specifically selected individuals with at least an undergraduate degree, as higher levels of education are positively related to job crafting (Rudolph et al., 2017). Furthermore, blue-collar workers may show different job crafting behaviors due to factors like job autonomy and power, necessitating specialized measurement scales (Berg et al., 2010; Nielsen & Abildgaard, 2012). Data collection consisted of an initial baseline survey, followed by two daily surveys over one working week (Monday to Friday). Participants answered the first daily survey right after work (available from 5 pm to 7 pm) and the second one before bedtime (available from 9 pm until the end of the day).

252 participants completed the baseline survey. The criteria for each time point required participants to have fully completed both the after-work and bedtime surveys on the *given day* within the specified time frame, along with the fully answered bedtime survey from the *next day*, which enabled us to predict lagged effects. In line with other diary studies on laissez-faire leadership and to ensure daily interaction with the supervisor, we excluded any time points in which participants reported no indirect or direct supervisor contact that day (e.g., in person or via email; see Diebig & Bormann, 2020³), as well as time points in which participants had commented other irregularities (e.g., being on sick leave) or provided incorrect attention check responses (e.g., “Please select option 5 to demonstrate your attention.”). The use of attention checks is recommended in panel research to enhance data quality without compromising the validity of the scales (Gummer et al., 2021; Kung et al., 2018; Shamon & Berning, 2020). Finally, we excluded participants with only one complete time point to be able to calculate person-means for person-mean centering (see Gabriel et al., 2019; Ohly et al., 2010). After these steps, the final sample consisted of 127 participants (dropout rate: 49.60%) who provided 359 valid time points (full day plus lagged bedtime measurement). Dropout rates in diary studies tend to be high and average around 50% (Heissler et al., 2022).

To rule out systemic dropout, we tested if participants in the final sample ($N = 127$) differed from the drop-outs ($N = 125$) regarding demographics and our focal study variables from the baseline survey. Results of t -tests revealed that there was no difference in gender ($t(250) = -1.02, p = .307$), age ($t(250) = -0.65, p = .517$), job tenure ($t(250) = -0.64, p = .524$), leader tenure ($t(250) = -0.69, p = .492$), as well as baseline measures of laissez-faire leadership ($t(250) = -0.30, p = .765$), job crafting ($t(250) = 1.38, p = .170$), and disengagement coping ($t(250) = -0.63, p = .528$). Thus, there was no systematic drop-out.

In the final sample, 51.97% of the participants were male and 48.03% female. Their average age was 40.00 years ($SD = 9.87$, range = 23–63 years). The average job tenure was

4.79 years ($SD = 5.27$, range = 0–32 years), and participants worked with their leader for an average of 4.07 years ($SD = 3.62$, range = 0–20 years).

Measures

In diary research, shortened and adapted measures for daily variables are recommended, as participants repeatedly respond to the same questions over multiple days (Ohly et al., 2010). We followed this recommendation by using existing shortened measures adapted for daily measurement if possible. When no such measures were available, we chose items with the highest factor loadings and adjusted them to suit daily assessment (Ohly et al., 2010). Participants rated all items on a 5-point scale from 1 (*not true at all*) to 5 (*very true*). The items were presented in German, with validated translations used whenever possible. Alternatively, we used forward-backward translation to translate the items (Brislin, 1970).

After Work Measures

We measured daily *laissez-faire leadership* behavior following the approach by Ågotnes et al. (2021), who adapted three items from the multifactor leadership questionnaire (MLQ X5; Avolio & Bass, 2004). A sample item is “Today, my supervisor was absent when needed.” Average Cronbach’s alpha over the study days was .89, ranging from .86 to .92.

We measured daily *job crafting* using the German version (Schachler et al., 2019) of the job crafting questionnaire by Slemp and Vella-Brodick (2013). From the initial 15 items, we selected three items for each dimension (task crafting, relational crafting, and cognitive crafting), that had the highest factor loadings and adapted them for daily measurement. Sample items for the three dimensions were “Today, I introduced new approaches to improve my work,” “Today, I made an effort to get to know people well at work,” and “Today, I thought about how my job gives my life purpose.” Average Cronbach’s alpha over the study days was .93, ranging from .92 to .94.

We measured daily *disengagement coping* using the situational version of the brief COPE inventory (Carver, 1997), specifically the German translation by Knoll et al. (2005).

We focused on the subscales denial, behavioral disengagement, and self-distraction, creating a 6 item scale.⁴ Sample items for the three dimensions are “Today, I was saying to myself ‘this isn't real’,” “Today, I gave up on trying to deal with it,” and “Today, I did something to think about it less.” Average Cronbach’s alpha over the study days was .91, ranging from .86 to .95.

Bedtime Measures

To assess daily *job satisfaction*, we followed the approach by Eatough et al. (2016) by measuring job satisfaction with one item adapted from the Michigan organizational assessment questionnaire (Lawler et al., 1975). The item was, “At the moment, all in all, I am satisfied with my job.”

We captured daily *in-role performance* using three items from a scale adapted from Goodman and Svyantek (1999) to capture day-specific job performance (Neff et al., 2011). A sample item is “Today, I demonstrated expertise in all job-related tasks.” Average Cronbach’s alpha over the study days was .85, ranging from .84 to .85.

Control Variables

We controlled for the time employees spent interacting with their supervisors on a given day. We assessed this during the after-work survey by asking about the duration of direct contact (e.g., phone calls, virtual meetings, face-to-face conversations) on that day (Bakker & Xanthopoulou, 2009; Diebig et al., 2017). Response choices for these items ranged from 1 (*no contact*) to 7 (*more than two hours*). Also, to account for temporal patterns, we included the day of the week as a control variable (days 1 to 4; Gabriel et al., 2019). To be able to predict the *change* of performance from one day to another (instead of just the *level* of performance), we also controlled for the level of performance on the given day when predicting next-day performance (Gabriel et al., 2019). Further, for the moderation analyses, we introduced one moderator while controlling for the main and interaction effect of the other moderator to isolate the contribution of each moderator (Kuonath et al., 2017; Neff et al., 2012).

Strategy of Analysis

For preliminary analyses, we used the *lavaan* package (Rosseel, 2012) in R studio (version 4.2.0) to calculate confirmatory factor analyses (CFA). To test the hypotheses, we conducted multilevel analyses with R studio to account for the nested data structure. Specifically, we conducted two moderated mediation analyses (one for each moderator) with laissez-faire leadership as the predictor, job satisfaction as the mediator, and next-day performance as the outcome, along with our control variables, using the PROCESS function in the package *bruceR* (Model 7; Bao, 2021) with a Monte Carlo simulation (1000 samples). We centered the predictor, control, and moderating variables at the person-mean to examine true within-person variation (i.e., daily variation of laissez-faire leadership, job crafting, and disengagement coping from the employee's personal means; Gabriel et al., 2019). Following Hayes (2017), we deemed the conditional indirect effect significant when the respective interaction between the independent variable and moderator variable was significant, and the bootstrapping confidence intervals did not include zero.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

We conducted confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) that controlled for the data clusters to ensure that our constructs were empirically distinct. Our proposed four-factor model⁵ with laissez-faire leadership, job crafting, disengagement coping, and job performance as distinct factors, as well as the introduction of the higher-order structure of job crafting and disengagement coping (e.g., Quilty et al., 2006), demonstrated a satisfactory fit to the data ($\chi^2(177) = 291.05, p < .001, CFI = .98, TLI = .98, RMSEA = .04, SRMR = .05$, Hu & Bentler, 1999). Additionally, the study model yielded better fit than: a) a one-factor model ($\chi^2(189) = 3192.87, p < .001, CFI = .45, TLI = .39, RMSEA = .21, SRMR = .18, \Delta\chi^2(12) = 1508.10, p < .001$), b) a two-factor model (with disengagement coping and laissez-faire leadership loading on one factor and job crafting and performance loading on the other factor)

with the best fit ($\chi^2(188) = 1804.91, p < .001, CFI = .71, TLI = .67, RMSEA = .16, SRMR = .12, \Delta\chi^2(11) = 825.48, p < .001$), and c) a three-factor model (with job crafting and performance loading on one factor and disengagement coping and laissez-faire leadership on separate factors) with the best fit ($\chi^2(186) = 1284.37, p < .001, CFI = .80, TLI = .77, RMSEA = .13, SRMR = .10, \Delta\chi^2(9) = 478.21, p < .001$). These results suggest that our proposed four-factor model provided the best fit for the data.

The means, standard deviations, intraclass correlations, and correlations among the study variables are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, Intraclass Correlations, and Correlations of the Study Variables

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>ICC</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Weekday ^a	2.55	1.10		—						
2. Day-level Direct Leader Contact ^b	3.81	1.72		.00	—					
3. Day-level Performance	4.25	0.70		.00	.14**	—				
4. Day-level Laissez-faire Leadership	1.73	1.06	.69	.00	-.07	-.19***	—			
5. Day-level Job Crafting	2.80	1.19	.88	.05	.26***	.32***	.14**	—		
6. Day-level Disengagement Coping	1.99	1.05	.68	.07	.05	-.20***	.47***	.38***	—	
7. Day-level Job Satisfaction	3.95	0.99	.67	-.05	.27***	.55***	-.29***	.36***	-.18***	—
8. Next-Day Performance	4.24	0.71	.67	.01	.15**	.64***	-.14**	.29***	-.09	.45***

Note. The correlations shown depict day-level correlations ($N = 359$). ICC = Intraclass correlation.

^a1 = Monday to 4 = Thursday (pertaining to the day of the first measurement).

^b1 = no contact, 2 = up to 5 min; 3 = 6-15 min; 4 = 16-30 min; 5 = 31-60 min; 6 = 1-2 hours; 7 = more than 2 hours (pertaining to the day of the first measurement).

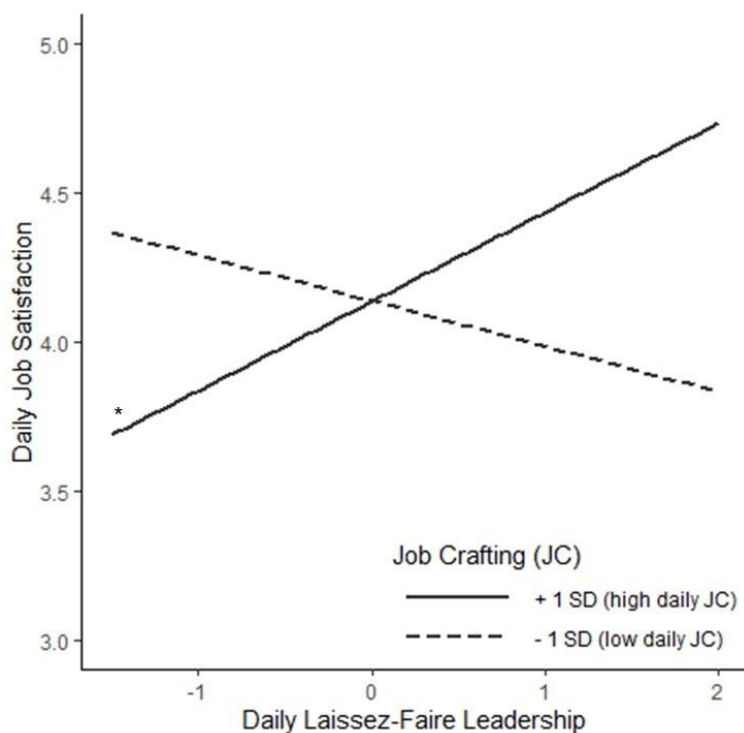
* $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$. *** $p < 0.001$.

Test of Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1a predicted a positive relationship between daily laissez-faire leadership and job satisfaction on days with higher levels of job crafting, but not on days with lower levels of job crafting. Supporting Hypothesis 1a, the interaction of job crafting and laissez-faire leadership was significant ($F(278) = 10.76, p = .001$). The simple slope analysis revealed that laissez-faire leadership positively related to job satisfaction on days with higher job crafting ($+1 SD, b = .30, t = 3.14, p = .002, 95\% CI [.11, .49]$). By contrast, there was no significant relation on days on which job crafting was low ($-1 SD, b = -.15, t = -1.81, p = .071, 95\% CI [-.32, .01]$). Thus, Hypothesis 1a was fully supported. The results of the simple slope analysis are illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Moderating Effect of Job Crafting on the Relationship Between Laissez-Faire Leadership and Job Satisfaction

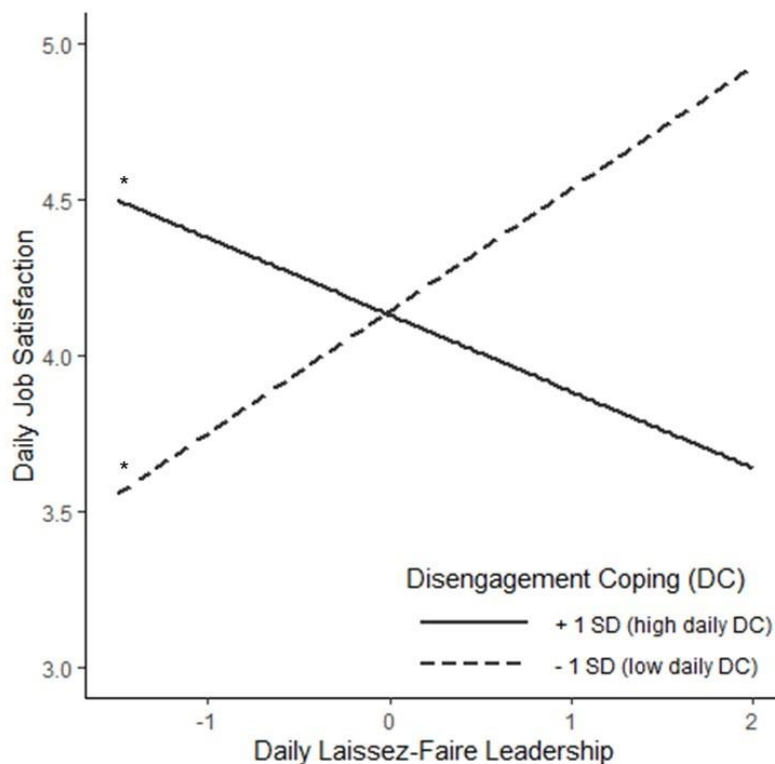


Note. * Indicates the significant slope(s).

Hypothesis 1b predicted a negative relationship between daily laissez-faire leadership and job satisfaction on days with higher levels of disengagement coping, but not on days with lower levels of disengagement coping. Supporting Hypothesis 1b, the interaction between disengagement coping and laissez-faire leadership was significant ($F(315) = 20.40, p < .001$). In line with our hypothesis, the results of the simple slope analysis showed that the negative relationship between laissez-faire leadership and job satisfaction was significant on days with higher disengagement coping (+1 $SD, b = -.25, t = -3.04, p = .003, 95\% CI [-.41, -.09]$). Going beyond our initial proposition, on days with lower levels of disengagement coping, the relationship between laissez-faire leadership and job satisfaction was significantly positive (-1 $SD, b = .39, t = 3.90, p < .001, 95\% CI [.20, .59]$). The results of the simple slope analysis are illustrated in Figure 3.

Figure 3

Moderating Effect of Disengagement Coping on the Relationship Between Laissez-Faire Leadership and Job Satisfaction



Note. * Indicates the significant slope(s).

Hypothesis 2a predicted that on days with higher job crafting (but not on days with lower job crafting), laissez-faire leadership would be indirectly and positively related to next-day performance via evening job satisfaction. The estimation of the conditional indirect effects supported this hypothesis. More specifically, we found a significant positive indirect effect of laissez-faire leadership on next-day performance via job satisfaction on days with high job crafting (+1 *SD*, $b = .06$, $z = 2.58$, $p = .010$, 95% *CI* [.02, .11]), but not on days with low job crafting (-1 *SD*, $b = -.03$, $z = -1.63$, $p = .103$, 95% *CI* [-.08, .00], see also Table 2 and 3).

Table 2

Model Summary of Moderation and Moderated Mediation

Variable	Job Satisfaction			Next-day Performance		
	<i>Estimate</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t-value</i>	<i>Estimate</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t-value</i>
(Intercept)	4.14	0.11	39.24***	3.38	0.18	19.09***
Weekday	-0.07	0.03	-2.56*	0.02	0.02	0.75
Interaction with Leader	0.04	0.02	1.85	0.01	0.02	0.61
Same-Day Performance	0.30	0.08	3.72***	-0.31	0.07	-4.82***
Laissez-Faire Leadership	0.07	0.06	1.26	0.01	0.05	0.18
Job Crafting	0.00	0.08	-0.03	-0.04	0.07	-0.56
Disengagement Coping	-0.01	0.06	-0.24	0.00	0.05	-0.08
Laissez-faire Leadership x Job Crafting	0.68	0.21	3.28**	-0.03	0.16	-0.18
Laissez-faire Leadership x Disengagement Coping	-0.67	0.15	-4.52***	0.01	0.11	0.11
Job Satisfaction				0.21	0.04	5.37***

Note. To be able to report the models in a more nuanced manner, these calculations were done using the *lme4* (Bates et al., 2015) and *lmerTest* (Kuznetsova et al., 2017) package in R. $N = 359$ observations nested in 127 participants. *SE* = Standard Error.

* $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$. *** $p < 0.001$.

Hypothesis 2b predicted a negative indirect link between laissez-faire leadership and next-day performance via evening job satisfaction on days with high disengagement coping (but not on days with low disengagement coping). Supporting our hypothesis, there was a significant negative indirect effect of laissez-faire leadership on next-day performance via job satisfaction on days with high disengagement coping (+1 *SD*, $b = -.05$, $z = -2.54$, $p = .011$, 95% *CI* [-.10, -.02]). Again, going beyond our initial hypothesis, there was a significant positive indirect effect of laissez-faire leadership on next-day performance via job satisfaction on days with low disengagement coping (-1 *SD*, $b = .08$, $z = 3.14$, $p = .002$, 95% *CI* [.04, .14], see also Table 2 and 3).⁶

Table 3

Test of the Conditional Indirect Effect of Laissez-Faire Leadership on Next-Day Performance Through Job Satisfaction for Different Levels of Job Crafting and Disengagement Coping

	Daily Job Crafting			Daily Disengagement Coping		
	Level	<i>b</i>	95% <i>CI</i>	Level	<i>b</i>	95% <i>CI</i>
Level of Moderator	-0.34 (- 1 <i>SD</i>)	-0.03	[-0.08, 0.00]	-0.48 (- <i>SD</i>)	0.08	[0.04, 0.14]
	0.00 (<i>M</i>)	0.02	[-0.01, 0.04]	0.00 (<i>M</i>)	0.02	[-0.01, 0.04]
	0.34 (+ <i>SD</i>)	0.06	[0.02, 0.11]	0.48 (+ <i>SD</i>)	-0.05	[-0.10, -0.02]

Note. $N = 359$ observations nested in 127 participants. *CI* = confidence interval.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore the effects of daily laissez-faire leadership by taking employees' daily coping strategies into account. We found that on days when employees engaged in high job crafting, there was a positive relationship between laissez-faire leadership and next-day performance via evening job satisfaction, whereas on days with high disengagement coping, this relationship was negative. These findings extend our understanding of how daily laissez-faire leadership can have positive and negative effects at work depending on employees' daily coping strategies.

Theoretical Implications

This study makes several theoretical contributions. First, we shed light on the mixed findings in the literature concerning laissez-faire leadership, which indicate its potential for being perceived as ambivalent and having a dual nature (e.g., Zhang et al., 2023). Laissez-faire leadership is often seen as a negative leadership style, with negative consequences for employees. Our findings partially support the established negative effects of laissez-faire leadership (e.g., Skogstad et al., 2014b), but they also support newer research showing that positive effects are possible (Fiaz et al., 2017; Jamali et al., 2022; Zareen et al., 2015). Consequently, our findings corroborate the notion that laissez-faire leadership functions as a double-edged sword, especially in the short-term (Zhang et al., 2023). These findings point toward a reconciliation of mixed results found in studies using other research designs (Yang, 2015; Jamali et al., 2022).

Second, we contribute to daily leadership research in the field of laissez-faire leadership. We emphasize the importance of studying daily experiences and effects of laissez-faire leadership, since associations that are non-existent at the between-person level may exist at a within-person level and vice versa (Kelemen et al., 2020). Our results highlight laissez-faire leadership as a dynamic construct that can indirectly affect employees' behavior even the following day. Thus, we contribute to the literature on laissez-faire leadership, which has mainly overlooked its daily variability, and add to the body of research that considers leadership behavior a fluctuating construct.

Third, our findings highlight the role of daily coping strategies in influencing the effects of daily laissez-faire leadership. This implies that the ability to deal with laissez-faire leadership is not solely determined by traits (e.g., goal orientation; Zhang et al., 2023), but that individuals can actively choose coping strategies to effectively deal with laissez-faire leadership. Our findings show that job crafting and disengagement coping are independent strategies that can vary on a daily basis and have distinct effects. Specifically, we extend the

literature on job crafting, which typically emphasizes its role in buffering negative effects (e.g., Bakker & de Vries, 2021; Hakanen et al., 2017; Huang et al., 2020; Vogel et al., 2016). By showing that daily laissez-faire leadership can positively affect employees on days on which they show high job crafting, our findings reinforce the theoretical notion that job crafting supports positive gain spirals through the generation of resources (Bakker et al., 2023). That is, job crafting may serve as a buffer for the effects of negative forms of leadership (e.g., abusive supervision; Huang et al., 2020), while it has the potential to transform the effects of ambivalent forms of leadership into positive ones. In contrast, our study highlights the negative effects of disengagement coping, making it a maladaptive regulation strategy within the job demands-resources model (Bakker & De Vries, 2021; Bakker et al., 2023). Specifically, daily laissez-faire leadership had a negative indirect effect on employees' next-day performance via reduced job satisfaction on days when employees applied disengagement coping to a high degree. Interestingly, low levels of daily disengagement coping were associated with higher daily job satisfaction when experiencing daily laissez-faire leadership. This indicates that individuals can derive positive outcomes from laissez-faire leadership when they do not engage in disengagement coping. Because employees typically tend to mirror their leaders' behavior, they may tend to show signs of disengagement from work when experiencing laissez-faire leadership, which can lead to negative outcomes (e.g., Buch et al., 2015; Robert & Vandenberghe, 2021). However, employees who refrain from disengagement coping may be able to interpret laissez-faire leadership positively (e.g., Yang, 2015) and engage in aspects of their work that provide them with satisfaction regardless of their leaders' behavior (e.g., the meaning they find in their work; Allan et al., 2019).

Practical Implications

This study holds practical implications for leaders, employees, and organizations. Considering the dual impact of laissez-faire leadership on job satisfaction and next-day

performance, as well as the comprehensive findings concerning its negative effects on employee well-being (e.g., Diebig & Bormann, 2020; Diebig et al., 2016; Skogstad et al., 2007), it is advisable for leaders and human resource professionals to remain cautious of such behavior. While the daily effects can be positive, persistent leader absenteeism is likely to be perceived as threatening. Laissez-faire leadership can be reduced by paying attention to its antecedents. For instance, organizations can implement processes to screen leaders for related personality traits (e.g., neuroticism; Fosse et al., 2024) or mindsets (e.g., reluctant staying mindset; Fan et al., 2024). Additionally, addressing factors contributing to leader exhaustion, a risk factor for laissez-faire leadership, can be a proactive measure (Courtright et al., 2014).

On a daily basis, it may not always be possible to avoid laissez-faire leadership. However, our results show that employees can derive positive effects from it through adaptive coping mechanisms, such as job crafting. Human resource professionals can support their employees by implementing job crafting interventions (Oprea et al., 2019). Such interventions should convey the benefits and behaviors associated with daily job crafting. Additionally, investing in leadership training programs that promote positive leadership styles, such as daily empowering leader behaviors or daily transformational leadership, can further support employee job crafting (Hetland et al., 2018; Jiang et al., 2021). Moreover, daily personal resources like overnight recovery experiences and sleep quality (Hur & Shin, 2023), momentary self-regulatory capacity (Roczniewska & Bakker, 2021), and daily social or job resources such as skill utilization (Cullinane et al., 2017) or co-worker cross-over of job crafting (Peeters et al., 2016) present promising avenues for organizations to foster daily job crafting.

Further, our results revealed adverse effects of maladaptive coping strategies such as disengagement coping and suggested that avoiding disengagement coping can even result in positive effects of laissez-faire leadership. Consequently, it is crucial to educate employees about the risk of disengagement at work. Individuals who are more vulnerable or prone to

disengage from their work, such as older employees (Duxbury & Halinski, 2014; Gaillard & Desmette, 2008) or those experiencing elevated job stress and exhaustion (Afrahi et al., 2022; Chen & Cunradi, 2008), can especially be supported by training programs designed to cultivate personal resources negatively associated with disengagement coping, such as self-efficacy and adaptability (Collie et al., 2018; Goussinsky, 2012). Furthermore, the presence of social support and validation are negatively associated with disengagement coping (e.g., Collie et al., 2018; Duxbury & Halinski, 2014; Smith et al., 2013). Therefore, leaders and human resource professionals should actively cultivate a supportive and appreciative work environment, promoting supportive leadership and encouraging mutual support among employees.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study is not without limitations. First, we relied on self-reports, which may raise concerns regarding common method variance (Podsakoff et al., 2012). To mitigate some of these concerns, we adopted a within-person design with person-centered scores in our analyses and spaced out surveys across different times (i.e., post-work, pre-bedtime, next-day). It is worth noting that self-reported data can provide valuable insights, particularly for behaviors not easily observable by others (Bolino et al., 2010). Nevertheless, future studies may add to our design by incorporating assessments of colleagues or supervisors, for example regarding laissez-faire leadership or performance.

Moreover, our sample consisted of highly educated employees, potentially limiting the generalizability of our results to the broader working population, especially towards blue-collar workers. While some studies indicate that blue-collar workers engage in job crafting (e.g., Nielsen & Abilgaard, 2012), their opportunities and behaviors related to job crafting can differ from those of white-collar workers due to factors such as job autonomy and power (Berg et al., 2010). Therefore, the efficacy of job crafting as a coping strategy in the context of laissez-faire leadership may differ for blue-collar workers. Future research should explore

the applicability of job crafting as a coping strategy for this demographic and identify adaptive coping strategies tailored to their specific needs.

Additionally, other forms of adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies in the context of laissez-faire leadership should be examined. For instance, strategies related to emotional regulation (e.g., mindfulness, cognitive reappraisal, and emotion suppression; Brockman et al., 2017) or engagement coping tactics (e.g., humor or acceptance; Carver, 1997) could be explored. Our results may also extend to other negative leadership styles, such as exploitative or tyrannical leadership (Mackey et al., 2021). Job crafting may be a helpful strategy to buffer or transform the effects of various negative or ambivalent leadership styles (see also Huang et al., 2020), as well as serving as an important mediator that translates positive leadership into favorable employee outcomes (e.g., Kim & Beehr, 2018, 2020; Yang et al., 2017).

Furthermore, it would be valuable to investigate whether these coping mechanisms are relevant for a broader spectrum of employee outcomes, such as daily stress, exhaustion, or recovery experiences. Expanding the evidence of the effectiveness of coping strategies in relation to various leadership styles and outcomes would offer insights into a broader applicability of job crafting and disengagement as coping strategies.

Conclusion

Although prior research suggests that laissez-faire leadership often has adverse effects on employees, our study unveiled a more nuanced picture of its impact on a daily level. We highlighted that daily laissez-faire leadership can elicit both positive and negative indirect effects on followers' next-day performance via evening job satisfaction, depending on employees' daily coping strategies. Notably, daily job crafting emerged as a positive coping strategy, while daily disengagement coping predicted negative indirect effects. Also, our results indicate that refraining from disengagement coping can foster positive effects. To advance our understanding, future research should explore further outcomes of daily laissez-faire leadership, investigate additional coping strategies, and extend our findings to other

forms of leadership. This broader perspective will contribute to a nuanced comprehension of leadership dynamics and the coping strategies that shape employee experiences.

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Footnotes

¹While disengagement is also referred to as a facet of burnout (e.g., in the Oldenburg Burnout Inventory by Demerouti et al., 2001; Afrahi et al., 2022), in this study we specifically focus on disengagement as a coping strategy involving distancing behaviors.

²As this study was part of a larger research project; remote work capability was a prerequisite for a separate (currently unpublished) study within the survey. Notably, we ensured that there was no overlap in variables between this study and the other investigation within the research project.

³We also conducted analyses without this exclusion, which yielded a similar pattern of results.

⁴Item selection followed the framework of Connor-Smith and Flachsbart (2007), categorizing disengagement coping as responses distancing from stressors or their effects. Additionally, we omitted the substance use dimension due to its misalignment with the survey's main themes (leadership, employee behavior, and wellbeing) and the post-work measurement context.

⁵We omitted job satisfaction from the confirmatory factor analyses as it was assessed with one item.

⁶Following Becker et al.'s recommendation (2016), we performed analyses without control variables, confirming similar result patterns.

PART II

The Meaning of the Mundane:

Exploring Daily Meaningful Work Through a Qualitative Diary Study

**The Meaning of the Mundane:
Exploring Daily Meaningful Work Through a Qualitative Diary Study**

Saskia Glaas¹, Huong Pham², and Dieter Frey¹

¹Center for Leadership and People Management, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität (LMU),
Munich

²Competence Centre for Diversity and Inclusion, University of St. Gallen (HSG), St. Gallen,
Switzerland

Note. Earlier versions of this study were presented in September 2024 at the 53th Congress of the German Psychological Society (DGPs) in Vienna, Austria, and were discussed in June 2023 at the PhD workshop of the section for Industrial and Organizational Psychology of the German Psychological Society (DGPs) in Braunschweig, Germany. We sincerely thank Hannes Münstermann for his help in collecting data for this study and Silvana Weber for her constructive feedback on earlier versions of this manuscript.

Abstract

Is daily work purposeful and significant, or is it merely a mundane, ‘Monday to Friday sort of dying’ experience? What meaning can be found in everyday tasks? We address these questions through a qualitative diary study examining the day-to-day experiences of meaningful work among 155 employees over five workdays, resulting in 579 data entries. Drawing from a sensemaking perspective, we investigate the themes associated with the meaning of daily tasks and discover that these tasks are indeed perceived as meaningful. Specifically, our template analysis of the data identifies themes of positive impact on others, personal development and need fulfillment, experiences of achievement, and organizational contribution. These perceptions are closely linked to beneficiaries and are proximal in psychological distance. Our findings support existing research on meaningful work and offer new insights, suggesting that psychological distance may distinguish short-term, episodic perceptions of meaningful work from steady mindset perceptions. By doing so, we advocate for future research on the temporality and dynamics of daily meaningful work and promote innovative methodological approaches. Moreover, our findings provide a valuable foundation for developing interventions aimed at enhancing daily experiences of meaningful work.

Keywords: meaningful work, meaningfulness, qualitative diary study, temporality, sensemaking, psychological distance

Introduction

Work that holds personal significance and is deemed worthwhile by individuals—defined as *meaningful work*—is associated with various positive outcomes at both individual and organizational level, such as heightened work engagement, organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and general health (Allan et al., 2019; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). As a result, organizations and scholars alike have begun to recognize the importance of fostering meaningful work to engage and retain employees (Bailey et al., 2019; Deloitte, 2017). With current changes in the economy and work design challenging the perception of meaningful work (Fraccaroli et al., 2024), addressing this topic becomes increasingly important.

Our days are primary building blocks of our experience of time that cumulatively shape our overall perception of life (Sonnentag et al., 2024). Research has acknowledged that meaningful work can manifest as both an episodic, fluctuating state and as a stable, enduring mindset (Tommasi et al., 2020), but has overlooked the qualitative exploration of these daily experiences. Further stressing the importance of addressing this gap, the impact of meaningful work varies depending on whether it is viewed as a trait-level construct across individuals or a state-level construct within individuals (e.g., Fletcher et al., 2018; Vogel et al., 2020). To understand if and how daily tasks are perceived as meaningful, our study investigates how individuals construe and experience meaningful work on a daily basis. Drawing upon the concept of linking perceptions (Berg et al., 2013) and adopting a sensemaking perspective (e.g., Park, 2010), we asked employees to reflect on the significance of their daily tasks at work.

Our study contributes to the literature in three key ways. First, we provide new insights into meaningful work by exploring daily employee experiences, identifying both common themes and new themes specific to daily meaning-making. Second, we highlight the importance of psychological distance in daily meaning-making at work, showing how the proximity of daily tasks results in differing perceptions of meaningful work compared to

long-term evaluations. By employing a qualitative diary study, we capture the nuanced, contextualized experiences of daily meaningful work, offering new perspectives that complement and expand traditional interview methods. Lastly, our findings offer practical implications for enhancing perceptions of daily meaningful work, which may lead to positive outcomes for employees and organizations.

Literature Review

Meaningful Work and Sensemaking

The concept of *sensemaking* plays a pivotal role in understanding how individuals shape their perception of reality to find meaning in their work (e.g., Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Rosso et al., 2010). It is a cognitive process through which individuals grapple with novel, ambiguous, or unexpected events (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Weick, 1995). By extracting and interpreting cues from the environment, they construct plausible narratives that provide coherence and understanding. Assigning meaning is considered a type of sensemaking (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). It addresses broader existential questions about the purpose of people's existence by integrating their identity with their roles and membership to social groups.

Multiple strategies for meaning-making have been identified, such as narrative identity work (Cinque et al., 2021; Weller et al., 2023), drawing upon critical incidents (Szöts-Kováts & Primecz, 2024), constructing themes revolving around personal agency, authenticity, relationality, or quantification (Scott, 2022; Trittin-Ulbrich & Glozer, 2024), and increasing the proportion of positive cues in work experiences (Vuori et al., 2012). Notably, sensemaking can extend to finding meaning even in tasks that are perceived as harmful or ambivalent, as well as during tensions, challenging times, and unfavorable working conditions (Berkelar & Buzzanell, 2015; Cinque et al., 2021; Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017; Robertson et al., 2023; Weller et al., 2023).

In our study, we adopted a sensemaking perspective to explore how daily tasks are perceived and connected to personal meaning. Drawing from the concept of *linking*

perceptions (Berg et al., 2013), we focus on the mental connections individuals establish between their tasks and meaningful facets of their lives, such as personal interests, values, relationships, or identity aspects. For instance, a researcher might associate writing tasks with the personal value of advancing knowledge or with their interest in a particular topic. This approach is particularly relevant for daily meaning-making, given its feasibility on a day-to-day basis.

Temporality and Meaningful Work

Traditionally, meaningful work has been perceived as a relatively stable mindset, characterized by a consistent sense of value attributed to one's work (Tommasi et al., 2020). This mindset arises from people's relationship with their work (Rosso et al., 2010) and lasts over time while varying across individuals. However, other conceptualizations have highlighted the episodic and fluctuating nature of meaningful work. They suggest that meaningful work can vary on a day-to-day basis due to daily influences (e.g., Lysova et al., 2023; Meng et al., 2023; Tommasi et al., 2020). Accordingly, the dual nature of meaningful work includes both stable and fluctuating elements (Tommasi et al., 2020).

Aligned with this dual nature, Park (2010) introduced the existence of both global and situational meanings. Global meaning includes overarching beliefs, goals, and feelings that provide a general framework for life. In contrast, situational meaning refers to a specific context and can align or diverge from one's global meaning (Park, 2010; Park et al., 2012). Individuals can thus derive meaning both on a daily basis and within a broader, overarching framework.

Further, construal level theory and the concept of *psychological distance* (Trope & Liberman, 2010) offer valuable insights regarding the dual nature of meaningful work. Psychological distance refers to the distance from one's immediate experience (Trope & Liberman, 2010). It can include temporal, spatial, social, or hypothetical aspects. Construal level theory posits that psychological distance influences how abstractly or concretely events

are represented in one's mind (Trope & Liberman, 2010). Accordingly, individuals tend to think concretely about near-term events and abstractly about distant events. Applied to meaningful work, this suggests that individuals may perceive meanings in daily tasks as closer in psychological distance (Carton, 2018). Conversely, when reflecting on the broader meaning of their work, which covers longer time frames and long-term goals and aspirations, the associated meanings may be more abstract.

Recent qualitative research has increasingly focused on temporality and fluctuations within the concept of meaningful work. For instance, one interview-based study discovered that meaningful work experiences emerge episodically, particularly through shared, autonomous, and temporally complex work experiences (Bailey & Madden, 2017). Another study revealed that meaningful work is continuously derived from circumstances that are both enabling and constraining (Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017). Furthermore, one study explored the impact of perceived time acceleration, which refers to an increased pace of work, on entrepreneurs' perception of meaningful work (Frémeaux & Henry, 2023). The participants exhibited different strategies in response to time acceleration, which underscored the significance of temporality in shaping such perceptions. A different study explored the process of enacting a calling, finding this process to change over time based on various factors such as personal circumstances or labor market pressures (Robertson et al., 2024). Additionally, one study demonstrated how employees may shift their perceptions of what makes work meaningful over time or in reaction to external factors and new situations (Jiang, 2021). This fluctuating nature of meaningful work is also evident in quantitative studies, where experiences of meaningful work are found to vary on a weekly (Geldenhuis et al., 2020), daily (Lysova et al., 2023; Meng et al., 2023; Vogel et al., 2020), and situational (Fletcher et al., 2018) basis.

While these studies have enriched our understanding of the relationship between temporality and meaningful work, we know little about the perception of daily meaningful

work. Some researchers assume that day-to-day tasks are perceived as small-scale and time-constrained, thereby diminishing their significance. For example, Carton (2018) highlighted a disconnect between everyday work and the visions of organizations, stressing the importance of leaders helping employees recognize the connection between these two aspects. Others suggest that individuals may need to integrate their tasks into a broader framework to perceive meaningful work, rather than considering tasks in isolation (Berg et al., 2013). However, contrary to the notion that daily tasks lack meaning, quantitative studies offer evidence suggesting that meaningful work can be experienced at the state level (e.g., Lysova et al., 2023), and strategies such as linking perceptions provide tools for finding meaning in daily tasks (Berg et al., 2013). Therefore, exploring how employees perceive and derive meaning from their daily tasks can provide fresh insights and add nuance to our understanding of meaningful work.

Themes in Meaningful Work

Tasks are acknowledged as crucial components of meaningful work (Bailey et al., 2017). As they can vary from day to day—unlike more stable dimensions such as roles or organizational structures—our study aims at exploring the themes associated with the meaning of daily tasks.

Themes related to meaningful work are a significant focus in the literature. Lips-Wiersma and Morris's (2009) influential work highlighted four core themes: unity with others (i.e., shared values and belonging), serving others (i.e., contributing to others' well-being), expressing full potential (i.e., expressing talents and creativity or experiencing achievement), and developing and becoming self (i.e., personal and moral development). Other qualitative studies have similarly identified themes such as connection, contribution, conversion, and recognition (Bailey et al., 2024; Martikainen et al., 2022; Pavlish & Hunt, 2012). The themes of meaningful work can usually be categorized across the dimensions of "self" and "others". The "self" dimension consists of values, motivation, and beliefs about work (Rosso et al.,

2010). The "others" dimension includes relationships with coworkers, leaders, groups, communities, and family (Rosso et al., 2010).

One overarching core theme of meaningful work that spans both the “self” and “others” dimensions is the concept of beneficiaries—those who benefit directly from employees’ work (Grant, 2012; Rosso et al., 2010). For example, nurses may derive meaning from contact with patients and helping them, while teachers may find meaning in their interactions with and impact on students. Accordingly, scholars propose that employees use social interactions within the workplace to connect their tasks with meaning (Wrzesniewski et al., 2003). Specifically, they use interpersonal cues to examine the value or significance of their job (Bailey et al., 2024; Lysova et al., 2023). Similarly, Dutton et al.’s (2016) social valuing framework suggests that daily interactions with others cultivate an individual’s sense of felt worth, which plays a central role in shaping experiences of meaningful work. Engaging with beneficiaries has further been shown to enhance performance and persistence (Grant et al., 2007; Grant, 2012), and helping others or reflecting on such acts can increase meaningful work (Allan et al., 2018). Given the importance of beneficiaries—whether others or oneself—we additionally investigated their roles in daily tasks.

Given that the existing body of research predominantly relies on interview methods and general evaluations to explore meaningful work, it remains unclear whether daily meaning-making aligns with the broader conceptualizations of meaningful work or diverges, potentially due to the closer psychological distance associated with daily tasks (Carton, 2018). Our study adopts a qualitative diary study approach to explore the themes that are associated with daily tasks, thereby addressing the following research question: *How do individuals construe and experience meaningful work in their daily lives?*

Method

Research Method: Qualitative Diary Study

The data for this study were collected through a qualitative digital diary approach. Qualitative diaries include any diary entries made by participants that go beyond short-form survey responses or questionnaire scales (McCombie et al., 2024). This method captures daily experiences in real-time within natural contexts, while offering greater depth than other diary survey methods (Poppleton et al., 2008; McCombie et al., 2024).

Qualitative diary studies vary widely in format, administration, interval, time period, sample size, and prompt (McCombie et al., 2024). Design choices depend on the research question and field, for example, due to the expected frequency of the behavior or event under investigation. Our study used a written format, common in qualitative diary studies (McCombie et al., 2024), and administered the diaries digitally for ease of access and distribution (Berkman et al., 2014). Given our focus on daily experiences, we opted for daily participation intervals with an interval-contingent approach: Participants recorded their experiences at regular, predetermined intervals (Radcliffe, 2013), specifically after each workday over the course of one workweek. This duration was chosen to capture sufficient task variation from the participants, who worked at least 20 hours per week. We aimed to recruit at least 100 participants to ensure a diverse range of workplace experiences. Finally, we asked participants to document their daily tasks and the personal meaning they found in these tasks. We were careful to design our instructions to strike a balance between collecting data relevant to our research question while allowing for open and unconstrained responses (McCombie et al., 2024).

Procedure and Diaries

Participants began by completing an initial online baseline survey, providing demographic details and consenting to participate in the study¹. Following this, they engaged in a daily online survey over five consecutive workdays after work. Daily reminder emails were sent to encourage diary completion. Each day after work, participants reflected on their workday and recalled tasks and/or projects they had worked on. They were then asked to

identify three specific activities and describe the personal meaning they found in these tasks.

Thus, the instruction followed the concept of linking perceptions (Berg et al., 2013), as we asked participants to associate their daily tasks with other meaningful aspects of their lives.

Sample

From May to September 2023, we recruited a sample of German employees from personal and professional networks, mailing lists, and social media. Participants were required to meet the following criteria: a) be of legal age, b) work at least three days a week, and c) work at least 20 hours a week.

The final sample for the daily reflections comprised $N = 155$ participants who provided $N = 579$ unique diary entries. On average, participants completed 3.75 days out of 5 ($SD = 1.03$, range = 1–5). The average age of participants was 33.60 years ($SD = 13.28$, range = 20–65). Among them, 101 were female (65.16%), 53 male (34.19%), and one was non-binary (0.65%). Additionally, 30 participants held management positions (19.35%), while the rest did not ($n = 125$, 80.65%). Most participants had a university degree ($n = 87$, 56.13%), or a high school diploma ($n = 43$, 27.74%), with some holding vocational degrees ($n = 12$, 7.74%), doctoral degrees ($n = 4$, 2.58%), secondary school certificates ($n = 1$, 0.65%), general secondary school certificates ($n = 1$, 0.65%), or other qualifications ($n = 7$, 4.52%). The sectors represented in this study were diverse, with the majority from services ($n = 64$, 41.29%) followed by public service ($n = 41$, 26.45%), business ($n = 25$, 16.13%), construction ($n = 8$, 5.16%), manufacturing ($n = 5$, 3.23%), energy supplies ($n = 3$, 1.94%), craftsmanship ($n = 3$, 1.94%), finance ($n = 3$, 1.94%), and transportation ($n = 3$, 1.94%).

Data Analysis

We chose template analysis to address our research question (King, 2004), a method commonly used in qualitative diary studies (e.g., Krehl & Büttgen, 2022; Poppleton et al., 2008; Radcliffe & Cassell, 2015). Template analysis involves generating a list of codes (templates) to represent the identified themes in the data (King, 2004). This approach

typically starts with predefined codes that are then refined during the iterative coding process (King, 2004).

Initially, we familiarized ourselves with the responses and segmented the text into individual tasks, including their contexts and associated meanings. The first author of the study developed the initial template by examining a subset of the data (i.e., the responses of the first 15 participants) and defining codes based on the research question regarding themes in daily meaningful work (Radcliffe & Cassell, 2015). These codes were then applied to the entire dataset. Through iterative rounds of analysis, we refined the template by incorporating new aspects that emerged during data analysis. Ultimately, we synthesized these themes into overarching categories, resulting in the final template. The codes were organized hierarchically, with higher-level codes representing broad themes and lower levels describing more specific themes within these broader categories (King, 2004). This final template guided the interpretation of the data. The second author of the study was also actively engaged in discussing the thematic analysis to ensure that alternative interpretations were considered. This collaborative approach helped to enhance the rigor and credibility of the analysis by providing multiple perspectives on the data (Krehl & Büttgen, 2022; Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017; Trittin-Ulbrich & Glozer, 2024).

While primarily employing an inductive approach to categorize the data (Mayring, 1991; 2012), our analysis was also guided by previous literature on meaningful work. Thus, the approach may best be described as abductive, iterating between data and theory to connect emerging themes to existing literature while also uncovering new theoretical insights (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009; Robertson et al., 2024; Trittin-Ulbrich & Glozer, 2024).

Findings

Our analysis revealed three overarching themes: (a) *community engagement and support*, (b) *achievement and organizational contribution*, and (c) *personal growth and need fulfillment*. We also analyzed the beneficiaries mentioned in these overarching themes. The

overarching themes were prevalent among the majority of participants, indicating they are recurring in daily tasks. A detailed overview of all themes and their similarities to existing literature can be found in Table 1.

Themes of Community Engagement and Support

The most common theme that emerged was *community engagement and support*. This included behaviors aimed at supporting, serving, or developing others, as well as actions focused on building or improving relationships, positively influencing others' emotions, and addressing societal issues.

Assisting or Supporting Others

Most participants mentioned themes that focused on activities that helped or supported others in need. This included answering questions of others: 'Through my completed task, the question of a customer could be answered.' (participant 65). Additionally, participants expressed support for others who were experiencing problems: 'Through exchange with colleagues, I can help them with their problems.' (participant 26). They also provided assistance with tasks: 'Through my support, another employee of mine was able to acquire a project with a client.' (participant 102). Some participants also reported reducing the workload burden of others: 'Through the revision of the PowerPoint presentation, I was able to relieve my colleague, allowing her time for other tasks.' (participant 28). Lastly, participants demonstrated care for patients or clients: 'Through the careful examination of a patient, I was able to reduce their pain.' (participant 88). These examples illustrate the various ways in which assisting or supporting others contributed to make daily work meaningful.

Serving Others

Another commonly observed theme was service to others, which involved actions taken to benefit others without specific requests or prompts such as questions or problems. This included examples of activities aimed at organizing for others: 'Because I organized the team room, it can now be better used by everyone.' (participant 3). It also involved informing

others: ‘By documenting what happened in the therapy sessions, my colleagues can read up on it and pick up from there.’ (participant 3). Additionally, we identified several other acts of service that benefited others, such as: ‘By creating a Zoom link, everyone was able to participate in the seminar.’ (participant 117), ‘By supervising the exams, I was able to ensure that all students had fair examination conditions.’ (participant 32) and ‘Through my work, customers receive products they enjoy.’ (participant 106). These examples underscore how various acts of service to others can give meaning to tasks.

Building Relationships and Collaboration

Participants often mentioned tasks aimed at building relationships and fostering collaboration. For instance, they highlighted making new connections: ‘By attending an event, I was able to make new contacts.’ (participant 199). Additionally, they mentioned fostering team spirit: ‘We were able to strengthen the team's cohesion through an active lunch break.’ (participant 55). Participants also emphasized getting to know others better: ‘Through my open and communicative nature, I can get to know my colleagues better.’ (participant 66). Further, participants discussed resolving or preventing misunderstandings: ‘Through the exchange with a colleague, I ensured that misunderstandings were cleared up and that our collaboration continues to be as strong as before.’ (participant 92). Lastly, they highlighted improving collaboration: ‘Through a conversation with one of my employees, I was able to establish a better mutual understanding for collaboration.’ (participant 102). These examples illustrate that relatedness and a sense of unity with others play an important role in the daily experience of meaningful work.

Contributing to the Education and Development of Others

Participants also derived meaning from contributing to the education or development of others. They discussed teaching students, junior staff, or new colleagues: ‘I have created a product training for our new apprentices. Through this, I provide them with the necessary technical information they need for their daily work.’ (participant 15). Additionally,

participants shared their expertise with others: ‘By summarizing results via PowerPoint, I can share my knowledge with my colleagues.’ (participant 26). Furthermore, there were mentions of assessing skills or providing feedback: ‘Through feedback on the class assignments, I showed my students their strengths and weaknesses so they can work on them.’ (participant 32). Lastly, participants facilitated others' development by elaborating on tasks or providing opportunities for growth: ‘By planning the next steps, I can provide my trainee with an exciting training experience.’ (participant 133). These findings suggest that having a positive impact on the future of others is important for experiencing meaningful work from day-to-day tasks.

Impacting the Emotions of Others

Participants further described actions that had a positive impact on the emotions of others. This included eliciting positive feelings, such as joy (e.g., ‘Through the exchange with my colleague, I brought her joy.’; participant 18), fun (e.g., ‘I helped with a group project to make learning fun for the students.’; participant 62) or satisfaction (e.g., ‘Through phone calls with customers, their satisfaction was ensured.’; participant 107). Further, participants described reducing negative emotions, such as fear (e.g., ‘Through a respectful conversation with a client struggling with addiction, I can reduce her fears about our institution.’; participant 30), worry (e.g., ‘By paying invoices, we take away some of the parents' worries.’; participant 45), or frustration (e.g., ‘Through my listening, a colleague was able to vent her frustration about her supervisor.’; participant 54). These examples demonstrate that contributing to others short-term well-being is a meaningful everyday experience.

Addressing Societal Issues

Only a few participants mentioned tasks aimed at addressing broader societal issues. Examples include: ‘By providing new content on our website, I have contributed to further combating the stigma surrounding mental health.’ (participant 59) and ‘Through my inquiry about the gender quota at a large sustainability meeting, the topic receives more attention.’

(participant 87). These findings indicate that everyday tasks can be connected to the improvement of large-scale issues. However, this was not a very common way to derive meaning in everyday tasks.

Themes of Achievement and Organizational Contribution

Themes of *achievement and organizational contribution* also emerged frequently. This included themes revolving around efficiency, organizational success, goal achievement, maintenance of operations, quality, and compliance with regulations.

Efficient Work Practices

Most participants described engaging in activities aimed at improving efficiency. Specifically, this included streamlining or optimizing work processes: ‘Through the introduction of a new tool, the time-consuming process of creating files can be simplified in the future.’ (participant 13). Also, participants described making preparatory arrangements: ‘By discussing current topics together, my colleague and I were able to prepare for the next client meeting.’ (participant 87). These findings indicate that everyday tasks can be related to efficiency and a sense of achievement, which in turn can make these tasks meaningful.

Contributing to Organizational Success

Tasks were often outlined as contributing to the success of the organization. This included examples of building revenue: ‘I worked on a loading plan today to ship food to Europe from Vietnam. This contributes to the well-being and revenue of the company.’ (participant 136). Participants also noted maintaining or building the organization's reputation: ‘By printing the finished poster for the congress, my clinic can be represented well.’ (participant 52). Additionally, participants contributed to the strategic alignment of the organization: ‘Through the discussion with the team, we were able to collectively make an important decision and present a new strategy to the company.’ (participant 10). Lastly, participants engaged in the attraction of employees or customers: ‘Through new hires, our company can continue to grow.’ (participant 150). These examples show that employees can

connect the impact of their daily tasks to the overall success of the organization to derive meaning.

Goal Achievement and Progress

The theme of goal achievement and progress generally highlighted some form of advancement in work. For example, participants articulated how their activities were directly related to goal achievement: ‘Through conscientious input of index cards, I am getting closer to the project goal.’ (participant 22). Additionally, participants noted their progress: ‘I was also able to achieve small progress in building my prototype.’ (participant 26). Furthermore, they highlighted the completion of tasks: ‘By completing the medical report, I was able to close the case.’ (participant 47). These examples illustrate a sense of achievement and competence that can be derived from everyday tasks.

Maintenance of Operations

Some activities aimed at maintaining operational integrity. For instance, participants described maintaining necessary structures or processes within the organization: ‘By reviewing and approving production samples, the product will soon be available in the warehouse and for sale.’ (participant 156). They also reported ensuring seamless organizational procedures: ‘By discussing the current upcoming courses in my field and deciding on their implementation and modalities, I ensure a smooth course progression.’ (participant 21). These findings indicate that occasionally, the meaning of tasks is not found in progress, but in maintaining the processes and structures that are already in place.

Quality Management

Other activities were aimed at maintaining or improving quality standards, including fixing errors and improving the quality of products or services. Examples include: ‘Through error correction, I was able to improve product stability.’ (participant 29) and ‘Through my suggestion for mask modification, I was able to enhance user visibility into customer metrics.’

(participant 143). Accordingly, participants exhibited a commitment to high levels of quality in daily work, which gave their daily tasks meaning.

Complying with Regulations

Although mentioned by only a few participants, some activities were undertaken to comply with regulatory or administrative requirements, for instance: ‘Through report generation, I have fulfilled the administration's requirements.’ (participant 129). Another example is: ‘Through communication with our lawyer, I ensured that the company remains on the safe side of the law and that we avoid penalties.’ (participant 74). These findings suggest that, in some cases, the inherent meaning of tasks is derived from the necessity of performing them, and employees are able to recognize this significance.

Themes of Personal Growth and Need Fulfillment

Finally, the overarching theme of *personal growth and need fulfillment* was present in our data. This included narratives of personal growth through knowledge, skill and career development, as well as the fulfillment of personal needs and earning an income.

Acquiring Knowledge and Skill Enhancement

The most prominent theme was the pursuit of knowledge acquisition and skill enhancement. This included activities that lead to gaining new knowledge: ‘Today, I had a successful onboarding session where I learned a lot of new things.’ (participant 126). Additionally, participants described experiences that led to insights: ‘The breakdown of one of our crucial machines made me realize the importance of ensuring all machines are operational so that our customers can receive their goods quickly and without issues.’ (participant 23). Also, participants mentioned training or improving their skills through their tasks. A variety of skills were mentioned, including those related to communication (e.g., ‘Through the presentation, I was able to improve my speaking and presentation skills’; participant 150), regulating emotions (e.g., ‘Through the difficulties encountered during the submission of the application, I was able to practice remaining calm even in challenging

situations.’; participant 69) or technical skills (e.g., ‘Through the new project, I was able to expand my Excel skills.’; participant 55). These findings illustrate employees' continuous drive for self-development and learning, which can be fulfilled through everyday tasks.

Fulfilling Personal Needs

Participants often described how their activities met personal needs. These included needs for autonomy (e.g., ‘Through an email, I was able to stand up for myself.’; participant 8), relatedness (e.g., ‘I attended a team leader meeting and felt accepted.’; participant 37), and competence (e.g., ‘Today, I realized my increasing efficiency and performance curve during certain treatments, thanks to my gained experience’; participant 88). Further, participants mentioned experiencing intrinsic motivation (e.g., ‘I enjoy processing the payouts.’; participant 20) and contributing to their well-being (e.g., ‘By planning the upcoming week, I was able to take a breather and felt like I lowered my stress level, even though there are currently many leads in the finalization stage.’; participant 2). These examples demonstrate that employees can experience their everyday task as a means to fulfill their basic needs.

Career Growth and Professional Development

Some participants noted activities geared towards improvement of their career prospects. This often included interactions with supervisors (e.g., ‘Through a conversation with my boss, I was able to improve my career prospects.’; participant 8), or other actions that were related to professional development (e.g., ‘Today's acquisition of new IT skills will propel me forward in my professional career.’; participant 68). These examples illustrate a future-oriented view, in which employees connect their everyday tasks to their future career and professional development aspirations.

Table 1*Themes Emerged from Data Analysis*

Theme	Community Engagement and Support					
	Assisting or Supporting Others	Serving Others	Building Relationships and Collaboration	Contributing to the Education and Development of Others	Impacting the Emotions of Others	Addressing Societal Issues
Relative Frequency	Mentioned by $N = 96$ participants	Mentioned by $N = 63$ participants	Mentioned by $N = 59$ participants	Mentioned by $N = 53$ participants	Mentioned by $N = 48$ participants	Mentioned by $N = 4$ participants
Description	The activity provides assistance or support to other individuals, for example, by answering questions, reducing workload burdens, or assisting in problem-solving.	The activity is carried out for the benefit of other individuals, without reference to specific requests or prompts such as questions or problems.	The activity is aimed at expanding or improving one's own or others' relationships or collaboration, as well as establishing new contacts.	The activity serves to convey knowledge or to develop and assess the knowledge or skills of others.	The activity positively impacts the emotions of others, including eliciting positive feelings or reducing negative emotions.	The activity addresses societal issues or contributes to their improvement.
Example	Through processing emails, I was able to assist others and provide feedback.	Through my contribution in the morning meeting, my colleagues have a better overview of the status of the tasks.	The team teaching with my colleague was helpful for both of us and had positive effects on our relationship.	I have created a product training for our new apprentices. Through this, I provide them with the necessary technical information they need for their daily work.	Through my encouragement, I was able to reduce my client's fears.	By providing new content on our website, I have contributed to further combating the stigma surrounding mental health.
Similarities with Existing Research	Serving others (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009), competence in the SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000), contribution (Bailey et al., 2024; Martikainen et al., 2022; Pavlish & Hunt, 2012; Rosso et al., 2010)	Serving others (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009), competence in the SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000), contribution (Bailey et al., 2024; Martikainen et al., 2022; Pavlish & Hunt, 2012; Rosso et al., 2010)	Unity with others (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009), unification (Rosso et al., 2010), relatedness in the SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000), connection (Martikainen et al., 2022; Pavlish & Hunt, 2012), relationality (Trittin-Ulbrich & Glozer, 2024)	Serving others (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009), competence in the SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000), contribution (Bailey et al., 2024; Martikainen et al., 2022; Pavlish & Hunt, 2012; Rosso et al., 2010)	Serving others (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009), competence in the SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000), contribution (Bailey et al., 2024; Martikainen et al., 2022; Pavlish & Hunt, 2012; Rosso et al., 2010)	Serving others (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009), competence in the SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000), contribution (Bailey et al., 2024; Martikainen et al., 2022; Pavlish & Hunt, 2012; Rosso et al., 2010)

Note. $N = 155$ participants. SDT = Self-determination theory

Table 1 (continued)

Theme	Achievement and Organizational Contribution					
	Efficient Work Practices	Contributing to Organizational Success	Goal Achievement and Progress	Maintenance of Operations	Quality Management	Complying with Regulations
Relative Frequency	Mentioned by $N = 69$ participants	Mentioned by $N = 68$ participants	Mentioned by $N = 42$ participants	Mentioned by $N = 30$ participants	Mentioned by $N = 22$ participants	Mentioned by $N = 8$ participants
Description	The activity serves to enhance efficiency, such as streamlining future work processes, saving time, or making preparatory arrangements.	The activity contributes to the success of the organization, for example in terms of revenue, maintaining and building reputation, strategic alignment, or attracting employees or customers.	The activity is related to goal achievement, task completion, or progress.	The activity contributes towards upholding operational integrity, for example, maintaining structures within the organization or ensuring seamless organizational procedures.	The activity is directed towards upholding quality standards, including fixing errors and improving the quality of products or services.	The activity is undertaken to adhere to regulatory or administrative requirements.
Example	Through my intensive training of my apprentice, I will save more time in the future.	I worked on a loading plan today to ship food to Europe from Vietnam. This contributes to the well-being and revenue of the company.	Through conscientious input of index cards, I am getting closer to the project goal.	By discussing the currently upcoming courses in my field and deciding on their implementation and modalities, I ensure a smooth course progression.	Through error correction, I was able to improve product stability.	Through report generation, I have fulfilled the administration's requirements.
Similarities with Existing Research	Expressing full potential (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009), competence in the SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000), individuation (Rosso et al., 2010)	Expressing full potential (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009), competence in the SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000), individuation (Rosso et al., 2010), daily work as a symbol of the organization's vision (Carton, 2018), cognitive crafting (Slemp & Vella-Brodrick, 2014)	Expressing full potential (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009), competence in the SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000), individuation (Rosso et al., 2010)	Expressing full potential (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009), competence in the SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000), individuation (Rosso et al., 2010)	Expressing full potential (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009), competence in the SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000), individuation (Rosso et al., 2010)	N/A

Note. $N = 155$ participants. SDT = Self-determination theory

Table 1 (continued)

Theme	Personal Growth and Need Fulfillment			
	Acquiring Knowledge and Skill Enhancement	Fulfilling Personal Needs	Career Growth and Professional Development	Earning Income
Relative Frequency	Mentioned by $N = 90$ participants	Mentioned by $N = 61$ participants	Mentioned by $N = 20$ participants	Mentioned by $N = 3$ participants
Description	Through the activity, new knowledge is acquired or skills are trained or improved.	The activity helps to fulfill personal needs, such as promoting well-being or providing enjoyment.	The activity serves to improve career prospects or to develop professionally.	Earning income or money is mentioned as the purpose behind work-related activities.
Example	By conducting a counseling session, I was able to enhance my communication skills.	By training a new employee, I feel socially fulfilled and competent.	By elaborating on various topics for my mentoring, I was able to further plan my personal objectives/goals within the company.	Through my work, I earned a lot of money today.
Similarities with Existing Research	Developing and becoming self (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009), competence in the SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000), individuation (Rosso et al., 2010), conversion (Martikainen et al., 2022)	Autonomy, relatedness, competence, and intrinsic motivation within the SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000), conversion (Martikainen et al., 2022), recognition (Pavlish & Hunt, 2012)	Developing and becoming self (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009), competence in the SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000), individuation (Rosso et al., 2010), conversion (Martikainen et al., 2022)	Financial motivation (Mortimer & Klein, 2023), Commercialisation (Trittin-Ulbrich & Glozer, 2024)

Note. $N = 155$ participants. SDT = Self-determination theory

Earning Income

A few participants mentioned earning income as a primary motivation behind their work-related activities, for example: ‘Through my work, I earned a lot of money today.’ (participant 129). Thus, sometimes employees may find meaning through earning money. However, this is not a very common theme for daily meaningful work.

Beneficiaries in Themes

Additionally, we investigated the prevalence and roles of *beneficiaries* within the themes. This focus was chosen because beneficiaries play a significant role in the sensemaking process and interactions with them can influence one’s experience of meaningful work (e.g., Grant et al., 2007; Rosso et al., 2010; Wrzesniewski et al., 2003). We frequently identified beneficiaries within the reported themes, which also included a wide range of groups. For a comprehensive overview of all beneficiary categories, see Table 2.

The most frequently mentioned overarching category was *other people*, both inside and outside of the participants’ workplace. These types of beneficiaries were most commonly mentioned in the category of community engagement and support. Beneficiaries within the workplace included colleagues and supervisors, for example: ‘Today, I was able to assist another new and inexperienced colleague with advice and action in resolving a specific case.’, (participant 72) or ‘Through the meeting with my boss, I was able to bring a smile to his face.’ (participant 67). External beneficiaries included customers and patients, such as: ‘Through a phone call, I was able to assist a customer.’ (participant 8) and ‘Through a conversation with a patient, I was able to help her gain a better understanding of her emotions.’ (participant 129). Additionally, other individuals were discussed that were not further specified, as they were either mentioned by name or simply referred to as other people, for instance: ‘Wrote a summary for Claudia to reduce her concerns about the appointment.’ (participant 143) and ‘Organized an event and thereby brought joy to others.’ (participant 123). Lastly, beneficiaries from educational institutions, such as students and children, were

mentioned. Although they are technically part of the organization, such as a school, we counted them separately due to the unique relationship that arises in educational institutions, especially when serving minors. Examples include: ‘By explaining a complex task, the student was ultimately able to solve it and experience a sense of achievement.’ (participant 95) and ‘By creating a calm atmosphere at bedtime, the children got enough sleep and could rest adequately.’ (participant 44).

Another prominent category was *oneself* as a beneficiary of the activity. This was indicated by the absence of other beneficiaries as well as the reference to oneself and most often mentioned within the themes of personal growth and need fulfillment. Examples included statements such as ‘I put forward a proposal in my working group, which allowed me to realize my own ideas.’ (participant 36) and ‘I initiated an application, thereby developing myself and facing a new challenge.’ (participant 117).

Less frequently mentioned were *non-humans* as beneficiaries, primarily the organization as a whole. These beneficiaries were most often referred to within themes of achievement and organizational contribution. For instance, participants mentioned: ‘Lastly, I worked on invoice deductions and wrote to the customers informing them about outstanding balances they have with us. The purpose is also company-oriented and aims to bring money into the company.’ (participant 126) and ‘I coordinated appointments and thus helped the company with planning.’ (participant 117). In a few cases, communities were also identified as beneficiaries: ‘My research into the construction of an innovation building can provide a structurally weak city with inspiration for its future direction.’ (participant 139).

Also less common were mentions of *oneself and others* as beneficiaries, for example by referring to oneself and another person, or by the use of inclusive pronouns such as ‘we’. These beneficiaries were mentioned in all three types of themes. Exemplary statements included: ‘Through a short but humorous phone call with a colleague, both of our moods improved.’ (participant 30) and ‘A patient came in with severe pain, which I was able to

reduce through treatment. As a result, he now wants to switch from his previous dentist to me, which brings me joy and reaffirms my approach to treatment and patient care.’ (participant 88).

Table 2

Beneficiaries in Themes Emerged from Data Analysis

Beneficiaries	Relative Frequency	Description and Examples	Connection to Theme(s)
Other Individuals			
Other People from one's Workplace	Mentioned by $N = 110$ participants	The beneficiaries are part of the individual's organization, e.g., colleagues, one's own or other teams/departments, supervisors, or junior employees.	Mainly community engagement and support
Individuals External to the Organization	Mentioned by $N = 64$ participants	The beneficiaries are not part of the individual's organization, e.g., customers, patients, applicants, or network partners.	Mainly community engagement and support
Other Individuals not Further Specified	Mentioned by $N = 28$ participants	Other individuals are mentioned as beneficiaries; however, the nature of their relationship remains ambiguous as they are identified as 'others' or by name.	Mainly community engagement and support
Members of Educational Institutions	Mentioned by $N = 19$ participants	The beneficiaries are members of educational institutions, e.g., pupils, children, or students.	Mainly community engagement and support
Oneself	Mentioned by $N = 135$ participants	Oneself is mentioned as a beneficiary, indicated by the absence of other beneficiaries and the reference to oneself.	Mainly personal growth and need fulfillment
Non-human Beneficiaries	Mentioned by $N = 69$ participants	The mentioned beneficiaries are non-human, e.g., the organization or communities.	Mainly achievement and organizational contribution
Oneself and Others	Mentioned by $N = 57$ participants	The beneficiaries included oneself and others, exemplified by the mention of oneself and another person, or by the use of inclusive pronouns such as "we."	All themes equally
None Mentioned	Mentioned by $N = 55$ participants	No beneficiaries were mentioned or apparent in the statements.	Both achievement and organizational contribution and community engagement and support

Note. $N = 155$ participants.

Lastly, *no beneficiaries* were mentioned or apparent in the statements, which was found in both themes of achievement and organizational contribution and community engagement and support. This involved statements such as: ‘By completing the waste disposal

service, all chemical waste could be properly disposed of.’ (participant 33) and ‘The provision of advertising materials enabled an event to take place.’ (participant 19).

Discussion

While quantitative diary studies have shed light on the daily fluctuations of meaningful work (e.g., Cai et al., 2024; Meng et al., 2023), the nature of these daily perceptions remains largely unknown. Contrary to the assumption that daily tasks tend to lack significance (Carton, 2018), the findings of our qualitative diary study demonstrate that employees do indeed find meaning in their daily tasks, specifically through themes of community engagement and support, achievement and organizational contribution, as well as personal growth and need fulfillment. To conclude, we explain how our findings relate to the literature and add to what is known about meaningful work.

Theoretical Implications

Themes and Beneficiaries in Daily Meaningful Work

Participants constructed their work as meaningful by making connections to various well-established themes of meaningful work, while also discussing less common themes. Among the themes we identified, making a positive impact on others through various means—such as helping, developing, providing emotional support, a sense of community, or services—emerged as a prominent way in which participants found meaning in their daily tasks. This finding is consistent with established themes such as serving others and community with others (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009), contribution and connection (Bailey et al., 2024; Martikainen et al., 2022; Pavlish & Hunt, 2012; Rosso et al., 2010), as well as the dimensions of others and communion (Rosso et al., 2010). Moreover, our findings support the results of a study by Allan et al. (2018), which suggests that engaging in activities aimed at helping others or reflecting on such actions can enhance perceptions of meaningful work. These findings challenge the common assumption that daily tasks have minimal impact, revealing instead that they can significantly influence others in positive ways.

Further, we identified the overarching theme of achievement and organizational contribution. This category includes various themes such as efficient work practices, contributing to organizational success, achieving goals, making progress, and managing quality. These themes align with existing concepts such as expressing full potential (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009) and individuation (Rosso et al., 2010) through creating, achieving, and influencing, as well as demonstrating self-efficacy. While these themes are less frequently discussed compared to helping others, our findings highlight their importance, specifically for daily tasks. Individuals can find meaning by a sense of ‘getting things done’, upholding structures, or through continuous improvement and the related mastery experiences. Among these themes, contributing to organizational success emerges as the most prevalent in the literature, echoed in cognitive crafting (a type of sensemaking; Slemp & Vella-Brodrick, 2014) and the work of Carton (2018), where employees reframed tasks to be part of the organization's vision. Unlike Carton (2018), we did not observe explicit references to organizational vision; rather, tasks were generally linked to the organization's well-being, such as generating revenue. Lastly, compliance with regulations—although not addressed in previous work to our knowledge—is noteworthy because it underscores employees' recognition of the necessity of certain tasks in daily work. In summary, these results emphasize that daily tasks can be perceived as having an organizational impact and that employees can focus on the self-efficacy, achievement, and mastery associated with tasks to derive meaning.

Additionally, our study highlights themes related to personal development, growth, and fulfillment of individual needs, which are well-established in the literature. These findings resonate with existing concepts such as developing and becoming self (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009), individuation (Rosso et al., 2010), conversion (Martikainen et al., 2022), and recognition (Pavlish & Hunt, 2012). They suggest that individuals can satisfy their drive for self-improvement and learning, as well as meet their needs through everyday tasks. Moreover, these findings suggest a forward-looking perspective, as participants connect their daily tasks

with future career and professional development aspirations. This aligns with previous research, which demonstrated that work is perceived as meaningful when it offers opportunities to realize future work selves (De Boeck et al., 2019). Less frequently, participants mentioned earning an income as the meaning of their work. Research suggests that deriving meaning from earning a living is not necessarily inconsistent with other forms of meaningful work. For example, one study showed that teachers work both for the money and to positively impact their students (Mortimer & Klein, 2023), although there may be tensions between these two types of motivations. Similarly, another study explored how influencers craft narratives to both give meaning to and commercialize their work, revealing that these narratives can sometimes reinforce and at other times undermine each other (Trittin-Ulbrich & Glozer, 2024). Thus, daily tasks seem to be meaningful when they are seen as contributing to the individual's development or fulfilling their basic needs.

Lastly, our analysis regarding beneficiaries within the themes revealed frequent mentions of a wide range of beneficiary types. Our findings support the literature that discusses the importance of beneficiaries (e.g., Grant et al., 2007; Grant, 2012), and are consistent with concepts such as interpersonal sensemaking (Wrzesniewski et al., 2003) and the social valuing framework (Dutton et al., 2016). Also, the frequent acknowledgement of oneself as a beneficiary aligns with the commonly discussed distinction between self and others (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009; Rosso et al., 2010). Thus, our findings underscore the common prevalence of beneficiaries in daily tasks and their pivotal role in daily sensemaking. However, it should be noted that negative interactions or devaluing experiences with beneficiaries may have no positive or negative effects (Bailey et al., 2024; Dutton et al., 2016; Nielsen & Colbert, 2022).

The Role of Psychological Distance

In our study, we observed a tendency of proximity in psychological distance regarding the themes of meaningful work. Participants often found meaning in short-term activities like

assisting colleagues or satisfying customers, with less emphasis on connections to larger societal issues or the long-term future. Similarly, the beneficiaries of their work were typically colleagues, customers, or themselves, with less mention of society or other large groups as beneficiaries. While there were exceptions —such as recognizing the impact on personal development or contributing to the organization’s success on a larger scale—this trend is particularly noteworthy when compared to broader evaluations and interview studies. For instance, this observation contrasts with research by Bunderson and Thompson (2009), which demonstrated that zookeepers linked their work to the future conservation of entire wildlife species, or with studies highlighting work’s contributions to the larger society (Bailey et al., 2024; Molloy & Foust, 2016). However, this finding aligns with construal level theory (Trope & Liberman, 2010), which states that individuals think more concretely about near-term events and more abstractly about distant events. Consequently, it is sensible that individuals find meanings that are more short-term and closer in psychological distance when considering daily tasks, while thinking more abstractly when reflecting on the overall meaning of their work.

Our findings also offer a nuanced perspective on Carton's work (2018). They challenge the belief that employees must connect their daily tasks to the organization’s vision to perceive them as meaningful, and that leaders are essential for bridging this gap. Instead, individuals can derive meaning from immediate, everyday activities, such as helping a colleague. However, leaders may still play a crucial role in elucidating the broader organizational goals associated with daily tasks, as proposed by Carton (2018). Given the multiple possible meanings of daily tasks, individuals may tend to derive meanings that are closer in psychological distance. Accordingly, higher-level meanings, especially those connected to organizational vision, may be easier to construct with leadership guidance.

Lastly, this finding holds implications for research on the temporal aspects and the dual nature of meaningful work. It supports the idea of meaningful work having a dual nature

(Tommasi et al., 2020), suggesting that psychological distance may distinguish short-term, episodic perceptions of meaningful work from steady mindset perceptions. Further, it indicates that different results may emerge depending on the timeframe in which individuals engage in sensemaking. This insight is relevant for studies examining the temporality of meaningful work (e.g., Bailey & Madden, 2017; Mitra & Buzzanell; Lysova et al., 2023) and research that explores the different effects of short-term, within-person and overall, between-person meaningful work (e.g., Fletcher et al., 2018). Additionally, our results call for new consideration regarding the measurement of daily meaningful work. Many existing scales, such as the Work and Meaning Inventory (WAMI; Steger et al., 2012) and Spreitzer's Meaning Scale (1995), include items with large psychological distance, which may not fully capture daily meaningful work. Given that themes close in psychological distance may provide more accurate representation of daily meaningful work, it is crucial to incorporate this into daily measurement approaches.

Practical Implications

Our findings provide valuable insights into practical implications for enhancing daily experiences of meaningful work. Considering that individuals are able to amplify or extend the positive effects of their daily experiences on well-being through reflection and focusing on positive work aspects (Ilies et al., 2024), our findings may be used to derive concrete, cognitive strategies that employees can use to increase their perceptions of daily meaningful work.

Given the prevalence of community engagement and support, raising employees' awareness of the impact of their daily tasks on others could increase their sense of purpose. This includes acknowledging small and short-term impacts that happen daily, such as answering questions or bringing joy to others with a simple gesture. Furthermore, employees can benefit from framing their tasks as positively impacting the organization and reflecting on their sense of achievement and mastery derived from daily tasks. This may involve focusing

on progress, improvement, and maintaining quality. Additionally, when necessary, employees may recognize the importance of tasks that need to be done, even if they don't directly contribute to progress or improvement. Moreover, employees can enhance their sense of meaningful work by reflecting on their daily learning and development at work, as well as embracing feelings of competence, relatedness, and autonomy on a daily basis. Further, employees can enrich the perceived meaning of their daily tasks by identifying the beneficiaries of their work and prioritizing their attention to them and the benefits they derive from their daily work. Additionally, employees may recognize and appreciate how they themselves benefit from their work to further enhance their perceptions of meaningful work. Lastly, if employees perceive a disconnect between their work and the organizational vision (Carton, 2018) or struggle to see the bigger meaning of their work, it may be beneficial for them to focus on the direct impact that they achieve through their daily work within their immediate circle of influence.

The findings of this study provide a foundational basis for the development of strategies in the domain of daily meaningful work. These can also enhance daily work engagement and satisfaction (Cai et al., 2024; Meng et al., 2023) and may even result in long-term benefits when used consistently (Ilies et al., 2024). Therefore, promoting employees' awareness of these aspects through leadership, intervention, or organizational practices could prove beneficial.

Limitations and Future Directions

While this study offers valuable insights, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. Our instruction and design prompted participants to engage in meaning-making, which may differ from the spontaneous meaning construction that occurs in everyday life. For example, the qualitative diary method may encourage respondents to reflect on aspects of their work they might not consider otherwise (reactive bias; Poppleton et al., 2008; Houtgraaf et al., 2022). However, this limitation is not exclusive to qualitative diary studies and also occurs in

more conventional techniques (Poppleton et al., 2008). Importantly, qualitative diary studies offer unique advantages, such as capturing short-term perceptions, mitigating retrospective biases, and providing in-depth insights into daily behavior and cognition (Houtgraaf et al., 2022; McCombie et al., 2024; Poppleton et al., 2008). To enhance the robustness, future studies could draw upon other techniques used in qualitative diary studies, such as the critical incident technique (e.g., Krehl & Büttgen, 2022) or event-contingent designs, where participants report every time they experience meaningful work (Radcliffe, 2013).

Furthermore, relying on daily short written responses may have limited the richness of information compared to interview-based approaches. Typically, the researcher is not present in qualitative diary studies, which may lead to a loss of information (Radcliffe, 2013). Enhancing the depth and variety of methods used to capture responses could yield additional insights and provide a more comprehensive understanding of daily meaningful work. For instance, incorporating daily short interviews as well as audio or video formats (McCombie et al., 2024), may offer additional information and capture more natural speech patterns than written responses alone. Supplementing the daily writings with interviews at the start and/or the end of the diary period could offer contextual insights and enrich the gathered data (e.g., Poppleton et al., 2008; Radcliffe & Cassell, 2015). Given the relative rarity of qualitative diary methods compared to quantitative diary studies and interview approaches in this research field, diversifying methodological approaches would be beneficial for advancing both the knowledge of daily meaningful work as well as refining study designs by offering multiple avenues for data collection.

Conclusion

How we experience each day, over time, shapes how we perceive our lives. Accordingly, experiencing meaning in our daily work is crucial for both long-term and short-term perceptions of personal significance and contribution. In this article, we highlighted the need to explore perceptions of daily meaningful work. Our findings revealed that daily tasks

can be perceived as meaningful through various means, including positively impacting others, personal development and need fulfillment, personal achievement, and perceiving an impact on the organization. Notably, psychological distance may play a key role in distinguishing these short-term perceptions from broader evaluations of meaningful work. We hope that our findings pave the way for further exploration of daily meaningful experiences and serve as a stepping stone to increase daily meaningful work for employees.

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Footnotes

¹This study was part of a larger research project. A separate unpublished study examined daily meaningful work and well-being.