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**The Meaning of Work and the Individual's Sensemaking – From the  
Perspective of Human Resource Managers**

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**The Meaning of Work and the Individual's Sensemaking – From the  
Perspective of Human Resource Managers**

**Ph.D. Dissertation**

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# 1. Introduction

“My desire to live is once again enormous. (...) I have realized this: the meaning of my life is the meaning I choose to give it.”

(P. Coelho: The Fifth Mountain)

I would like to start out with a brief, personal story. It has been sixteen years since I graduated from the university; in the time since, I have switched jobs every three or four years, looking for where I truly belong. I have now been working at the University as an assistant professor for nine years. This, as far as my career goes, has been an especially long time. I have often tried to discover exactly why it is that I am working: what, indeed, does my work mean to me? I continue to look for where I belong, and I continue to think about questions such as, “what determines what we think of our work?” or, “what role do our surroundings play in this?” Well – that is why I settled on this topic for my research.

What is the meaning of work? Most of us never really consciously consider this question. Yet it is worth examining because the meaning of work does influence several factors of interest not just to us, but also to company managers. It impacts the extent to which the individual is satisfied with their work; how much stress the individual encounters while performing their job; the individual’s physical and psychological health; the degree of motivation the individual feels; performance; and the extent to which the individual feels a connection to their workplace and to their job.

With this dissertation, I am establishing a link between two areas important to me: human resources management (hereinafter referred to as HR) and the meaning of work, an area that I have researched and taught in recent years since returning to the university. In an earlier stage of my career, I worked as an HR specialist, manager and then as a consultant. HR as a professional area is still a field of great interest to me, which explains why I chose to study HR professionals in my research. With this study, my purpose is to subtly point HR professionals toward the study of the meaning and meaningfulness of work.

My dissertation is structured primarily along the lines proposed by Maxwell (1996). In the second chapter, following this introduction, a brief overview of my research problems is provided. The third major section of the dissertation the focus is on a review

of the literature discussing the meaning of work, with special attention paid to sources which relied on similar points of departure as I did. This review makes it clear that studies dealing with the meaning of work are lacking the perspective of sensemaking and a process-oriented approach. I therefore expand the summary of the literature to include a review of the literature of sensemaking.

In the fourth – methodological – chapter, the purposes of my research (personal, practical and research purposes), and my research questions are described and my original research framework is presented (chapters 4.1-4.2). Then, the research methodology applied is discussed (case study methodology based on qualitative interviews); I will also cover the role of the researcher, the research field, the characteristics of the sample and the process of data collection and data analysis (chapter 4.3). A separate chapter devoted to the question of validity and reliability, and a review of the quality criteria of my research.

In the fifth chapter, the most important results of my research are described, and discussed where my work may prove to be novel in both theory and in practice.

Compiling a Ph.D. dissertation is the result of a long, oftentimes arduous, journey: a journey for which one needs many supporters. I wish to express my thanks, first of all, to my husband, who encouraged me during the entire process, supported my thinking and provided the background for my research. Thanks also to Gyula Bakacsi, my superior, who encouraged me throughout. My thanks also to the Institute and the Department for providing the professional workshop where I can continue my development. Amy Wrzesniewski, Rita Glózer and István Kunos, the three opponents of my dissertation proposal, also helped my thinking with countless pieces of advice, recommendations and critical observations. I am grateful also to HR managers who agreed to the interviews. I owe special thanks to Andrea Fehér, who stood by me during a particularly difficult period in the course of my research and who taught me how to use Atlas.ti; thanks also to Attila Bokor, whose feedback also helped me come to new conclusions. My thanks to experts and representatives of other fields with whom I was able to discuss my questions and dilemmas: Beáta Andrásné Kotschy (teacher), Edit Révay RSCJ (sociologist), Barna Konkoly-Thege (psychologist), Tamás Martos (psychologist), Viola Sallay (psychologist), Péter Pajkossy (cognitive psychologist), Tibor Pólya (cognitive psychologist) and Ákos Fellner (political scientist). Thanks also to all of my coworkers who helped clarify issues and helped me proceed during various stages of my dissertation: András Gelei, Sándor Takács, Katalin Bácsi, Henriett Primecz, Andrea Toarniczky and Sára Csillag.

## 2. Research problems

### 2.1. The significance of the research topic

Just consider: we spend roughly one-third of our lives working. Accordingly, the meaning or significance we attach to work – our understanding of work – affects our entire lives. For some, it is a service; for others, a profession, or a sense of professionalism; it can be a business, a calling or a sense of creating or earning money; yet others view it as a job or a career. Everyone constructs their own meaning and story of it.

According to the results of scientific research, the meaning that the individual makes of their work impacts the following factors:

- the individual's satisfaction (Wrzesniewski et al, 1997; Wishner, 1991; Brown, 2001; Roberson, 1990);
- the stress the individual encounters while working (Locke – Taylor, 1990; Simon, 1997; Isaksen, 2000; Berte, 1989);
- the individual's physical and mental health (Baumeister, 1991; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997);
- the individual's motivation or performance (Roberson, 1990; Shamir, 1991);
- the individual's sense of belonging (Ashforth – Pratt, 2003; Pratt, 1998; Jaeger, 1994).

The most often underscored result of meaningful work is that the individual becomes satisfied with their job (Roberson, 1990). A decade ago, nearly fifty percent of American employees said that they were not satisfied with their jobs (Pratt–Ashforth, 2003). The significance of meaningful work was recently further underscored by a survey of 5000 German employees. Ninety-two percent of the individuals polled in this representative survey mentioned in first place that the most important factor, as far as satisfaction is concerned, is the feeling that they are doing something meaningful in the workplace. The survey was conducted by the German magazine *Young Nurse* (Legfontosabb az értelmes..., 2002<sup>1</sup>). It does seem timely, then, to conduct a study examining the meaningfulness and meaning of work.

Researchers examining the meaning of work still have much to discover about the meaning work carries in people's lives and what influences this meaning (Wrzesniewski

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<sup>1</sup> Downloaded from the Internet

et al., 2003). This is an interesting question also because, according to research findings, individuals working in the same job may attach different meanings to their jobs (Wrzesniewski et al, 1997). The model of social information processing (Salancik – Pfeffer, 1978) has called our attention to the fact that the individual’s approach to their work is greatly colored by the social environment in which they perform their activity. Precisely how this social environment – including coworkers and managers – impacts one’s understanding of their jobs is not yet entirely clear (Wrzesniewski et al., 2003).

The meaning and meaningfulness of work, and the evolution of these factors, is an issue important both for the individuals as well as for their organizations. From the perspective of the individual: if the employee is provided a broader perspective on the meaning and meaningfulness of their work, this understanding in itself allows them to improve their own situation and to transform it in their own favor. For the organization, this is important primarily in terms of employee retention and increasing employee satisfaction, commitment and motivation (Roberson, 1990). The more favorable conditions organizations are able to create for their employees – conditions which allow for meaningful work –, the more the company’s performance may improve. Pratt and Ashforth (2003) point out that creating meaningful working conditions is not just a means for organizations, but may be a purpose in itself.

The individual examination of the change in the work meaning helps us understand what it is that individuals consider during the process of change; what factors lead them to change the meaning that their work carries for them. What conditions lead them to view their work as meaningful and when is it that they no longer consider it to be that? By examining these changes, we will be able to understand the consequences, for the organization and for the individual, if the individual no longer finds their work meaningful and, on the other hand, what consequences it carries if individuals find their work to be increasingly meaningful.

## **2.2. Research fundamentals, research goals and research questions**

The scope of research examining the meaning and meaningfulness of work is rather broad; I therefore believe it is necessary to first provide an overview of research approaches before describing my own approach. Depending on the definition of the concept of the meaning of work they used, researchers took various approaches. According to one group of researchers, the meaning of work and the meaningfulness of work is necessarily a subjective matter, with the meaning of work defined intrinsically (coming from the individual) (e.g. Simon, 1997; Isaksen, 2000). Another group of researchers believe that the meaning of work and the meaningfulness of work may be determined according to a set of objective criteria – so it is, therefore, objective (e.g.

Morse – Weiss, 1955; Vecchio, 1980; MOW International Research Team, 1987). A third group of researchers emphasize the concept of intersubjectivity: that the social surroundings of the individual affect the meaning of work; the interpretation of this community impacts their individual understanding (Salancik – Pfeffer, 1978; Wrzesniewski – Dutton, 2001, Pratt – Ashforth, 2003; Wrzesniewski et al., 2003). The meaning of work can be understood as a constant, static definition at any particular moment (e.g. Morse – Weiss, 1955; Vecchio, 1980; MOW International Research Team, 1987; Isaksen, 2000) or as a variable, dynamic definition (Pratt – Ashforth, 2003; Wrzesniewski et al, 2003), with the latter lending itself to an approach focused on the process.

In my own approach, I accept the approach of intersubjectivity. I therefore find it prudent to examine the meaning of work on the level of the individual, while considering the effects of a particular community on the individual's understanding. In my opinion, the meaning of work is different not just in every society – but it is different from person to person. Just what one considers work, and what meaning they attach to it, depends on the individual. At the same time, I believe the sensemaking of work is also shaped by the meaning accepted by society, the organization or the community around them (Pratt – Ashforth, 2003). My approach reflects a distinct organization theory assumption, which I believe is important to make readers aware of.

### **The Author's Organization Theory Assumptions**

In my view, the individual's cognitive processes and norms, or social cues affecting them, are at the center of the process of meaning construction – this is the core issue studied by **social constructivist** theory. The primary focus of social constructivist research is how individuals construct the world mentally, through categories provided by their social relations. These studies follow the work of Vygotsky (1981) and Bruner (1990) (Fletcher, 2006; Young – Collin, 2004). They primarily examine the subjective knowledge of the individual, their cognitive processes and thoughts, as well as the social surroundings or environment in which the individual is active (Fletcher, 2006). How individuals construct meaning how do they coming to know is an important question. These processes play out primarily within the individual, who integrates new knowledge into already existing schemas or modifies existing schemas as appropriate (Young – Collin, 2004).

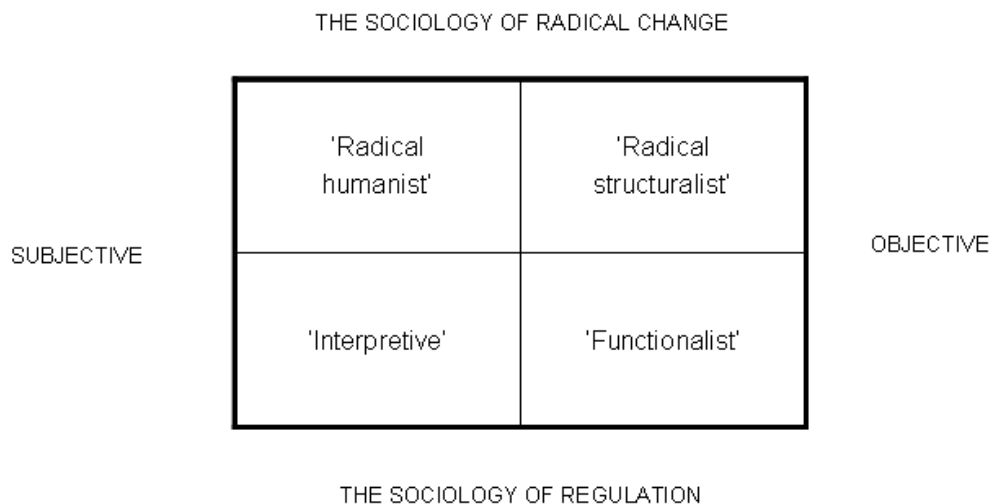
From a social constructionist perspective, sensemaking is the process of socially constructing reality. Sensemaking is a social process: the individual's interpretation cannot be separated from commonly shared meanings. The meaning is related directly to the context and to members of an organization, i.e. other individuals. These members of the organization do not explore reality as it already exists outside of them; rather,

they construct it and learn it from each other (Gioia, 1986; Weick – Bougon, 1986; Isabella, 1990).

Social constructionism and social constructivism represent two different approaches – yet the separation of the two is not always clear (Samra-Fredericks, 2008; Young – Collin, 2004). One notable difference is that social constructivists consider construction more of an individual process (Samra-Fredericks, 2008; Young – Collin, 2004) in which the individual’s schema or mental model plays a key role (Samra-Fredericks, 2008). At the same time, social constructionists consider knowledge to be supported by social processes – i.e. that knowledge goes hand in hand with social action. Several researchers, however, do not differentiate between these two approaches, or believe them to be interchangeable; no final consensus exists yet at this point on the separation of the two approaches (Young – Collin, 2004).

Burrell and Morgan’s (1979) matrix, accepted widely by organizational researchers, places social science theories in one of four paradigms, as their mutually exclusive suppositions are incommensurable. One axis of the matrix is the objective-subjective axis, separated along the lines of ontology, human nature, epistemology, and methodology. The other axis is broken down according to the sociology of order and change.

**Figure 1: The Burrell – Morgan matrix (based on Burrell – Morgan, 1979:22)**



My research represents a social constructivist approach. My organization theory assumptions are both functionalist and interpretive. I acknowledge the interpretive framework of Burrell and Morgan (1979), but – unlike them – I consider the boundary between interpretive sociology and functionalist sociology to be permeable, and choose to suppose commensurability. Kieser’s study of constructivism (2002) described three different basic approaches to organization theory: the social constructivist, the cognitive

and the system theory approaches. Cognitive constructivism “in a certain sense attempts to reconcile the positivist and interpretive approaches” – this is the category where this dissertation belongs. Kieser’s key thesis is that the “the individual’s behavior is driven for the most part by subjective theories, i.e. subjective suppositions of causal relationships, as well as simple rules stored in the individual’s memory” (p.17). Chell (2000) says that this, itself, is a paradox: on the one hand, an individual’s experiences are singular, subjective and also socially constructed, and on the other hand, individuals create labels and categories when processing their own thoughts, feelings and experiences. The individual’s subjective world is also reflectively labeled through signs, symbols and language. This is the “ontological oscillation” supported by constructivists, which makes such a contradiction possible. According to Pitt (1998), this approach places at the center of the objective-subjective axis on the Morgan – Smircich (1980) model, and may be termed the structuralist-interpretive approach.

Following a review of my research perspectives, a brief overview is offered of the purposes I hoped to realize through my research, as well as of the questions I was seeking answers to. My research goal is to explore the meaning work carries for human resources managers, and how this meaning is influenced by their social environment. Through that, I hoped to obtain a deeper understanding of HR work, the meaning of work, changes to the meaning of work and of the process of sensemaking. Through my research, I hope to join the international discourse focused on the meaning of work, and I also hope to reach Hungarian HR managers. My longer term purpose with this project, and through related dialogue, is to contribute to the personal development of my interview subjects and the development of their organizations.

In my research the focus is on the change in the work meaning from the perspective of the individual. I was interested in determining the conditions under which the meaning of work changes, and how it changes, in the case of the individuals examined. I wished to explore the process and steps the change in the work meaning takes and what patterns of the change in meaning we are able identify.

### **3. Review of the literature**

My review of the literature for the dissertation consists of two major sections. The first part focuses on key studies dealing with the meaning of work, while the second section discusses the literature of sensemaking, the process which contributes the most to the individual’s understanding of meaning.

### **3.1. The meaning of work – a review of the literature**

In my presentation of studies dealing with the meaning of work, I took an approach which is key to my own research, and gave an in-depth review above all of studies exploring the individual's understanding. Thus, the review does not give a true reflection of the frequency of publications examining the meaning of work. The majority of the studies discuss the central role of work and provide a historical overview of the role of work (Wrzesniewski et al., 2003). The studies are grouped primarily according to what definition of the meaning of work they offer; as a second criterion, are following a chronological approach. The studies examining the meaning of work are grouped into one of the following four categories: (1) beliefs, values, attitudes; (2) meaningful work; (3) the individual's understanding; (4) the presence of social factors. Before, however, moving on to present a more detailed overview of my research, I describe in greater detail dilemmas surrounding the concept of work and the meaning of work.

#### **3.1.1. The concept of work**

It is difficult to define work (Genis – Wallis, 2005; based on Brief – Nord, 1990a), as the boundaries of work are not clearly delimited. Certain activities may be seen as work in some cases, but the same may be seen as leisure time activities in other instances (Brief – Nord, 1990a; Noon – Blyton, 1997). Thus, it is not the activity itself which is the most significant, but rather the conditions and the consequences of the activity (Genis – Wallis, 2005). The most widespread definition of work is based on an economic approach: “what people do for financial compensation in order to earn a living” (Brief – Nord, 1990a:2). This economic approach narrows down the definition of work in several ways. It does not, for one, take into consideration activities which the individual does not in exchange for remuneration – either because (1) it is a part of the gray economy, (2) it is household work or (3) it is volunteer work (Brief – Nord, 1990a; Noon – Blyton, 1997; Genis – Wallis, 2005). Furthermore, a purely economic minded definition of work is also problematic because, – according to the generally accepted definition provided by Ryan and Deci (2000:71) “the performance of an activity in order to attain some separable outcome,”– it narrows down the concept of work to that of an activity performed for extrinsic motivations. It ignores work performed for intrinsic motivation, “doing an activity for the inherent satisfaction of the activity itself” (Ryan – Deci, 2000:71). According to several large-sample surveys conducted in developed countries, 65-95% of respondents said they would continue their work even if they had enough money to live well without having to work (Morse – Weiss, 1955; Vecchio, 1980; MOW International Research Team, 1987). Based on the above, we



again arrive at a significantly narrower definition of work, if we take it to mean purely the tool necessary to receive remuneration, to make a living.

### **3.1.2. The concept of the meaning of work**

The meaning of work is also determined by the cultural environment, and has changed over time (for more in-depth analysis of this, see the studies by Brief – Nord, 1990a; Cartwright – Holmes, 2006; in Hungarian, see Dalminé, 1994 for a discussion of work paradigms). Accordingly, the various definitions of work cannot be separated from the particular age and society when and where they were determined. Researchers have defined the meaning of work in many different ways: the beliefs, values and attitudes of the individual in relation to work (Brief – Nord, 1990a; Quintanilla, 1991; Morse – Weiss, 1955; Vecchio, 1980); the individual's values (Fagermoen, 1997); the individual's motivations as regards work (Hackman – Oldham, 1976; Roberson, 1990; Chalofsky, 2003); or the individual's understanding of what they do at work as well as the significance of what it is that they do (Wrzesniewski et al., 2003). Researchers defined the concept of meaningful work as: work or as a context which the individual perceives is purposeful and is significant (Hackman – Oldham, 1976; Pratt – Ashforth, 2003; Chalofsky, 2003).

This dissertation examines the meaning of work – a concept that cannot be separated from the meaningfulness of work. The literature oftentimes ignores the separation of these two concepts (Rosso et al., 2010). Researchers often use these two terms interchangeably, thereby contributing to confusion surrounding the use of the two terms and their relationships (Rosso et al., 2010; Wrzesniewski, 2010)<sup>2</sup>.

In English, the word “meaning” covers a concept which includes one's understanding, sense or intentions (Lázár – Varga, 2006). According to the Hungarian *Értelmező szótár*<sup>3</sup> (Eőry, 2007), “meaning” is (1) the content or text which is meant, and (2) the content indicated through a (linguistic) sign or signs<sup>4</sup>. The meaning of “meaningfulness”

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<sup>2</sup>As my opponent, Amy Wrzesniewski, indicated in her evaluation of my dissertation: “ She begins to pull apart some thorny concepts that are interrelated and have been treated as interchangeable in some areas of the literature so far – specifically, the difference between meaning and meaningfulness, which is likely to be one of the most important frontiers of differentiation in the future of meaning of work research. While meaning of work concerns the content of what the work signifies (a means to an end, one's source of identity, and/or something else entirely), meaningfulness has generally come to be treated as the amount of purpose or significance carried by the work.”

<sup>3</sup> Explanatory dictionary+

<sup>4</sup> According to an English dictionary (Hanks, 1989) meaning is: 1. the sense or significance of a word, sentence, symbol, etc; 2. the purpose or underlying or intended by speech, action, etc; 3. the inner,

is (1) the ability to think or perceive; (2) the rational purpose of something; (3) as in the sense of something: according to something or (4) the meaning of something. Thus, meaningfulness can, on the one hand, be synonymous with meaning – on the other hand, it can also denote something more specific: the rational purpose of something. In my view, meaningfulness is indeed more specific than the word meaning; everything has a meaning, yet not everything has, or makes, sense. When discussing the meaning of work, I refer to the concept of **meaning** to denote the content indicated through a sign or signs (understanding signs to apply to social situations as well). I use the word **meaningfulness** in its more specific meaning, to denote the rational purpose of something. Accordingly, I differentiate between the meaning and the meaningfulness of work, and the concept of meaningful work.

In relation to meaning and sense, I often use the verb “interpret,” which is defined in the Hungarian *Értelmező szótár*<sup>5</sup> (Eöry, 2007) as the following: (1) to attach a meaning to any kind of communication, (2) to determine the sense of a piece of legislation or (3) to explain the meaning of something. In this dissertation, the verb **interpret** is used in the senses of making meaning of some kind of communication and to explain the meaning of something; it is used synonymously with the verb to construct.

### **3.1.3. The meaning of work: beliefs, values, attitudes**

In this section’s review of studies dealing with the meaning of work, the ones which interpret the meaning of work as a set of beliefs, values and attitudes are examined. In this area, we are able to differentiate between three main avenues of research: research into the work centrality, into work values and into work orientations. I go into greater detail to describe the literature of work orientation, as my own research also covers this area.

#### **3.1.3.1. Work centrality**

This group includes studies which examined the central role work plays in the life of the individual, as compared to other domains of their life (e.g. free time, family, religion).

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symbolic, or true interpretation, value or message; 4. valid content; 5. philosophy: a. the sense of an expression, b. the reference of an expression; 6. expressive of some sense.

<sup>5</sup> Explanatory dictionary+

In their study, Morse and Weiss (1955) based their approach on an understanding of work as a means to make a living, and examined the various functions of work from the perspective of working individuals. From a nationwide U.S. sample of 401 males, they selected individuals who were employed. One key question of their study was whether these individuals would continue to work if they were to come into an inheritance which would provide them with a comfortable living for the rest of their lives. Their findings are summarized below:

- For a significant portion of those surveyed, work is more than just the means to an end;
- The individual need not be facing the possibility of unemployment, or need not be retired, to be able to envision what it would be like to not be working;
- Work, apart from its economic nature, also plays a secondary role for both middle class as well as working class individuals; this secondary role is different in the case of the two classes, however. For middle class individuals, work provides the individual with a purpose, a sense of performance and a means at self-expression. Working class individuals, were they not employed, would merely sit or lie around – for them, work is simply having something to do, and provides an opportunity to engage in physical labor.

The study originally conducted by Morse and Weiss was repeated by Vecchio (1980) to determine whether any changes in social values during the interim years would be reflected in the study results. Vecchio's purposes included the following: (1) to determine, once again, the percentage of individuals who would choose to continue to work in a situation where they were no longer reliant on working to make a living; (2) comparing the 1980 results to the findings of the 1955 study; (3) to draw conclusions regarding the validity of predictions related to social changes. Vecchio's findings included the following: There was, indeed, a change in attitudes, according to the results of the survey (although the methodology differed from that used in 1955). The percentage of individuals who would choose to quit working increased by 39% (from 20% to 27.8%). These findings matched expectations of cultural changes.

The Meaning of Working project (MOW), 1980s: conducted with the participation of 15 thousand respondents in more than eight different countries, this series of studies examined the subjective meaning of work (Quintanilla – Wilpert, 1991). The project provided the following definition of the meaning of work: “values, beliefs and expectations espoused by the individual” (Quintanilla, 1991:85). The purpose of the study was to explore the empirical structure of the meaning of work through the involvement of respondents representing different social, professional and national backgrounds (Quintanilla, 1991), and to explore the significance of work as compared to other facets of an individual's life (Harpaz – Fu, 2002). The study focused on three main concepts:

- (1) the central role of work: the significance of work in an individual's life;
- (2) the purposes of work: 11 purposes of working which individuals focus on or expect as they work (England – Whitely, 1990 p. 68):
  - “A lot of opportunities to learn new things.
  - Good interpersonal relations (with managers, coworkers).
  - Good opportunities for upgrading or promotion.
  - Convenient work hours.
  - Lot of variety.
  - Interesting work (work that you really like).
  - Good job security.
  - A good match between your job requirements and your abilities and experience.
  - A good pay.
  - Good physical working conditions (such as light, temperature, cleanliness, low noise level).
  - Lot of autonomy (you decide how to do your work).”
- (3) social norms applicable to work, as well as beliefs and expectations related to laws and obligations connected to work.

England and Whitely (1990)<sup>6</sup> discuss some of the more comprehensive findings of the MOW study, listed below. The two most often cited reasons for working are the following: (1) in the interest of obtaining personal wealth (if money is provided for the activity performed) and (2) because of an obligation or expectation (if something is part of one's duties). Few of the respondents said work was an undesirable activity (a total of 4.2% marked it as such). Half of all respondents viewed work in a positive light; approximately one-sixth had a neutral opinion of it, while one-third had a negative opinion of work (considering the value and the definition of work). Based on their personal definitions of work, the MOW project placed individuals in one of six distinct categories. All of these categories were clearly defined, and conclusions were ultimately drawn from the findings based on breakdown by nationality and other factors, providing results by country and organization. Several other research studies were conducted based on the dimensions laid out in the MOW project (e.g. Westwood – Lok, 2003; Harpaz – Honig – Coetsier, 2002).

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<sup>6</sup> This study is not as broad as the entire MOW project – it summarizes the findings from six countries. See the MOW International Research Team (1987) publication for a comprehensive review of all findings.

### 3.1.3.2. Work values

We are also able to separate a direction of studies which identified the meaning of work with work values<sup>7</sup>.

In their model, Locke and Taylor (1990) connect the meaning of work to coping with stress. The authors identify the meaning of work with values earned and values expected through work. According to their approach, individuals start working in possession of a certain set of values, which then impact on their experiences in the workplace, and which are in turn affected by them as well. In other words, individuals may be considered successful if they receive from their work whatever it is that they desire. They may be considered less successful if they experience contradiction between their expectations and their experiences. This contradiction can lead to stress, despondence or frustration, which results in the individual having to reevaluate their work from time to time, and then drawing conclusions based on their experiences. As a consequence, they alter their actions, expectations and values – or alter all of these. Following this evaluation and re-evaluation performed by the individual, work will either carry greater or lesser personal meaning to the individual.

Fagermoen (1995, 1997) conducted a two-tier research study of the meaning of work of nurses; the primary question of that study was the following: “What are the values underlying nurses’ professional identity as expressed through what is meaningful in nurses’ work?” In the first tier of the study, 767 randomly selected nurses were asked to fill out questionnaires; in the second stage, deep interviews were conducted with six nurses, who were asked to provide accounts related to their caring for patients. Human dignity and altruism were the two primary moral values, and intellectual and personal motivation were the two primary work values cited. The narrative part of the research confirmed and refined the findings of the questionnaire component of the survey. The source of the meaning of work was the nurses’ interactive relationship with patients, their relatives and colleagues, which also impacted on the nurses’ professional development.

In their study, Ross et al. (1999) defined the meaning of work as the means to an end. They asked 193 teachers of Spanish and 179 students to evaluate the significance of work and basic values. For the teachers, their work provided them with social stability and close-knit social relationships. For the students, in addition to the above, work

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<sup>7</sup> Essentially, the MOW project may be linked to this set of research studies.

supported the individual's personal development, independence and a sense of excitement.

### **3.1.3.3. Work orientations**

The first publication related to work orientations is connected to Bellah et al. (1985): they determined that individuals define their work in three different ways as compared to other life-domains. They described three different and basic ways of approaching work: as a job, as a career or as a calling. Work orientation describes the reason and the purpose of the individual when performing their work, and the meaning their work carries for them (Bellah et al., 1985; Wrzesniewski, 1999; Rosso et al., 2010). It was Wrzesniewski et al. (1997) who described the characteristics of work orientations by developing a questionnaire which allowed them to describe each of the various orientations with certain types of behavior, values and feelings associated with work.

Pratt et al. (forthcoming:5) emphasized, in addition to belief, purposes and values in their own definition of work orientation: evaluative dispositions about the purpose of work. I believe it is necessary to expand on the dispositions of this definition further. Firstly, it applies to values and beliefs which describe why working is worthwhile. These create an interlinked pattern of values and beliefs. Secondly, orientations may be considered characteristics because they reflect the preferences and world views of the individual and because they are relatively constant and may only be changed slowly. Thirdly, orientation applies to the purpose of work as a general life-domain, and not to the characteristics of a specific job or task.

If we compare this concept to previous definitions of work orientations, we see that values play a greater role in this. The authors (Pratt et al., forthcoming) develop this three-aspect model further into a five-aspect model and emphasize, for each of these, the aspect that represents a value or a meaning for the individual. Previous definitions considered orientations to be a type of interpretation, a frame, a relationship or a purpose which also carried within themselves certain values. Based on the above, it appears that Pratt et al. emphasized certain elements of the already existing concepts, but did not examine certain other aspects (e.g. behavior, feelings). An additional difference lies in their understanding of orientation as a dispositions: previously, authors either did not examine the change in this (Bellah et al., 1985) or were permissive as far as their changeability was concerned (Wrzesniewski, 1999). Yet orientation, as a concept of dispositions, describes stability and difficult changeability.

### 3.1.3.3.1. Possible work orientations

In the approach to orientation, the three-way categorization<sup>8</sup> (Bellah et al., 1985; Baumeister, 1991; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997; Wrzesniewski, 1999, Rosso et al., 2010) is most common. Work can simply be a job, or it can be a career or a calling, if we use these three categories. These three orientations are not sharply delineated from each other – the same individual may hold elements of all three.

An individual with an orientation primarily of a “job” performs their work primarily to attain financial gains – they do not seek or receive other motivators. Money may denote economic success, security and anything else that may be obtained for a payment. In their case, work itself is not a purpose, but the means to achieve resources to be able to enjoy the time spent not working. This individual’s primary interest or ambition is not present in their job. Essentially, the main purpose of job-oriented individuals is to earn their salary (Wrzesniewski, 1999). At the same time, a stable job may be a source of self-worth for the individual, and this self-worth is oftentimes tied not just to the job, but also to the amount of the salary (Baumeister, 1991).

An individual viewing their work through the “career” orientation tends to put more personal effort or investment into their work, which is indicated by their progress in the organizational or professional structure, in addition to financial motivators. The individual considers the advantages provided by their work, and their commitment is a function of this. This individual’s comprehensive purpose is increasing their revenue, prestige, social status, power and competence through their advancement in the profession. In the case of individuals professing a career orientation, competition, performance and comparison to others, victory and avoiding failures are also present. All of these serve to increase self-esteem. The comprehensive purpose of individuals with career orientations is maximizing their income, social status, power and prestige in their profession (Wrzesniewski, 1999). Individuals with a career orientation focus on themselves: they obtain feedback during their work, and work thus becomes a tool toward creating, expressing, validating and recognizing themselves (Baumeister, 1991). Individuals with a career orientation are willing to sacrifice their free time, social relationships and family commitments to get ahead in their careers. The individual is driven by a spirit of competition, in an effort to achieve success, prestige and status. Baumeister (1991) lists workaholics in the group of career oriented individuals, for whom work essentially is the meaning of life. This is somewhat modified in

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<sup>8</sup> I provide detailed descriptions of the various orientations according to the studies listed in parentheses. I indicate and cite separately comments which differ from the general understanding.

Wrzesniewski’s (1999) classification, which identifies meaning in work with a calling orientation.

Individuals viewing their work as a “calling” have a difficult time separating their work from other facets of their lives. Work, fulfillment achieved through work and pleasure are seen as their purposes. Thus, work in itself appears as a purpose. It is often linked with the belief that they make the world a better place through their work. This is where calling orientation differs from career- and job orientation, because the latter two are primarily personal in nature. An individual with a calling orientation is committed to a profession, so that they may become a good representative of the profession; they thus join the professional community and those that they serve (Bellah et al., 1985).

**Figure 2: The three work orientations and related purpose-structures (source: Wrzesniewski, 1999: 12)**

| Clear purposes related to work         | Job orientation | Career orientation | Calling orientation |
|--|-----------------|--------------------|---------------------|
| Income and financial benefits          | +               | +                  |                     |
| Professional progress                  |                 | +                  |                     |
| Fulfillment and meaningfulness in work |                 |                    | +                   |

Pratt et al. (Pratt et al., forthcoming) in their publication propose a five-aspect model instead of a three-aspect one. Wrzesniewski (1999: 121) also allows that beyond the three-aspect orientation, further orientations may be possible. Wrzesniewski points to social orientation as an additional possibility. Wrzesniewski also notes that further orientations, not yet developed by researchers, are certain to be encountered.

**Figure 3: Comparing studies of work orientation<sup>9</sup>**

| Publications:  | Name of orientation |        |                   |         |         |
|--|---------------------|--------|-------------------|---------|---------|
|  | Job                 | Career | Calling           |         |         |
| Bellah et al., 1985<br>Baumeister, 1991<br>Wrzesniewski et al., 1997<br>Wrzesniewski, 1999 | Job                 | Career | Calling           |         |         |
| Pratt et al., forthcoming  | Job                 | Career | Craftman-<br>ship | Service | Kinship |

Pratt et al. further divide the calling orientation into three orientations based on the basic concept by Bellah et al. (1985), as the figure above shows. This change affects the following three fundamental aspects of the calling orientation: 1. work in itself has a

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<sup>9</sup> author’s own summary



meaning and value; 2. work includes close relationships and a sense of community with coworkers; 3. it includes a desire to help others and contribute to a common good. The authors believe that common characteristics in the literature of callings – such as fulfillment and helping others – do not always appear together, and should therefore be treated as separate orientations. They cite several examples: a mathematician may enjoy their invention and it may represent self-realization, but they do not consider how it will help others. Individuals who fight for human rights may not necessarily enjoy their lobbying activities, yet it is often an integral part of their jobs. The authors, based on the work of Bellah et al. (1985), therefore identify a third orientation, which emphasizes the social or relational characteristics of work. I will proceed to describe the concepts of the three new orientations which the authors propose using instead of the calling orientation.

First, the **craftmanship orientation**: in this case, it is a job well done that provides meaning to the individual. Individuals with this type of orientation build on their own expertise and skills, they are proud of the results of their work and a job well done represents value to them in itself. Craftmanship orientation is a disposition allowing one to view a job well done as something valuable in itself. Those with this type of orientation find meaning in performing their job well. The authors present a job well and effectively performed, and professional knowledge, as sources of self-esteem. According to Baumeister (1991), this may also be encountered in the case of job-oriented individuals and in the case of those performing lower-status jobs. At the same time, Baumeister (1991) acknowledges that jobs requiring professional skills are richer sources of efficacy and self-esteem than jobs requiring no training.

Secondly, **service orientation**: where good deeds serve as meaning for the individual. Whereas in the case of the craftmanship orientation, work itself is valuable and is the purpose, in the case of individuals with a service orientation, work is a tool to improve the lives of others and to advance some cause. Service generally applies to the service of other persons, but may be expanded to include animals or an ideology or a religion. The focus of the individual performing the service is always on the other who is benefiting from their work. Service orientation is a characteristic allowing the individual to find work valuable because it provides an opportunity to improve the lives of others and to advance some cause – i.e. to do good.

Thirdly, **kinship orientation**: in this case, it is a job done together with others that provides meaningfulness to the individual. For individuals with this type of orientation, work is a tool to establish close, quality relationships similar to those with their family. By using the expression kinship, as opposed to social, the authors wish to emphasize the quality of the relationship. The closeness of the relationship is indicated by the use of expressions derived from the family sphere (e.g. brothers, sisters) which are used by police officers, firefighters or monks. The kinship orientation is a characteristic that

allows the individual to find their work interesting because it provides an opportunity to establish relationships reminiscent of close, quality family ties.

### **3.1.3.3.2. Empirical research studies**

Two empirical studies, using quantitative methodology, have been conducted to identify orientations (focusing on three orientations) and their characteristics. In the following section, some of their key findings are presented. In the first such study (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997), the three orientations presented significant differences from one another according to the profession examined. Job oriented individuals spoke of lower satisfaction in their jobs and found greater joy in other areas of their lives (e.g. friends, hobbies) and wished to spend less time doing their jobs than calling oriented individuals. The distribution of career oriented individuals in lower status jobs changed according to their age: younger individuals appeared willing to spend more time and energy in their work to help their advancement than older individuals. Calling oriented individuals described a closer and more satisfactory relationship with their jobs: they spent more time working, which brought them more joy and satisfaction. Satisfaction with life and with work was the highest among individuals with a calling orientation. Interestingly, however, the satisfaction was greater in the case of the calling oriented individuals, even when individuals with calling, career and job orientations working in the same job in the same organization were asked.

Delimitation according to orientations was possible regardless of profession. Researchers, examining identical professions, found that individuals in the same organization and in the same profession may have had any of the three orientations (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997).

In the second research study, career and calling orientations led to the same results and were not as sharply separated as in the first study (Wrzesniewski, 1999). Examining unemployed individuals, the quality of the job received was significantly different in the case of career and calling oriented individuals than in the case of job oriented individuals. In the case of career oriented individuals, orientation was a good indicator of advancement.

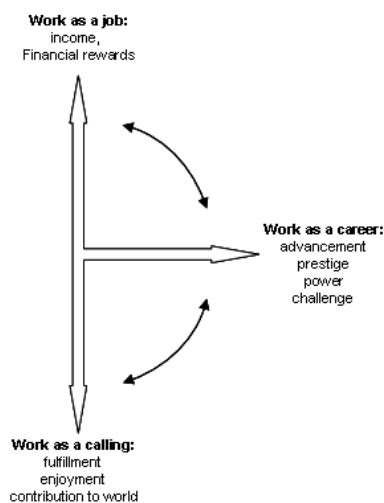
### **3.1.3.3.3. Relationships between work orientations**

Job, career and calling represent three fundamentally different orientations which are, however, not completely separate from one another. The three orientations each carry different explanations for why the individual is working and what meaning they make of their work, thus imbuing them with relative significance compared to one another. Accordingly, individuals with a calling orientation may see the significance of financial remuneration for their work; this, however, is subordinated to the satisfaction the calling oriented individual derives from their work. Thus, work orientation may be seen as the

relative, and not absolute, importance of why the individual works (Wrzesniewski, 1999:10). Based on empirical research studies, individuals were able to identify clearly (in the three categories) which orientation applies to them (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997, Wrzesniewski, 1999).

Wrzesniewski's (1999) study allows for one individual to have several strong orientations, primarily finding calling-career and job-career combinations to be possible, while discarding calling-job combinations.

**Figure 4: Depicting the relationship between work orientations (source: Wrzesniewski, 1999: 122)**



The figure clearly shows that the individual may be located anywhere along the arrows: it is possible for the individual to have a purely job, career or calling orientation or to have a profile which simultaneously includes several orientations of different strengths. I wish to note here that, as the figure shows, Wrzesniewski (1999) does not accept the concurrent presence of three orientations. Baumeister (1991:119), on the other hand, allows for individuals to have elements of two or even three orientations.

#### **3.1.3.3.4. The changes in orientations**

The large-scale empirical research study examining the three-aspect model of orientations (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997) does not touch on the possible change in orientations. Wrzesniewski's (1999: 121) dissertation briefly mentions the possibility of the change in orientations: in Wrzesniewski's view, this may be caused by the development of the individual, the change in the employee's status or changes in their surroundings. Pratt et al. (forthcoming: 26) emphasize durability and the difficulty of change in their concept of orientation as a dispositions. In their publication, they point to the examination of whether orientations change and develop over time as a possible further area of research in the future. They raise the question whether orientations change at a time of personal crisis.

At this point, we might call attention to a research gap: the change in orientations has not yet been examined in empirical research studies. I believe it is worth considering whether orientations change in the case of specific individuals, as well as what might cause such changes and whether such processes have typical patterns.

In sum, we may conclude that studies defining the meaning of work as a belief, a value or an attitude relied primarily on a positivist general approach and were conducted using quantitative tools and methodology. For the most part, they relied on questionnaires and, to a lesser degree, semi-structured interviews.

### **3.1.4. Meaningful work**

This chapter features a review of studies which defined the meaning of work by relying on the concept of meaningful work.

The concept of meaningful work, is in many ways, closely related to the concept of satisfaction. There are several studies where this is present. Consider the job characteristics model as put forward by Hackman and Oldham (1976), a milestone work in research on job satisfaction and work motivation. According to the authors, workers' motivation and satisfaction is determined by the following three, so-called critical psychological, states. (1) The meaning of work and its significance denote the feeling of the individual that their work is, in some way, purposeful, important or significant (what matters is what the individual's experiences are with their work). (2) The responsibility the individual feels for the results of their work: the individual's feeling that the results of their efforts are truly dependent on them. (3) The understanding of the results of the individual's work: understanding how satisfactory their performance on the job is (Gelei, 2005: 163). It has been decades since this model was developed, and a large number of other studies examining work have been conducted in the time since, building on Hackman and Oldham's work (see Torraco, 2005; Grant – Parker, 2009 for more detail).

Kahn's study (1990), laying out theoretical foundations, featured two surveys of the individual's engagement and disengagement in their work – the dynamics of the role and work relationship. Kahn describes three psychological conditions: meaningfulness, security and accessibility. Among the influencing factors, Kahn found individual, interpersonal, group, inter-group and organizational level factors. According to the author, the individual experiences meaningfulness, from a psychological perspective, if they feel themselves worthy, valuable and useful, and if their physical, cognitive or emotional energy also increases.

Building on the foundations of motivational theory, Gayle (1997) conducted a study of six senior IT professionals to determine the purposes and meaning of their work. Gayle used the following definition of purposes and meaning (p.14): individuals are able to perform activities which they feel are important, are not trivial and are not insignificant; they are able to participate in these and are able to commit to these activities. They are committed to their own values, ideas, purposes and missions as well as the values, ideas, purposes and missions of others, and act according to these. The author found ten similar patterns to describe situations where the individuals experience purposes and meaning – six of these are themes valid for the level of the individual, while four described organizational-level themes. Gayle found that the purposes and meaning of the workplace carry special significance for the IT professionals participating in the project, who often rely on their cognitive skills in complex and abstract situations. Gayle also found that when respondents experienced purposes and meaning to their work, their motivation, satisfaction and creativity increased significantly.

Chalofsky, following a comprehensive study examining the meaning of work, conducted two further research projects in 1996 and 1999. Based on these, and founded on the basis of motivational content theories, Chalofsky defined the concept of meaningful work in 2003. Chalofsky's assumptions were based on the foundations of classic motivation theories and humanistic psychology: (1) individuals have an inherent need for meaningful work; (2) the forces acting within a person are driven by the desire to fulfill their needs. In Chalofsky's definition, meaningful work is activity through which the individual can express the purpose and meaning of their life. It gives a kind of essence to whatever the individual does and brings a feeling of accomplishment to their life. Meaningful work brings a sense of integrated completeness to the individual's life through work itself, a sense of self and a sense of balance. The author emphasizes the importance of creating meaningful workplaces, describing a new psychological contract between the organization and the employee – it is not the individual's performance and the organization as such which are the focal point, but rather the individual and the meaning of their work. Chalofsky also calls attention to the significance of crafting work: in this approach, it is the fitting of work which is emphasized, rather than the individual's adaptation.

Shacklock's PhD research (2005) examined the meaning elderly employees attach to their work. The purpose of the study was to determine, through a qualitative approach, the meaning elderly employees attach to their work, to understand whether elderly Australian employees wish to continue working. Shacklock defined the meaning of work through the reasons the individual would wish to continue working. The author did not cover the motivational theory background of the study. Shacklock's study was conducted in a university setting, and was comprised of four parts examining both the managerial as well as organizational sides of the topic. Shacklock found that the

majority of elderly employees do not wish to continue working past their retirement; some of the reasons mentioned included a desire to spend more time with their spouses and other interests outside of their work. Due, however, to demographic trends, there is a need both at the universities examined, as well as in Australia in general, to develop a new approach to elderly employees. Shacklock provided a three-tier solution to these issues.

Bunderson and Thompson (2009) conducted their study of the meaning of work and the phenomenon of professional calling among zookeepers. Other researchers believe that a calling is the most important element on the road to truly meaningful work. The authors' definition of calling was based on the neoclassical concept of the term. A calling is, at the same time, both binding and ennobling; both are sources of identity, meaning and significance, and are also sources of obligation, sacrifice and vigilance. Their hypotheses were tested in 157 different zoos, and the findings of their research confirm the above-mentioned double-sworded nature of meaningful work.

Cheney et al. (2008, 150), in their comprehensive study, summarize the findings of research studies examining meaningful work. They believe individuals find their work to be meaningful if (1) it has a purpose, (2) it creates a sense of agency, (3) it strengthens a sense of belonging or of relationships, (4) it provides an opportunity to exercise influence, (5) it makes it possible for the individual to utilize and develop their own talents, (6) it creates a sense of contributing to a greater good and (7) it provides the means for a decent living.

#### **3.1.4.1. How work becomes meaningful: meaning mechanisms**

In my research, I also examine the meaning of work from the perspective of meaning mechanisms; accordingly, a detailed overview of the relevant literature provided as well. This concept is actually a framework, a meta-model, which – with a new approach – links several other research studies and models. These include chapter 3.1.6 of my dissertation, where I describe the interpersonal sensemaking model of work meaning. The concept of meaning mechanisms recognizes the process-nature of meaning in that it points to the impact certain factors have. At the same time, it does not examine the process itself, and also emphasizes the individual's interpretation; thus, it is also connected to the following chapter.

A highly significant summary study was published in 2010 in the field of the meaning of work, collecting key studies published thus far in this field of literature (Rosso et al., 2010). It also attempts to create a new structure of categorization. One of the new elements of this article is the introduction of the concept of mechanisms to the study of the meaning of work, and the identification and categorization of these mechanisms<sup>10</sup>. The authors rely on the terminology of mechanisms developed by Stinchcombe (1991: 372-373). According to the authors, a mechanism defines how and why work becomes meaningful for the individual. In the area of the meaning of work, the authors understand mechanisms to mean those processes through which the sources of the meaning and meaningfulness of work impact the meaning and meaningfulness of work. The authors identified seven key mechanism categories in the area of the meaning of work: authenticity, self-efficacy, self-esteem, purpose, belongingness, transcendence and cultural and interpersonal sensemaking. The mechanisms listed focus on psychological processes through which it becomes possible to experience the meaningfulness of work. Cultural and interpersonal sensemaking represent an exception to this: this is based on both the psychological and social processes serving as the foundation of the meaning construction of work.

## **1. Authenticity**

Authenticity is one of the most often cited mechanisms in the literature in terms of what makes work meaningful. Several types of the authenticity mechanism are described in the literature of the meaning of work; these are expanded upon below.

### **a. Self-concordance**

One manifestation of authenticity is when the individual feels that they are in concordance with themselves (Sheldon – Elliott, 1998; Bono – Judge, 2003; Baumeister – Vohs, 2002; Gecas, 1991): their behavior is consistent with their own values and their own interests. This experience helps support a feeling of inner consistency, which may create a deep sense of meaningfulness.

### **b. Identity affirmation**

Another manifestation of authenticity is when the personal identity as perceived by the individual is validated, reinforced and activated through their work; this is the essence of the identity affirmation mechanism (Elsbach, 2003; Gecas, 1991). The experience of authenticity may come from within: the individual's work requires skills which are

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<sup>10</sup> My description of the mechanisms is based on the study by Rosso et al. (2010: 108-113).

important to them, which they can identify with and which they possess. It may, on the other hand, come from the outside: the individual's interactions reinforce the notion that others perceive them the same way in which they perceive themselves.

### **c. Personal engagement**

The third, and perhaps most often cited, manifestation of authenticity (and what I personally believe to be most popular) is when the meaningfulness of work stems from the feeling that the individual is personally immersed by, and alive in, their work (Deci – Ryan, 1985; Kahn, 1990). Their work provides intrinsic motivation for the individual because they are able to express, through their work activities, their authentic self, and they are able to realize and develop this (Amabile et al., 1994; Csikszentmihályi, 1990; Kahn, 1990; Shamir, 1991; Spreitzer et al., 2005).

## **2. Self-efficacy**

The category of efficacy mechanisms includes processes where work becomes meaningful through the experience of the individual that they have power and they have the ability to realize an effect that they desire, or to change some situation. Through their work, the individual experiences how they have the competence to change or exert control over their environment, and this lends meaningfulness to their work (Bandura, 1977; Baumeister – Vohs, 2002; Gecas, 1991).

### **a. Control or autonomy**

Individuals have the desire for freedom of choice and to effectively control their activities and their surroundings, as indicated by the concept of self-determination as used by Deci (1975). This reinforces the individual's belief that they are not passive, but are rather active actors (Gecas, 1991; Wrzesniewski – Dutton, 2001), something that they are able to experience when deciding how to perform their work.

### **b. Competence**

The individual also experiences the meaning of work when they overcome challenges in their work, and thereby are able to learn, grow and feel themselves to be more competent (Spreitzer et al., 2005; Gecas, 1991).

### **c. Perceived Impact**

In the case of the mechanism of perceived impact, work may become more meaningful when the individual feels that they are able to change their circumstances or they have a positive effect on their organization, coworkers or something extrinsic to them (Grant, 2008).



### **3. Self-esteem**

The mechanism of self-esteem shows how work may become meaningful for the individual when, as a result of on-the-job performance or some other kind of affirmation, the individual feels themselves to be valuable and excellent (Baumeister – Vohs, 2002; Gecas, 1991).

### **4. Purpose**

The mechanism-category purpose shows that work may acquire meaningfulness simply by having a purpose. Philosophers have emphasized the significance of purpose in the life of the individual. According to Frankl (1988/1946), the individual would not be able to exist for a longer period of time if they had no purpose; that is how fundamental purpose is. Researchers differentiate among a broad spectrum of purposes: from intrinsically driven purposes and motivations all the way to extrinsically or spiritually driven purposes.

#### **a. Significance**

In the literature of the meaning of work, purpose is described as significance of work (Pratt – Ashforth, 2003). Individuals are also able to experience the meaning of their work when they feel they have something to work for, when their work has some kind of purpose and when their work serves some purpose which is important to society, the organization or to the community.

#### **b. Values systems providing a sense of purpose**

The organization may provide a direction for its employees as the carrier of values. Employees may feel that these values provide a clear structure of purposes which may imbue their work with meaningfulness.

### **5. Belongingness**

Individuals may also experience the meaning of their work through maintaining “lasting, positive and significant interpersonal workplace relationships” (Baumeister – Leary, 1995:497), which a significant number of publications have examined in the literature of the meaning of work.

#### **a. Social Identification**

Social identification includes the following mechanism: individuals desire to be members of a social group or workplace community which they find attractive. Membership in this community may lend meaningfulness or may lend more meaningfulness to their work. Let us consider the meaning constructions of those

performing what is considered, for some reason, to be dirty work (Ashforth – Kreiner, 1999).

#### **b. Interpersonal connectedness**

Interpersonal connectedness in the workplace may contribute to a feeling of personal closeness, belonging and togetherness, which is comforting and supportive (Dutton – Heaphy, 2003; Dutton et al., 2006), thereby contributing to the individual feeling their work to be more meaningful. This is especially the case in organization where coworkers maintain close social bonds or feel themselves to be part of a family (Pratt – Ashforth, 2003).

### **6. Transcendence**

Transcendence applies to how the individual links, or substitutes, their self to something greater than themselves or to some entity pointing beyond the material world (Maslow, 1971).

#### **a. Interconnection**

Work may derive meaningfulness by the individual linking or contributing, through their work, to something greater than their self and which is extrinsic to them. This may be a force outside of them or may be God (Lips-Wiersma, 2002).

#### **b. Self-abnegation**

Work may obtain meaningfulness when the individual consciously subjects themselves to something extrinsic and greater than themselves (e.g. society, an organizational vision, family, spiritual entity). Individuals with a holy calling may imbue their work with meaningfulness by serving a greater force and by believing that their fate is pre-determined.

### **7. Cultural and Interpersonal Sensemaking**

Cultural and interpersonal sensemaking is different from other mechanisms in that it affects the construction of the meaning of work, and not what makes work meaningful. It embraces the social effects affecting the evolution of the meaning of work. While other mechanisms are focused primarily on meeting basic human needs, cultural and interpersonal sensemaking emphasizes the role of the social environment in the construction of the meaning and meaningfulness of work (Wrzesniewski et al., 2003).

Researchers examining the concept of meaningful work tend to build upon the foundations provided by motivation theory. Some of their studies examined the meaning of work as a subjective element, while others look at the meaning of work as an objective element.

### **3.1.5. The meaning of work: the individual's understanding**

In this section an overview of studies and models are provided which deal with the meaning of work through the individual's understanding of it.

Fineman (1983), using a qualitative methodology and an approach of constructivist organizational theory, is one of the few researchers to try to understand the meaning of work in the 1980s through a detailed description of what it means to be at work. Critical of quantitative large-sample surveys, Fineman offers the following comments:

“Work meaning has become tightly circumscribed by predetermined investigator constructs and measures. The search for a certain type of scientific sense (nomothetic, generalistic, large classificatory dimensions) has tended to miss what initially *seems* to be the subject of concern – how *individuals* construe *their* work experience” (p.145).

In the study, Fineman had hoped to grasp the manifest as well as the tacit/implicit nature of work (what is manifested and is present in the individual's consciousness and what is not manifested and is not present, respectively). In Fineman's view, it is possible to grasp the tacit/implicit meanings of work neither through traditional research methods nor through the involvement of individuals who are employed. That was the reason Fineman chose to collect respondents who were not employed at the time, who could describe aspects of being employed that others would have taken for granted. Fineman had earlier conducted interviews with 100 unemployed individuals; these interviews were also used for this study.

Fineman's major findings:

- Nearly one-third of the respondents mentioned a sense of alienation, stress, entrapment and being made ridiculous in their previous jobs.
- Nearly one-fifth of the respondents said their previous workplace provided them with a sense of performance and a purpose to their lives.
- The most typical image of the study: security as provided by the job, from both a financial as well as an emotional perspective.

In my view, the shock caused by unemployment cannot be ignored when evaluating the findings of the study. In the same vein, the ensuing emotional process experienced by respondents must also be considered. What is, however, quite clear is the unchanging importance of the Protestant work ethic: many individuals thought of themselves as

lacking a purpose or roots when not employed. Other spoke of a sense of guilt and were unable to relax during their newfound free time.

Berte's dissertation (1989) examined the meaning police officers attach to their work. Berte offered the following definition of the meaning of work: whatever personal interpretation and evaluation police officers themselves give their workplace experiences. Meaning lends experience a purpose, value and significance (p.4). Berte conducted deep interviews with twenty police officers, utilizing a phenomenological approach to uncover their meaning of work. The interviews revealed eighteen themes of workplace stress, all of which were related to the autocratic leadership style employed in the police force. Berte's dissertation included a recommendation to reduce the number of stressful situations at the police.

Simon's research study (1997) examined meanings made of the individual's identity at work, as a spouse and as a parent, as well as the relationship of these identities to mental health. The qualitative study was based on a forty-person sample using in-depth follow-up interviews. The author's study was based on a one-time set of questions, meaning that Simon was unable to explore the structure and the processes through which these meanings emerged. Respondents mentioned the following meanings in relation to their workplace identity (with the order, below, indicative of the number of times cited): (1) making a living and financial security; (2) independence and self-sufficiency; (3) meeting challenges and reaching purposes; (4) responsibility and stability; (5) helping others, contributing, productivity and belonging; (6) identity, self-worth, self-esteem; (7) a lack of time and energy for one's spouse and children (no. 7 mentioned only by female respondents). Based on the research, Simon found that there is a significant variety among meanings associated with individuals' role identities. These meanings depended on what costs and benefits individuals attach to the particular role.

Deems (1997) examined the natural workplace – a workplace which is in harmony with the individual's nature, growth and development. Utilizing a phenomenological methodology, Deems examined the experiences and understanding of individuals at two organizations which sought to create more natural and humanized working environments. Deems offered the following definition of the meaning: one's understanding of certain aspects of the world. Deems determined that self-authority, participatory work practices and interaction with others were the conditions ensuring the individual's development. According to experience, natural workplaces stimulate both the individual's learning as well as the learning of the organization as a whole.

Isaksen (2000) identified the various dimensions of the meaning of work in the context of repetitive work activities, performed under unpleasant workplace conditions. Isaksen conducted deep interviews with 28 blue-collar workers and observed them on the job. Seventy-five percent of the workers saw rationale to their jobs. The author defined eight

different categories of the meaning of work; the following three were cited the most often: employees found meaning to their work (1) through their relationship to the workplace and its procedures; (2) through engagement in social relations; (3) and by viewing their work as a component of a broader, meaningful context. Isaksen concluded, based on the study, that – in keeping with previous research studies – repetitive work results in several symptoms of stress; at the same time, the study only partly supported the notion that if the individual finds meaning or purpose to their work, their symptoms of stress will decrease.

A common characteristic of the studies cited above is that all examined the individual's interpretation, and all studies did so through deep interviews and a qualitative methodology. The studies above were conducted at a particular time and are indicative of that time, thereby providing a static picture of the meaning individuals made of their work.

### **3.1.6. The meaning of work: examining the effects of social factors**

My research examines the individual's understanding of the meaning of work, from a perspective which also takes into consideration the social environment of the individual. In my study, I look upon the individual as a part of the environment around them, while maintaining a focus on understanding the individual. The following three models take a similar approach, and therefore they are discussed in greater detail.

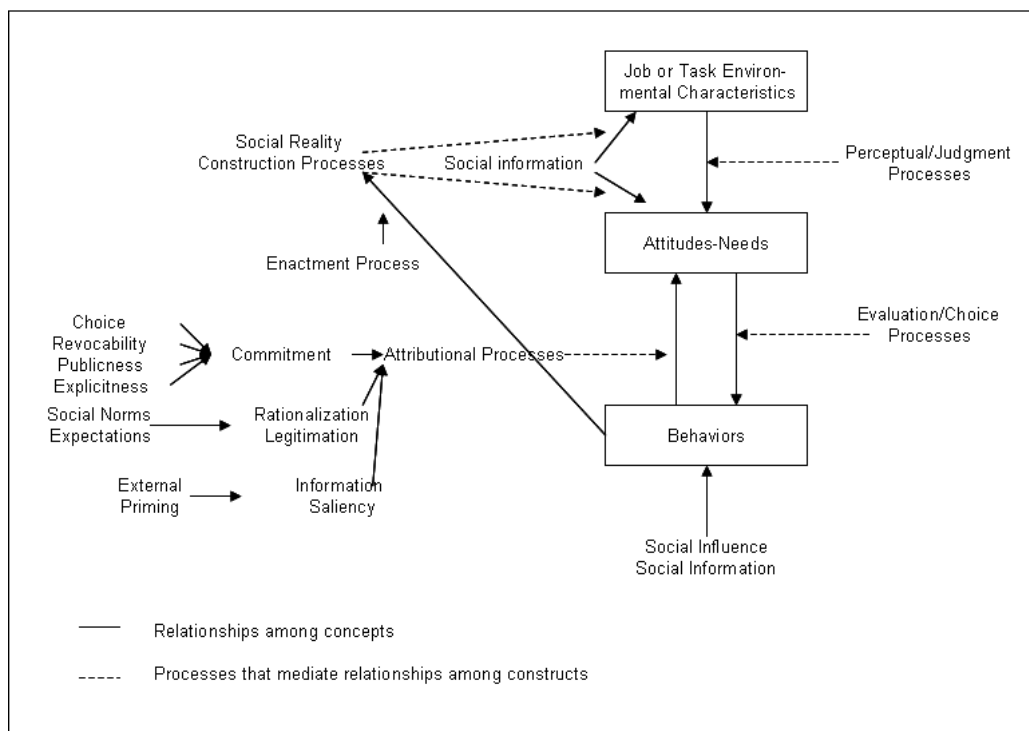
#### **3.1.6.1. The model of social information processing**

Salancik and Pfeffer (1977, 1978) point to social influences on attitudes to work in their model of social information processing (SIP). This model proved to be a watershed in the study of the meaning of work and has led to many a debate. The following two approaches were of critical importance in terms of my own research: the model of job crafting (Wrzesniewski – Dutton, 2001) and the interpersonal sensemaking model of work meaning (Wrzesniewski et al., 2003). Both models are built around the basic principles of the SIP model – I therefore believe it is important to discuss both in greater detail. The topical nature and relevance of the model has also been supported by the research studies cited above, and which I find to be exemplary pieces of research. The basis of the model is “that individuals, as adaptive organisms, adapt attitudes, behavior and beliefs to their social context and to the reality of their own past and present behavior and situation” (Salancik-Pfeffer, 1978:226).

### 3.1.6.1.1. Major findings of the model

One of the most important sources of information is the individual's social environment. The social environment conveys cues which the individual uses to construe and interpret events. It also provides information about how the individual should shape their attitude and opinion. Further, the social environment makes certain activities, conclusions and thoughts of the individual's past salient, while other such concepts remain hidden; it also conveys norms and expectations to justify these past actions. In other words, the social environment affects the definition of the individual's attitudes and needs in the following two basic ways. (1) It provides a direct construction of meaning, through guides to socially acceptable beliefs, attitudes and needs, and to socially acceptable reasons of these; and (2) it directs the individual's attention to certain pieces of information, making these pieces of information more salient, and it establishes expectations concerning the individual's behavior and for its logical consequences.

**Figure 5: The model of social information processing (source: Salancik and Pfeffer, 1978: 227)**



### A More Detailed Explanation of the Logic of the Model:

#### *The Social and Personal Construction of Reality*

The characteristics of work or of a task (leadership style, workplace relationships) are not givens, but are constructed. The individual relies on social information (others'

perceptions, others' actions) to shape their understanding of the variety of their job, as well as its significance or meaning. Individuals themselves participate in constructing reality, by (1) filling in any blanks in information when recalling specific events as part of the perception process; and (2) by perceiving reality only selectively – and thus only receiving information from a segment of their environment when they direct their attention to that segment.

#### *The Social Basis of the Individual's Attitude*

The expression of the individual's attitudes and needs are met by social influence in the following instances:

(1) Work provides the individual with a complex set of cues; the individual may react erratically to these cues. Co-workers' own attitudes to their own work may influence an individual's own attitudes. Understanding others' attitude to their work may provide some form of guidance to the individual as far as what their own reactions ought to be to the complex cues encountered. If the individual's coworkers complain at length about how boring their job is, the individual can either reject this or choose to integrate these sentiments in their own relationship.

(2) Social effects may also direct the individual's attention to certain specific conditions of their environment: i.e. some features become especially salient. Co-workers may call the individual's attention to certain favorable or unfavorable working conditions or to certain features of the work, thereby influencing the individual's own assessment.

(3) Social effects also impact through the interpretation of cues coming from the individual's environment. The individual is affected by how others interpret cues from their environment; e.g. how co-workers interpret disciplinary action against another worker or that worker being shifted to another job.

(4) Social effects may also influence the interpretation of the individual's own needs. In other words, and partly as a result of interaction with others, the individual learns what needs, values and expectations to have.

#### *Attitude from Environmental Perceptions*

Individuals' attitudes are not merely the results of social effects, but also of workplace tasks and the cognitive analysis of other workplace conditions.

#### *Past Behavior Determines Attitude*

Past behavior also affects the individual's attitudes, as does the degree to which that behavior may be ascribed to the environment or to the individual. Some of the factors playing a role in this process include the following: the individual's commitment to

their work, information available about past behavior, and social norms and expectations which influence what may be considered legitimate and rational explanations for the individual's behavior in the past. Organizations provide their members with their own set of rationalization tools – uniforms, corporate newsletters, stories of the company's achievements, etc. – which provide meaning, importance and justification as employees go about their business. In order to maintain their social relations, individuals choose explanations for their actions in the past which are both in sync with the facts and are also socially acceptable.

#### **3.1.6.1.2. Examining the effects and the evaluation of the model**

The authors' model served as the beginning of a major debate about workplace attitudes among shapers, designers and researchers of workplaces. Those supporting efforts to enrich work cited the objective characteristics of the workplace and the individual's work as the most important components of employee attitudes. Those supporting the model of social information processing spoke of the effects of social cues on the individual's attitude. As a result of the model, two major shifts can be observed in the study of workplace attitudes (Staw et al., 1986). First, more attention was paid in research studies to the examination of cognitive and subjective elements of work, with the notion that the interpretation of the individual's work situation is at least as important as objective reality gaining more and more ground. Second, researchers' focus shifted from trying to coordinate the characteristics of the individual and work to including an examination of the effects of work environment cues, and accepting that the individual's attitude may be shaped through social cues. Several laboratory studies were conducted to demonstrate the effects of social cues, without ever determining whether the laboratory and the real working environment were in fact different from one another.

From the perspective of my own research, it is a relevant finding that the model calls attention to the communications and role-model nature of the manager. Based on the model, whether working conditions are accepted or not is influenced to a large extent by social constructionist processes; a manager or coworkers may play key roles in this. Examining the change in meaning, the model accepts the possible change in the work meaning, underscores the factors which may influence this, but at the same time does not go on to analyze this change.

#### **3.1.6.2. The model of job crafting**

In this section, a review is offered of how the individual may alter their job according to their own needs, and what this depends on. The model of job crafting is important as far as my own research is concerned because the individual may change their image of their



job, and may as a result alter their job. The model is built around the SIP model, as it considers the social effects affecting the individual and identifying the various factors which impact on how the individual enacts their work.

### **3.1.6.2.1. Major findings of the model**

#### **What Do We Mean by Job Crafting?**

The job crafting model is a product of Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001). According to their definition (p.179), “crafting a job involves shaping the task boundaries of the job (either psychically or cognitively), the relational boundaries of the job, or both.” Changing the boundaries of one’s tasks means that the individual is able to change the nature or the number of activities which must be performed on the job. Changing the boundaries of cognitive tasks refers to how the individual sees their work (e.g. as a set of discrete parts or an integrated whole). Changing the relational boundaries means that the individual is able to decide for themselves who they are in contact with while performing their job. By changing any one of these factors, the design and the social environment of the job is also transformed. According to the authors, there is no such thing as “objective” work to which the individual’s perceptions could be compared. The individual crafts their job over and over again.

The crafting of the job is, on the one hand, a cognitive activity – how the individual views workplace relations and tasks – and, on the other hand, an active activity – changing the boundaries of the task or the relationships. Accordingly, the crafting of the job is a psychological, social and physical activity. The individual crafting the job creates a job for themselves that is different from their original job.

As a result of crafting the job, according to the authors, the work identity (how individuals define themselves during their work) and the meaning of work also changes. Wrzesniewski and Dutton define this shift based on the definition provided in the comprehensive review authored by Brief and Nord (1990b). The meaning of work (p.180): “individuals’ understandings of the purpose of their work or what they believe is achieved in their work.” According to the authors, the meaning of work is also reflected, on a more general level, in the framing of work; in other words, a doctor may frame their work in the context of healing people. Through these changes, individuals report different understandings of self (who they are in their work) (Gergen – Gergen, 1988) and make a different case for why their work is important to them.

#### **Characteristics of Job Crafting**

##### *Motivation for Job Crafting*

The authors trace individuals' motivation to craft their work to three basic personal needs.

- The individual's need to be in control, to avoid alienating themselves from work. Control over one's surroundings is one of the most elementary human needs – attaining control over one's work may be a manifestation of this desire. Alienation from work is indicated by the individual's inability to exercise any control (or ability to exercise only minimum control) over their tasks, working conditions or overarching purposes of their work (Braverman, 1974). If the individual is able to exercise control or is able to provide a new framework for at least some of these factors, at least to a small extent, they may feel their job to really be their own. Even in jobs with only a low level of autonomy, the individual has the opportunity to craft at least certain elements of the work.
- The individual's desire at self-enhancement, which is reflected in the search for and maintenance of a positive sense of self (Erez – Early, 1993), both in the individual's own view and the view of others. This is all palpable in several aspects of work. On the whole, workers shaping their jobs are able to craft their work in such a way as to make it possible to achieve a more positive sense of self and a reinforcement of that image by others.
- The need for relationships. Individuals are driven to maintain relationships with others which bring meaning to their lives (Baumeister – Leary, 1995). The authors view the re-framing of the meaning of work as a component of building relationships.

Individuals who do not fulfill these needs through their work are not motivated in the crafting of their work, in the same way as individuals whose needs are already met are disinterested, as well. At the same time, the motivation to craft work most often comes to the forefront in situations when the individual feels that their needs are not being met in their current job.

#### *Perceived Opportunities for Job Crafting*

Individuals may detect an opportunity to craft their work: they may detect a certain level of freedom or an opportunity for independent action in the course of their work. The following two factors, both dependent on the design of work, impact on this: (1) The level and nature of the mutual interdependence of the tasks; and (2) the individual's own discretion or freedom in shaping their work, which is a variable of the control mechanisms in place. The greater the interdependence of the tasks at hand, the lower the level of freedom the individual enjoys in shaping their work. In the case of jobs which are relatively independent of one another (e.g. hairdresser or cleaning staff member), the individual enjoys a greater opportunity to modify the tasks or relationships related to the job. Supervision or control by the management also influences just what opportunities the individual has in crafting their job. In the case of service center or call center

representatives, for instance, the constant supervision provides for more rigid boundaries, and less opportunities. In the case of jobs which are explicitly defined and controlled, individuals tend to see fewer such opportunities. According to the author, greater autonomy does not necessarily lead to more meaningful work and to a greater level of perceived responsibility; it does, however, increase the number of opportunities detected by the employee to modify their tasks and their relationships according to their own needs. A less restrictive dress code, flexible working hours and a flexible workplace in general can contribute to the individual's crafting of their jobs. Monitoring the employee's activities on the computer, including internet and e-mail use, decreases the individual's opportunities to craft their work.

### *Work Orientation*

The individual's basic orientation to their work, in all likelihood, influences the extent to which they wish to craft their work. Research studies differentiate between three basic orientations to work (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997): (1) job focused – i.e. working primarily for financial gain; (2) career-focused – i.e. working primarily in the interest of a potential promotion; and (3) vocation-based, i.e. working primarily for pleasure and for self-fulfillment. In their research, Wrzesniewski et al. (1997) demonstrated that individuals representing all three work orientations are present across a broad range of professions. Employees, then, are most likely interested in crafting their work according to their own personal orientations – which means that the same job is performed very differently by different people. Employees with a career-focus, for instance, tend to establish relationships with – and assist – more influential individuals, and take on tasks which provide them with a great degree of visibility within the organization.

### *Forms of Job Crafting*

The ways for the individual to craft their work include the following: (1) modifying the number, extent or types of workplace tasks; (2) changing the intensity and nature of workplace relationships (the number of interactions); (3) changing, cognitively, the boundaries of the tasks. Changing the individual's outlook on their jobs may result in radical changes in the execution of their work in general. For instance, nurses tend to do different tasks if they view their work as supporting patients and providing comprehensive care or as a highly technical type of medical assistance. All of this is present in the so-called stigmatized professions (Ashforth – Kreiner, 1999), which have seen a change in the work meaning through a re-framing, re-calibration and re-focusing of the tasks; all of these were achieved through the de-valuation or denial of the negative aspects of the job and, at the same time, the creation, or over-valuation, of positive aspects.

### *The Effects of Job Crafting*

The crafting of the job changes the meaning of the individual's work and their work identity. By crafting their tasks and relationships, the individual also changes the meaning of work, thereby making it possible for the individual to re-frame the objectives of their work and to experience their work in a different light. Changes, which increase the individual's impression that there is a purpose to what they are doing, are likely to change the meaning of work as well.

Workplace relationships have a defining role in the formation of work identity. Individuals and professional communities in contact with the individual influence the individual's self-image. In the context of workplace relationships, the individual's partners use their words and actions to shape the individual's work identity by either reflecting certain elements of the work identity or not (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934). The individual, by influencing what kinds of relationships they engage in and with whom, contributes to the shaping of their own work identity and to the creation of an identity which fulfills their needs for positive self-worth. McCall and Simmons (1966:105) describe the individuals' creation of a self-confirming structure of opportunities, then forming a social environment which feeds their self-image.

The crafting of work is a dynamic process. Following the individual's efforts at change, clearly in their own favor, the individual may start other transformational activities, further shaping the meaning of work and their work identity.

#### **3.1.6.2.2. Examining the effects and the evaluation of the model**

This is a dynamic model, which points out the dynamics of the relationship between the individual and their work and to changes of the meaning of work. The model points out the role the individual plays in the shaping of the meaning of work.

The model was extremely inspirational to researchers and paved the way for several publications. It inspired several researchers. Ghitulescu's 2006 PhD dissertation covered this topic, examining the crafting of work in a group setting, using both qualitative and quantitative surveys. Lyons' study (2008) examined the individual's personal differences. Berg et al. (2010) examined the job crafting practices of individuals working in different jobs: they examined 33 employees, using a qualitative methodology. Berg et al. examined, in their forthcoming study, the relationship between job crafting and meaningful work.

In addition to theoretical research into job crafting, several publications have been prepared for practicing professionals: Berg et al. (2008) summarized articles which have appeared up until that point, and illustrate the phenomenon of job crafting with the practical example of a cook; Wrzesniewski et al. (2010) used two separate examples in their article to illustrate the specific realization of the process and the utility of the model.

From the perspective of my own research, I believe it is important that the model includes an examination of the process of the change in the work meaning, while also examining patterns of meaning change. The authors primarily identified the changes in meaning initiated through the individual's own motivation, which covered whatever job the individual was holding at the time. Given the motivational nature of the process, the authors did not include in the scope of their study the effects of coworkers on the change in meaning. This oversight is resolved by Wrzesniewski et al. (2003) in their interpersonal sensemaking model of work meaning.

### **3.1.6.3. Interpersonal sensemaking model of work meaning**

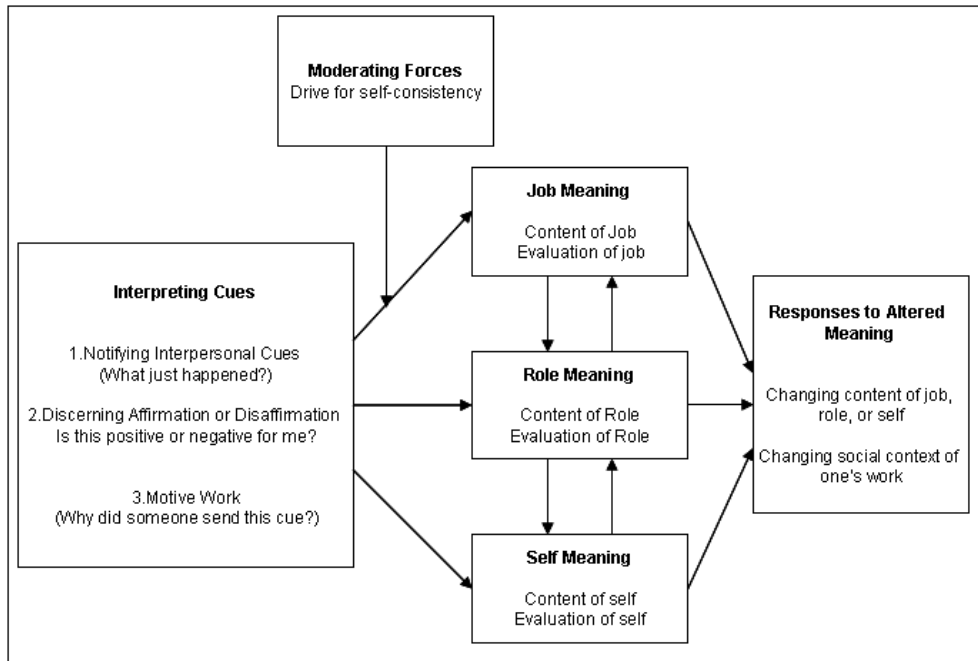
Wrzesniewski et al. (2003) established a dynamic model for the shaping the job in which the need to change the meaning of the individual's work arose as a result of stimuli noticed by the individual. The model is founded on the following theories, which apply to the characteristics of the individual, with certain basic suppositions.

- Existentialism (Frankl, 1988/1946): Individuals look for meaning in all of their actions.
- Symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1966): Meaning is not fixed; it is, rather, a continuous creation which both reflects and shapes patterns of action. Individuals determine their own values and competencies based on reflections of others' evaluation.
- Each individual has a strong desire at a positive self-definition (Erez – Early, 1993).
- Sensemaking: The individual evaluates their work continuously and relates to their work based on the meaning they make of their experiences on the job. In an organizational framework, the individual is more likely to initiate a process of sensemaking when they detect problems in their situation (Weick, 1995).

#### **3.1.6.3.1. Major findings of the model**

The authors provided the following definition for the meaning of work: "Employees' understanding of what they do at work as well as the significance of what they do" (p.99). In their model, the authors emphasize three main aspects of the meaning of work: job meaning at work, the meaning of their role and the meaning of the self at work. The authors examined all of these aspects from both a content-based (what is it?) and an evaluative (what is its value?) perspective.

**Figure 6: Interpersonal Sensemaking in the Creation of the Meaning at Work (source: Wrzesniewski et al., 2003: 104)**



The meaning of the job as it applies to the content of the job: what characteristics do the tasks or activities forming a part of their job or its evaluation contain? What value does the individual attach to the job and to the tasks or activities related to the job? For the individual, it is usually clear what they are tasked with in the workplace and whether they have any latitude in modifying these by either completing or omitting certain tasks (Wrzesniewski – Dutton, 2001). It depends on the individual’s set of values, preferences, purposes and the effects of their social environment what values they attach to their work. The latter is the focus of this model.

The role described in the model includes both a structural element – the perceived role the individual holds in the social structure of the organization (Ashforth, 2001) – as well as a social element – others’ expectations of the employee in the particular position. The meaning of role, then, is the following: the role the individual fills, as well as its content and evaluation – what value does the individual attach to the role they hold?

In the model, the individual’s perception of their self is their self-understanding as related to their self at work. Some researchers define this as the identity. The meaning of the self at work has both a (1) contentual element – what personal characteristics or properties the individual holds while performing their work – as well as an (2) evaluation element – what value does the individual attach to their self at work. The self at work is shaped and created through feedback and interaction with others.

## **A More Detailed Review of the Logic of the Model**

### *Interpersonal Cues*

The process of sensemaking in relation to interpersonal cues starts with the individual, at work, noticing certain actions or behavior performed by others or a group of others. An interpersonal cue is behavior of the individual that is noticed by another individual, who interprets the cue as conveying a message about how they are perceived by the individual performing the behavior. These cues may be direct and open (for instance, a request related to the job or a notice of dismissal or resignation) or nuanced and indirect (like non-verbal gestures). It is important to determine what cues the individual notices and what effect these have on the process of sensemaking.

### *The Process of Interpretation*

The process of interpretation is comprised of three main components: recognizing the cue, recognizing the affirmation or disaffirmation and attaching the perceived motive. This process typically plays out very quickly and without much conscious attention devoted to it.

- Recognizing the interpersonal cue. The individual generally recognizes very few such cues. It is typically the unusual, surprising cues which launch the individual's process of sensemaking.
- Recognizing the affirmation or the disaffirmation. Following the recognition of the cue, the individual interprets it, and determines whether it is positive or negative from their perspective. It serves as reinforcement if it recognizes the individual's existence, value or significance; it is a negative experience if it is a cue that is derogatory or does not recognize the competence of the individual. The cue either reinforces the individual or makes the individual uncertain about who they are. In a workplace environment, others' perception may apply to the job, the role or to the individual's self.
- Motive work. As a final step, the individual interprets why the other performed the particular activity. An assessment of intentionality can either reinforce or can weaken the effect of the cue on the purpose of work. The basis of attribution theory – that the individual attempts to interpret the world so as to make it controllable for themselves (Kelly, 1955) – supports the role motive discovery plays in the process of sensemaking.

What, then, determines which cues the individual notices and how positively or negatively they view the cue? What determines what motives they ascribe to the other individual? This depends on the individual and on the situation: in an organizational environment, scopes of authority and personal relations also play a role. According to research studies, individuals with greater power tend to pay less attention to others and

tend to set up stereotypes more readily (Fiske – Depret, 1996; Keltner – Gruenfeld–Anderson, 2003; Lee – Tiedens, 2001). The role the individual occupies in the organizational hierarchy, then, influences what cues they notice and how they interpret those cues.

#### *Linking Interpersonal Cues with the Meaning of Work*

As a final step in the process, the individual translates the positive or negative cues and modifies their understanding of the meaning of work. The individual determines, based on cues they believe are important, what values their job, role and workplace identity entail – factors which cannot be separated from one another.

#### *Modified Meaning*

The individual may have the capability to influence what tasks they perform and with whom they are in contact during their work. The individual may seek out workplace tasks, environments or relations which offer them more positive cues (Wrzesniewski – Dutton, 2001).

#### **3.1.6.3.2. Examining the effects and the evaluation of the model**

A novelty of this model is that it links the individual interpretation of the job and the role with the social environment of the individual: thus, it represents the individual as an open system. The evaluation of the social environment is present throughout the entire model: value is present both as a meaning of work and as a meaning of the various subsystems (the self, the role and the job). Through various stories and examples, the author presents the effects of reinforcement or making the individual uncertain on the different aspects of the meaning of work.

From the perspective of my own research, I believe it is important that, in addition to the effect of the environment, the model also examines the process of the change in meaning; it does not, however, include a contentual examination of the meaning of work and what patterns of the change in meaning it is possible to identify.

#### **3.1.7. Structuring of studies examining the meaning of work**

Wrzesniewski et al. (2003) point out that we still know little about what steps individuals take and what roads they travel – what processes they experience – when interpreting their work, and how they feel in the meantime, what they do and what they think. Thus, the examination of the change in meaning, as a process, is still an area of research that is very much relevant. The individual examination of the change in the



work meaning also carries additional advantages, advantages for both individuals as well as for organizations. These are presented in chapter 2.1.

The process of the change in meaning is at the focus of my research, with a special view to certain steps of this change and factors impacting it, such as the impact of the social environment in the workplace. In my research, to understand the change in meanings formulated by individuals, I have validated the following assumptions as far as the concept of work meaning is concerned:

- Meaning is an individual interpretation applied to events in the individual's surroundings; it is subjective. This is a different approach from studies which considered the meaning and meaningfulness of work to be objective, i.e. analyzing these using sets of objective criteria (e.g. Morse – Weiss, 1955; Vecchio, 1980; MOW International Research Team, 1987).
- Meaning changes, depends on a situation and is not constant: in this, it is related to the concept of sensemaking. The individual interprets their work continuously and relates to their job based on the meaning and meaningfulness they make of their experiences on the job. In an organizational framework, the individual is more likely to initiate a process of sensemaking when they detect problems in their situation (Weick, 1995).
- The social surroundings and the environment of the individual affect the meaning of work. The individual's interpretation of the meaning of work is affected by their social environment: their interpretation of the work meaning of affects the individual's understanding of it (Salancik – Pfeffer, 1978; Wrzesniewski – Dutton, 2001, Pratt – Ashforth, 2003; Wrzesniewski et al., 2003).

The chart below provides a summary of which research studies and models include examinations of the various dimensions I found important. My purpose with this overview was threefold: on the one hand, I wished to provide a summary overview of the major publications of the literature from my own research perspective. On the other hand, I wished to show which studies I relied on when planning my own research. Thirdly, I wished to point out gaps in the literature I hope to fill with my own research. As the chart clearly shows, the majority of the studies I reviewed examined the understanding of the individual, while also – naturally – presenting a number of other research directions key to the field.

Figure 7: A review of the literature of the meaning of work<sup>11</sup>

| Definition of work meaning | Research study   | Meaning: interpretation | Change in meaning | Social effects |
|----------------------------|--|-------------------------|-------------------|----------------|
| Beliefs, values, attitudes |  |                         |                   |                |
| Work centrality            | What different functions does work have from the perspective of employees – Morse – Weiss (1955), Vecchio (1980)                               |                         |                   |                |
|                            | Social norms related to work, the purposes of work and an examination of the central role work plays – Meaning of Working (MOW) project (1987) |                         |                   |                |
| Work values                | Linking the meaning of work (values sought and expected from work) and coping with stress – Locke – Taylor (1990)                              |                         | x*                | x              |
|                            | Exploring the value of work through the meaning of work – Foggermoen (1995, 1997)  |                         |                   |                |
| Work orientations          | The meaning of work: the means to an end – Ross et al. (1999)  |                         |                   |                |
|                            | Differentiation of Job – career – calling – Bellah et al.. (1985)  | x                       |                   |                |
|                            | Large sample survey about the three orientations – Wrzesniewski et al.. (1997)   |                         |                   |                |
|                            | Definition of work orientations – Baumeister (1991)  |                         |                   |                |
|                            | Large sample survey about the three orientations in case of unemployed – Wrzesniewski (1999)   |                         |                   |                |
|                            | Defintion of five orientations – Pratt et al.. (forthcoming)   |                         |                   |                |
| Meaningful work            |  |                         |                   |                |
|                            | The model of job enrichment – Hackman – Oldham (1976)  |                         |                   |                |
|                            | The engagement and disengagement of the individual in their work – Kahn (1990)   |                         |                   | x              |
|                            | What is the purpose and meaning of the individual’s work, based on motivation theory – Gayle (1997)  | x                       |                   |                |
|                            | Meaningful work: activity through which the individual expresses the meaning and purpose of their life – Chalofsky (2003)                      |                         |                   |                |
|                            | An examination of the meaning elderly employees attach to their work (reasons for  | x                       |                   |                |

<sup>11</sup> author’s own classification

| Definition of work meaning                     | Research study   | Meaning: interpretation | Change in meaning | Social effects |
|--|--|-------------------------|-------------------|----------------|
|  | the individual to continue to want to stay engaged at work) – Shacklock (2005)   |                         |                   |                |
|  | A study of the meaning of work and the phenomenon of professional calling among zookeepers – Bunderson – Thompson (2009)                                     |                         |                   |                |
| Work meaning mechanism                         | Summary metamodel of the work meaning mechanism – Rosso et al., 2010   | x                       | x*                |                |
| Individual understanding                       |  |                         |                   |                |
|  | Understanding the meaning of tacit and implicit work through a detailed examination of the notion of what it means to be at work – Fineman (1983)            | x                       |                   |                |
|  | Examining the meaning of police work (personal interpretation and assessment of their work experiences as provided by police officers) – Berte (1989)        | x                       |                   |                |
|  | Meanings made of work identity and their relationship to the individual's mental health – Simon (1997)   | x                       |                   |                |
|  | Examining the natural workplace – Deems (1997)   | x                       |                   | x              |
|  | The various dimensions of the meaning of work in the context of repetitive work activities, performed under unpleasant workplace conditions – Isaksen (2000) | x                       |                   |                |
| Individual understanding and social influences | Social influences on attitudes related to work – Salancik – Pfeffer (1977, 1978)   | x                       | x*                | x              |
|  | The model of job crafting – Wrzesniewski – Dutton (2001)   | x                       | x                 |                |
|  | Investigating job crafting of teachers and blue collar workers – Ghitulescu, 2006  | x                       | x                 |                |
|  | Examining the individual's personal differences in job crafting – Lyons (2008)   | x                       | x                 |                |
|  | Summarising the studies about job crafting – Berg et al. (2008)  | x                       | x                 |                |
|  | Exploring the job crafting practices of individuals working in different jobs – Berg et al. (2010)   | x                       | x                 |                |
|  | Illustrating the job crafting process in two cases – Wrzesniewski et al. (2010)  | x                       | x                 |                |
|  | Exploring the relationship between job crafting and meaningful work – Berg et al. (under publication)  | x                       | x                 |                |
|  | The interpersonal sensemaking model of work meaning – Wrzesniewski et al. (2003)   | x                       | x                 | x              |

\*the study covers the notion of change, but does not explore the change process

Following a review of the literature of the meaning of work, I found that only one single study had examined the subjective interpretation of the meaning of work, the impact the social environment plays in this and the change in work meaning as a whole: this is known as the interpersonal sensemaking model of work meaning (Wrzesniewski et al., 2003). I found one model which focused on the process of the change in meaning: the model of job crafting. I have also identified further studies during my review – these agreed with the change in work meaning (Locke – Taylor, 1990; Salancik – Pfeffer, 1978; Rosso et al., 2010 summary), but did not examine the process. The model of social information processing underscored the impact of the workplace environment (Salancik – Pfeffer, 1978), and also served as the foundations of two additional models: the model of job crafting and the interpersonal sensemaking model of work meaning.

In my own research, in addition to the change process, I paid special attention to examining patterns which may be detected in the process of meaning change. The authors identified patterns in the process of meaning change in the model of job crafting. They, however, primarily identified the changes in meaning initiated through the individual's own motivation, which covered whatever job the individual was holding at the time. In my own research, I examined changes which came about as a result of some critical event. I paid special attention to the examination of the impact the workplace environment, and my research covered a broad range of the individual's relation to work in addition to their specific job (e.g. work as a life-domain). In sum: I have not found a single study which would have examined both the alteration of the content of meaning and the change process, while also emphasizing the impact the individual's social environment has – thus, from this perspective, my research represents new findings.

It is my hope that my work contributes to a further understanding of the change in the work meaning: by conducting my research in a different context (looking at critical events), I may be able to spotlight new aspects of this alteration. As the summary above shows, there are two studies related to the field of the change in work meaning which I consider points of departure for my own research: these were authored by Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001) and by Wrzesniewski et al. (2003). I believe it is worthwhile to examine, in connection with these two studies, what theoretical contributions I expect my own research to provide. Both of these studies focused primarily on examining the change in work meaning as a process; they were less detailed in the contentual questions of the meaning of work. In the study dealing with the phenomenon of the job crafting we see examples for linking the process and content questions (182). In the model of interpersonal sensemaking model of work meaning, the authors used the identification of job-role-self to incorporate contentual questions in their model; they did not explore, however, the contentual patterns of the meaning of work and the job-role-self. My

research allows for an exploration of contentual patterns from several perspectives (mechanisms, orientations and schemas) as well as the identification of the process. I expect my research to provide information on the change in work meaning as far as new, previously unidentified further attributes are concerned: the extent of the change and its nature – in this regard, it could prove to be novel compared to published processes examining the change in the work meaning.

In order to provide additional foundations for the process-oriented perspective of my research, I found it worthwhile to examine the literature of the process of meaning change. Based on the literature of sensemaking, I identified the research methodology, and the research framework applied, which proved appropriate for my own examination of the change in the work meaning.

## **3.2. Sensemaking – a review of the literature**

In order to lay the foundations of my research, I believe it is necessary to present the literature of sensemaking, in addition to studies of the meaning of work.

### **3.2.1. The concept of sensemaking**

There is no consensus among researchers on the definition of the concept of sensemaking. Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991), Gioia (1986), Gioia and Thomas (1996) and Lamertz (2002) use the term interpretation as a synonym of sensemaking. “Sensemaking is the process whereby people attempt to construct meaningful explanations for situations and their experiences within those situations” (Gioia, 1986: 61).

Weick (1995) acknowledges that interpretation is a part of the process of sensemaking, but defines the process in a broader manner. According to Weick, how the individual recognizes cues through a process of experiencing is an important part of the process of sensemaking, as is the question of how the interpretations and meanings of cues transform and become explicit. Weick maintains that problems are not given – they are construed by the individual in the particular situation, which is oftentimes murky and contradictory. Weick also considers the individual’s responses and actions to be an integral part of the process. Louis’s (1980a) definition matches the above-mentioned broader approach; in Louis’s approach, sensemaking is a cycle, the interpretation of experiences, and also includes responses to the new situation. The approach I believe sheds the most light on the relationship between sensemaking and schema, and which is

most in harmony with my own research is the following: to ascribe some significance to a purpose or a cue (e.g. work) by placing it into existing, or emerging cognitive framework (Goleman, 1985; Starbuck—Milliken, 1988; Pratt – Ashforth, 2003).

Sensemaking comes into play when the individual encounters factors which disrupt their world. These can be events which are out of the ordinary, individuals who call into question previously adopted concepts or these may be unexpected or unusual occurrences. When people get flustered for one of these reasons, or something similar, they rely on their existing world view and cognitive framework to help explain the situation. Sensemaking is, however, more than creating meaning of unexpected or disruptive set of events; as Weick (1995) had pointed out: “Sensemaking is writing and reading the book at the same time.” In other words, sensemaking is more than just the individual’s interpreting the world around them; it is also construing the world around them by recognizing and reacting to factors around the individual which are out of the ordinary and disruptive.

### **3.2.2. The nature of sensemaking**

Weick (1995) identified seven main characteristics of the process of sensemaking; these are summarized below.

#### **Grounded in Identity Construction**

In general, sensemaking is a self-centered process (e.g. Gray et al., 1985). “What do I have to pay attention to?” “Once I’ve noted it, what does this cue mean to me?” “What can I expect, what will happen next?” “What others expect of me is important; what do I do now?” “What do I have to do?”

Researchers studying sensemaking often draw a connection to symbolic interactionism; although not a part of the official theory of sensemaking, key elements of the two theories match. These include the self, action, interpretation, meaning and joint action (Weick, 1995:41). According to symbolic interactionists (Mead, 1934), one’s self-concept develops through social interactions, and is dependent on others’ reactions. This approach goes back to the concept of the “looking glass” self. The looking glass self is comprised of the following three elements: “the imagination of our appearance to the other person, the imagination of the judgment of his appearance, and some sort of self-feeling such as pride or mortification” (Cooley, 1902:184.). According to symbolic interactionists, the individual imagines themselves from the perspective of others in every situation, placing themselves in the others’ shoes every time. One’s self is composed of these two parts: the I and the me. The me represents the general other

(general mirror image) as well as the expectations of the social environment – in other words, what one sees reflected in others' reactions. The I is, within the individual's personality, "original, unpredictable and disorganized" (Griffin, 2000/2003:60).

The individual's identity is created through a series of interactions: the individual is present in each of these interactions with a different definition of the self, and continues to re-define themselves in every situation. Dependent on how the individual views their surroundings, their image of themselves also changes. Sensemaking is built upon the need to maintain one's identity. The individual has three basic needs vis-à-vis themselves for doing this: "(1) the need for self-enhancement as reflected in seeking and maintaining a positive cognitive and affective state about the self, (2) the self efficacy motive, which is the desire to perceive oneself as competent and efficacious; and (3) the need for self-consistency, which is the desire to sense and experience coherence and continuity." (Erez – Early, 1993:28)

Thus, sensemaking is initiated by an unsuccessful attempt at self-justification, and serves to maintain a positive and consistent self image. Sensemaking is, then, a self-referential process: "how can I know who I am until I get to see what others are doing." In every situation, the individual looks for the potential consequences of that situation for themselves. The meaning of the situation is always shaped by whatever identity the individual holds valid in that particular situation. The more selves the individual has access to in a particular situation, the more meanings the situation carries for the individual. Continuing this logic, the more selves the individual has access to in a particular situation, the less likely they are to encounter a surprising or disruptive moment in that situation, and the lower the likelihood that they will have to overcome uncertainty or dubiousness (Weick, 1995; Louis, 1980a,b; Reason, 1990).

### **Retrospective**

Sensemaking is a retrospective process, and is a process of clarification. Its purpose is to help the individual understand a particular situation, to then be able to act appropriately. The individual must recognize the event at hand to be able to interpret it. For the process of sensemaking related to events, the individual must note the consequences and results of the event. Then, the individual ascribes a particular meaning to the activity, as appropriate, and to the circumstances which had preceded the event. In other words, when individuals ascribe a meaning to an event, they construct either an account or a history of that event, to be able to explain it and insert it into their own world of values and beliefs.

### **Enactive of Sensible Environments**

The concept of enactment is used in order to emphasize the parallels between lawmakers and managers: both groups construct reality through their authoritative actions, and their environments are obligated to react to their activities. Yet, at the same time, every individual is a part of their surroundings. To illustrate the joint determination of enactment by the environment and the individual, Weick cites the work of Follett (1924: 62-63 in Weick, 1995: 33.), which is in harmony with the symbolic interactionist approach: “I never react to you, but to you-plus-me; or to be more accurate, it is I-plus-you reacting to you plus me. ‘I’ can never influence ‘you’ because you have already influenced me; that is in the very process of meeting, by the very process of meeting, we both became something different. It begins even before we meet, in the anticipation of meeting.”

### **Social**

Although sensemaking may seem like an individual process, it is in fact social, to begin with. Sensemaking supposes that knowledge and belief is created through interactions with others, and is transformed as the individual shares these with others. Accordingly, sensemaking is a continuous, iterative and reflexive process.

Sensemaking is a social process, because the individual’s behavior is a subject of the actions of others, whether these are present or only perceived. Symbolic interactions are important components of the process of sensemaking. Sensemaking is never a singular process, because the individual is, intrinsically, dependent on others. Even monologues and unilateral forms of communication suppose some kind of audience – and even the monologue changes along with the audience.

### **Ongoing**

Sensemaking has no clearly defined beginning and end. Sensemaking is continuous, because it is a social process. Communication is one kind of continuous process of sensemaking, in which the individual ascribes meaning to their surroundings and to the cues affecting them (Weick – Sutcliffe – Obstfeld, 2005). The interconnected flow of experiences drive the individual to continuously re-evaluate their experiences collected in the past, according to the present. The explanation then induces the individual to act; the response received then provides the cue for further sensemaking activities and actions. As the individual moves forward (in a continuously repetitive cycle of sensemaking related to situations, cues, people and actions), the meanings encountered will be questionable and dubious less often, as the individual already has a rich and complex set of meanings to rely on.

### **Focusing on and by Extracted Cues**



Sensemaking is more than just the interpretation of cues. If the cue is not noticed, no meaning can be ascribed to it. Individual cues are picked out and noticed from an interconnected flow of cues. The individual filters, groups and compares the cues. What is noticed depends on the environment and the context. Salancik and Pfeffer (1978:233) pointed out the effects of the social environment on the recognition of cues – according to them, the social environment links individuals with their activities which are in need of explanations. In other words, the environment affects which pieces of information are noticed by the individual; it also conveys norms and expectations which impact on the explanations.

### **Driven by Plausibility rather than Accuracy**

Sensemaking is a retrospective process; accordingly, complete precision is not possible when recalling and interpreting events. Recalling experiences from the past is a type of reconstruction – which makes precision even more untenable. The individual is never able to recall events exactly the way they happened (Weick, 1995; Weick – Sutcliffe – Obstfeld, 2005).

Sensemaking is about coloring the meaning of cues. The individual attaches the particular cue to more general categories, and develops it in greater detail according to their past experiences (Weick, 1995). For every event, the individual has several possible ideas and experiences at their disposal, to color and detail a particular cue.

### **3.2.3. The process of sensemaking**

In the following chapter, the elements of the sensemaking process and the model of sensemaking are presented which had the greatest effect on my own thinking.

**Differing from expectations.** The process of sensemaking begins when a situation encountered is found to differ from the expected. In other words, it is either in sync with expectations or differs from them: the process of sensemaking is driven by the question “same or different?” Situations found to be “different” are described in various ways by researchers dealing with the study of sensemaking (Weick – Sutcliffe – Obstfeld, 2005): contradiction, malfunction, surprise, flustering, uncertainty, opportunity, chaos. Initially, it may not be clear what the problem is, or whether there even is a problem to be solved, or the situation merely represents a momentary lapse, or is a singular unusual occurrence. As the situation develops, the individual begins to organize the event in small, manageable parts which are in harmony with their existing mental models and their knowledge-and-experience framework.

**Recognition, labeling and categorization.** The individual notices the unusual, new occurrence and compares it to previous experience. The mental models of the individual – which were constructed through their work, training and life experience – drive what to pay attention to. The individual’s attention is directed by their mental models and a certain specific combination of the cues appearing (Weick – Sutcliffe – Obstfeld, 2005). Comparing the circumstances to “situation normal,” the individual recognizes and selects the new elements and proceeds to label them, in the interest of differentiation and identification. The individual assigns a name to the cues which they had not paid attention to previously. These new labels are linked to their relevant experiences.

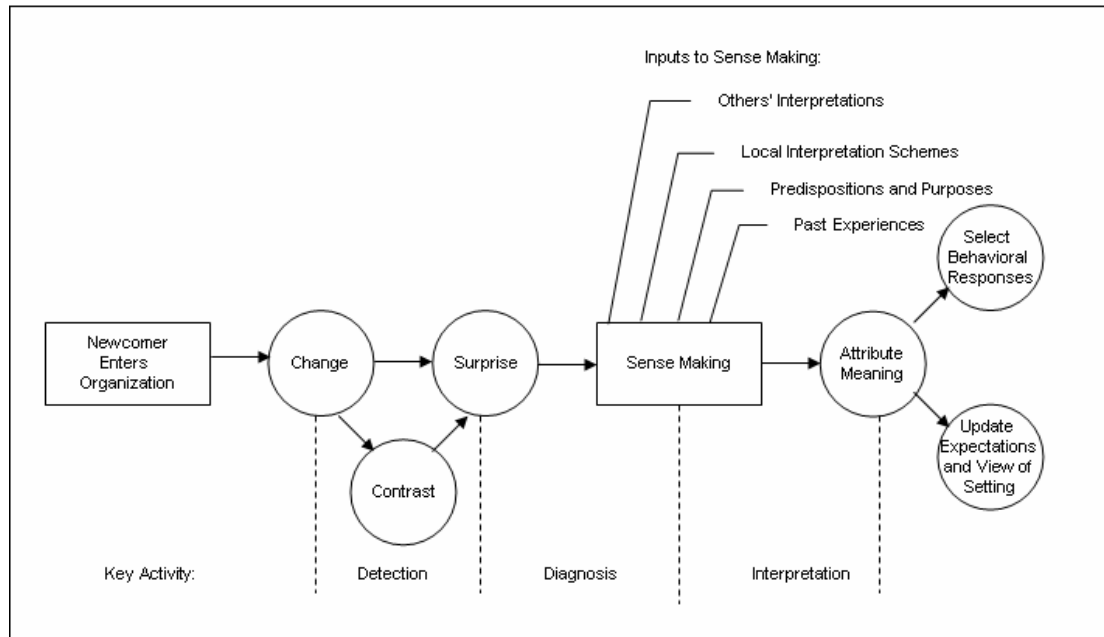
**Creating plausible explanations.** Once the individual has differentiated and labeled the particular event, they begin to attempt to explain it. Several explanations, even in contradiction with one another, may be created following a single event; the individual will then select and accept the explanation which appears most credible. During the process of sensemaking, the individual strives for a credible explanation – not necessarily the most accurate one (Weick, 1995; Weick – Sutcliffe – Obstfeld, 2005): provide meaning to their situations so that they may continue their activity and at the same time maintain their environment.

**Action.** If, during the process of sensemaking, the first question is, “what is going on here?” the second, equally important, question is, “what am I going to do now?” (Weick – Sutcliffe – Obstfeld, 2005). During the process of sensemaking, action and speech tend to follow each other cyclically rather than linearly. The process may begin and end either with speech or with action; it then starts over again and continues in this manner. Action is inseparable from the cue; while during speech, the individual continues to categorize and ascribe meaning to the cue.

### **3.2.4. Louis’s model of sensemaking**

Of models describing the individual’s process of sensemaking, I wish to devote special attention to the one developed by Louis (1980a) and cited frequently. The model belongs to the schools of socialization research, built on phenomenological and social interactionist foundations, where meanings are construed through interactions and are grounded in situation-dependent interpretive schemas (Mead, 1934; Shutz, 1964; Berger – Luckman, 1966). Louis examined how the individual copes with experiences encountered early in their jobs, and how the individual ascribes meaning to these experiences. How does the individual identify, diagnose, interpret and respond to these experiences?

**Figure 8: Sensemaking in organizational entry (source: Louis, 1980a:242)**



### 3.2.4.1.1. Major findings of the model

A more detailed explanation of Figure 8 follows.

#### *Change*

Change is defined by Louis as the objective difference between the old and the new situation. This modified situation requires the individual to adapt. The more new elements there are, the more adaptation is required of the individual, who is still a newcomer at the organization. This change can be a role, an identity, a job, a situation, conditions, etc.

#### *Contrast*

Louis chose include the concept of contrast in the model based on the work of Gestalt psychology; contrast is evoked by characteristics noticed by the individual from their surroundings. The individual tends to notice whatever is different from their previous experiences. Contrast, then, is the subjective difference between the new and the old environment, and is a characteristic newcomers attach to their new situations.

#### *Surprise*

Surprise is the difference between the individual's expectations and their experiences in the specific new situation. Surprise can be either positive or negative. The individual's

expectation may pertain to work, the organization or to the newcomer individual themselves. The expectation may be conscious, tacit or nascent; experiences exceeding or not meeting expectations may also cause surprise. The author presents several typical sources and types of surprise.

- **Work:** The conscious or subconscious expectations of the individual are not met, or the nature of the work is unexpected. Characteristics which the individual did not expect earlier become important – e.g. a window in the office.
- **Self:** The individual's conscious and subconscious expectations are not met in fields such as their own skills, values, needs, etc. The newcomer has to face and cope with the realization that their own understanding of their self is different from their previous understanding. For instance: "I chose this job because it promised me a great level of freedom; and now I realize that I don't even need this freedom after all." The individual may be surprised to find that they react differently or unexpectedly to situations which they had known about previously or had expectations about how they may react to (e.g. overtime work).
- **Organization:** The individual may encounter surprise based on their understanding of certain cultural norms grounded in previous experience. Van Maanen (1977) describes "significant others," who surprise the individual when the individual realizes that their basic suppositions are different. At that point, the individual revisits their own, seemingly natural, presuppositions.

### *Sensemaking and the Other Elements of the Process*

Under the usual circumstances, the role of consciousness is fairly minimal in the behavior of the individuals; it is usually scripts which direct the individual (Abelson, 1976). Coping with the unusual situations, however, is driven by conscious thought and not by automated scripts. The individual need not think when they are operating according to pre-existing scripts and the outcomes encountered meet their expectations. When the outcomes encountered do not meet the individual's expectations, this threatens the cognitive consistency of the individual (Festinger et al., 1957; Abelson et al., 1968). This contradiction leads to tension, which drives the individual to take action to ease that tension. In other words, when the scripts do not work, the individual must explain to themselves why the particular situation led to those specific outcomes and why it did not lead to the outcomes expected. This is how retrospective explanations are created in the process of sensemaking.

Louis views sensemaking as a recurrent cycle where certain specific events follow one another. Each cycle begins with the expectations of the individual, which may be conscious or subconscious, and which serve as foreshadows of events to come. Then, the individual experiences the events, which may or may not be different from their expectations. Events which do not meet expectations, or surprises, compel the

individual to seek an explanation, and at the same time launch a process whereby the individual attempts to interpret the difference. The individual, dependent on what they ascribe the occurrence of the unexpected events to, decides on their behavioral response, and/or modifies their understanding of the individuals active in the event, the event itself, or their expectations of possible outcomes of future events. These modified expectations and suppositions essentially amount to modifying the individual's scripts.

The individual relies on a large amount of input to determine what meaning to ascribe to surprise and how to interpret it. Experiences obtained during previous, similar situations help the individual cope with the present situation. The individual's personal characteristics – to include their predisposition, whom they tend to blame in certain situations (themselves or others, etc.) as well as their intentions in the specific situation and in general – also impact on this. The process is also influenced by the individual's cultural presuppositions – the specific meanings they attach to the local context, or interpretive schemas. Information and interpretation derived from others also contributes to the process of sensemaking.

#### **3.2.4.1.2. Examining the effects and the evaluation of the model**

Louis's model of sensemaking describes the process of sensemaking by focusing on the individual's cognitive processes in an organizational context; as such, this is one of the most popular and most often cited approaches in the field. A novelty, however, in Louis's model, as compared to other literature of socialization, is an exploration of what newcomers to an organization encounter as they attempt to cope with situations that are unknown to them.

From the perspective of my own research, the identification of certain elements of the process of sensemaking is of special significance, as is the emphasis Louis places on the cyclical nature of the process. I believe it is important to note the individual's self-concept, their image of the organization as well as their image of the job in the process of sensemaking. At the same time, I wish to point out a contradiction in the model: the author narrows down sensemaking essentially to the creation of retrospective explanations (as the figure shows), and calls this process sensemaking as well.

From the perspective of my research, it is noteworthy that the author does not examine the meaning of work and its change. Louis primarily examined the process: emphasizing surprise and its interpretation by the individual, while examining separately the factors which influence interpretation. At the same time, Louis did not cover how interpretation may change the meaning of work.

The model may represent a good point of departure for examining the process in another context. On the one hand, the process of sensemaking may be examined at any stage in

the individual's career. This is a process which is continuous (Weick, 1995); certainly, it is encountered more often when the individual is new at a workplace. On the other hand, I also believe the nature of unexpected events may also be expanded: the author collected surprising and unexpected events which were clearly apparent at the time; but it is not certain that these will remain memorable in the longer term. In my opinion, the model can be expanded to include any surprising or unexpected event in the workplace, even if these unexpected events are or are not very memorable. With these additions, the model above inspired me to use it as a point of departure for the framework of my own research: this is a basic framework of thought which I can utilize when examining the change in the work meaning.

### **3.2.5. The role of the schema in the process of sensemaking**

In the above discussion of the process of sensemaking, the following concepts were mentioned: mental model, schema and script concept, these concepts are presented in greater detail in this section. The concept of the schema is associated with Bartlett (1932); it was Bartlett who first used the term to describe hypothetical mental structures which drive the individual's attention and their recall from memory. The schema theory is a theory pertaining to knowledge, which states that all knowledge is bundled in units, or schemas (Rumelhart, 1980/1992). Schemas are the building blocks of the individual's thoughts and their cognitive exploration (Rumelhart, 1980/1992; M  r  , 2001). Schemas are subjective theories based on personal experience, in reference to how the world works (Markus – Zajonc, 1985); as such, they drive perception, memory and inference (Fiske – Taylor, 1991 Literature dealing with organizations tends to use the concept of the mental model (Hill – Levenhagen, 1995; Bogner – Barr, 2000), the concept of the cognitive map (Weick – Bougon, 1986; Eden, 1992), the concept of cognitive structure (Walsh, 1995) the concept of a cognitive framework (Bogner – Barr, 2000), and framework (Starbuck–Milliken, 1985) as similar to the concept of the schema.

Individuals create schemas for the concepts of cues which they encounter frequently. Once the individual has created a schema in relation to a concept, and the individual encounters a cue which matches or relates to the schema, the schema is put in play for the individual to interpret that particular piece of information. Individuals are liable to interpret information in such a way as to make it consistent with pre-existing schemas, and to reinforce them (Fiske – Taylor, 1991; George – Jones, 2001). In other words, individuals construe or validate reality in such a way as to render it consistent with their preexisting expectations. In the context of schemas, “seeing is believing” (Weick, 1979).

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### **3.2.5.1. Work and schemas**

As mentioned in the summary of the literature of the work meaning, I focused on two primary areas in my own research: examining the contentual nature of the meaning of work and examining the process of meaning change. I wished to achieve the process focus through the examination of the process of sensemaking. I intended to realize the contentual focus through the examination of the work schema; this concept came to the forefront of my attention when learning about the process of sensemaking. In order to establish the professional foundations of my research, I have studied the Hungarian and international publications in the literature of the schema and I have reviewed where research into the schema was present as related to work. Based on the recommendation of my opponents<sup>12</sup>, I do not go into greater detail on Hungarian and international publications in the final version of my dissertation, as these are not directly related to my dissertation. In this chapter, the schema approaches used in the area of work, and used in my own research are presented.

#### **3.2.5.1.1. Work and schemas in the literature**

In my study of the literature, I encountered several examples linking sensemaking and the concept of the schema. Louis’s (1980b:337) publication describes career changes, using the concept of the cognitive map in the process model, which also reinforced my

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<sup>12</sup> My foreign opponent, Amy Wrzesniewski, noted when reading my proposal: “While the work on schemas in general is rather diffuse and vague (a fault of the literature, not of the student) I found the section on work schemas to be most relevant.” (Wrzesniewski, 2010).

own thinking. I researched the literature at length on how to link the schema approach to the meaning of work, and I ultimately encountered the following specific approaches.

The concept **vocational schema** is used by Neimeyer et al. (1985; Nevill et al., 1986; Neimeyer – Metzler, 1987; Neimeyer, 1989) in their research. They examined the way individuals process information when choosing a vocation, career or occupation: what information do individuals use to make their decision, and how do they use that information? Based on their study, they determined that the vocational decision making skills and career planning skills are a subject of individuals' cognitive structure (Neimeyer et al., 1985). They examined the differentiation and integration of cognitive structures in career decision making. They found that as the individual's career identity develops, their schemas become more organized (Nevill et al., 1986). Kelly's vocational construct system (e.g. low or high salary; structured or not structured work; low or high status) was viewed as a specific vocational schema (Neimeyer – Metzler, 1987). Further research has confirmed that with the development of the individual's identity, their vocational schemas also become more differentiated and integrated. This is in sync with the general characteristics of the process of cognitive development (Neimeyer – Metzler, 1987).

The concept **pre-employment schema** was used by Fonner – Roloff (2008) in their research. This pre-employment schema is viewed as a mental model of workplace norms, which works like a lens: this is what individuals see their experiences as an employee through. Fonner – Roloff (2008) examined the process of vocational socialization and the effects of friends on the individual's socialization prior to entering a new workplace. Several authors have examined the concept of pre-employment and workplace socialization (e.g. Chory-Assad – Tamborini, 2001, 2003; Jablin, 2001): How do parents, friends, partners, social and educational institutions, the media and previous work experiences impact on the individual's perception of their work or their workplace?

The concept **personal work schema** is used by Cardador and Pratt (2007) in their research, presented at an expert conference. They view the personal work schema as a personal construction of the individual about their work; the schema seeks to answer the following question: "How do I view my job?" In their research study, they surveyed representatives of three professions (nurses, entrepreneurs and police officers) and identified, based on their answers, the following four dominant work schemas: engaging, purposeful, relational and instrumental. Individuals with an engaging schema tended to view their job personally as enjoyable, interesting and challenging, observations which were primarily connected to their workplace tasks. Individuals with a purposeful schema tended to characterize their jobs as contributing to a greater good, value or something important. Individuals claiming the relational schema used relations



to describe their jobs: to them, work meant establishing and maintaining meaningful relations. Individuals with an instrumental schema viewed their work as the means to achieve another purpose (financial lifestyle, occupation). The authors linked the various work schemas and the professions with the meaning of work: they observed different meanings of work in the three professions, according to what schema the individual cited.

### **3.2.5.1.2. The frames of work meaning**

In my research, I used the approach of sensemaking to define the schema. I relied on the definition of sensemaking described in my research (see chapter 4.2.1.2): this includes the notion that social cues are interpreted by the individual by placing them into existing or emerging cognitive frames or frameworks that are being created. Several researchers in the field of political sciences and communication use frame and schema interchangeably (Barsalou, 1992; Biocca, 1991; Lawson, 1998).

In organizational theory literature, we also encounter examples, primarily related to the study of perception and interpretation, where the schema is defined similarly to the frame. Bartunek (1984: 355) defined the concept of interpretational schemas as “a map of our experience of the world.” Starbuck (1982) used the schema as a view of the world and as an ideology. Westenholtz (1993) defined it as a reference frame. Miller (1993: 119) emphasized the perceptual lens nature of the schema, which “established sets of values, assumptions, and beliefs.” Nystrom–Starbuck (1984:55) built on the concept of cognitive structure, “by which we mean logically integrated and mutually reinforcing systems of beliefs and values. Cognitive structures manifest themselves in perceptual frameworks, expectations, world views, plans, purposes, . . . myths, rituals, symbols ... and jargon.” Walsh’s (1995:281) summary study used the concept of knowledge structure: “is a mental template that individuals impose on an information environment to give it form and meaning.”

In keeping with the studies above, I use the approach of the schema as a frame of perception and interpretation. In chapter 4.2.1 developing the research questions, my interpretation is expanded of the concept and related considerations.

### **3.2.5.2. The change in schemas**

In the following chapter, the change in schemas is discussed, with a primary view to the approach of the schema as a frame of perception and interpretation. Schemas direct the processing of information, and, as such, change as a result of incoming information. We can distinguish between the following two types of schema change: first-order and

second-order change (Watzlawick – Weakland – Fisch, 1974; Bartunek, 1984; Bartunek – Moch, 1987). First-order change is incremental change when the current schema, as a result of much collected experience, becomes more complex, more abstract and more organized (Fiske – Taylor, 1991) and imbued with internal contradictions (Fiske – Taylor, 1991: 149). A thorough change in the schema is the second-order change.

George and Jones (2001) model the individual's process of schema change as it occurs in an organizational structure. In connection with the authors' model, I wish to emphasize several points which have become important in the course of my own work.

The authors point out that if the individual ends up in a situation contrary to their expectations, then – in keeping with the theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 2000/1962) – this leads to tension and the individual desires an easing of this tension.

An emotional response accompanies situations which are unexpected or which are related to purposes personally important for the individual or to their well-being; the reaction can be either negative or positive. Emotions help spur cognitive activity, so that the individual is able to react to the situation. The authors emphasize that various cognitive activities are associated with situations eliciting positive and negative emotional reactions. In the case of a positive variation, the process of sensemaking is characterized by creativity, inductive reasoning and flexible thought, when the individual links different stimuli to one another. In the case of a negative variation, sensemaking is characterized by deductive reasoning, methodical and detailed information processing and critical thought.

They point to the phenomenon of drawing into question existing schemas and expectations. If it is the fundamental nature of the schema that is drawn into question, what we are seeing is a second-order change, when the individual must re-frame (Bartunek, 1988) their expectations and their view of the world. If it is a narrower aspect of the schema that is questioned – and even if the difference is substantial – the individual incorporates the difference into their existing schema, as an exception; this is known as first-order change.

### **3.2.6. Individual sensemaking – empirical studies**

In this chapter, the major research directions of organizational sensemaking are presented, based on a review of the literature of organizational theory, and studies examining the individual process of sensemaking are described in detail.

Studies examining organizational and community processes of sensemaking represent the mainstream of organizational sensemaking research. First, it is worthwhile to

emphasize studies of sensemaking looking at the organizational interpretation of disasters, which have called attention to the significance of sensemaking on an organizational level. If we were to depict the direction of organizational sensemaking, disaster studies would represent the first wave. Weick's (1988, 1990, 1993, 1996) studies are key in this category, and continue to inspire other researchers even in 2010 (Maitlis – Sonenshein, 2010).

Research into organizational sensemaking was centered primarily on the examination of organizational changes; this is due to that fact that success of change is defined to a great extent by how common understanding and interpretation within the organization evolves. I had the opportunity to examine several of these studies in greater detail: studies by Isabella (1990), Gioia –Chittipeddi (1991), Gioia – Thomas (1996), Thomas – Clark – Gioia (1993) and, representing the most recent results, works by Sonnenstein (2009, 2010) and Maitlis– Lawrence (2007).

From studies examining community sensemaking, it is worthwhile to mention studies examining the interpretation of organizational problems and cases, including the work of Maitlis (2005) and Sonnenstein, related to the interpretation of ethics (2006, 2007).

It is necessary to differentiate between organizational and community interpretations and studies focusing on individual interpretations; the latter are far fewer in number than studies examining organizational and community sensemaking. My own study belongs in this group, and therefore the discussion of these research studies is expanded on. The publications are grouped based on the context of sensemaking.

### **During Socialization**

Louis's (1980a) seminal study, discussed in section 3.2.4, examined the individual's process of sensemaking during socialization. Vos et al. (2003) also examined the individual's process of sensemaking during socialization. The authors viewed the individual's psychological contract, as the creation of a cognitive schema, as the process of sensemaking. The researchers compiled six hypotheses in relation to personal perceptions, and conducted a longitudinal study of 975 newcomers to organizations, using a questionnaire to collect responses.

### **During Organizational Changes**

George and Jones (2001) describe the comprehensive process of the change in individual schemas and resistance to change. Their model points to the contradictory and unprogrammable steps of change. The authors present how, at almost every step of the process, there is a chance that the individual does not have to transform their schemas, resisting change. Isabella's (1990) study connects the processes of individual

and organizational change, identifying four steps of the interpretation of the process of organizational change: anticipation, confirmation, culmination and aftermath. Using research data, the author was also able to identify individual processes which characterized the transition between the various stages. The author linked the personal processes with the three stages of change as identified by Lewin (1947): unfreezing, moving and re-freezing. Balogun and Johnson (2004) examined the process of sensemaking among mid-level managers and based on narratives, conducting a longitudinal study of organizational changes. Their purpose was to explore the patterns of changes in the organizational schemas of mid-level managers. The authors reviewed the journals of 26 mid-level managers and conducted two interviews with each of them. The authors were able to identify various organizational schemas for the different periods.

### **When Changing Careers**

Blenkinsopp and Zdunczyk, in their 2005 study, examined problematic mid-life changes of career. Using a critical incident technique, they conducted in-depth interviews with seven managers. Their study, primarily exploratory in nature, examined the interpretation of career mistakes and related coping processes. Glanz (et al. 2001, 2003, 2005) dealt in their study with the sensemaking process of expatriates while working abroad. In Glanz's PhD dissertation (2005), Louis's (1980a) model was used to examine the experiences of expatriates who encountered several surprising and new situations while working abroad; their interpretation of these situations led to a change in their interpretive frames. Peltonen (1998) used a narrative and discourse analysis methodology to examine expatriates' stories about their development and careers. The author compared the meaning structures of expatriate career stories with the career stories of other individuals who had not left their home country. Louis (1980a) examined similarly unique characteristics of career changes as a process of sensemaking. Louis further developed, based on the findings, the model of sensemaking built on socialization processes, which also included the concept of personal cognitive maps.

### **During the Manager's Work**

Isenberg examined senior managers' thought processes over the course of five years, and in a 1987 publication examined the effects of two dramatic events on senior managers' thinking. The author conducted interviews with fifteen senior managers (up to the level of vice president), and had participants fill out a so-called Change Reaction Questionnaire. Isenberg also examined each company's internal reports and memoranda. In the course of the study, Isenberg found managers who had incorporated the two dramatic incidents into their old schemas; others had come to a new

understanding based on the events: a new definition of the problem was created and a new solution to the problem was found. The author calls attention to the necessity of reflection on the part of the manager. Phillips (2005/6) examined, in the context of sensemaking, the stories of two entrepreneurs about the founding of their companies and their personal experiences. The entrepreneurs spoke of how they were able to imbue with meaning their existence and identities as entrepreneurs and social activists.

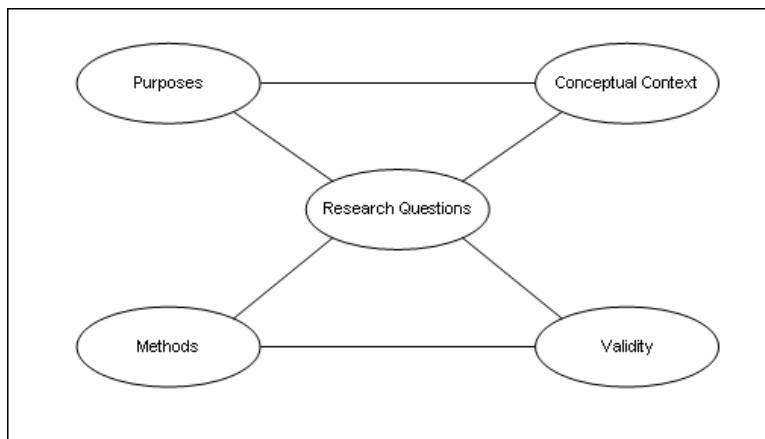
Summarizing individual research studies, we may conclude that studies examined sensemaking as a result of some greater change or as an effect of dramatic change. Change could have meant that the individual chose to alter their environment: by joining a new organization (Louis, 1980a; Vos et al., 2003), changing careers (Blenkinsopp – Zdunczyk, 2005; Louis, 1980b), or taking on work in another country (Glanz et al. 2001; Glanz, 2003, 2005; Peltonen, 1998). Change could have occurred when the surroundings of the individual changed, which may have been caused by factors within the organization or outside of the organization. The individual's process of sensemaking could have been induced by organizational changes (George—Jones, 2001; Isabella, 1990; Balogun—Johnson, 2004) or a changing of their environment (Isenberg, 1987; Phillips, 2005/6). As a common element of all research studies, we can point to the notion that individuals encountered a surprising or shocking event during their work, and this event launched a process of sensemaking or the change in meaning. To sum up the lessons to be learned from studies examining individual sensemaking, we may state that it is easiest to track the phenomenon of sensemaking in situations involving surprise or shock. This observation justifies my decision to examine the change in the work meaning by exploring critical events or incidents experienced by my subjects.

#### **4. Conducting the research**

In this chapter, the questions are discussed which may be used to describe the path which led me from formulating my research question, through the process of data collection and analysis, to providing the answers. Although it might seem linear, this path is far from it (Maxwell, 1996: 7). Describing the implementation of my research, I relied on the interactive qualitative research model of Maxwell's (1996). The reason I chose to do so is that during my research, my understanding of the phenomena examined changed, leading to a change in my research question, the conceptual environment I am in and the methodology applied. These interactive dynamics, which

Maxwell's model so aptly describes, are a unique feature of qualitative research. The structure of the various chapters presented accordingly.

**Figure 9: The interactive model of conducting qualitative research (source: Maxwell, 1996: 5)**



## 4.1. Objectives

Maxwell (1996) differentiated between three groups of purposes: personal purposes, practical purposes and research purposes.

### Personal Purposes

**Selecting the topic.** Ever since graduating from the university – and, in fact, quite possibly ever since I was a little girl – I have wondered about why, for what purpose, I would work and whether I should follow my family's example, or change that. Many others may have been in the same situation. I continue to ponder what our mission and calling is in the world, when it is that we feel our work has meaning and just what it is that my work means to me. Well – that is why I settled on this topic for my research. And because writing a dissertation is also a journey, a journey into learning more about oneself, I also found answers to my own questions as I conducted my research and did my writing.

For me, it was an interesting question whether a critical or memorable situation in the workplace can lead one to change their workplace or their profession. This is also connected to my personal experiences, having undergone something similar myself. I remember a very memorable performance evaluation discussion which eventually led me to decide to look for a new job. Shortly thereafter, I quit. So I already had a hypothesis for this question: yes, it can lead to that. Furthermore, I was interested in

what individuals think and do in these types of situations and whether the extent to which they feel their job to be meaningful and valuable changes as a result of some critical situation.

**Selecting the methodology.** I have always enjoyed stories. This is something that appealed to me in the narrative methodology and in learning about individual stories. At the same time, I was mistaken in my initial hopes for the opportunities and limitations afforded by this methodology. Instead, then, of the narrative methodology, I opted for a methodology of case studies based on qualitative interviews. This fitted more to my research questions, which is something I will describe in more detail in the chapter about methodology.

**Selecting the sample.** In an earlier stage of my career, I worked as an HR specialist, manager and then as a consultant. HR as a professional area is still a field of great interest to me, which explains why I chose to study HR as a profession in my research.

### **Practical Purposes**

I wish to advance in the scientific field and join the community of researchers who already have advanced degrees. I am committed to continuing along this path, and I intend to continue working as an educator and researcher. An additional purpose is to establish my own set of tools by researching the meaning and meaningfulness of work; such a toolset would be available for personal development as well as for organizational development.

### **Research Purposes**

My research purpose with this dissertation is to explore the meaning work carries for human resources managers, and how this meaning is influenced by their social environment. Through that, I hope to obtain a deeper understanding of HR work, the meaning of work, changes in the meaning of work and of the process of sensemaking.

With the help of this research study, I hope to join the international discourse on the meaning of work, and I hope that my results will contribute to a deeper understanding and a greater shared knowledge about the field.

Because my research is connected to HR professionals, I hope to use my findings as a type of feedback for the HR profession in Hungary. I will seek out HR managers to personally discuss with them the case studies developed in the course of my research; my hope is to obtain their feedback on my analysis while also helping them toward a greater understanding of the meaning and interpretation of work. Through this, in a broader perspective, I hope to contribute to their personal development. When

discussing the topics and the case studies, I also hope to cover the organization's practices; by using my dissertation as a point of departure, I hope to develop a toolset to discover and explore organizational practices. In the longer term, this may help organizations create more meaningful positions and retain their employees. An additional purpose, through the publication of my findings and sharing them in professional fora, is to emphasize for Hungary's HR field the importance of meaningful work; I view this as a way of imparting knowledge and making others more aware of the matter. The proposals outlined above go far beyond the dissertation and suggest avenues for research and other roles in the future.

## **4.2. Research questions and assumptions**

In this chapter, the conceptual framework and the topic of my research question is reviewed using the model proposed by Maxwell (1996). Qualitative research is typically conducted by using an open question defined in a loose theoretical framework; no specific hypotheses are attached to the question. Hypotheses are formulated during the course of the research project. Progressive focusing is typical of qualitative research; the definition of the research problem evolves gradually and the focus of the research becomes clearer (Szokolszky, 2004). Many qualitative researchers formulate propositions while creating their theory and during their analysis; the function of these propositions is similar to that of the hypotheses of quantitative studies (Maxwell, 1996:53, Miles – Huberman, 1994: 75). Propositions, however, differ from hypotheses in that they are shaped after the research has begun: they are based on data and evolve and develop as a result of interaction with the data (and not preceding data collection).

### **4.2.1. Formulating and narrowing down the research question**

When compiling my research proposal, and following a review of the literature, I found that few studies have dealt with the change in the work meaning, indicating that this is an area of research that may be worthwhile to focus on.

When planning my research, I formulated the following research questions:

- How does the individual view their work, and how does this change when the individual encounters a surprising situation?
- What meaning do participating individuals make of their work? How does this meaning change?

Both questions were aimed at examining the meaning of work, including both a content-based analysis of the meaning of work as well as the examination of the process of



change in meaning. In the chapter summarizing studies dealing with the meaning of work (Chapter 3.1.7), I have already explained my assumptions related to the meaning of work. At the same time, it is worth briefly reviewing these again as I describe my research questions: (1) meaning is an individual interpretation, (2) meaning changes, (3) meaning depends on the social environment of the individual.

I developed the following sub-questions based on the two questions above; these are obviously closely interlinked:

Content-based analysis:

- Did the meaning or meaningfulness of work change in the case of the interview subjects?
- To what extent did the meaning change?
- What patterns of meaning change did we encounter?

Process-based analysis:

- How did the meaning and meaningfulness of work change: what processes and steps led to the change in meaning?
- What factors influenced the change in the work meaning?

#### **4.2.1.1. The meaning of work – examining the content**

In order to answer my research questions related to the content, I looked for a focus using the approach of sensemaking, leading me to the concept of the schema. When drafting my research proposal, the schema concept was the contentual focus of my research; yet when analyzing the empirical data, I encountered several dilemmas which led me to expand the contentual focus of my research. As a result I examined the meaning of work from three perspectives: work orientation, work meaning mechanisms and work meaning schemas. I would like now to briefly share how I came to these conclusions.

##### **Meaning of Work = Work Orientations**

Based on the study report by Cardador and Pratt (2007), I made the assumption, on the one hand, that work orientations may be considered schemas and that it is worth treating orientations as schemas. This assumption was confirmed by findings related to the meaning of work. According to Baumeister (1991: 119), work orientations represent highly differing meaning prototypes of one's approach to work. According to Rosso et al. (2010: 98), "orientation opens a window to how [the individual] understands what their work means to them." This was the assumption I relied on at the outset of my

research. At the same time, when analyzing my data, I discovered something that one of my opponents had indicated in her evaluation: that the literature of the schema is “rather expansive and inexact” (Wrzesniewski, 2010), which made it more difficult for me to rely on it in my research. I therefore decided to start my data analysis by looking at work orientations.

I rely on the following definition of **work orientations**: generally, what meaning individuals make of their work and why they believe it is worthwhile for them to work is categorized according to the beliefs and values related to work as an activity (Rosso et al., 2010; Pratt et al., forthcoming).

### **Meaning of Work = Meaning of Work Mechanisms**

It was when examining the data that I first discovered how a process-based approach to the meaning of work could be of use for a study which also focuses on the process; accordingly, incorporating a new concept, the meaning of work mechanism, in my study would be of use. I therefore decided to examine the meaning of work in my study also through the meaning of work mechanism.

When discussing the concept of **meaning of work mechanisms**, I am referring to processes during which the sources of the meaning and meaningfulness of work influence the meaning and meaningfulness of work (based on Rosso et al., 2010).

### **Meaning of Work = Meaning of Work Schemas**

During my research, I also applied the approach of the schemas to the concept of the meaning of work. Thus, I was able to further expand the conceptual focus of the research using meaning of work schemas. I defined the schema as a framework, further enriching my understanding of the data.

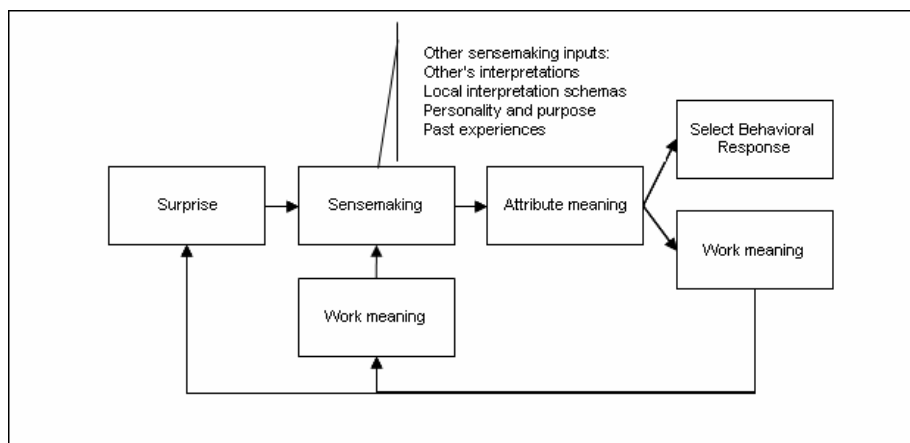
When referring to **the concept of the schema**, I am describing a framework or mental template which individuals apply to their environment to lend form (perception) and meaning (interpretation) to it (based on Walsh, 1995; Nystrom–Starbuck, 1984).

Using the above decisions, I came to approach the contentual questions of the meaning of work from three directions in my research framework.

#### 4.2.1.2. The meaning of work – examining the process

To answer my research questions related to the process, I used the approach of sensemaking as my point of departure. I relied on the following definition of the **process of sensemaking**: to attach significance, as a result of surprise, to some kind of social cue (e.g. others' actions or comments) by placing it into an existing or emerging cognitive framework; this is followed by a reaction to the cue (based on Starbuck – Milliken, 1988; Goleman, 1985; Pratt – Ashforth, 2003; and Louis, 1980a,b who has stressed the significance of a surprise).

**Figure 10: Preliminary interpretation framework of the changes in the work meaning<sup>13</sup>**



In my research proposal, I outlined a preliminary framework<sup>14</sup> (see Figure 10) of the changes in the work meaning, which may be summarized as follows. The individual experiences surprise in a social situation; this initiates a process of sensemaking. During the process of sensemaking, the individual's understanding of their work changes; as a result, the meaning of work also changes, which can then impact on how the individual perceives and interprets various workplace situations<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> Author's own work

<sup>14</sup> When formulating my research framework, I relied heavily on the model of the process of sensemaking developed by Louis (1980 a, b) and on the interpersonal sensemaking model of work meaning by Wrzesniewski et al. (2003).

<sup>15</sup> When describing the framework, as well as in the figure, I rely on the concept of the meaning of work, which expanded during the course of my research: it includes work orientation, meaning of work mechanisms and meaning of work schemas.

To conclude this chapter on my research questions, it is described how the streamlined and expanded concept of my research is expected to contribute to the literature. Using mechanisms is considered a new approach in the literature; as far as I know, the interactions and dynamics of mechanisms have not yet been studied empirically. The change in orientations and mechanisms has not yet been examined in empirical studies; neither separately, nor in a single study, making this a novel area of the literature. The concept of meaning of work schemas also brings a new perspective to the discussion of the meaning of work.

### **4.3. The methodology applied**

In accordance with my research purposes and research questions, my paper is structured primarily around **qualitative interviews based on case-study methodology**. Compared to quantitative studies, qualitative research has the advantage of an inductive approach and that it is focused on specific individuals and words, and not on numbers (Maxwell, 1996:17). The purpose of the qualitative methodology is to explore and describe experiences and to expand on, and interpret, meanings (Dale Bloomberg – Volpe, 2008). Qualitative methodology is perfectly suited when working to realize the following research purposes. (1) Obtaining an understanding of the meanings and perspectives of participants. (2) It may be used to understand a certain context and to explore how these surroundings impact on participants' actions. Thus, qualitative methodology may be used to understand how events, actions and meanings evolve in a certain set of environmental conditions. (3) It may be used to identify an unexpected phenomenon and to create a theory based on that phenomenon. (4) It may be used to understand the frame in which events and actions take place. (5) It may be used to expand on explanations of cause and effect (Maxwell, 1996: 17-20). Based on the above, we may conclude that a qualitative approach is an appropriate methodology given the main subject area of my own research.

A case study is a piece of empirical research which examines a particular phenomenon in its actual environment, especially in cases where the boundary between the phenomenon and the context is blurred (Yin, 2003:12-14). Case studies are preferred in qualitative methodology and may be applied with a variety of purposes in mind: to construct a theory, to obtain a deeper understanding of a local context or to test a theory (Yin, 2003; Eisenhardt, 1989; Szokolszky, 2004). This is due to the fact that case studies allow for several events to be connected, as the genre takes into consideration the interaction between the individual cases as well as between the case and its context (Maaloe, 2003). Case selection indicates what the researcher finds interesting and how (through what cases) the researcher believes the research question can best be

addressed. The research unit is the case itself, which may be a venue, an event, a specific behavior, an action or specific individuals (Beck-Bíró, 2009). In my own study, the **cases** are critical, memorable (pleasant or unpleasant) workplace events which affected the sensemaking of work.

In my conceptual framework, it is a specific instance of surprise that elicits the process of meaning change. I was seeking an appropriate methodological approach which was provided by **critical events** or critical incidents. Applying the approach of critical events is a novelty in research examining the meaning of work. Webster and Mertova (2007) referred to critical events which individuals were able to recall even after a long time and which contributed to a new understanding or world view on their part (p.73). The individual does not plan, expect or control these events (Webster – Mertova, 2007). These events come as a surprise to the individual. The analysis of critical events is generally known as critical incident technique (CIT); Flanagan (1954) is credited with the scientific application of CIT. The methodology appeared in the late 1990s in qualitative social constructionist research (Chell, 2004). One weakness of the critical incident technique is that it views events from a retrospective perspective; at the same time, because of the critical nature of the event, subjects tend to be able to recall the particular situation quite well.

The methodology applied in my research was **based on qualitative interviews, using case studies**. I had originally planned to implement the analysis of my research using a narrative methodology. Following the collection of data, however, it was the processing of the data using coding that proved successful. By coding, I was able to detect patterns which helped me understand the phenomena examined. I relied primarily on the analysts software Atlas.ti to identify patterns and the interrelationships between the codes; the software proved highly effective in pointing out linkages, and it helped me produce various comparisons and reports.

Because of my commitment to my original methodology, I believe it is important to mention briefly the differences between narrative methodologies and other qualitative methodologies, where the scientific community may not be united. Riessman (2008: 12) represents one distinct position, claiming that narrative analysis is built on stories, which Riessman treats as a unit. Here Riessman differentiates between narrative studies and qualitative studies. Riessman emphasizes that methodologies based on category analysis involve taking narratives into parts and elements; these are then coded, and the codes are often removed from their contexts. Methodologies built on categories tend to ignore the structural characteristics of the narratives and their linear nature, which the author believes are hallmarks of narratives. Lieblich et al. (1998) take a different view of narrative methodologies, including among narrative studies those which conduct categorical-contentual analysis of narrative texts: i.e. these analyze narratives not as a

whole, but in smaller units on the level of sentences or even words. I believe that Riessmann's (2008) position may be the more generally accepted one in terms of the analysis of narratives, as opposed to the categories used by Lieblich et al. (1998). Based on the above, and with a view toward the researchers' consensus, I choose to characterize my own research as a qualitative study.

### **4.3.1. The role of the researcher**

Given the nature of the research study – qualitative research based on qualitative interviews –, efforts to continuously remain conscious of my own role in the process, in the interpretation of the data and in drawing conclusions from the data have been of critical importance. Throughout the duration of the process, I kept the following question in mind: “How am I influencing the process and the results?” (This was proposed by Maxwell, 1996.) At each phase of the research process, I discussed my own thoughts related to this self-reflection. (1) in my dissertation, I made transparent the personal implications of decisions already taken (see, for instance, chapter 4.1 on Purpose); (2) over the course of my research, I maintained a research log, attempting to formulate my own presuppositions and thoughts about the phenomenon examined, and (3) I explicitly made my own thoughts clear when formulating my results.

In terms of my role as a researcher, establishing open relationships, based on trust, with interview subjects proved to be a challenge; this was, however, key to obtaining the information and to ensuring that the information obtained was reliable and valid.

It goes hand in hand with my role as a researcher that, like my interview subjects, I too had worked as an HR manager in the past. It was partly as a result of this that my interest turned to HR managers. It thus happened that in the course of an interview, I placed myself in the situation described by the subject. This made analysis easier, because the context was thus familiar to me. Emotionally, however, I was no longer especially attached to the field that our shared experiences would have presented a problem during the interviews or during their analysis.

### **4.3.2. Data collection**

#### **4.3.2.1. Research field and sample selection**

To meet my research objectives – examining the meaning of work and process of the change in the work meaning – and to explore potential background mechanisms, I chose

to study representatives of one profession, human resources managers. According to Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001), job crafting is a possibility in almost every job. Human resources managers provide an interesting sample because the scientific regard of HR practices and HR in general is faced with several contradictions, some of which have been accompanying HR functions since early on. A basic tension is present in the name itself: human (centered on the individual, caring) and management (control); in other words, caring and control are both present in this field (Legge, 1995). A further source of tension is that HR has always had to fight to prove its own reason for existence; from the time when this function was established, the value it brings to an organization has always been called into question. These trends continue, to this day, to define the directions for development of HR work; HR must always work to prove that there is a reason for it to exist, and that it is important, toward senior and line managers (Nkomo – Ensley, 1999; Farkas – Karoliny – Poór, 2009). Although in many corporations, the HR manager has achieved a respectable position within the company hierarchy, and can participate in business decisions, from a manager's point of view HR is generally regarded somewhat ambiguously (Szóts-Kováts, 2006). HR professionals, then, must bear considerable burdens: how do they identify with either the humane or the control side of their function, how do they achieve their rightful position in the company and how do they prove that their work is necessary?

### **The HR Field – International and Hungarian Background**

Human resources, as a profession, has over 100 years of history to look back on. The first HR sections were established sometime between 1900 and 1920. It was, primarily, U.S. practices and scientific activities which had a significant impact (Staehle, 1990) on the establishment of HR as a field; at the same time, in Europe, it was primarily British methods and experiences which had great influence. Generally speaking, the establishment of HR as a field was different in every country, according to the factors below: the (1) environmental factors, such as demographics, relevant for each region or country, as well as social values; (2) the shaping of competition strategies, including the question of how must people contribute to competitiveness; (3) the development of professional HR knowledge (Bokor et al., 2005). Over the course of the last century, HR as a profession has undergone continuous change, and the scope of activities belonging to this area has also expanded considerably.

Recent studies have confirmed that international companies' practices, indeed, have an effect on the practices of Hungarian HR professionals. Karoliny et al. (2005) examined the transformation of HR practices, and compared data from various years to come up with the following findings. Hungarian HR managers continue to occupy an important position in the company hierarchy. At foreign-owned corporations operating in Hungary, HR practices tend to follow European and American trends; Hungarian

companies, however, lag behind considerably. Another unfavorable trend is that Hungarian companies have not been able to catch up in terms of human resources development and education expenditures. The study “Economic competitiveness” (Bácsi et al., 2006), providing a review of changes during the past ten years in the case of small and medium enterprises, did not identify significant changes in the field of HR: compensation, performance evaluation and training did not see real changes. An analysis of management members’ professional skills also did not reveal any great developments over the past ten years.

### **HR Role Models and HR Managers**

From the perspective of my own research, I believe the most significant research studies were the ones examining the role of HR and the HR manager. A review of such studies follows. HR role models spell out what kinds of expectations the various members of an organization have of HR professionals (Bokor et al., 2005). Corner – Ulrich (1996) divided HR role models into four categories; these categories are used, adding Hungarian research studies to the model.

Activities are in the focus (HR professionals’ activities). Four roles are identified: support, service, consultations and leadership (Walker, 1994 in Corner – Ulrich, 1996). According to Walker, most HR professionals spend the most time in the first two roles; companies, however, wish to emphasize the second two roles.

Focusing on time (how HR professionals spend their time). Six roles are possible, according to this approach: businessperson, driver of change, internal consultant, strategic planner and implementer, talent manager, resource manager and cost superior (see Schuler, 1990, for more details).

Metaphors in the focus (what identity to HR professionals attach to themselves). Wiley’s (1992) model belongs to this third group, in which roles are differentiated according to strategic processes, legal matters and operational perspectives. Three to seven roles are identified in each of these. The role model put forward by Bokor et al. (2006) is one Hungarian study fitting this group. The authors, according to the self-image of HR managers, were able to identify certain emblematic HR managers: parrot (narrow focus, understands the message); mother hen (a bridge between the management and employees); enlightened ruler (has the power, does not change); fighter (lives for the fight and the conflict); nanny and schoolteacher (knows better what others should be doing); guru (does it instead of others); advisor (supports, recommends, confirms); implementer (overburdened with operative tasks).

Value added in the focus (what value does HR add). Ulrich’s (1997, 1998) HR business partner model belongs to the fourth, and to this day most popular, group. In Ulrich’s



model, HR must see to the following four roles, dependent on whether the main focus of the role's activities are strategic or operative issues, or the process or the human: administrative expert, employee champion, strategic partner, change agent. The human-process dimension did not arise in a Hungarian context (Bokor et al., 2005); only two compound roles could be identified.

A portion of research studies dealing with HR managers examine the career of an HR professional: does a woman's career differ from a man's (Ackah – Heaton, 2003), what career path leads to a position as HR manager (Kelly – Gennard, 2000) and how committed are HR professionals to their work (Snape – Redman, 2003). Studies examining the sensemaking of HR managers utilized a different approach. Watson (1995), comparing the realities of HR as well as rhetoric about HR, uses a social constructionist approach. What is HR, as a concept, label or rhetorical construct? Watson and Bargiela-Chiappini (1998) takes a similar approach to examine how the self-constructed messages and stories in Italian and British HR literature contribute to a better understanding of manager' tensions and dilemmas.

Having reviewed HR literature, I did not yet encounter any study which would have examined how HR managers experience their day-to-day life, what their work means to them and how this changes for them in light of critical situations. Based on this review, the research provides new findings based on the perspective of HR work.

#### **4.3.2.2. Size and composition of the sample**

Following the selection of the profession to serve as my research field, the next important step was **determining the sample**. In keeping with the traditions of qualitative research, the sample was compiled using not a statistical approach, but a theoretical one; the sample is deliberately small and contextually embedded (Miles – Huberman, 1994; Bokor, 2000; Gelei, 2002). When compiling my sample I looked for variety in terms of individual character traits. I determined six traits and sought to ensure variety in them:

- gender: male vs. female;
- size of company: small-medium vs. large – I hypothesized that the size of the company could influence the significance of the community;
- company ownership: Hungarian vs. international;
- age: 32 and under vs. 32-40 vs. 40-50 vs. 50 and over – experiences encountered; career purposes may be different as age progresses; it was difficult to find HR managers under 30, leading me to raise the “young” age category slightly;

- management level: first-level HR manager vs. second level HR manager – I hypothesized that there may be a correlation between the meaning of work and the responsibilities of the job;
- number of subordinates: none vs. 1-5 vs. 5-10 vs. 10-20 vs. 20 or more – I hypothesized that there may be a correlation between the meaning of work and the responsibilities that come with the job.

Ultimately, the sample was the following:

**Figure 11: Sample composition**

| <b>Interview Subject<sup>16</sup></b> | <b>Gender</b> | <b>Company Size</b> | <b>Company Ownership</b> | <b>Age</b> | <b>Mgmt level</b> | <b>No. of employees supervised</b> |
|---------------------------------------|---------------|---------------------|--------------------------|------------|-------------------|------------------------------------|
| Bence                                 | Male          | Large               | Hungarian                | Under 32   | Secondary         | 5-10                               |
| Rita                                  | Female        | Small, medium       | Hungarian                | 32-40      | Primary           | 1-5                                |
| Léna                                  | Female        | Small, medium       | Hungarian                | 32-40      | Primary           | 1-5                                |
| Balázs                                | Male          | Large               | International            | 40-50      | Primary           | 20+                                |
| Hajnal                                | Female        | Large               | International            | 40-50      | Primary           | 5-10                               |
| Norbert                               | Male          | Small, medium       | International            | 40-50      | Primary           | 1-5                                |
| Viktor                                | Male          | Large               | International            | 40-50      | Primary           | 10-20                              |
| Szilvia                               | Female        | Large               | International            | 40-50      | Primary           | 1-5                                |
| Csilla                                | Female        | Large               | Hungarian                | Over 50    | Primary           | 10-20                              |
| Mihály                                | Male          | Large               | International            | Over 50    | Primary           | 5-10                               |
| Melinda                               | Female        | Large               | Hungarian                | Over 50    | Secondary         | 20+                                |

My research was built around non-probability sampling (Babbie, 2003); one type of such sampling is the snowball method. This method means that a target individual's personal connections help seek out the next individual, who then in turn recommends a third individual, and so on. The term snowball refers to the gradually increasing size of the sample as each person interviewed recommends new ones. Whether this method provides a representative sample may be questioned; it is thus appropriate for use in

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<sup>16</sup> In an effort to protect my interview subjects, I present their data by category (and not by showing the precise information obtained). Subjects' names have been changed. Hajnal and Melinda, at the time of the interviews, were not working as HR managers; I therefore indicated their last HR managerial position in the table above.

investigative research. The snowball method is useful when examining a population whose members are difficult to seek out otherwise (Babbie, 2003; Szokolszky, 2004).

In my research, I conducted **case-specific analysis**: I examined pleasant and unpleasant critical incidents and the effects these had on the meaning of work. In interviews conducted with my sample of eleven individuals I was able to identify twenty-five cases: of these, fifteen had to do with negative experiences and ten were linked to positive events.

**Figure 12: Cases examined, broken down by subjects**

| Cases                |          |                    |          |
|----------------------|----------|--------------------|----------|
| Unpleasant surprises | Norbert1 | Pleasant surprises | Bence2   |
|                      | Norbert2 |                    | Csilla2  |
|                      | Hajnall  |                    | Csilla3  |
|                      | Szilvial |                    | Mihály1  |
|                      | Viktor1  |                    | Mihály2  |
|                      | Csilla1  |                    | Viktor2  |
|                      | Léna2    |                    | Szilvia2 |
|                      | Bence1   |                    | Norbert3 |
|                      | Melinda1 |                    | Norbert4 |
|                      | Melinda2 |                    | Melinda4 |
|                      | Melinda3 | Summary            | 10 cases |
|                      | Rita1    |                    |          |
|                      | Léna1    |                    |          |
|                      | Balázs1  |                    |          |
|                      | Balázs2  |                    |          |
| Summary              | 15 cases |                    |          |

As the figure above shows, a minimum of one and a maximum of four cases<sup>17</sup> are connected to each subject.

#### 4.3.2.3. The process of data collection

The primary tool of data collection for my dissertation was the set of **qualitative interviews** (Kvale, 1996) which provided an opportunity to explore personal experiences related to the defining events identified by interview subjects, as well as to describe the individual's thoughts and feelings. Each interview consisted primarily of two major focus points: first, exploring the meaning work carries for the individual and secondly, collecting surprising and critical events or cases which in some way –

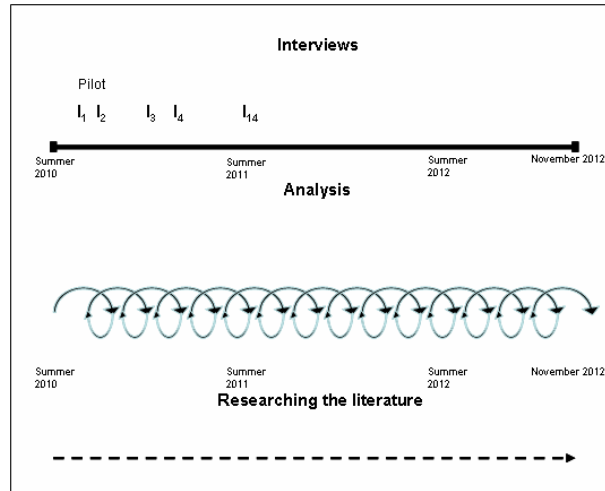
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<sup>17</sup> In my proposal, I anticipated three cases per subject; I was not far off in terms of the number of cases per person.

positively or negatively – significantly affected the meaning of work as defined by the individual. From a contentual perspective, the second focus of my interviews closely resembled narrative interviews; at the same time, the entire interview itself was closer to a thematic interview in nature (Szokolszky, 2004), which solicits data about personal experiences related to specific subjects. The conversation revolved around a specific, clearly defined subject: the meaning of work, its personal interpretations and related personal experiences. Interviews were structured around a preliminary interview outline; at the same time, interviews varied widely according to the specific subject's own experiences. I conducted interviews with subjects belonging to my research sample, recording each session. I used a qualitative methodology to analyze the verbatim transcript of the recorded interviews: I looked for similar patterns and coded these, relying on the content analysis software Atlas.ti. I structured my analysis around three main questions: exploring the content of the meaning of work; identifying the change in the work meaning; looking separately at positive reinforcing processes and negative processes that lead the individual to be less certain.

In qualitative interviews, data collection and data analysis is performed concurrently, in an iterative fashion (Huberman – Miles, 1994; Maxwell, 1996). My contentual focus evolved gradually during the data collection, as I incorporated more concepts in my study: work orientation, meaning mechanisms and meaning schemas. Originally, I had planned to conduct between 7 and 10 interviews, but ended up conducting 14 (of these, one subject did not have managerial responsibilities, meaning I was unable to use the data; I interviewed one subject twice and one interview subject was unwilling to re-interview with more specific topics). The cyclical process of data collection and data analysis lasts until theoretical saturation (Glaser – Strauss, 1967): i.e. until the point when additional data and cases would not significantly improve one's understanding, or would not enrich theoretical processes and theoretical frames. I believe that I have reached this level of theoretical saturation in my sample of HR managers as far as the study of the change in the work meaning is concerned. As a continuation, it would be possible to expand the study to cover another sample – i.e. non-managerial individuals and not HR representatives. This would exceed the scope of this dissertation, but might nonetheless lead to further interesting information about the nature of the meaning of work.

**Figure 13: The process of data collection**



I intended to conduct pilot studies with two interview subjects. I conducted the interviews with both subjects; then, following an initial analysis, I modified my questions. I returned to one of my subjects to ask my modified questions; the other subject was unwilling to interview again, so I was unable to use that interview in my research.

#### **4.3.2.4. The qualitative interview**

Semi-structured interviews allow the subject to explain and expand on their thoughts and explicit knowledge about the particular subject; at the same time, depending on the questioning technique, it also becomes possible to explore areas of implicit knowledge (emotions, motives, interpretations). In the case of semi-structured interviews, if new topics arise during the process of interviewing which the researcher finds important, it is possible to return to earlier interview subjects to collect missing data and information. This, naturally, requires the researcher to revisit any conclusions drawn up until that point in light of the new information collected (Carter, 1999).

I used semi-structured interviews to collect my data. Each conversation lasted between 60 and 140 minutes, with the average duration between 70 and 80 minutes. Initially, at the start of the interviews, or even when preparing for the interviews, I described the purposes and process of my research and how I would be processing the data. I asked each subject to provide demographic data as well as information about the major stages

of their career to date. I treated the names of my interview subjects confidentially and ensured that they would not be identifiable by others. Later, in the quotations, I changed their names to ensure trust and confidentiality.

Initially, the interviews focused on critical incidents experienced by the subject: what happened, why it happened and what the consequences were. I started my research with two pilot interviews, which made it clear that these questions are insufficient and that I would need to add further questions to my research. I realized that interview subjects did not actually, explicitly, discuss their relationship to their work; I therefore chose to include the following question: “What does your work mean to you?” Thus, after two pilot interviews, the key topic of my research was made to appear more markedly in the interviews: the meaning of work. We returned to this question several times in each interview.

In terms of critical situations, I found that the reaction of subjects varied when responding to my questions asking them to identify and relate critical situations. Some of the subjects had more difficulty than others when trying to identify such situations; I therefore used a number of different questions and approaches (e.g. identifying particularly positive and negative experiences). In terms of the number of critical elements: several interview subjects were unable to name three critical situations (the number I had originally been hoping for). Accordingly, we discussed however many they were able to identify.

I continued my research by using a question outline (which gradually expanded during my research, as described above). The outline is attached as an appendix. I considered the questions to be a sort of menu – one that I can diverge from and one that I can add to, depending on the particular subject I was interviewing. The questions I used during the interviews may be categorized according to the following:

- questions aimed at establishing contact and negotiating the framework,
- questions aimed at demographic information,
- questions aimed at the personal definition of the meaning of work,
- questions aimed at the critical situations,
- questions to clarify and verify,
- concluding questions.

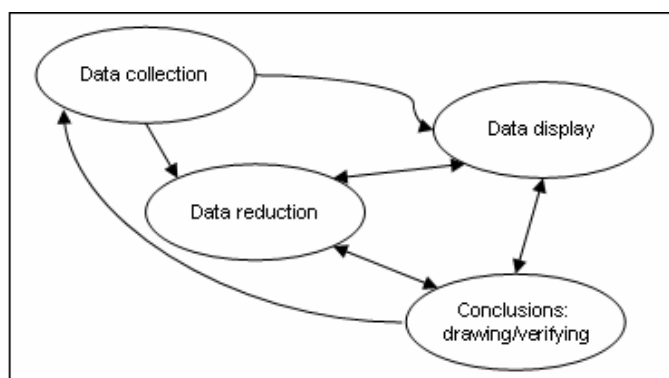
Almost all of the interview subjects expressed an interest in their own cases and in the dissertation itself; I provide these to them once the dissertation is finalized, and we will discuss their respective cases in detail together. Discussing the cases was not something I could endeavor to do in the time available; this is not something that I was able to channel into my dissertation.

A verbatim transcript was prepared of each interview. I relied on help from others to prepare these transcripts; I then compared each transcript with the recording of the interview before analyzing the data.

### 4.3.3. Data analysis

Data analysis and data collection are closely linked and are linked in the research process iteratively. Huberman and Miles (1994) use a notable figure to describe the process.

Figure 14: Elements of data analysis: the interactive model (source: Huberman – Miles, 1994: 429)



Data analysis incorporates three interlinked sub-processes (Huberman–Miles, 1994; Miles–Huberman, 1994): data reduction, data representation and the process of drawing and verifying conclusions. These may precede data collection, may take place concurrently or may continue following the collection of data.

**Data reduction:** reducing the amount of information available through selecting, on the one hand, the conceptual framework and research question and, on the other hand, the research methodology. In my research, I applied the approach of **meaning categorization** (Kvale, 1996): I grouped interview texts into categories, examining the connections and links between them. I examined the connections between various categories and codes separately in the case of each interview subject, and then I placed any corresponding categories in separate groups. I also examined the relationships between categories and groups. The various categories and groups in my research were, thus, created based on interview texts and through the relevant theories. This is how the various category-groups of orientation and mechanisms were created, together with the individual steps of the process.

**Data representation:** presenting the data in a structured and condensed fashion which facilitates the drawing of conclusions. Using the software Atlas.ti, I grouped the codes in various hierarchies and groups, and used a graphic representation of the relationships between closely interlinked codes to come up with a web, which I used primarily to examine relationships between orientation and mechanisms. The search function of Atlas.ti was a useful tool to that end: i.e. I was able to search for and call up the relevant texts for each code and group.

In order to understand the change process, I prepared individual **case descriptions** for each change processes, which contained quotes and a **case-level analysis** broken down by code (Appendix). Processing the codes in this way facilitated the comparison of the various cases, the classification of the cases and the identification of relationships between the cases. To present a summary representation of the data, I plotted the various steps of the processes on a **summary chart** (Chapter 5.3). This also depicted the relationships between the various steps. Furthermore, I prepared a **summary table** (Chapter 5.3) allowing for an easy comparison of the various cases. The table provides a concise overview of the data available and was of great assistance during the analytical stage.

**Drawing and validating conclusions:** interpreting and analyzing the data represented and condensed. First, I assigned the meanings of work to various in vivo codes which I identified using the texts: initially, I proceeded case by case; later, when comparing codes, I conducted my analysis among the cases. When analyzing the relationships between codes, I took into consideration the five orientations listed in the literature, as well as the mechanism types. I then linked to them the codes found when it appeared to be relevant. I also examined similarities and differences between the codes, combining several codes where necessary, or taking them apart if needed; this was done according to the examination of the specific subjects as well as other criteria (e.g. intrinsic or extrinsic motives, the relationships of orientations, mechanisms).

I also created a code for the process of change, where I collected pieces of texts having to do with the change; I later subdivided these according to the steps of the process. My use of the content analysis software Atlas.ti assisted the recording of codes: I was able to indicate relationships between codes in the code catalog by naming the various codes (using numbers to create a hierarchy). I also prepared separate memos of the codes. As my analysis progressed, these memos expanded, as did my understanding of the various codes and their relationships to one another. During my analysis of the process and the change, I was able to obtain a clearer understanding of the relationships between the various codes by examining, in detail, the specific cases. I then channeled these back into the contentual analysis of the codes.



I identified different patterns of the change in meaning in the process of change. In my analysis, I examined these from the perspective of reinterpretation of the situation and the topic of the change in the work meaning, focusing on various specific phenomena in the process. By expanding on this analysis further, I was able to identify patterns from the perspective of the frames of the change in the work meaning.

The table summarizing the changes allows for a comprehensive overview of the various groups, patterns and relationships. It also provides an opportunity to identify the frequency of the various cases, to determine how many cases fall under each group (e.g. temporary or lasting change; different types of reinterpreting a situation).

I used methods of comparison and seeking out differences as a tool of analysis and of drawing conclusions during the process of analysis. I placed special emphasis on examining particularly striking and special cases: cases which, for some reason, fit in no individual group during the analysis or were impossible to group according to specific criteria. The first memorable such case was that of Hajnal. In her case, I did not code self-esteem during the first round of coding. In all other cases, I found self-esteem codes, which made me reexamine her case again. I found that in the case of individuals whose primary orientation is that of the craftsmanship – like in Hajnal’s case – it is difficult to detect self-esteem: in these narratives, self-esteem does not appear explicitly, only in an implicit form. As was the case when identifying lasting and temporary changes, I sought out blatant and special cases which were out of place. I did this as long as both groups became homogenous, and the differences between the groups became greater than the differences between members of the group.

#### **4.4. Validity: quality aspects of the research**

When conducting a scientific study, it is important to ensure the quality of the research. Qualitative research schools tend to rely on criteria such as validity, reliability and generalizability, which are employed in traditional studies. At the same time, the meaning of these criteria here is different, as is the method used to achieve these purposes, than in the case of traditional research studied (for more, see Gelei, 2002). The traditional approach utilizes an end-point system of control (Bokor, 2000): there is a pre-determined sample, a pre-determined measurement, pre-defined variables and scales as well as statistical sampling. At the same time, qualitative research places the emphasis on the process itself. Ensuring validity and reliability, as well as control, are present at every phase of the research (Kvale, 1996; Gelei, 2002). This practice, however, may be formalized to a much lesser extent than is the case with traditional research methods using a quantitative approach.

In my dissertation, I paid special attention to providing a detailed overview of the methodology applied: what steps did I take and what tactics and methodological tools did I use to reach my next conclusion. In the following section, I summarized what principles I adhered to when conducting my research. These helped improve the validity, reliability and generalizability of my research. I relied on the works of Miles – Huberman (1994), Huberman – Miles (1994), Kvale (1996), Maxwell (1996), Bokor (2000) and Gelei (2002) when compiling this list.

### **Self-reflective attention, acceptance and raising awareness**

- Prior to examining the data obtained, I recorded my presuppositions, my emerging understanding and schemas, so that by making these explicit, I was able to look at the data in a more open manner. I was able to observe how my subjects view and understand their work and the world around them. In this respect, I was initially too open: I did not possess the kind of solid conceptual frame (the concept of the schema as I defined it was insufficiently delineated) which would have allowed me to begin the analysis. I therefore I decided to begin the analysis with orientation, which I opened up to mechanisms and eventually to the re-defined concept of schemas, as I saw fit based on what my subjects described.
- When conducting the interviews, I consciously paid attention to what influence I myself may have had on the subjects (by conducting the interview at a specific venue, through anything I said or did, or through the way I dressed).
- I recorded my own understandings and recognitions already during the process, treating these as hypotheses and moving forward with data analysis along their lines.
- At every step of the process, I examined and recorded my dilemmas and options, and I made conscious decisions (e.g. compiling the sample, opportunities for analyzing the data).
- Tracking surprises. I encountered many surprises during my research, resulting from the exploratory methodology used. It was a surprise for me when, following the collection of data and the initial phase of analysis, I was unable to make progress with my concept of the schema, and I had to begin the analysis with the concept of orientation. It later became clear that the concept of orientation is unable to track changes as finely as desired: my data was changing and this was not represented on the level of orientation. I looked for a new variable that would be suited for the appropriately fine tracking of the process-oriented approach: my data and my codes led me to mechanisms. This was when I opened up to a new concept: the area of work meaning mechanisms. An additional surprise for me was that I was able to apply the schema approach on a way that this would help me to reach an entirely

new approach. All of these were, essentially, changes affecting the conceptual frames and schemas of the study.

### **Transparency**

- My data is presented in a structured format, and with the cases elaborated, in an appendix to the dissertation. Although the cases contain raw data and plenty of quotes<sup>18</sup>, they also depict interview subjects' opinions. This allows the reader to look up raw data in their original context to track any level of my conclusions.
- I strove to document my research process clearly and to make it transparent. For instance: I have shown how my research focus changed, or how the concept of personal work schemas changed.
- I planned for a pilot project to make my questions and data analysis more exact. I described the findings of the pilot phase and decisions made based on that in the thesis.
- I paid special attention to, and covered in my thesis, how I handled contradictions or contradictory cases.

### **Triangulation**

- I used a tape recorder when collecting my data. Although I did not prepare the transcripts myself, I listened to each interview and added to the transcript where necessary, while listening to the recordings. I kept a research log to record my experiences during the interviews and while examining transcripts and analyzing them. I relied, in addition to the interviews themselves, on subjects' biographic information.
- Seeking out contradictory interpretations and explanations; self-checking. I endeavored to seek out negative and contradictory cases which went against prevailing theories or my own presuppositions. This was the case with Hajnal (described earlier), and the continuously evolving interpretation and significance of the mechanisms of self-esteem and significance. For a long time, I did not attach special significance to the latter as compared to the phenomenon of self-esteem, although the literature does underscore its importance. I then examined the cases from the perspective of significance, which was when I realized the connection between significance and the meaningfulness of work. When I examined significance in these cases, it became clear to me that Léna's first case represents an exception, as significance did not decrease in her case in the critical situation. Reexamining this again, I realized that HR as a profession represents for her the

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<sup>18</sup> All interview subjects agreed to the use of the cases they described in this dissertation; their names, however, have been changed.

possibility to help, thereby reducing significance in her case after all. Using this technique, my own understanding of the individual cases and the phenomena examined was continuously enriched.

- Replicating conclusions. I looked for inconsistencies in the cases and between the cases: did the individual's self-image and values change, and were any changes temporary or lasting? By also examining values, beliefs, self-image and orientation, as well as the mechanism, I was able to view each case through several different lenses. When I encountered something through one lens, I verified it through another, using another perspective of analysis. This allowed for cross-verification so that I could examine each case from 6-8 different perspectives, making each case clearer and stripping it as much as possible of contradictions.
- I sought out my colleagues and other experts for feedback as far as my conclusions and analysis were concerned. I also sought out the opinions of several of my colleagues, cognitive experts and psychologists in connection with difficulties related to the meaning of work and when identifying or interpreting schemas encountered in the text. I paid special attention to any contradicting opinions provided by experts.

### **Generalizability**

- When compiling my sample, I strove to select as different subjects as possible, according to the criteria chosen (according to age, gender, type of organization, etc. – for additional detail on the criteria, see section 4.3.2.2). I also strove to find unique cases, individuals who had been through major career changes and whose career has taken special paths; these individuals were able to consider several factors as far as their work and the meaning of their work are concerned (e.g. Melinda). Further, I hoped to find cases of individuals who are still very young, have only been recently made managers and thus view their work very differently from those who have worked as managers for 20-30 years (e.g. Bence). I strove to ensure that the sample includes someone who has only very few subordinates as well as someone who supervises many employees.
- Maxwell (1996) differentiates between internal and external generalizability: in the case of the former, the conclusions drawn may be generalized only for the entire field or group, while in the case of the latter, the inferences may be valid beyond that range. In Maxwell's opinion, internal generalizability is one of the strong suits of qualitative research. Often, however, there is no reason to suppose that the conclusions drawn from a valid qualitative study would not be valid in a different context as well.
- We can differentiate between three possible levels of generalizability: (1) valid from the sample for an entire population; (2) valid from a particular practical context to the level of the theory; and (3) valid from one case examined to a next. In the case

of qualitative studies, it is primarily the latter two levels which are possible. The last item is of interest primarily within the framework of the study, while theoretical generalizability is actually the real test external validity. “In this case, generalizability means that a general theoretical framework is established which may be utilized in another context as well. By doing so, these new contexts may be understood, given certain other conditions” (Bokor, 2000:127).

- Thus, my research aims at internal generalizability and, by developing the conceptual framework itself, at theoretical generalizability. I relied on the following criteria to support the generalizability of my research (Bokor, 2000:128):
  - A careful identification and description of the unique features of my sample, to which I devoted an entire chapter.
  - Ensuring an appropriate variance of my sample. The variance of my sample was ensured by my criteria when selecting the sample; I followed these criteria while collecting my sample. When compiling my sample, I strove to select as different subjects as possible, according to the criteria chosen (according to age, gender, type of organization, etc.).
  - Providing sufficient, detailed descriptions so that the reader may identify conditions matching their own situation. I ensure this through quotes and a detailed elaboration of the cases. I am including the cases in the appendix to my dissertation, so that the reader may verify for themselves the validity of my conclusions.
  - Matching and linking with theories developed earlier. I devoted an entire chapter to comparison with existing literature and to a discussion of new and different conclusions.
  - Providing a general description of processes and their results. This is ensured through summary chapters.
  - Making the generalizable parts of the theory explicit. This is ensured through summary chapters.

## **5. Research findings**

On the basis of my research, critical events influencing the meaning of work may be divided into two groups. The first group consists of cases which subjects characterize with the following terms:” breaking points and similar disappointments” (case Léna 2),”that was a more serious turning point” (case Léna1),”that negative thing” (case Bence1),”Here I was faced with an unpleasant surprise” (case Csilla1),”so that was a negative, definitely negative thing in my life” (case Melinda1). These cases all relate to

some kind of unpleasant event or surprise. The second group consists of cases which subjects characterize as follows: "these feedbacks were absolutely positive to me." (case Bence2), "so, to me, it was a very very pleasant surprise" (case Csilla2), "in fact, there was just one more pleasant surprise" (case Csilla3), "so then came this positive [happening]" (case Melinda4), "I had a really good experience" (case Viktor2). These cases all relate to some kind of pleasant event or surprise. During the processing of the data I adopted the hypothesis that there may be differences in the effects of pleasant and unpleasant surprises. Therefore, I went along with the above grouping and analyzed the effects of critical events to the meaning and meaningfulness of work. My hypothesis was based on George and Jones's model (2001) who pointed out that different cognitive activities are in keeping with positive and negative emotional reactions.

Basically, when I presented my results I followed the changing of the process and dealt with contentual aspects therein separately. I chose this kind of data presenting because I found that answers to research questions closely intermingle and cannot be easily separated. In the next paragraph I indicate which research question refers to which chapter. Inter-related research questions are dealt in a contracted way.

The study of process:

- How the meaning and meaningfulness of work has changed for the subjects: what processes and steps have been involved? What factors have influenced the change in the work meaning?
  - I give a summary of this process in Chapter 5.1.1 and a detailed presentation in Chapter 5.1.2.
  - Making a difference between the meaning and meaningfulness of work and the study of change are dealt with in Chapter 5.3.2.
  - The summarizing Chapter 5.3 deals with both contentual and process-related aspects.

Contentual study:

- Have the meaning and meaningfulness of work changed for the individual in question? To what extent?
  - In the research I found and processed a case in which temporary and lasting change had occurred, and with no change in the work meaning. In Chapter 5.1.2.6 the lasting character of change is dealt with in more details.
  - Making a difference between the meaning and meaningfulness of work and the study of change are dealt with in Chapter 5.3.2.
- What kind of patterns of change meaning can be identified?
  - Contentual questions are dealt within the study of change in two sub-chapters: in Chapter 5.1.2.5 patterns are explored, whereas in Chapter 5.1.2.6 emphasis is put on the lasting character of change.

- The summarizing Chapter 5.3 deals with both contentual and process-related aspects.

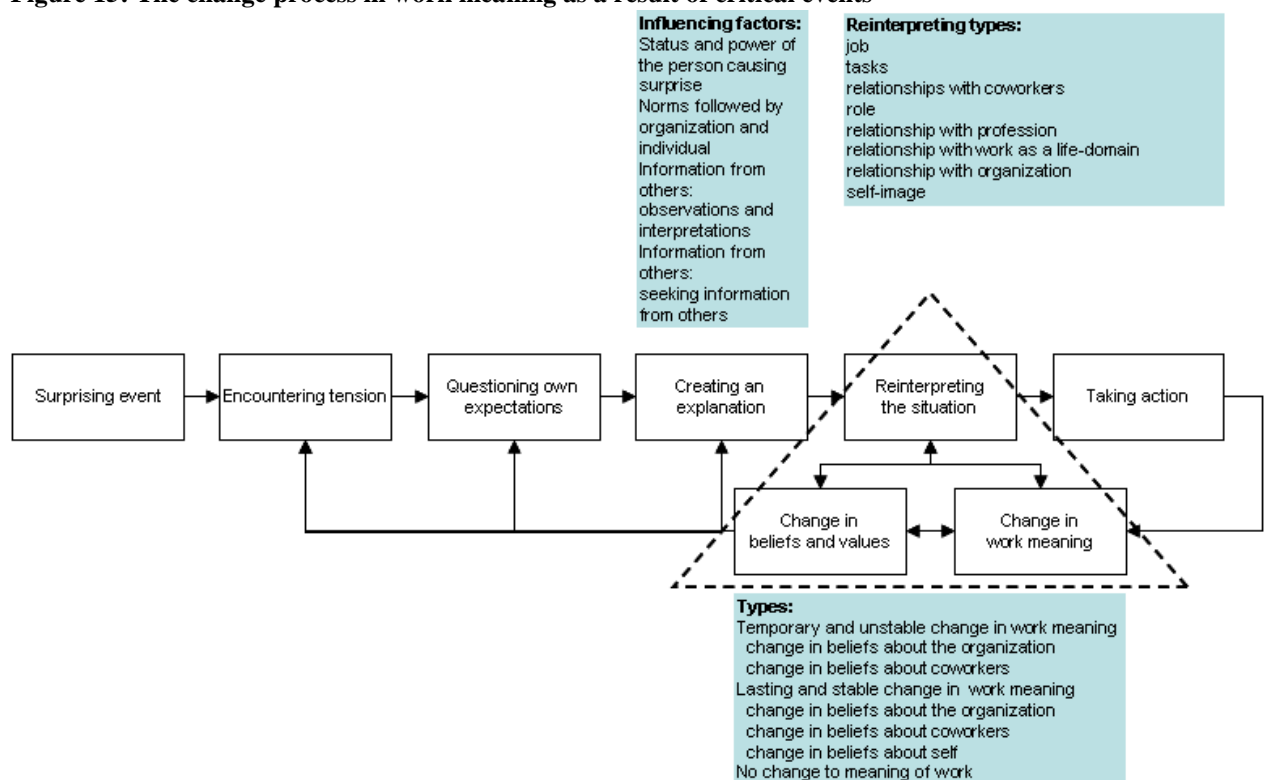
## 5.1. Unpleasant surprises

In my research I found that unpleasant surprises had taken a negative direction compared to the individuals' expectations and risked the individuals' self-esteem. In most cases negative surprises had also led to a change in the work meaning.

### 5.1.1. summary description of the process

The figure below depicts the process and the relationships between the various steps.

**Figure 15: The change process in work meaning as a result of critical events<sup>19</sup>**



Each critical event commenced with some kind of event that was unexpected for the individual. Situations found to be “different” and unexpected are described in various

<sup>19</sup> Based on the research

ways by researchers dealing with the study of sensemaking (Weick – Sutcliffe – Obstfeld, 2005): contradiction, malfunction, surprise, flustering, uncertainty, opportunity or chaos. In my model, based on Louis (1980a,b) I chose to describe this “different” situation as surprise.

Critical events are always accompanied, to some extent, by tension, which is in keeping with the cognitive dissonance theory proposed by Festinger (2000/1962). George and Jones (2001) pointed to the phenomenon of cognitive dissonance in their model depicting the process of schema change. When experiencing critical events, individuals strive to reduce tension to a level that is acceptable to them and to reinforce their own positive self-image and self-esteem.

As a result of the surprise, individuals recounted how in some cases they came to question their own beliefs and expectations. Individuals generally wish to know, and find reasons for, why the unexpected situation occurred and why the expected outcome did not materialize. Several factors influenced the individuals’ interpretation of the unexpected situation and what meaning they give to it: (1) status and power of the individual eliciting the surprise, (2) norms adhered to by the organization and the individual, (3) information obtained from others: observations and interpretations, (4) information obtained from others: seeking information from others.

The tension experienced by the individual tended to ease through the change in the interpretation of the situation and/or through a change in their situation serving to reinforce their self-esteem and positive self-image. Individuals shifted their interpretation of the situation in the following ways: (1) reinterpreting their job; (2) reinterpreting their tasks; (3) reinterpreting their workplace relationships; (4) reinterpreting their role; (5) reinterpreting their relationship with their profession; (6) reinterpreting their relationship to work as a life-domain; (7) reinterpreting their relationship with the organization; (8) reinterpreting their own self-image. Each individual may have experienced one or several of these types of reinterpretations – and reinterpreting the situation was necessary in every case to ease the tension. Webster and Mertova (2007) also describe this when discussing a new understanding and a new view of the world (p. 73). One exception to this notion is the case of Balázs<sup>2</sup>, which shows that if the degree of surprise is not significant enough to lead to some kind of change, the individual is able to reduce the cognitive dissonance within a short time and does not need to reinterpret or redefine the situation to do so. This is actually typical in the lives of most people, and it is in fact reinterpreting which is considered extraordinary.

In approximately one-half of the cases, the different types of reinterpretation and the actions of the individual to realize these steps led to an easing of tension within the individual. In some of these cases, reinterpretation resulted in solutions without needing



radical changes. In some cases, individuals describing an easing of tensions resorted to more radical actions to change their situation: they left the organization or switched to a different job within the same organization or at a subsidiary. In the other half of the cases, reinterpretation did not successfully bring about the necessary easing of tension, meaning that the situation still carries within it further potential changes, making it unstable.

I examine the change in work meaning and the change in beliefs separately. I approached the meaning of work from two perspectives, examining the change in mechanisms and orientations in each case. The cases may be divided into two distinct groups according to the durability of the change: temporary and unstable changes vs. lasting and stable changes – these are the dividing lines between the two groups. Both groups include cases where the individual's beliefs about the organization changed and where their beliefs about coworkers changed. I was able to identify cases where the meaning of work did not change.

## **5.1.2. Detailed presentation of the process**

### **5.1.2.1. A surprising event**

The cases produced various surprising situations. The most characteristic pattern was when individuals had a certain expectation about work, e.g. the kind of service they are going to give will be welcome. The role of expectation is amply dealt with in literature (Weick – Sutcliffe – Obstfeld, 2005).

It is worth having a closer look at individual cases to see the roots of controversy. The first group involves cases where external conditions had been changed unexpectedly or more suddenly than anticipated:

- a change had been noticed in managerial expectations:
  - top management did not share decision-making with middle management (case Bence1),
  - the general manager ended established supporting systems (case Léna2),
  - processes had been standardised and five of his employees were dismissed (case Norbert1)
  - functions had been centralised and several of them were taken away from her (case Hajnal1)
- managerial decisions could not be tuned to their set of values:

- her immediate manager was dismissed (case Melinda1)
- the general manager ended established supporting systems (case Léna2)
- her own position had been transferred to someone else and she had been offered an other position (case Melinda2)
- she had been given a lot of extra work (case Hajnal1)
- unexpected negative feedback:
  - negative performance evaluation (cases Norbert1, Norbert2)
  - status questioned (case Csilla1),
  - clients did not appreciate their efforts (cases Szilvia1, Viktor1),
  - left out from social events (case Rita1)

In the second group the individual experienced a situation different from the anticipated one. The situations do not involve actual changes but refer to the differing expectations about themselves:

- managerial responsibility was too much for her (case Léna1)
- managerial tension was too much for her (case Melinda3)
- reacted too sensitively to downsizing the workforce (case Melinda1)

The above groupings imply that most of these surprising cases can be put down to a change in the environment or to the differing expectations. Most of the surprises were due to managerial decisions about organizational operation which all reduced the individuals' sense of importance: this way they felt that their contribution to organizational purposes had been diminished. Another source of surprise for several individuals involved managerial decisions that could not be tuned to their set of values. Unpleasant surprises were caused not only by managers but colleagues as well. Other causes included formal feedback, managerial performance-evaluation, negative or offending comments or reactions on work or a person. Another instance of unpleasant surprise was caused when individuals found themselves in a critical situation and acted differently from the way they would have expected from themselves.

### 5.1.2.2. Encountering tension

Experiencing controversies resulted in tension for individuals and when it had become unpleasant they tried to ease them. These cases involve different occurrences of tension:

swearing, foul language

„what the hell am I doing here” „one and a half years of sheer drudgery” (case Csilla1 )  
 ”it was a stupid thing to do ” , ”we all went berserk” (case Bence1),  
 ”how silly of me” (case Melinda3),  
 ”they were just fired like shit” (case Melinda1)

high words and heated tone : "let's just leave it there, alright ?" (case Hajnal1 ),  
"I just hated it" (case Hajnal1 ),  
"this battle must be fought in any way" (case Csilla1)

When they were telling their stories emotional tension appeared again, although these incidents had happened one or more or even fifteen years earlier. It can also be stated that tension in many cases had become lasting, exerting a longer influence on them.

*"this really bugged me" (case Bence1), "there was a nice heap of wrath" , "Bollocks!" case Csilla1 ), "we got irritated" (case Bence1), "it was horrid, I felt really awful " (case Szilvia1), "I felt down-trodden" (case Rita1), "breaking points and disappointments and the like" (case Léna2), "a painful revelation" (case Viktor1).*

The range of emotions is rather wide e.g. the fear from something bad, anger, wrath, sadness and disappointment because something did not happen the way the individual had expected. When studying upgraded tension, it is worth referring back to the theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 2000/1962:65). Here, the author points out that the intensity of dissonance changes with the degree of importance of involved factors. Every unpleasant situation the subjects talked about – in one way or another – had a negative influence on their self-esteem or self-image which are very important from the individuals' point of view. Therefore, they try to protect and strengthen it, as it counts as a rather strong motivating factor (Gecas, 1991; Rosso et al., 2010) which, understandably, justifies heated reactions during the interviews.

The heated, tense nature of these situations is further emphasized by individuals who, in some way or another, had been living in high tension for a longer period or faced sudden emotional upheavals which then lead to real or potential illnesses.

*„I got a tumor (case Csilla1),  
„I got ill [...] had gastric ulcer" (case Viktor1),  
„now I'm bound to have gastric ulcer" (case Bence1)  
„My blood pressure jumped up to 170, I just felt a big pressure on my chest, I couldn't go through the electrocardiogram examination" (case Melinda3).*

All this confirms that the need to ease tension had a special importance for the individuals, lest they should be harmed in some way. Certain unpleasant incidents induced the individuals to find an acceptable way that would ease tension and settle contradictions for them.

### **5.1.2.3. Questioning own expectations**

After being given some information some of the individuals reached the point where they admitted questioning their own beliefs and expectations. This kind of questioning and losing of confidence had a primary effect on their self-esteem and self-image –

more probably on those people who, in critical situations, tend to put the blame on themselves.

*“They could actually make me hesitate whether if senior management exhibit no need for my work in this respect, well then what the heck am I doing here”(case Csilla1)*

*“Then I really thought they might not like me at all. Maybe I’ll have to behave differently in the future.”(case Rita1)*

*“that wasn’t of too much use, either, and that made many of us quite uncertain”(case Bence1)*

*„Because of that, I sometimes feel I’m not multinational-conform. Yes, this really is a serious problem for me now.”(case Norbert2)*

One of the subjects (e.g. case Léna2), did not say a word about losing confidence. Instead, she made a firm statement about how she had not even thought about accepting the situation and how she dashed on to change it immediately. She insisted so firmly to her initial expectation that she did not even care to look for any supporting information for her case – she simply put the blame on the manager and the organization. Viktor1 case was another case of this kind, so we may suppose that they tend to blame others in critical situations. In the above two cases and in the case of those who tend to blame others in critical situations the step of questioning their own expectations had been left out.

#### **5.1.2.4. Creating an explanation**

Individuals in the sample collected further information in their own diverse ways to explain deviation from their expectations. When trying to explain situations the maintaining and protection of their self-esteem or the consolidation of their own standpoint played an important role. Individuals had been affected by several factors in the way they interpreted unexpected situations.

#### **The status and power of the person causing surprise**

The status and power of the person causing surprise is an important aspect as they affect the way the subjects interpret the situations and the meaning they give to them. Wrzesniewski et al. (2003) also call attention to this aspect. Obviously, the interpretation of the situation is affected by the subject’s own status and power as well.

*„they said, I’m too much for this organization, in their opinion, the company doesn’t need HR services of such quality, they believe I’m a true professional expert, but I should go somewhere else. Right in my face. And then I told the CEO, like okay, shall I pack my things then?” (case Csilla1)*

The above feedback came from top management, so Csilla construed she no longer had a place in the organization. If these comments had been made by a subordinate colleague, she would probably have reacted differently.

A negative feedback from a superior has a different effect from those given by other people:

*„But he honestly told me, as well, that if I carry on like this, then I might have to leave the company pretty soon.” (Case Norbert2)*

In the cases of negative feedback from the superior weighs in more heavily. Naturally, this aspect should be interpreted in the context of organizational culture.

It should also be noted that these problem stories mostly involved higher status managers, which confirms that power and status weigh in considerably in these cases.

### **Norms followed by organization and individual**

Organizational and individual norms (i.e. the way individuals would like to be treated) both formulate the individuals' expectations and have an influence on what kind of situations are considered unexpected and how they are to be interpreted. The following example highlights organizational norms, customs, and basic principles:

*„And as the headcount expanded, at one point I noticed that they were talking about activities I wasn't invited to, and I really felt miserable, why they didn't tell me if they had always invited me before, after all.” (case Rita1)*

As for individual norms, i.e. the way individuals would like to be treated the following examples are given:

*„I don't really like the, so I don't think it was appropriate, the management approach” (case Bence1)*  
*„you think, how dare he criticize me” (case Csilla1)*

### **Information from others. Observations and interpretations.**

Attributional theory may help when we examine how information coming from others affects the individual's own interpretation. According to this theory individuals are 'naive scientists' (Heider, 1958 in Forgas 2002/1985; Kelley, 1967 in Forgas 2002/1985), who use available information to interpret unexpected events while making their own characteristic bias on the way. One type of self-service bias may be observed in the research i.e. people readily suppose that their own attitudes, opinions, values, behavior are practically the same as the majority's attitudes, opinions and behavior. In other words, they like to think that they are 'normal' or similar to other human beings. This 'false consensus' bias (Ross, 1977 in Forgas 2002/1985) had come up in many

forms during the interviews. When interpreting this kind of contradiction subjects considered the case 'normal' or 'abnormal':

*„So it is completely normal [...] but still,” (Case Hajnal1)*  
*„that this is the normal way of things” (Rita1)*

The similarity in colleagues' or other people's behavior had surfaced in several cases:

*“It's interesting, lay-offs are in the air these days at this company. Everyone started to work, because everyone is frightened.”(Case Norbert2)*  
*„the people who really wanted and who were really able, they felt the exact same way, that is, no, and I talked with them a lot about this and I saw we weren't getting anywhere.”(case Bence1)*

Quite probably, the above cases also involve perceptual biases. Everybody or at least those who they consider similar to them must behave in a similar way. All this supports the reinforcement of the individual's own self and eases tension. These self-protective biases, therefore, help individuals to maintain a positive self-image of themselves (Forgas, 2002/1985).

There are other solutions to be found: Rita examined her own conduct in similar situations and came to the following conclusion:

*“and that I have a lot of activities, too, that I don't invite the director of whatever to, 'cause I just don't want him to be present. Or it's not adequate that he participate, and then I could already deal with it.” (case Rita1)*

In each case individuals looked for self-supporting information or perceived the environment to be familiar. These examples helped them to strengthen their position and – by serving as a model – they offered potential alternatives for finding a solution.

### **Information from others, seeking information from others**

This group consists of cases where individuals looked for support from a highly-esteemed manager in the organization: "I had the backing of the General Manager " case (Csilla1) or when they turned to their colleagues: „the people who really wanted and who were really able, they felt the exact same way, that is, no, and I talked with them a lot about this and I saw we weren't getting anywhere.”(case Bence1).

Another group consists of cases where individuals turned to family members: "At home I told my husband about it and he knows that I would never, in any way..." (case Szilvia1),"if he (the husband) doesn't say so, I'm not going to take one step ahead" (case Hajnal1). Support to ease tension came from family members. All this kind of information was directed to maintain and strengthen the positive self-image of the individual. To sum up, we can ascertain that individuals in critical situations look

specifically for that kind of information or interpretation which can strengthen their self-esteem and positive self- image.

It had also occurred that the individual is not very much surprised and manages to ease tension during the interpretation process. Case Balázs2 demonstrates a smaller contradiction where at first Balázs questions his own purposes and basic principles, too. Then he goes on to argue that this is the way he can find peace with himself and 'fill up his tank' with positive feedback, he is able to reduce cognitive dissonance on his own, therefore, there is no need for a change. Critical situations that bring about changes differ from case Balázs2 in that explanation in itself is not enough to ease tension – the individual needs real change.

#### **5.1.2.5. Reinterpreting the situation and taking action**

Apart from giving an explanation, individuals were able to ease tension by reinterpreting and/or changing their situation. They were motivated by their will to strengthen their self-esteem and positive self-image in an uncertain, tense situation. Certain types of reinterpreting the situation (e.g. reinterpreting position, tasks, relationships) may be matched with specific types of job crafting highlighted by Wrzesniewski – Dutton (2001). Compared to job crafting, the most dominant factor in the reinterpretation process is the individual's desire a self-affirmation.

#### **Reinterpreting the job**

As part of reinterpreting the situation individuals often reinterpreted their own jobs. By "job" I mean the group of "work tasks and interactions" (Wrzesniewski – Dutton, 2001:179), i.e. job tasks and work relationships are also regarded as part of the job. In order to protect and maintain their positive self-image in the new situation individuals, first of all, reinterpreted the value of their jobs. In essence, these changes may be identified with the type of cognitive job crafting (Wrzesniewski – Dutton, 2001).

Léna still wants to create values and support in the new conditions.

*„I was still able to find my place in the first outplacement program, and understood the economic reason behind it, but when the next year [...] I won't sniff around in people's files to find their soft spots, if I will, then that will be to develop them, to help'em move forward,“ (case Léna2)*

Csilla reinterpreted her job. The deputies of GM started a battle against her which she had to fight. She had to reinterpret her job, tasks and relationships to be able to convince them. She took up the fight with the support of the general manager. Her job had

become a battlefield where she had to fight and reinterpret her relationship with the two managers as well.

*„But then as the CEO backed me, and said I would win the battle, I should do my work accordingly, and he stood by me, then I said, okay, let's try.” (Csilla 1 case)*

### **Reinterpreting the tasks**

In one group of cases individuals reinterpreted their job tasks. By „job tasks” I mean “tasks represent the most basic building blocks of the relationship between employees and the organization” (Griffin, 1987:94). In essence, reinterpreting job tasks and work relationships corresponds to the forms of job crafting which refers to the crafting tasks and relationships. In the examined cases there had been a time sequence in job shaping i.e. in one case, tasks were reinterpreted first (case Léna1) and task-related relationships came later – or vice versa: the individual reinterpreted relationships first (case Csilla1) and related tasks came later.

After reinterpreting her role Léna began to shape her tasks: managerial tasks were reduced, professional tasks were increased.

*“And then, also in the company, I started to follow that, you know, to step back and have someone else take care of the operational matters of the company's management, [...] I got more involved in the projects themselves, that is, to deal with the human audits, now, that was one such serious turning point.” (case Léna1)*

### **Reinterpreting the relationships with coworkers**

In another group of cases individuals reinterpreted their work relationships. By “work relationships” I mean interactions in the job involved (Wrzesniewski – Dutton, 2001:179). Previously, I have mentioned the time sequence in reinterpretations. Reinterpreting a job had surfaced in a case where the individual reinterpreted her relationships only (case Szilvia1). When doing this, she also had to reinterpret her role as a HR manager and ask herself what she can expect from her colleagues.

*„Well, I've been doing this for quite long now, so now these things, I'm immune to them, but in the beginning, and actually not only the beginning, but for quite long afterwards, so even after several years it could feel so frustrating that a lot of people are just plain impossible to do good to, or you can't, on the one hand, that there's nothing that you, as part of HR, could do that would be equally good for everyone, and they won't, those who'll come to me won't be the ones who are happy about what happened, but those, who aren't.”(case Szilvia1)*

Apart from reinterpreting her job Léna went on to tackle with the circle of tasks and involved parties she is in contact with. As a result of this, she cut back on keeping in touch with her solicitor and accountant.



*“have someone else take care of the operational matters of the company’s management, so that he is the one to arrange for the accountant-lawyer, I don’t know, to keep the office running,” (case Léna1)*

Csilla also reinterpreted her relationship with the two managers: she took on fights and supported her team as well to do so.

*„So, very strong self-discipline, self-control, I had to permanently, and artificially, keep up my enthusiasm, I had to display to my team that okay folks, we’re fighting back. Cause they were insulted, too, they had their part of it all through me. The two deputies, many times they talked to my people in a tone that was, like terrible.”(case Csilla1)*

When finding herself in a new situation Rita reinterpreted her own role, her relationships with her job and her relation to colleagues. She now considered herself a manager and fully undertook the managerial job. At first, she strove to be liked, later – to be acknowledged.

*„In the beginning, when I was just starting out with HR, I wanted, or I wished everyone would love me, each one of my coworkers, and then my job would be so easy. [...] So I decided the goal wasn’t to make everyone like me, but the goal is to make them recognize me, and that’ll be more than enough.” (case Rita1)*

A special case in reinterpreting relationships is when one deals with his/her superior, which, after all, represents the closest ties with the organization. When we earlier referred to ‘forging an explanation’ it was pointed out that the power and status of the person who causes surprise has a great significance. In his first case Norbert informed us about the deterioration of his relationship with his manager. He reinterpreted his relationship with his manager and also with the organization and decided to distance himself from both as much as possible. This led to alienation from the organization and he began to set purposes and priorities for himself without wanting to meet either his manager’s or the organization’s expectations. He wanted to quit and looked for a new workplace. He searched continually but failed to find a new job.

*„I was constantly trying to find a way to flee work such that I find, the appropriate, thus not performing at the maximum, but still have some energy left, but in a way that I can still sell it. Well, I would leave.[...] Yes, this is fine with them. Good. Should finish work, and then I can go home.”(case Norbert1)*

In the second case he said that after a change in the manager’s person and getting a new performance evaluation he committed himself to the organization and the new manager. He reinterpreted performance criteria and from then on he was keen on meeting (managerial) expectations.

*„Now there and then, my primary goal was to improve my commitment.” „I changed my attitude. It’s just that, as I see it, no matter how well I perform now, such an opinion is hard to turn around”(case Norbert2)*

## **Reinterpreting the role**

In some cases individuals reinterpreted their own role. Based on Ashforth's (2001) definition I define role as the individual's perceived position in the social structure of the organization (2001). This definition puts the greatest emphasis on the structural aspect. The perceived character of the position underlines that perception involves the social aspect as well (Wrzesniewski et al., 2003), i.e. other people's expectations from employees in a given job. Reinterpretation of the role appeared in two distinct forms: that of their own role and/or that of HR's role. In case the individual reinterprets his/her own role only and in another case reinterpretation of own role is combined with that of HR's. Melinda's case is an example for narrowing down role interpretation. After reinterpreting her job, tasks and relationships she decided against taking up tasks or position where she would have to deal with downsizing people. She gave a new definition to her role in the organization: she wanted to switch to the areas of HR consultancy and development where she could keep out of downsizing tasks. This reinterpretation and her newly adopted HR role did not affect the role of HR in the company.

*„that was the point when I decided, this was an important thing, that I would leave this area and wouldn't do the HR partner job”(case Melinda1)*

Bence's case is another example for a combined reinterpretation of own role and HR. In the aftermath of a gradual change within the organization he perceived changes in the role of HR (and every other departments') which he could not identify with and went on to give a new definition to the role he would have liked to fill in. He felt HR had become merely an executive body. He, on the other hand, wanted to work in a strategic position. He wanted to work in a HR area that has an initiative role and exerts influence on decision-making and not to do merely implementing tasks.

*“And the other thing is that I hate this type of HR role. That is, that HR would be only about me being some sort of second-order caretaker, who is told, after the great decisions have been made, afterwards HR is told to take care of the operational aspects and then HR takes care of the operational aspects. So I'd like to take part in decision making, that is, being like, doing an HR where I have a part in the decisions. So that if I say, we're expanding the company, then I should have a concept, I should be able to have a word in along what lines the company should be expanded, and when I dismiss him, then I should understand why it's done and that it shouldn't just be, like, we need to downsize now and you need to take care of the legal things. “ (case Bence1)*

It may also happen that change in relationships is due to change in the organization. A change in relationships had made Rita realize that from then on she had become considered a manager by her colleagues and this change in position is the reason why the relation towards her had also changed. Only after this change in relation could she really look at herself as a manager.

*„It was somewhat later that I got to understand that our relationship had changed, that I was a manager now. They don't look at me the same way anymore, they themselves, as a group, regard me as a part of the company's management now.”(case Rita1)*

### **Reinterpreting the relationship with profession**

I identified another type of reinterpreting the situation i.e. when individuals reinterpreted their relationship to the profession. Base on Abbott's (1989) definition, I define profession as work types. I found an example when the individual reinterpreted her relationship with the HR profession, formulated a new concept about it and owing to this, eventually she found herself a new profession. Melinda decided to quit HR work and continue her career in IT. The fundamental reason was that she no longer wanted to fill in a position where she had to downsize people. Previously, she had worked in IT so she decided to go back to that profession.

*„I said, I'd rather leave, and then I rather opted for becoming a consultant and trying to build an image for me as a person who would be a specialist in info-organization”(case Melinda2)*

This was followed by distancing herself from the organization, loosening ties with it and actively looking for another job.

### **Reinterpreting the relationship with work as a life-domain**

The most significant change in the reinterpretation process had been brought about by the reinterpretation of work as a life-domain. By “work as a life-domain” I mean the role work plays in our life as a distinct principle separated from other life-domains, e.g. free time, studying, family. (Rosso et al., 2010; Lepisto et al., in manuscript; Pratt et al., forthcoming). I found an example where the individual reinterpreted her relationship with work as a life-domain. She compared it to other life-domains and formed herself a new concept of work. Melinda's illness made her realize the value of her own health and the value of time spent with her family which became more important for her than time spent with work.

*„So what I'm saying is that it's better if a woman has other plans, too, then she can act more low-keyed, she can settle with less. That is, if you know what I mean, that is I knew, that it's okay, when he offered it, that I can cope with it, and that's a good feeling, you know, when you see you can cope with it. You know you are, well, not vain, but maybe that's the right expression, maybe I could do it, and okay, but I'm more important than that, this, and that, and the family, but if I could start over again, I'm sure this is what I would change, that is, I wouldn't take on some much. It was too much and life's too short for that.”(case Melinda3)*

This was followed by distancing herself from the organization, loosening ties with it and actively looking for another job.

## **Reinterpreting the relationship with the organization**

When reinterpreting the new situation in certain cases individuals reinterpreted their relationship with the organization. Relationship with the organization is a special subset in work relationships and interactions (Wrzesniewski – Dutton, 2001:179) with a special focus on the organization. In several cases individuals reached the point where they were unable to ease tension in the given conditions, although the steps they had taken to reach that point were different. Bence tried to change the conditions.

*„I was still trying, I was still trying to change things and then such a, when I got to the moment when, like, oh, that's something I can't change, that I, well, need to do something no” (case Bence1)*

First Léna had formed herself an acceptable reinterpretation of the new situation but when conditions changed again and possibilities were ended she reached that point. On the whole she did not try to change the conditions; she simply put the blame on the organization.

*„this is a very dry, executive function, with no questions asked, that is, the culture didn't allow for any counterarguments,”(case Léna2)*

Hajnal also reached the point where she could no longer accept the situation. She felt conditions in the organization could not be changed. Interestingly enough, she did not mention any attempts of hers to reinterpret either her position or the conditions. It seemed as if she had taken organizational expectations fixed or as if any kind of reinterpretation would have weakened the importance of her position.

When individuals reached the point when they felt they could not change the conditions and were unable to accept the situation, they began to distance themselves from the organization and loosened ties with it. At that point they became more open to offers or started looking for work actively.

Léna became more open to an existing offer.

*„And then meanwhile, they had been trying to persuade me to leave for organization B, for about half a year, but I felt so attached to organization A that I, well, I didn't really want to leave, but by then, my scope of tasks finally tipped over into such a direction, that I would have had to execute completely nonsense measures, that then I said, okay let's try this”(case Léna2)*

Bence got an offer.

*„when I got to the moment when, like, oh, that's something I can't change, that I, well, need to do something now, so right then, maybe god, maybe not, but something intervened and it was right then that I received an offer, that is, I didn't have to wait to become so frustrated that no one ever would take notice of me anymore, after all, a frustrated man isn't someone, so no one would want to hire a frustrated man”(case Bence1)*

Reinterpretation of relationship with the organization in each case went along with changing beliefs about the organization itself: individuals thought it was not worth working there either because they did not want to do the available job and/or there was no need for what they were able or willing to offer. In each of these cases change was preceded by the individuals' perception that there was no point in working there because they could not experience the key mechanism in these critical situations, which essentially made their job meaningful.

### **Reinterpreting the self-image**

In nearly half of the cases individuals had changed their image and beliefs about themselves. By "self-image and beliefs" I mean the way individuals defined themselves at work or their work identities (Wrzesniewski – Dutton, 2001: 180). I found two different patterns for reinterpreting work identity: (1) Individuals redefine their existing role and themselves in it. (2) They become alienated from the role and commit themselves to another role and redefine a new work identity accordingly.

According to one typical pattern, the individual redefines his/her existing role and themselves in it. Typically, one characteristics of the role become more emphasized than before. Case Bence1, may serve as an example for this. He realized that in fact he would like to be in a responsible, leading HR position. His belief about himself had changed i.e. how much responsibility he was willing to take.

*„So this was the negative thing that reassured me that what I need is to be able to make decisions and I do assume responsibility for those decisions and I really try to be a strategic partner, not just someone whom an assistant tells, and that wasn't meant to be an offense against assistants, that I'd look down on assistants or so, but I do think this isn't the way things should've happened”(case Bence1)*

Case Léna2 is another example for this pattern. A critical situation made her realize that in fact she would have liked to be in a developer, supporting HR position where certain functions are excluded.

According to another typical pattern, individuals become alienated or distanced from their role, commit themselves to another role and define their work identity accordingly. Case Melinda1 may serve as a good example for this; in the new situation she realized she was too sensitive to do the tasks of her position e.g. downsizing, therefore, instead of a role in human partnership she would prefer a role as a HR developer.

*„so still, maybe I invested much too much emotion in this thing, but that was the point when I said I wouldn't take an HR partner manager's job, particularly not under a manager like that” .(Melinda 1 case)*

Another example for this pattern is case Léna1: a critical situation made her realize that she could no longer reconcile company leadership with HR work and in fact she would

rather be a HR professional and not a CIO. From then on she had considered herself a HR professional and not a CIO or a businesswoman.

When giving an overview of the phenomena of reinterpreting a new situation we can conclude that individuals had to deal with one or more types of reinterpretation in each specific case which proved to be a requisite to reduce tension in each case. An exception to this is case Balázs<sup>2</sup> which shows that if surprise is not so great, the individual can reduce cognitive dissonance in a short time by giving an explanation to the situation and there is no need for further redefinition. This example is an important counterpoint because it happens more often in everyday life while reinterpretation is rare, unique and memorable.

#### **5.1.2.6. Change in beliefs, values and in the work meaning**

In this chapter I deal with another aspect of change. My primary purpose was to identify the lasting character of change in the work meaning, its stability or mutability, the content of work meaning and the directions of change<sup>20</sup> with an added emphasis on how beliefs and values change.

Beliefs and values as sources of the meaning and meaningfulness of work and values as elements of mechanisms had great significance in the research for the meaning of work. (Rosso et al., 2010:96). Drawing on the study of Bem (1970:2), by “belief” I mean a perception of a relationship between two things or between something and its characteristics. In the present research the concept of „values” is used in the following sense: „broad tendency to prefer certain states of affairs over others” (Hofstede, 1980:19). I approached the meaning of work from two angles: I examined the change in mechanisms and the change in orientation in the specific cases.

As we have already mentioned the common element in both critical incidents and surprising cases is that the individual could not experience the mechanism which gave meaning and meaningfulness to their work – or if they could, only in a limited degree. These limited experiences always threatened the positive self-image and self-esteem, which accumulated considerable tension. In reaction to these situations individuals chose actions and interpretations that would serve their self-esteem and positive self-

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<sup>20</sup> increase=greater degree of experience, decrease=smaller degree of experience

image. According to the permanency of changes cases can be put into two clearly distinct groups: temporary changes and lasting changes. A characteristic feature of temporary changes (in 6 cases) is that the meaning of work changes only temporarily, for a shorter or longer period of time. In the cases of lasting change (in 8 cases) the meaning of work goes through lasting change.

Another grouping of cases refers to whether they had brought about stable or unstable change for the individual. In half of the cases (in 8 cases) individuals were able to reduce tension by various types of reinterpretations and actions aimed to materialize them, which then resulted in lasting change. In some of these cases (in 3 cases) reinterpretation resulted in a solution without the need for radical change. Talking about reducing tension one of the subjects said 'so that was settled then' (case Rita1) – this way reinterpretation made the situation acceptable for her. In some of the cases where reducing tension had been involved (in 5 cases) more radical steps were taken: quitting the organization, switching to another position within the same organization or in a subsidiary company. In the other half of the cases (in 6 cases) reinterpretation had not brought about an acceptable solution, therefore, the situation bears further potential for change i.e. it remains unstable.

#### **5.1.2.6.1. Temporary and unstable change in the work meaning**

Nearly half of the cases may be put in this group (6 cases). Typically, the meaning of work changes only for a shorter/longer period of time. The common feature in temporary and unstable changes is that the individuals' beliefs had changed but at the same time their values and beliefs about themselves remained intact. Another common feature is that cognitive dissonance is sustained – it can be followed clearly in Norbert's cases. It seems, that the explanation that makes the organization/manager responsible and denies Norbert's own responsibility and the one that does assume responsibility and commitment – prevail simultaneously, and thus induce tension and create cognitive dissonance. Consequently, it cannot be stated that there had been a real change in Norbert's case since both conditions can be noted at the same time in his story.

As beliefs are concerned individuals had changed their beliefs about job and/or tasks and/or work relationships. On the basis of change in beliefs we can identify two further sub-groups: beliefs about the organization and beliefs about colleagues. In the first case surprise for the individual was caused by the general manager, division manager or the HR manager (in the case of second level HR managers). During the reinterpretation process of the surprising situation the individual changed his/her belief about the manager or the organization. Here I would refer back to the significance of the power and status of the person who causes surprise. In the second case surprise is caused by a

smaller or larger group of colleagues and not the superior. Under the influence of the surprise situation the individual changed his/her belief about colleagues.

### **Change in beliefs about the organization**

In this group of cases individuals thought it was not worth working in the company either because they did not want to do the demanded work and/or there was no need for what they were able or willing to offer. Norbert thought it was not worth performing well because his superior or organization did not appreciate his efforts. He reinterpreted his relation towards the organization by distancing himself from it and looked at it as a source of income until he found an other workplace.

*„I was constantly trying to find a way to flee work such that I find, the appropriate, thus not performing at the maximum, but still have some energy left, but in a way that I can still sell it. Well, I would leave.[...] Yes, this is fine with them. Good. Should finish work, and then I can go home.” “Until then it’s just a living, or there’s no other ground, I’ve been looking and applying for various positions all the time.”(Case Norbert1)*

As a common feature we can identify the fact that in each case it was the manager who initiated, said or did something surprising or shocking which then made the individual change his/her belief about the manager and the organization as well. Apart from other factors, this change affected two mechanisms: the mechanism of significance and the mechanism of self-esteem which individuals could experience in a limited degree only when they found themselves in surprising situations. Subjects in this group were unable to experience the key mechanism in a degree they would have liked after the change. Therefore, the change brought a relatively unstable solution for them which still included tension and a potential for another change. Norbert’s first and second case and Hajnal’s first case belong to this group where there is a continuing element of uncertainty, transition and instability in the individuals’ stories. This comes across quite clearly in Hajnal’s following words:

*„So, but this really is still in the process of taking shape, pretty much. We’ll have to see. Might well happen that the next day, I get enticed by some job opportunity, what do I know. But, but then it really needs to be an exciting one”(Case Hajnal1)*

or as Norbert put it:

*And what also plays a role is that later, I would like to start some sort of own business. Stand on my own two feet. I realized that this won’t work in the long run, I won’t work for this company in the long run. I will have to either become self-employed or start up something new using my own resources.(Case Norbert2)*

### **Change in beliefs about coworkers**



In this group of cases individuals had learned that in certain conditions there was no point in expecting appreciation from colleagues. A common feature here is that individuals expected that their work would have some kind of positive effect on the organization and they would get some kind of reward or appreciation from their colleagues. Szilvia expected her help and extra work to be appreciated, Viktor thought they would accept his arguments for the allocation of bonuses and Csilla hoped she would be thanked for her work, her area of work and her personal significance would be appreciated.

It can also be seen that individuals had not received the expected appreciation for years or in some cases they had even been attacked. They had been carrying on tension for a longer time until the situation changed: either they apparently accepted the situation or, eventually, conditions had changed. Szilvia took a longer time to accept the situation.

*„Well, I've been doing this for quite long now, so now these things, I'm immune to them, but in the beginning, and actually not only the beginning, but for quite long afterwards, so even after several years it could feel so frustrating that a lot of people are just plain impossible to do good to, or you can't, on the one hand, that there's nothing that you, as part of HR, could do that would be equally good for everyone, and they won't, those who'll come to me won't be the ones who are happy about what happened, but those, who aren't.”(Case Szilvia1)*

Viktor also talked about a longer period:

*“As I said, insofar as I'm trying to be more tolerant, or at least acquiesce and accept that certain people hold different values than I do, and that I have to respect that, to acquiesce, and maybe even resort to making use of it, after all, that must obviously have an important role in their motivation. So if someone is motivated by having a bigger and fancier car, if this under certain conditions, on the other side, you know, I as a, have to ensure the consistence and transparency of benefits within the company, but if they are motivated by having this brand of car instead of that brand, and this big instead of that small, well then okay, I acquiesce, then this is important to them and this is what I'll have to provide to them, because this is what they are motivated by. Fifteen years ago, I couldn't have accepted that this is how things work. Now I can accept that this is the way it is. This.” (Case Viktor1)*

Viktor's words still bear a kind of hidden tension: the several uses of “have to's” indicate that after so many years he still has not been able to accept this situation. Although he says he tries to be more tolerant, the following quotation includes contradicting approaches (“I'm already over that part, so I, I'm not completely over it”).

*“I was taken aback by this thing so badly, that I was like okay, I have to go home now, I couldn't, that is, I just got stomach cramps and all, now I'm already over that part, so I, I'm not completely over it, so, for example at this management training I've just told you about, what the various role plays and discussions revealed was that I have a certain system of values, which is very important to me, and I come across as a very*

*tolerant, friendly and nice person, exactly as long as I don't feel that someone's about to tread on those values. And then I see red and start acting like a madman. So, it seems I still don't have this thing perfectly under control, and, by the way, I might actually not even want to, so maybe I don't always want to accept this with a dispassionate, calm smile, when things that I consider important, like respect, openness, cooperation, responsibility, when I see that someone practically ignores these, maybe even ridicules them, treads on them, and consequently, treads on their fellow men. Even today, I find it hard to tolerate something like this, but still much-much better than 15 years ago.”(Case Viktor1)*

Viktor and Csilla talked about heated fights with colleagues to convince them. Szilvia did not mention such an instance.

*„Well, for example, in the beginning, I had a lot of disputes concerning, for instance, company cars, like what size of car we need and what we need it for and what it means, that car, that it's a status symbol, and that I need a car of this size, or a car like this or that” (Case Viktor1)*

*„So, very strong self-discipline, self-control, I had to permanently, and artificially, keep up my enthusiasm, I had to display to my team that okay folks, we're fighting back.” (case Csilla1)*

Csilla was lucky because conditions had changed and she managed to convince colleagues by her perseverance.

*„and then after a while they somehow got it that it's quite good, after all, to have such high-quality HR in place. And then after one and a half years of many-many truly cruel conflicts, all at once they told me, they came to me at a celebration, and apologized for those one and a half years. And that now they see, and they really need me, and I should please forgive them, they truly appreciate me, and let's have a drink, and they gave hugs and kisses, and everything's been fine ever since.” (case Csilla1)*

In the cases of Viktor and Szilvia the feeling of lack remained, the expected effect or appreciation were absent, which would have been a significant factor in their self-esteem. Szilvia and Viktor reacted differently to this lack of appreciation. Szilvia also said it caused tension to her but did not mention any changes she had made to reduce it.

*“how can people have so much malice, and then there were a couple similar incidents, so I've been toughened by now, but this really was too much. I can see it on my colleagues, who are much younger than I am, and now my assistant here, and earlier, too, that they experience this sooner or later, that yes, there's so much malice coming back to us from people, 'cause you know, it's very-very rare that they'd come and say 'thank you', there are some, but that's the rare case. When it affects a lot, say, a lot of people from the shop floor, then that's the rare case, but if someone ever happens to not like something, and then they even suspect some sort of disguised intention, now we're quite sure to hear about that, and that can hurt so very-very badly, so these can be so frustrating each time.” (case Szilvia1)*

As we could note in his previously quoted words Viktor had to endure a continuing sense of lack and tension which is obvious from the many uses of “have to's” and the

reference to a painful discovery. All this confirms that this change had brought only a temporary and relatively unstable solution.

*“And then it was rather painful to realize that this is not really the way it is, so no, if I can achieve results and induce changes, if I can do that with certain people, that’s already the sort of success you have to be extremely happy about. But with a relatively large group of, say, 150 people, that I could bring about relatively remarkable changes in how they think about what a person’s tasks are, or how a workplace community or any other community functions, how one should balance individual and community interests, what responsibility and commitment mean, with that, I really don’t feel as if I had achieved truly serious results in the past 15 or 16 years.”(case Viktor1)*

Therefore, he looked for a job where he would be able to make the desired changes.

*„So the point is, what I’m trying to say is that I’ve already had one such impetus before, that here I come and save the world, right then, I happened to start working for a government body, which lasted full two weeks altogether. So what emerged there was, once again, that the world is not exactly ready to get redeemed by me, so thank God it turned out pretty quickly there, so this misunderstanding, we cleared it up at once, and then I left, too, a.s.a.p. So this, it seems to be returning in, say, 10-year cycles, that is, I expect the next such wave of inspiration of mine to arrive around 20xx.”(case Viktor1)*

All the above three changes may be considered unstable. Due to a fortunate change in external conditions Csilla’s situation had become stable i.e cognitive dissonance disappeared. Szilvia and Viktor still carry on a varying degree of cognitive dissonance and instability at the same time. We can see now that for these individuals the most difficult thing to accept is the lack of appreciation of their work and that their colleagues do not give them the appreciation they expect in certain situations. Each of them thought it fundamentally important to exert influence on others: either by supporting them or by making changes in organizational or personal levels. Significance mechanism involves the individual trying to achieve this key purpose. I deal with significance mechanism in detail in a later chapter of my dissertation, under the summarising Chapter 5.3.

#### **5.1.2.6.2. Lasting and stable change in the work meaning**

Another, larger group of the cases (8 cases) represent lasting change in the meaning and meaningfulness of work. Here we can see the lasting change in mechanisms and orientations: one mechanism or orientation had been given a higher value, whereas an other one had become less important. The common feature we may identify is that in every case there had been a change in the individuals’ beliefs and sets of values and their self-image, beliefs, self-definition, i.e. work identity had changed as well. The change in self-image reflects the lasting and stable nature of change. In the case of beliefs we may identify a greater degree of change than in the cases of

temporary/unstable change. Apart from changing beliefs about job, work tasks and work relationships individuals also changed their beliefs about their role in the organization, about their profession or about work as a life-domain.

On the basis of change in beliefs we may identify another three sub-groups: individuals changed their beliefs about the organization or the coworkers or about themselves. **Change in belief about the organization** had been preceded by an instance when surprise was caused by the general manager, division or head of department or a head of HR (in the case of second level HR managers) and the individual changed his/her belief about the manager or the organization after they had reinterpreted the surprising situation. (See case Bence<sup>1</sup>, Léna<sup>2</sup> and in Melinda's cases). In these cases change had always been preceded by the individuals' perceiving that there was no point in working there because they could not experience the key mechanism in these critical situations, which essentially made their job meaningful. When individuals reached the point when they felt they could not change conditions and were unable to accept the situation, they began to distance themselves from the organization and loosened ties with it. At that point they became more open to offers or started looking for work actively and got themselves an other job or position.

In the case of **change in belief about coworkers** surprise was not caused by the superior but by a smaller or larger group of colleagues and the individual changed his/her belief about colleagues. After the surprising situation had come about the individual's relationship to colleagues had changed. Rita's first case belongs to this group.

Among cases with lasting change we can find one where individuals **changed beliefs about themselves** only and not about their manager or colleagues. Under the influence of the critical situation they evaluated and changed priorities and thus changed work identity as well. The first cases of Léna and Balázs belong here.

#### **5.1.2.6.3. No change in the work meaning**

There was one case where no change could be identified. For Balázs meaningfulness of work basically involves reaching purposes, implementing changes and getting appreciated for it by other people or by himself. Balázs<sup>2</sup> case shows a contradiction where he questions his purposes and basic principles, too and argues that for him this is the way to find peace with himself, and he can get support from positive feedback. This argument enables him to reduce cognitive dissonance so he does not need a change to that end. If we compare this case with Balázs's 1st case, the latter involves a bigger contradiction i.e. purposes and basic principles are no longer compatible, Balázs has to make a choice between the two. He gives priority to purposes and modifies basic

principles in order to reduce tension incurred by cognitive dissonance. Balázs2 case shows a situation where the degree of surprise is not so great that it should lead to some kind of change, cognitive dissonance can be reduced shortly by an explanation suited to the situation. Balázs (case Balázs2) did not reinterpret his situation – no change was involved.

## **5.2. Pleasant surprises**

Another large group of changes involves pleasant surprises. Pleasant surprises diverge in a positive direction from the individuals' expectations: in seven out of ten cases they increased the individuals' self-esteem and lead to a change in meaning. In this chapter I am primarily concerned with effects made by pleasant surprises as compared to those incurred by unpleasant surprises with the main emphasis on differences, i.e. I deal with differences in more detail. Before the more detailed analysis I give a brief summary of the specific elements of the process. Three of these elements show a greater deviation from negative cases, they are closely related and are linked together by the same triangle in the figure (see Chapter 5.1.1) which shows reinterpretation of the situation, change in beliefs and values and - as a consequence - change in the work meaning. I examine these elements in detail in two sub-chapters (similarly to chapters dealing with unpleasant surprises).

In the cases of positive surprises there was only one instance for tension and only one case where own expectations and beliefs had been questioned. In cases where surprise lead to changes individuals probably questioned their expectations as well but they had not mentioned it in their stories.

Individuals usually would like to know, search for reasons why the unexpected situation had come about instead of the anticipated one. In positive situations they were not very keen to know who was responsible for what had happened, rather, they were primarily involved in how to interpret what had happened. In most cases pleasant surprises were interpreted as positive feedback and affirmation (cases Mihály1, Mihály2, Viktor2, Bence2, Szilvia2). Csilla's positive cases are very similar to these: for her, positive surprises meant value judgement and affirmation (Csilla2, Csilla3). There are different cases too where surprise did not change the individuals' self-esteem, either because he felt ambivalence about the situation (Norbert3, Norbert4) or because she thought the appreciation she received was not realistic (Melinda4).

Under the influence of positive surprise they changed the interpretation of their situation in several cases (in 7 cases) without changing their position (they did not quit the organization). Similarly to the unpleasant situations, reinterpretation leads to the

reinforcement of positive self-esteem and self-image. Nearly each type of reinterpretation can be found in positive cases as well. There was one exception: (6) The reinterpretation of the relationship of work as a life-domain – refers to so many aspects of life that it is probably quite rare – even in negative cases, there were not positive case for it in the sample. At the same time, we might also find an example for it in cases of pleasant surprise.

Similarly to the approach to negative cases I deal with the change in the work meaning and the change in beliefs separately. Positive cases may be clearly divided into two groups: changes were made (all stable and lasting) or no changes were made. In positive cases there were no examples for unstable or temporary change and probably they are rather unlikely because pleasant surprises caused much less cognitive dissonance. This is confirmed by a lower level of tension, easing tension took shorter time, cases became shorter, subjects did not have much to say about them: subjects are, and have always been more concerned with negative cases. The reason for this is probably that they did not consider pleasant surprise as a threat to self-esteem.

### **5.2.1. Reinterpreting the situation and taking action**

In several (seven) cases unexpected positive surprise made individuals reinterpret their work identity, self-image and it reinforced their self-esteem. Interestingly, several subjects linked positive cases together and gave them the same interpretation. (Csilla, Mihály, which is four cases out of ten), while with negative cases it was only Szilvia who gave similar explanations to her negative situations (I processed one, which is one case out of fourteen).

The following types of reinterpretation can be identified: (1) Reinterpretation of job, (2) Reinterpretation of tasks, (3) Reinterpretation of relationships with coworkers, (4) Reinterpretation of role, (5) Reinterpretation of relationship with profession, (7) Reinterpretation of relationship with organization, (8) Reinterpretation of self-image. Let us examine in sequence what are the differences in these reinterpretations as compared to those referring to unpleasant cases:

#### **(1) Reinterpretation of job, (2) Reinterpretation of tasks, (3) Reinterpretation of relationships with coworkers.**

In these types of reinterpretation cases individuals undertook extra tasks that originally did not belong to their job. In several cases this might be explained by their determination to prove their skills to a trusting superior (cases Csilla2, Csilla3, Bence2), in one case the individual wanted to reach her purpose (which, for her, equals with the

meaningfulness of work) (case Szilvia2). An important difference here is that individuals undertook extra tasks by themselves, on their own initiative, and not in order to reduce tensions of cognitive dissonance which, again, could be considered a pressing matter.

#### **(4) Reinterpretation of role.**

Pleasant surprises lead to changes in the majority of cases (seven out of ten): individuals reinterpreted their own role or HR's role, while in the negative cases reinterpretation of role lead to change in eight out of fifteen cases, therefore, there is some difference in proportions in negative and in positive cases. The difference in positive cases lies in the direction. In negative cases individuals can not identify with their own role or HR's role and that is why they decide to quit: HR partnership role (case Melinda1), implementing role, downsizing HR role (case Léna2), implementing role (case Bence1), and these were all instances where the individuals changed their beliefs about the organization as well. In cases where the individuals' beliefs about the organization did not change – both directions can be noted: distancing and quitting or approaching and undertaking. For example Léna (case1) was unable to identify with her existing role: she could much better identify with the role of an HR expert. In positive cases there is a marked direction of approaching, undertaking, commitment. Distancing and quitting do not appear.

#### **(7) Reinterpretation of relationship with the organization**

The difference between the two main groups of surprises lies again in the direction of reinterpretations. Instead of distancing, there is a drive to commitment. As an interesting difference we may note that in the majority of negative cases reasons were linked to the organization and more people became distanced or quitted the organization, (eight out of fifteen cases). In cases of positive surprise, proportionally, we find much fewer cases (one out of ten cases) where the individual linked the situation to the organization and under the influence of the situation actually committed himself to the organization (Bence2).

#### **(8) Reinterpretation of self-image.**

Among the cases of unpleasant surprises I found two different patterns for the reinterpretation of work identity: (1) individuals reinterpret their existing role and themselves in it, (2) individuals become alienated, distanced from their role and commit themselves to an other role and redefine work identity accordingly. In cases of pleasant surprise the first pattern can also be found: (1) individuals reinterpret their existing role and themselves in it. There is no example for the other pattern: in accordance with the reinterpreting the role and the relationship with organization – the reinterpreting the

work identity also strengthens commitment to the role. Examples for this are the cases of Mihály1 and Mihály2 where the individual reinforced himself by thinking that positive feedback also referred to decisions he had made in the past, (although it could not have been a conscious effort on his part as things could not be foreseen clearly at an earlier time). Under the influence of positive feedback Mihály strengthened more and more his work identity as a HR professional and he still considers himself a successful man i.e. a successful HR professional. Similarly, he had become more and more committed to the role of a HR manager.

*„So I can say, I can really say that I don't regret that back then, when HR, when it turned out like this, that I went with the flow for a while, 'cause when they put me there, to head the financial department, I didn't know that I would pretty quickly, say, be reassigned to HR, or more accurately, that HR would be reassigned to me. This wasn't the result of conscious planning. [...] So it's pretty sure that if I had stuck with any other position, any previous position of mine, and not taken this path [HR], then, then I couldn't, couldn't possibly call myself a, well, successful man, whatever has happened” (case Mihály1)*

Another example for the above instance is case Viktor2, where the individual identified positive feedback with both himself and his role. By this, he reinforced himself and thought it was worth supporting his colleagues as a developer HR manager, therefore, he became more committed to the role of a developer HR manager.

### **5.2.2. Change in beliefs, values and change in the work meaning**

Positive cases may be divided into two distinct groups depending on whether any changes were involved (all lasting and stable changes) or no changes were involved. As I have mentioned earlier we did not identify unstable and temporary changes in positive cases and probably it would be impossible.

Positive cases which show the lasting change in the work meaning have the same characteristics as negative cases – in this respect we did not find differences. In the case of lasting changes we can see the changing of mechanisms and orientations: one mechanism or orientation had become more valued while an other one had become less important. As a common feature we may identify in each case a change the individuals' beliefs and sets of values, their self-image, beliefs about themselves, self-definition i.e. work identity. The difference is that change in belief does not concern colleagues or the organization but, mostly, themselves.

There are instances of no change even among positive cases. In the case of unpleasant surprise we saw that if it does not go beyond the individuals's expectation, the individual can reduce cognitive dissonance without needing a change. In the case of



pleasant surprise change is absent when the individuals ignore the potential for positive reinforcement offered by reinterpretation. I have found several examples for this. Norbert (cases 3, 4) reacted to surprising positive feedback by bringing up earlier, personally painful negative feedback. Melinda (case 4) reacted to instances of surprising, positive feedback by making some kind of objections against each one. In none of these cases did the individual interpret approval or positive feedback in a way that would have given more meaningfulness or significance to their work and by which their self-esteem could have grown.

In sum, I encountered the following differences as compared to unpleasant surprises. In positive cases, cognitive dissonance was far lower: this is evinced by the lower level of tension and by the fact that individuals were able to ease the tension more quickly. In the majority of cases (in seven cases), individuals viewed pleasant surprises as reinforcing them and shifting their own self-image in a positive direction as a result. Lasting changes were accompanied by various reinterpretations which represented all types, except the reinterpretation of work as a life-domain. As a result of positive surprises, the individuals voluntarily took on additional, new tasks and became more committed to the organization, their role and their profession. Pleasant surprises either brought about lasting change or did not lead to change; I did not encounter temporary changes. Pleasant surprises led to no changes when the individuals ignored interpretation possibilities to reinforce their self-esteem inherent in the situation.

### **5.3. Summarizing the changes in work meaning**

In the previous chapter, I have reviewed the change process of work meaning and its various sub-types. In this chapter, the categories of the reinterpretation of the situation are compared with the change in work meaning, as well as conclusions drawn from pleasant unpleasant surprises.

The figure below depicts the categories of the reinterpretation of the situation with the change in work meaning.

Figure 16: The reinterpretation of the situation and the types of meaning of work in the various cases<sup>21</sup>

| Change              | Reinterpreting the situation |          |                     |              |                                 |                          |                           |               | Change in beliefs and values and change in work meaning |                         |                        |                                      |                    |               |                      |                        |              |             |                           |                           |
|---------------------|------------------------------|----------|---------------------|--------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|---------------|---|-------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------|---------------|----------------------|------------------------|--------------|-------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|
|                     |                              |          |                     |              |                                 |                          |                           |               | Temporary change in beliefs and values                  |                         |                        | Lasting change in beliefs and values |                    |               |                      | Change in work meaning |              |             |                           | No change in work meaning |
| Cases               | 1. Job                       | 2. Tasks | 3. Working rel. M-C | 4 Role HR- O | 5. Relationship with profession | 6. Work as a life-domain | 7. Relationship with org. | 8. Self image | Beliefs about managers                                  | Beliefs about coworkers | Beliefs about managers | Beliefs about coworkers              | Beliefs about self | Values change | Mechanism change T-L | Orientation change     | Significance | Self esteem | No change in work meaning |                           |
| Umplesant surprises | Norbert1                     | +        | +                   | M            |                                 |                          | +                         |               | +   |                         |                        |                                      |                    |               | T                    |                        | ↓            | ↓           |                           |                           |
|                     | Norbert2                     | +        | +                   | M            |                                 |                          | +                         | +             | +   |                         |                        |                                      | +                  | +             | L*                   | +                      | ↓            | ↓           |                           |                           |
|                     | Hajnall                      | +        |                     | M            |                                 |                          | +                         |               | +   |                         |                        |                                      |                    |               | T                    |                        | ↓            | ↓           |                           |                           |
|                     | Szilvia1                     | +        |                     | C            |                                 |                          |                           |               |   | +                       |                        |                                      |                    |               | T                    |                        | ↓            | ↓           |                           |                           |
|                     | Viktor1                      | +        | +                   | C            | O*                              |                          |                           |               |   | +                       |                        |                                      |                    |               | T                    |                        | ↓            | ↓           |                           |                           |
|                     | Csilla1                      | +        | +                   | C            | O**                             |                          |                           |               | +   | +                       |                        |                                      |                    |               | T                    |                        |              |             |                           |                           |
|                     | Léna2                        | +        | +                   | M            | HR,O                            |                          | +                         | +             |   |                         | +                      |                                      | +                  | +             | L                    | +                      | ↑            | ↑           |                           |                           |
|                     | Bence1                       | +        | +                   | M            | HR,O                            |                          | +                         | +             |   |                         | +                      |                                      | +                  | +             | L                    | +                      | ↑            | ↑           |                           |                           |
|                     | Melinda1                     | +        | +                   | M            | O                               |                          |                           | +             |   |                         | +                      |                                      | +                  | +             | L                    | +                      |              | ↑           |                           |                           |
|                     | Melinda2                     |          |                     |              | O                               | +                        |                           | +             | +   |                         | +                      |                                      | +                  | +             | L                    | +                      |              | ↑           |                           |                           |
|                     | Melinda3                     |          |                     | M            | O                               |                          | +                         | +             | +   |                         | +                      |                                      | +                  | +             | L                    | +                      | ↑            | ↑           |                           |                           |
|                     | Rital                        | +        | +                   | C            | O                               |                          |                           |               | +   |                         |                        |                                      | +                  | +             | L                    | +                      | ↑            | ↑           |                           |                           |
|                     | Léna1                        | +        | +                   | C            | O                               |                          |                           |               | +   |                         |                        |                                      | +                  | +             | L                    | +                      | ↑            | ↑           |                           |                           |
|                     | Balázs1                      |          |                     | M,C          | O                               |                          |                           |               | +   |                         |                        |                                      | +                  | +             | L                    | +                      | ↑            | ↑           |                           |                           |
| Balázs2             |                              |          |                     |              |                                 |                          |                           |               |   |                         |                        |                                      |                    |               |                      |                        |              |             | +                         |                           |
| Pleasant surprises  | Bence2                       | +        | +                   |              | O                               |                          | +                         | +             |   |                         | +                      |                                      | +                  | +             | L                    | +                      | ↑            | ↑           |                           |                           |
|                     | Csilla2                      | +        | +                   | M            | HR,O                            |                          |                           | +             |   |                         |                        | +                                    | +                  | L             | +                    | ↑                      | ↑            |             |                           |                           |
|                     | Csilla3                      | +        | +                   | M            | HR,O                            |                          |                           | +             |   |                         |                        | +                                    | +                  | L             | +                    | ↑                      | ↑            |             |                           |                           |
|                     | Mihály1                      |          |                     |              | O                               | +                        |                           | +             |   |                         |                        | +                                    | +                  | L             | +                    | ↑                      | ↑            |             |                           |                           |
|                     | Mihály2                      |          |                     |              | O                               | +                        |                           | +             |   |                         |                        | +                                    | +                  | L             | +                    | ↑                      | ↑            |             |                           |                           |
|                     | Viktor2                      |          |                     |              | HR,O                            |                          |                           | +             |   |                         |                        | +                                    | +                  | L             | +                    | ↑                      | ↑            |             |                           |                           |
|                     | Szilvia2                     | +        | +                   |              | O                               |                          |                           | +             |   |                         |                        | +                                    | +                  | L             | +                    | ↑                      | ↑            |             |                           |                           |
|                     | Norbert3                     |          |                     |              |                                 |                          |                           |               |   |                         |                        |                                      |                    |               |                      |                        |              |             | +                         |                           |
|                     | Norbert4                     |          |                     |              |                                 |                          |                           |               |   |                         |                        |                                      |                    |               |                      |                        |              |             | +                         |                           |
|                     | Melinda4                     |          |                     |              |                                 |                          |                           |               |   |                         |                        |                                      |                    |               |                      |                        |              |             | +                         |                           |

Explanation

- \*\* temporary change
- \* ambivalence
- T temporary
- HR HR role
- C coworker
- O own role
- L lasting
- M manager
- ↓ decrease
- ↑ increase

<sup>21</sup> Based on the research

### 5.3.1. The durability, permanence and extent of the change

We may conclude that in response to surprising situations, the individual tends to reinterpret several factors related to their work and situation – and, as a result, the meaning and meaningfulness of their work also changes. They formulate a new opinion and belief of these reinterpreted factors. In the case of temporary and unstable changes, this reinterpretation and change in beliefs had to do with the individual's job, tasks, workplace relationships and their relationship with the organization. In the case of lasting and stable changes, the individual also reinterpreted their beliefs about themselves and, at the same time, also redefined their role within the organization or the role that their profession or work plays as an important component of their life. All of these indicate an ever-greater rethinking and major changes in the life of the individual.

Lasting changes only occurred if the individual reinterpreted their beliefs about themselves and the role they hold in the organization. It did not lead to lasting changes if the individual was unable to identify with their changing role (case of Viktor1), had an ambivalent relationship with the manager (case of Norbert2<sup>22</sup>) and thus did not rethink their work identity or were unable to identify with it (case of Csilla1). The case of Melinda – who also reconsidered relationship with her profession and work as a life-domain – is worth looking at in greater depth. In her narrative (case of Melinda2 and Melinda3), she did not touch on a reconsideration of her role within the organization. At the same time, reconsidering her new profession and the significance of her work was accompanied by a reconsideration of her tasks, job and role, accepting a more or less radical change in these. Melinda did not discuss these aspects of the change; it is conceivable that she thought this to be self-explanatory.

In the case of temporary and unstable changes, we saw that individuals – to varying degrees – were unable to experience in their workplace mechanisms which would have imbued their work with a sense of meaning and significance. This led to a drop in the significance they made of their work and of their self-esteem. One feature common to all temporary and unstable cases is that the cognitive dissonance continues to be present: in the narratives recounted by the individuals, this cognitive dissonance is

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<sup>22</sup> This case is in conflict with the way Norbert interprets pleasant surprise (cases Norbert3, 4). In this case, following the new boss's performance evaluation he talks about commitment and taking responsibility. When we analyse cases Norbert3 and Norbert4, it seems that blaming management and the organization and at the same time refusing his own responsibility lives side by side with his commitment and taking responsibility. These two approaches contradict each-other and cause cognitive dissonance. Therefore, we cannot say that change had happened in Norbert's case because both conditions can be detected in his story. In fact, he has an ambivalent attitude towards his manager and organization.

characterized by contradictions and tension. In the case of temporary changes, the mechanisms changed, but the orientations did not. Based on all of this, we may conclude that temporary changes are indicated more precisely by the change in the mechanisms; in fact, a negative change in the mechanisms clearly indicates as much, as the figure shows. Lasting changes brought about changes in both the mechanisms as well as the orientations.

### **5.3.2. Self-esteem and significance: the meaningfulness of work**

Among the various mechanisms, two play more prominent roles: self-esteem and significance. We have already discussed self-esteem. As a result of unpleasant surprises, individuals feel their self-esteem may be in danger: they felt themselves to be less important and less valuable and lost their confidence. By transforming the situation and/or their interpretation of their situation, their purpose was to reaffirm their own self-esteem and their positive self-image. Cases involving pleasant surprises are similar as far as the interpretation of the situation is concerned: individuals tended to use their interpretation to reinforce their self-confidence and positive self-image.

So far, we have not dealt with the role of significance, although it is similarly critical and is, like self-esteem, generalizable for all. The mechanism-category purpose shows that work may acquire a sense of significance simply by having a purpose (Rosso et al., 2010). Among philosophers, it was primarily Frankl (1988/1946) who emphasized the significance of purpose in the life of the individual: in Frankl's view, no human being could survive for long without purposes – purposes are simply that fundamental. Researchers differentiate among a broad spectrum of purposes: from intrinsic purposes and motivations all the way to extrinsic or spiritually motivated purposes (Rosso et al., 2010). In the cases examined, we saw that each individual had some distinct purpose which they were hoping to reach and experience. This, essentially, provided the primary meaningfulness of work. Each of these purposes is, in actuality, related to a specific mechanism. For Rita, the meaningfulness of work was provided primarily by amicable personal relations (interpersonal connectedness mechanism); for Melinda, this was coping with difficult tasks, proving herself and succeeding (competence-proving mechanism); for Léna, it was helping and serving others (perceived impact – service mechanism). We were able to identify similarly fundamental purposes for each individual. We also saw that surprising situations, for the most part, posed a threat to experiencing these purposes. That is why individuals strove to create a situation that is more favorable to them and that would allow them to experience their purpose, by formulating a new, different interpretation and then working to realize it through their actions. When their own personal purpose was irreconcilable with that of the organization, they left their workplace.

We encountered two examples where the individual experienced such far-reaching changes in their lives that it changed their fundamental purposes. In the case of Rita (case 1), her desire at amicable personal relationships (interpersonal connectedness mechanism) was replaced by a desire at recognition (self-esteem mechanism). In the case of Melinda (case 3), coping with difficult tasks, proving herself and succeeding (competence-proving mechanism) was replaced by the desire for realistic requirements and realistic tasks (control-autonomy mechanism). As a general pattern we saw that cases where lasting changes were processed, the fundamental purpose became more important and valued: this was the case with Bence<sup>1</sup>, Léna<sup>2</sup>, Balázs<sup>2</sup> and Bence<sup>2</sup> (as well as all cases indicated by an upward-pointing arrow in the Significance column of the figure, apart from the cases of Rita<sup>1</sup> and Melinda<sup>3</sup>). We also encountered examples where the case and the change did not have to do with the meaningfulness of work or their fundamental purpose: this was the case with Léna<sup>1</sup>, Melinda<sup>2</sup> and Viktor<sup>2</sup> (no arrow is shown in their case in the Significance column of the figure). Viktor's cases are worth examining more closely, however. Essentially, it appears as though Viktor had dual purposes: one has to do with a major effect and realizing a significant change, but this was met with failure. This is shown in the case Viktor<sup>1</sup> and is connected to the perceived impact-career mechanism. The other purpose has to do with personal development, which is a new purpose for him (he participated in a leadership training course just prior to our interview and formulated this purpose for himself there); this is shown in the case Viktor<sup>2</sup>, and is connected to the perceived impact-service mechanism. Both purposes operate in parallel: the development purpose was announced within the organization, and he proved successful in its realization. This was reinforcing in nature to him. His purpose of realizing major changes was not announced, it was accompanied by failures, and this filled him with uncertainty and tension. If we compare these two purposes: the purpose at realizing changes loses some of its significance, but is still more important than the development purpose. This was reinforced by the fact that Viktor stated, in connection with development, that he creates value for others – he does not say that this is what lends meaningfulness to his work. Viktor's cases depict a transitional phase of changing fundamental purposes: a point where no change has yet taken place. They also show, however, that each individual may only have one fundamental purpose. This is further confirmed by the cases of Melinda<sup>3</sup> and Rita<sup>1</sup>, where they describe changes to their fundamental purposes.

We also see an example of a mechanism which thus far had not been included in the literature, and have two cases to support its significance. This new mechanism is striving for financial security. The literature (Rosso et al., 2010) defines mechanisms through which the sources of the meaning and significance of work influence the meaning and meaningfulness of work. We see from the two cases that if striving for financial security becomes important or, alternatively, becomes less important, the work

of the individual acquires new meaning and a new meaningfulness. We see examples supporting both options in the cases examined. The case of Norbert (Norbert2) shows that the meaning of work changes when the individual feels threatened in their workplace. Work is transformed into a workplace to hold on to and the guarantor of the individual's livelihood and financial security. The case of Melinda (Melinda2) depicts a situation where the individual's desire for financial security decreases: instead of financial security provided by her job, Melinda chooses a type of "psychological security." She herself wants control to ensure that she does not end up in a situation that would be humanly unacceptable for her. This is signaled by an increase in the control-autonomy mechanism. If we examine striving for financial security – as a new mechanism – we see that it is unable to fulfill the role of the fundamental purpose of work: it is unable to imbue work with meaningfulness. If this is the criteria we choose to focus on, striving for financial security cannot fill this role. At the same time, the examples above show that work acquires a new meaning through the process of striving for security. Thus, if we take a broader approach to mechanisms – as a meaning of work – then striving for financial security may also be considered a mechanism.

At this point, it is worthwhile to return to the differences in definition, and distinctions, between the meaning and meaningfulness of work. This is often ignored by the literature (Rosso et al., 2010; Wrzesniewski, 2010). Through an understanding of the individual's fundamental purposes within their work, and of the significance of work, the two processes are easy to separate. We saw, in the cases examined, that each individual had some kind of principal purpose which they were hoping to experience and which lent a meaningfulness to their work. Based on my research, we are able to formulate the following, more precise, definition of the meaningfulness of work. **The individual experiences the meaningfulness of work primarily through the fundamental purposes of their work, through the significance of their work – this is what the individual strives to experience through their work.** This definition is worth expanding upon based on my research.

- (1) **Fundamental purpose.** The individual may have several purposes with their work, but only one fundamental purpose, and they work primarily to experience this one. Thus, there is a kind of priority order among the individual's purposes. Examples of these include the cases of Viktor, which depicted a transitional period in the change in the fundamental purpose; the cases of Melinda which depict a change in the meaningfulness of work and incorporate a shift in priorities between work and other components of her life; and the case of Rita1, which describes a change in her fundamental purpose. This statement also means that the same purpose may carry great significance for one person, but may not be priority number one for another individual. Fundamental purposes, thus, differ from person to person.

- (2) **Social impact.** Although this is not included in the definition, the cases still show that the meaningfulness of work may change depending on the individual's social environment and the social impacts they encounter. The cases of Melinda and Rita serve to underscore this.
- (3) **The importance of the purpose.** The purpose is so critical for the individual, that they would be willing to take on serious risks to experience the purpose or if they encounter serious difficulties meeting that purpose. Its significance is reflected in the fact that if the individual is unable to realize that purpose, they may experience frustrations or even illness. This is in keeping with Frankl's (1988/1946) statements regarding the importance of the purpose.
- (4) **The purpose as a process and an experience.** The purpose may, fundamentally, be linked to a specific mechanism in the sense that this is not something to reach or be reached – it is to be experienced, is an experience and is a process.
- (5) **The difference between meaningfulness and meaning.** It follows from the definition that if something is not a fundamental purpose, but is important for the individual, it impacts not the meaningfulness of their work, but its meaning. In other words, the meaning of work can be every additional purpose or mechanism, or content expressing the work, which is not the individual's fundamental purpose. Thus, the relationship, formulated at the beginning of the dissertation, between meaning and meaningfulness is valid: “meaningfulness is narrower in scope than meaning: everything has a meaning, but not everything has a meaningfulness.”
- (6) **Enactment.** In the definition above, the phrase “what the individual strives to experience through their work” denotes that if the individual encounters any kind of obstacle when trying to experience their purpose, they will strive to create a situation more favorable for themselves – and to facilitate the experiencing of their purpose – by formulating a new interpretation and taking action to realize this. The action taken to realize the new interpretation is in harmony with enactment, a characteristic of sensemaking (Weick, 1995). The concept of enactment emphasizes that individuals are able to influence their surroundings. I.e. they define a new role for themselves and proceed to realize it (cases of Léna1 and Melinda1), or they change their roles (cases of Léna2, Bence1) – either within the same environment or under new conditions. As we saw in the cases of Norbert, it is also possible that the individual may experience significant tension if realizing their own purposes and vision is met with obstacles.
- (7) **Perceived phenomenon.** In the definition above, the phrase “what the individual strives to experience through their work” indicates that it is a subject of the individual's perceptions how they experience the purpose through their work. The meaningfulness of work denotes the extent of the perceived sense of work – i.e. the

extent to which the individual is able to experience the meaningfulness, the fundamental purposes of their work in their work.

If we examine the literature dealing with the meaningfulness and meaning of work, we see that researchers confuse, or at least do not treat separately, the concepts of the meaningfulness and meaning of work (Rosso et al., 2010; Wrzesniewski, 2010). The distinctions in the definition used above (item no. 5) between the meaning and meaningfulness of work is in harmony with the definitions used by Rosso et al. (2010), Wrzesniewski (2010) and Pratt–Ashforth (2003). The concept of subjective perception, and the social determination of perception, emphasized in the definition and in the explanation are in harmony with the model of job crafting (Wrzesniewski – Dutton, 2001) and with the interpersonal sensemaking model of work meaning (Wrzesniewski et al., 2003) – and with the model of identity based model of work meaningfulness (Pratt–Ashforth, 2003). At the same time, in addition to fundamental differences – as shown above –, it has become possible to provide an additional, more exact definition of the meaning of work. This represents a new topic in the literature, that I will be expanding upon in the Discussion chapter.

#### **5.4. Frameworks of the meaning of work: the model of meaning of work schemas**

Following the summary, let us return to one of the fundamental conceptual frameworks of my dissertation – schemas, with a necessary focus on theoretical generalizability (Maxwell, 1996). As mentioned in the preceding chapter, we are able to differentiate between changes of various magnitude: the task-job-role-profession-life-domain represent an ever-increasing rethinking and ever-greater changes in the life of the individual. The various categories of reinterpreting the situation may essentially be understood as different perceptual and interpretational frameworks of the meaning of work, i.e. as different schemas of the meaning of work. If we look at our definition of the process of sensemaking (Chapter 4.2.1.2): it stated that we are placing social stimuli in existing or emerging cognitive frameworks, it alludes to the existence or change in the perceptual and interpretational framework.

The model summarizes what perceptual and interpretational frameworks the meaning of work affects. In other words: what cognitive frameworks and categories the individual considers when thinking about the meaning of work. Is it the individual's task, job, role, profession, a part of their life, workplace relationship, their relationship to the organization and the individual in their work. Thus, **work, as a perceptual and interpretational framework is made up of several closely interlinked perceptual**



**and interpretive frameworks** – the meaning of the totality of all of these creates the meaning of work.

The model of the meaning of work schemas confirms that it is possible to identify a certain **hierarchical structure** among the various perceptual and interpretational frameworks comprising the meaning of work. Together with the reinterpreting of the job, the individual also reinterprets their tasks: Csilla (case 1) transforms her tasks according to the new situation and agrees to take on the fight. Reinterpreting the role also includes having the individual say no to their current job, tasks and/or relationships or seek out or take on a new role: e.g. take on a management job vs. a specialist job (case of Rita 1) or take on a specialist positions vs. a management job (case of Léna 1), or seek out a job which does not entail tasks they find undesirable (case of Melinda1). Reinterpreting the individual's relationship to their profession includes having the individual change their understanding of their current profession: they may choose a new profession in the place of their current one and may rethink their role, job and tasks (case of Melinda 2) or may become committed to their current profession (HR), role, job or tasks (cases of Mihály 1 and 2). Reinterpreting work as a life-domain includes having the individual change their fundamental understanding of the role their work plays in their life, as well as of their profession, their role within the organization, their job and their tasks (Melinda 3).

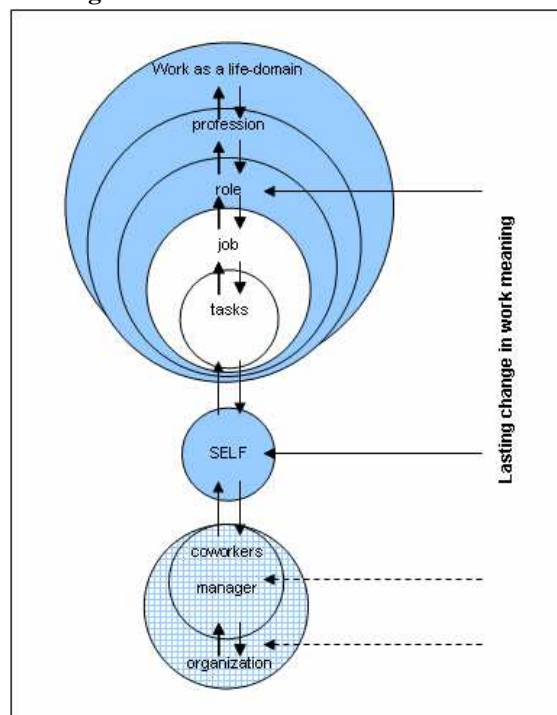
Based on the process, we can see that reinterpreting the situation is primarily affected by **relationships with managers and coworkers**, and how the individual makes sense of the situation depends on their own thought processes and interpretations. Social relationships are the instigators of the change, but are also affected by the change: as a result of an unexpected event, the individual may reinterpret their social relationships when reinterpreting the meaning of their work.

The temporary and unstable change in work meaning may be considered the **first-order change in** work meaning schemas; one unique feature is that following the change, the schemas may carry internal contradictions (Fiske – Taylor, 1991; George – Jones, 2001). In the case of the lasting and stable change in work meaning, the fundamental character of the meaning of work schemas is called into question. This may be referred to as **second-order change**, when the individual must reframe (Bartunek, 1988; George – Jones, 2001) their expectations and their view of the world. In terms of the change in the work meaning, the second-order change is different from the first-order change in that the individual's work identity changes, and similarly their interpretation of their own role also changes.

The figure describing the model (Figure 17) shows what elements of the meaning of work change as a result of the change. Based on my research findings, a lasting change

in work meaning occurred in fourteen cases, involving durable changes to the individual's mechanisms, orientation, beliefs and sets of values. In these cases, the individual's self-understanding also changed, and as a result, so did their understanding of their role. In some cases, the change covered the individual's profession or work as a part of their life. These are indicated in the figure using darker colors. As a result of the hierarchical structure, we also know that if the individual changed their understanding of their role, this is accompanied by a reinterpretation of their job or tasks. Based on my research, it is not possible to draw clear conclusions on the change in meaning of social relationships: in the majority of cases involving lasting changes, individuals reinterpreted their relationships with coworkers or their managers. In some cases – but not in all – this change was accompanied by a reinterpretation of the individual's relationship with the organization. The model also calls attention to the fact that a lasting change in the work meaning occurred if there was a change to the individual's beliefs about themselves and their roles.

**Figure 17: The model of meaning of work schemas**



It is worthwhile to review the literature when examining the concept of the meaning of work schema. In their manuscript, Lepisto et al. point out (p. 12) that the literature is not consistent in terms of the **level of abstraction of the concept of work**. There are interpretations where work is seen as a task, a job or a profession; the authors cite several examples of each approach. Some researchers defined work on the level of tasks: “tasks represent the most basic building blocks of the relationship between employees and the organization” (Griffin, 1987:94 in Lepisto et al., manuscript). Others defined work on the level of the job: “a set of task elements grouped together” (Ilgen –

Hollenbeck, 1992: 173 in Lepisto et al., manuscript) or “work tasks and interactions” (Wrzesniewski – Dutton, 2001:179). Citing models and approaches, the model of job enrichment defined work on the level of the job (Hackman – Oldham, 1976), as well as in the model of job crafting (Wrzesniewski – Dutton, 2001; Berg et al., 2010). Other researchers approached the issue from the level of the profession, which they viewed as types of jobs (Abbott, 1989 in Lepisto et al., manuscript). In the “Meaning of Work” (MOW) project, examining the centrality and central role of work, work was interpreted more abstractly, using the following definition: “the degree of general importance that working has in the life of an individual” (Quintanilla, 1991:85). Similarly, a more general interpretation of work was used in research covering work orientation, relying on the following definition of orientation: “beliefs about the activity of work in general” (Rosso et al.:98). Lepisto et al. (manuscript) pointed out that these latter two approaches consider work on a more general and abstract level, and not on the level of a task, job or profession. The authors refer to this more general level as work as a life-domain, similar to leisure time, studying or family.

The results of my research add further detail to the question of the **abstraction level of work**, and add additional content to this approach in two areas. Firstly, the case studies add to the interpretation levels of work: the level of task-job-profession-life-domain is joined by an additional level, that of the role. Secondly, these levels may be divided into two broader, closely linked groups: the task-job group and the role-profession-life-domain group. The change in the interpretation of role-profession-life-domain may bring change to the meaning of work and the orientation of work; the change in the interpretation of the task-job does not change the meaning of work, except in cases where it is accompanied by the changing of the role as well. Based on research results, we may be able to draw the conclusion that the self-image of the individual, their work identities and roles is closely interconnected. This conclusion is in harmony with what is stated in the interpersonal sensemaking model of work meaning: in it, authors point to the fact that the meaning of job, role and the meaning of self are closely linked and affect one another (Wrzesniewski et al., 2003) and jointly affect the meaning of the work of the individual.

At this point, it is worthwhile to return to the concept of **work orientation**, which Pratt et al. (forthcoming) and Lepisto et al. (manuscript) linked to the purpose of the individual as far as work, as a life-domain, is concerned. Based on my findings, we may conclude that the purpose of work as life-domain is too high-level in nature: even less radical, but comprehensive changes led to changes in work orientation and the meaning of work. We have several cases to illustrate this (e.g. the cases of Bence, Léna, Mihály and Csilla). Based on the above, we see that orientation is not on the level of life-domain purposes, but on the level of roles. This aligns with the authors’ definition of

work orientation insofar as orientation being considered a disposition. My own research underpins the relative permanence of work orientation among the individuals: I saw that parallel with the changes in work orientation, the beliefs and values of the individual also changed. In light of my research findings, it is worth examining the definition of work orientation as proposed by Rosso et al. (2010:98): “beliefs about the activity of work in general.” The authors treat this separately from beliefs related to specific work. It is necessary to add to this definition, based on the model, that these beliefs pertain to the following aspects: role, profession, work as a life-domain and the self at work.

In our comparison of the literature, it is important to cover the model of job crafting (Wrzesniewski – Dutton, 2001). As a result of the crafting of the job, the authors believe the work identity of the individual (how the individuals define themselves in the course of their work) also changes, as does the meaning of work as defined based on the definition provided in the comprehensive review published by Brief and Nord (1990b). The meaning of work (Wrzesniewski – Dutton, 2001: 180): “individuals’ understandings of the purpose of their work or what they believe is achieved in their work.” The conclusions of my own research both support this definition, but also differ from it. As a common element, we may state that for lasting change to occur, it is necessary for the individual’s self-definition and beliefs about themselves to change. The difference is that in the definition formulated by Brief and Nord (1990b) does not precisely explain the “individuals’ understandings of the purpose of their work” and what exactly the authors mean by “what they believe is achieved in their work.” This may pertain to purposes having to do with task, job, role, profession or life-domain – i.e. it can apply to the fundamental purposes (significance) behind the individual’s work, since all of these can be said to be the purposes of their work or what they wish to reach through their work. In the cases examined, we saw that each subject had some kind of priority purpose which they strove to achieve – this served as the primary purpose of their work (Chapter 5.3.2). Based on the research, we see that lasting change also came about when the fundamental purpose of the individual did not undergo a quality change: e.g. the cases of Bence, Csilla<sup>2</sup>, Csilla<sup>3</sup>, Melinda<sup>1</sup>, Melinda<sup>2</sup> and Léna. It is possible that Brief and Nord, as well as Wrzesniewski and Dutton, did not look to define the purpose on this level. Based on the meaning of work schema, I propose the following new definition: the individual’s understanding of the purpose of their work, or what they believe they can achieve through their work; this purpose may be related to their tasks, their job, their role within the organization, their profession or the role their work plays in their lives. The meaning of work may undergo lasting change if the work identity of the individual changes, or if the purpose related to the role of the individual in the organization and/or their profession and/or the role their work plays in their life changes.

## **5.5. Discussion**

In this chapter I put the findings of my research on the map of literature with regard to the meaning of work and point out how my results contribute to professional discourse. Then I give an overview of this contribution to the content and process of the meaning of work. Subsequently, I compare it to the sensemaking process. I also examine how it relates to HR role models. Finally, I deal with its practical relevance and usability.

### **5.5.1. Literature on the meaning of work**

The studying of critical events proved to be a useful approach both in discovering the meaning and meaningfulness of work and also in their changes. By using this approach we were able to focus on several characteristic features of the meaning and meaningfulness of work and their changes that other researches have not managed to identify. No researcher so far has attempted to study critical incidents in this context, which may give a novelty value to the present work.

Individuals were affronted with critical incidents in the company of other people at the workplace. In each case the incident was caused either by the manager of the organization, the superior or colleagues. On the basis of our findings we can assert that the meaning and meaningfulness of work is influenced by colleagues or the social environment of the individual at the workplace. Under this influence the meaning of work for the individual, i.e work orientation and the meaning mechanisms of work may change. We can go even further: under the influence of colleagues and the social environment individuals may change their perception of work tasks, job, colleagues, managers, organization, their own role, profession and their work as a life-domain. Consequently they may go on to change all these factors and look for another workplace, and profession or adopt a new way of life.

Among the main trends that study the meaning of work my research belongs to the group which emphasizes intersubjectivity, namely which considers the meaning of work as subjective and acknowledges the influence of the surrounding community on individuals when they construe a meaning of work for themselves. This group of research consists of the following models: social information processing model (Salancik – Pfeffer, 1978), the model of job crafting (Wrzesniewski – Dutton, 2001), the interpersonal sensemaking model of work meaning (Wrzesniewski et al., 2003), the model of the meaningfulness of work from identity perspective (Pratt – Ashforth, 2003). My research also adds a new aspect to the intersubjective approach to the meaning of work since it shows how the influence of the community may lead to a change in

workplace or profession or even to the radical reinterpretation of the meaning of work. These issues have not been dealt with in literature so far.

When we look at literature it seems that the concept of the meaning or meaningfulness of work is used wrongly by the scholars (Rosso et al., 2010; Wrzesniewski, 2010). In my extended definition of the **meaningfulness of work** (Chapter 5.3.2) I tackled the difference between the meaning and the meaningfulness of work (point 5), which is compatible with definitions by Rosso et al. (2010) Wrzesniewski (2010) and Pratt – Ashforth (2003). The subjective, perceived character of the meaning of work (point 7), and the social embeddedness of perception (point 2) are in keeping with all those models which point out the intersubjective character of the meaning and meaningfulness of work. Rosso et al. (2010) have already emphasized the significance and importance of purposes (point 3) in their publication but no mention have been made of the change in purposes or the process of enactment (e.g. reinterpretation, change in workplace) or consequences (e.g. illness). The processional, experience-like character of the meaningfulness of work as a purpose (point 4) has also been absent in literature, although the concept of work-meaning mechanism (Rosso et al., 2010) includes it as well. The phenomenon of perception and the enactment of ideas (point 6) is highlighted by the model of job crafting (Wrzesniewski – Dutton, 2001). This model emphasizes individual liberty, endorses personal initiatives to enable individuals to shape their job.

Another new aspect of my research in the attempt to have a better understanding of the meaningfulness of work is the assertion that the individual has a primary purpose, is keen on to experience it and therefore is willing to take even higher risks. In my view, by using the method of critical incidents we were able identify this anchor-like character of the meaningfulness of work, i.e. the individual sticks to reaching a primary purpose which he/she is not willing to give up. The primary character of purposes with reference to the meaningfulness of work was published by Pratt et al. (under publication). The authors here presented three new orientations which they consider as the primary elements in making work meaningful. This publication, however, does not deal with empirical cases. Personally, I have not yet met a similar conceptual approach (supported by empirical research) to the meaningfulness of work. The primary status of purposes sheds a new light on previous results in literature. Let us just take a case where the organization would like to make work more meaningful for its employees. Obviously, we have to adopt a different approach if each individual has only one single purpose he/she wants to reach or if we suppose there might be several of such purposes. At this point, however, we should call attention to the limits of research. The present research is a qualitative one and as such its greatest strength lies in its internal generalizability (Maxwell, 1996) but there is no reason to suppose that in many aspects the findings of a valid qualitative research may not be valid in other contexts as well. Since the number

of subjects is relatively low (eleven persons) and the research sample – due to the primary scope of interest – is quite homogenous (managers, professionals with higher degrees, employees) it is appropriate to support the above statement with a significantly different sample (e.g. employees with lower qualifications, skilled or unskilled workers, entrepreneurs, people working in unpleasant conditions). I think these findings, supported by further research, may contribute to a better understanding of the meaningfulness of work.

By the studying of the process of giving meaning to work I created the model of **meaning of work schemas** which is a new kind of approach among similar researches. I pointed out that the meaning of work is inseparable from the different perceptual and interpretational frameworks. Of these I have identified the following ones: the frameworks of tasks, job, role, profession, work as a life-domain, relationships with coworkers, relationship with the organization, and the work identity or self-image. The above model reflects the hierarchical structure of perceptual and interpretational frameworks which add up the meaning of work. Furthermore, it calls attention to the fact that lasting change in the work meaning had occurred when the individuals had changed their beliefs about themselves and their own roles. Conclusively, it seemed appropriate to complete and specify literature's concept of "orientation" and also to create a more general concept of the "meaning of work".

The concept of **work orientation** was defined by Pratt et al. (under publication) and Lepisto et al. (in manuscript) as something belonging to the individual's purpose concerning work as a life-domain. On the basis of the meaning of work schema we may conclude that the above linking involves too high a level because change in orientation and in the meaning of work had also occurred in cases of less comprehensive changes. Taking the above notion into account we can see that work orientation should be linked to role-specific purposes.

The comprehensive volume of Brief and Nord (1990b) is considered a milestone in the definition process of the **meaning of work**. Building on the definition of this work I propose a new definition which includes the various perceptual and interpretational frameworks of the meaning itself and the results that concern the change in the work meaning as well.

#### **5.5.1.1. Mechanisms and orientations**

It might be worth referring to works on the topic of orientation which have been or will be published (Wrzesniewski, 1999; Pratt et al., under publication) and which accepted the possibility of **change in orientation**. These works, however, did not deal with the

nature of change so, in this respect, this notion counts as a novelty in literature. In the majority of my samples I managed to identify longer term, lasting change in orientation which always went along with change in work mechanism as well. As a common feature I found that in each case there had been a change in the individuals' beliefs and sets of values and their self-image, work identity had also been changed.

The studying of **work-meaning mechanisms** is a novelty in literature. After formulating the concept of mechanisms there had been no further research in this conceptual framework. Apart from **lasting change** in mechanisms, we were able to identify **temporary, unstable change** as well. As a common feature of temporary, unstable cases we found that cognitive dissonance prevails, which can be inferred from contradictions and tension in the individuals' stories. At temporary changes we may note that mechanisms change but orientations do not. At lasting changes we may note the permanent change in mechanisms and orientations. The common feature to be identified is that in each case there had been a change in the individuals' beliefs and sets of values and they also changed their self-image, work identity. The change in self-image shows the lasting and stable character of the change. In respect of beliefs we may identify a greater degree of change than in temporary, unstable cases. Apart from beliefs about job, tasks and work relations, individuals also changed their beliefs about their role in the organization, profession and work as a life-domain. This kind of grouping of lasting change is also a novelty in literature.

We also found an example for an other **mechanism** which had not been dealt with in literature and its significance is supported by two cases. This new mechanism involves the drive for material security. As we could already see work is given a new meaning by this drive as a process. Thus, if we interpret mechanisms in a broad sense – as part of the meaning of work – the drive for material security may also be considered a mechanism.

In a currently published study Rosso et al. (2010) identified mechanisms and placed them in a comprehensive meta model. In this work they indicated the further study of interference and dynamics of mechanisms as the future direction of research. The study of the change in mechanisms and orientations in my research enabled to examine **the interference and joining of mechanisms**, and orientations which, as such, is another novelty in literature.

Each case of critical incidents involved a certain degree of tension, which confirms Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance (2000/1962). Individuals in such situations tried to reduce tension to an acceptable level to strengthen their positive self-image and self-esteem which critical incidents had put in jeopardy. On the basis of findings key role is played by **self-esteem** and another, outstanding role is played by **significance**



which had been changed along with several other mechanisms. In the literature of the meaning of work self-esteem (Wrzesniewski et al., 2003; Wrzesniewski – Dutton, 2001), and significance (Wrzesniewski et al., 2003; Pratt – Ashforth, 2003; Grant, 2008b) had been given outstanding importance. As we have seen before, individuals try to counteract the reducing of both self-esteem and personal significance. They attempted to choose a new situation or interpret the existing one in which the above factors would eventually turn into a positive direction.

### **5.5.1.2. Researches on the change in the work meaning**

In this chapter I compare my results to those yielded by other researches on the change in the work meaning. Two key studies in this field have been published by Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001) and Wrzesniewski et al. (2003). These authors defined the meaning of work in a different way from mine, i.e. the meaning of work was not identified with orientations and mechanisms – they were defined on a more general level. Both studies primarily focused on the change in the work meaning with less emphasis on contentual issues, so none of them linked contentual changes in the meaning of work to individual steps in the process. In the study that deals with the job crafting we find examples for the linking of the process and contentual issues (p. 182) but a comprehensive, type-specific identification is missing. As for the interpersonal model of sensemaking contentual issues were included in their model by the identification of 'job – role – self'. Yet, they had not explored either the contentual patterns of the meaning of work or the pattern of "job – role – self". The study of the process in the change in orientations in my research made it possible **to identify both contentual patterns and the process** itself. The process of critical events identified the meaning of work i.e. the changing directions, permanency of specific orientations and mechanisms along with the identification of characteristic types and groups. In this respect the present work contributes to the published researches dealing with change in the work meaning.

The process showing the phenomenon job crafting (Wrzesniewski – Dutton, 2001) primarily draws on three individual demands as motivating factors: need for control, a need for positive self image and the need for human connection with others. As a common feature we may identify desire for positive self-image as a demand. Building on my research we may identify another, fourth demand that incurs the alteration of work: the individual's demand for reducing cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 2000/1962) – a phenomenon which surfaced at critical incidents. Another identifiable difference is that individuals in critical situations may alter their jobs, may initiate further changes by which they reinterpret not just their jobs but also their relationships with the

organization, profession and work as a life-domain. All this goes beyond the phenomenon of changing job. The following figure shows identical and different factors.

**Figure 18 : Comparing the job crafting and the process of critical events**

|  | <b>Process of job crafting</b> | <b>Process of critical events</b> |
|--|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| <b>Incurring needs</b>                                     |                                |                                   |
| Need for control   | +                              |                                   |
| Need for positive self-image                               | +                              | +                                 |
| Need for human connection with others                      | +                              |                                   |
| Need for reducing cognitive dissonance                     |                                | +                                 |
| <b>Reinterpreting of the situation</b>                     |                                |                                   |
| Reinterpreting the job                                     | +                              | +                                 |
| Reinterpreting the tasks                                   | +                              | +                                 |
| Reinterpreting the relationships with coworkers            | +                              | +                                 |
| Reinterpreting the relationship with role                  |                                | +                                 |
| Reinterpreting the relationship with profession            |                                | +                                 |
| Reinterpreting the relationship with work as a life-domain |                                | +                                 |
| Reinterpreting the relationship with the organization      |                                | +                                 |

The interpersonal sensemaking model of the meaning of work (ISM) (Wrzesniewski et al., 2003) and my research examine a similar process as both of them focus on sensemaking: both are event-based and are incurred by external stimuli. At this point we may refer to the process that job crafting which, in turn, is demand-based and – caused by individuals.

From one aspect the interpersonal sensemaking model interprets stimuli in a broader sense than the process which examines critical situations. My research does not include non-verbal stimuli – all subjects talked about verbal stimuli only. If we consider other aspects we find that it is the process which examines critical events that interprets stimuli in a broader sense. Wrzesniewski and colleagues examined personal stimuli among participants. Current study also included more general stimuli e.g. a manager’s decision or when the individuals reacted differently from the way that would have been expected on the grounds of belief they had formed about themselves.

With regard to the process, sensemaking identifies three steps in the interpretation process: (1) notifying interpersonal cues, (2) discerning affirmation or disaffirmation (3)

motive work. This is followed by the linking of interpersonal stimuli with the meaning of work and, consequently: the modified meaning. Let us begin the comparison of processes with looking at similarities. As a common feature we may identify the fact that ISM also underlines the significance of unexpected or surprising stimuli in the sensemaking process. The central motif in realising affirmation or disaffirmation of confidence is whether the unexpected event reduces or increases the individual's self-esteem. The significance of self-esteem is emphasized in my own research too. Differences may be identified in the following steps. ISM's process identifies fewer elements in the process: it does not emphasize the significance of tension and the significance of reducing cognitive dissonance in the further steps of the process. It does not identify questioning of own expectations in cases of losing confidence. Neither does it identify reinterpreting of the situation and the different types thereof. In ISM the meaning of work appears as the reinterpreting of the content and value of "job – role – self". It is dealt with at the topic of beliefs, values and the change in the work meaning. On the basis of its subjects' stories ISM identifies affirmation, disaffirmation and ambivalent stories. In my research I could differentiate between two types of stories only: a reinforcing, positive one and discouraging, negative one. The following figure shows the identical and different elements.

**Figure 19: Comparison of the interpersonal sensemaking model of work meaning and the process of critical events**

|  | <b>Interpersonal sensemaking model</b> | <b>Process of critical events</b> |
|--|--|-----------------------------------|
| <b>Interpersonal cues</b>  |  |                                   |
| Positive   | +                                      | +                                 |
| Negative   | +                                      | +                                 |
| Verbal   | +                                      | +                                 |
| Non-verbal   | +                                      |                                   |
| Beliefs about self   |  | +                                 |
| <b>Interpretational process</b>                                  |  |                                   |
| Recognition of interpersonal stimuli                             | +                                      | +                                 |
| Experiencing tension   |  | +                                 |
| Recognition of affirmation or disaffirmation                     | +                                      | +                                 |
| Questioning of own expectations                                  |  | +                                 |
| Motive work  | +                                      | +                                 |
| Creating an explanation  |  | +                                 |
| <b>Reinterpreting the situation and taking action</b>            |  | +                                 |
| <b>Linking of interpersonal stimuli with the meaning of work</b> | +                                      | +                                 |
| <b>Modified meaning</b>  | +                                      | +                                 |

### **5.5.2. The processes of sensemaking**

In the theoretical part of my dissertation I highlighted two of these processes which serve as frames of reference from the point of view of my research. My approach, however, differs from both because apart from the process itself it deals with contentual aspects as well.

Weick and colleagues (Weick – Sutcliffe – Obstfeld, 2005) discern four different elements of the process in their publication: (1) Differing from expectations, (2) Recognition, labeling, categorization, (3) Creating plausible explanations (4) Taking action. With one exception these process elements can also be identified in the process of critical events: I did not earmark the element of recognition, labelling and categorisation (2) because subjects did not mention them. In all probability, these elements are beyond the territory of consciousness and that is why subjects had not mention them in their stories. Apart from the above-mentioned ones the process of critical events identifies other elements, e.g. experiencing tension, questioning of own expectations, reinterpreting of the situation and taking action, changing of beliefs, values and the meaning of work. Each of these steps are characteristic of surprising situations which had brought about greater, more memorable changes in the individual's life, whereas the process elements identified by Weick et al. may be characteristic of surprising situations with smaller change as well. The process of critical events calls attention to the fact that surprising, unexpected situations incur tension and jeopardise the individual's self-esteem. As one of the seven main characteristics of the sensemaking process Weick (1995) identified identity construction. He suggests that sensemaking is induced by a failed attempt of self-justification and it serves the preservation of a positive, consistent self-image. At the same time he may not stress properly the significance of self-esteem and the tension caused by cognitive dissonance and the jeopardising of self-esteem, which acts as a catalyst in the whole process.

For my research Louis's model (1980) had a genuinely definitive value as it gave the initial framework for it. The context in the two researches, however, were different: Louis examined novices from the angle of socialisation. He collected their surprising, unexpected events which were conspicuous at the time of collection but it is doubtful if they had a lasting effect. In my research I collected critical events that had happened years before and had a greater effect. The focus was different too: Louis emphasized surprise and its interpretation by the individual (how and by whom interpretation is influenced), whereas I focused on interpretation (how and by whom interpretation is influenced) and its effects (how it changes the meaning of work) as well.

Louis separates the identification of surprise into three parts: change, contrast, surprise. I consider this as one entity of 'surprise' since my subjects did not emphasize any other

element of the perception. Sensemaking is present in both processes. In my research this element may be identified with 'making an explanation' because Louis interprets sensemaking in a narrower sense: he calls retrospective explanation sensemaking (1980a). Behavioral response may be identified with taking action. Expectations and the change in the recognition of the situation, on the other hand, may be associated with 'reinterpreting the situation' and by the 'change in beliefs, values and the meaning of work'. While Louis did not elaborate in details on this element, in my approach – by the identification of characteristic patterns - it is given a great emphasis. In Louis's process the emphasis on the significance of tension and the questioning of own expectations are absent. The following figure shows the identical and different elements (differing terminology is indicated in separate columns).

**Figure 20: The comparison of Louis's sensemaking model and the process of critical events**

| Louis's sensemaking model                          |     | Process of critical events |   |
|--|-----|----------------------------|---|
| Change   | +   | (+)                        | Surprising event  |
| Contrast   | +   | (+)                        | Surprising event  |
| Surprise   | +   | +                          | Surprising event  |
| Sensemaking  | +   | +                          | Creating an explanation                                     |
| Behavioral response                                | +   | +                          | Taking action   |
| Expectations and the change in the view of setting | (+) | +                          | Reinterpreting the situation                                |
| Expectations and the change in the view of setting | (+) | +                          | Change of beliefs and values and change in the work meaning |
|  |     | +                          | Encountering tension  |
|  |     | +                          | Questioning of own expectation                              |

### 5.5.3. HR role models

When I had to consider choosing samples I hinted that among HR researches the approach concerning HR role models is probably the most relevant for my dissertation. This chapter deals with the reference points to HR role models.

The area of HR is characterised by a number of contradictions and sources of tension, amply highlighted in literature as well. According to literature HR professionals have to carry the following burdens: how to identify with the humane side or the control side (Legge, 1995), or how to fight for their own position or prove their work is necessary (Nkomo – Ensley, 1999; Farkas – Karoliny – Poór, 2009). Of these two sources of tension the latter typically appeared in critical situations, i.e. the battle to defend the status quo or assert acknowledgement. The point here is whether company management acknowledges the HR manager, whether they consider people-related issues as strategic questions, or whether they involve HR managers in decision-making. This issue is

closely related to strategical vs. operative dimension of Ulrich's (1997, 1998) role model.

At situational level this issue appears in the following way: How much control HR is given by management or does HR get involved in decision-making? Contradictions in the HR role appeared in the following critical situations:

In the case of Léna2 a new manager's new kind of leadership concept meant downsizing with less and less support for dismissed employees. By outplacement programs were finished as well. Léna's belief about HR's role had changed. Up to that point she considered it as a developing, supportive body in the organization. According to her interpretation, HR role involved a kind of initiating and developing function, which, by this change had become a purely implementing role which did not allow for asking questions, only for executing decisions. On the other hand, HR had become a downsizing function that puts an end or cuts back on previously developed systems and initiatives and abuses people's weak points. Léna interpreted her own role as a supporter and developer and could not identify with an implementing, downsizing HR role.

*“there was no need and they blocked the service side of this entire area. It turned into such an executive function of a purely administrative nature, and of course, back then there had been a great-great need for me to be there, and help, and do my job, but that just went away.” (case Léna2)*

In case Bence1 decision-making procedure at the company had changed and the second level management had been ignored. Consequently, they were unable to influence decisions and they did not even get any justification for it. In this case change did not affect HR only. Nevertheless, Bence conceived a demand for taking up a strategic role for himself.

*„And the other thing is that I hate this type of HR role. That is, that HR would be only about me being some sort of second-order caretaker, who is told, after the great decisions have been made, afterwards HR is told to take care of the operational aspects and then HR takes care of the operational aspects. So I'd like to take part in decision making, that is, being like, doing an HR where I have a part in the decisions. So that if I say, we're expanding the company, then I should have a concept, I should be able to have a word in along what lines the company should be expanded, and when I dismiss him, then I should understand why it's done and that it shouldn't just be, like, we need to downsize now and you need to take care of the legal things.” (case Bence1)*

In the case of Csilla1 top management did not acknowledge her as a HR manager and neither did they consider HR as an important area.

*“There I was faced with an unpleasant surprise, as the two deputies, Béla Nagy and Katalin Kis wanted to boot me out, telling me in the face, they said, I'm too much for this organization, in their opinion, the company doesn't need HR services of such quality, they believe I'm a true professional expert, but I should go somewhere else. [...] I've never wavered in my faith in the significance and the value of this profession,*

*that is, I'm so deeply convinced that it does indeed represent value added, that they simply can't make me doubt it.”(case Csilla1)*

On the whole, out of 15 unpleasant surprises I found only 3 which also involved the strategic-operative dimension. In the other negative cases and in the cases of pleasant surprises issues concerning HR's strategic-operative role had not been mentioned.

In some further cases involving the strategic-operative dimension HR's role was not questioned but the individual's own role was. In case Melinda1 she resented being left out of decision-making and in this way she got into a situation she could not accept morally. Hajnal (case 1) said that earlier, as a novice she could complete much more important tasks and assignments than now, as an experienced manager. This reflects her own subjective perception but it also indicates that as a HR manager she could not take part in the formulating of company trends and directions or in making major decisions.. In the case of Norbert1 the source of tension is also the general manager of the company who did not appreciate Norbert's work, so he felt he was continuously reduced to an implementing, operative role. Compared to cases where HR's role is involved, the above cases of individual role-taking have a different element, i.e. individuals did not relate their own situation to HR's.

The individual's own role is questioned in a case where tension does not appear in the operative vs. strategic dimension but in relation to the roles of a change agent and that of an administrative expert. In case Viktor 1 his own role is being questioned and not that of HR's. This case involves an argument about allocating company cars and its repercussions. Concerning an issue of sharing bonuses Viktor reinterpreted his own role, job and work tasks. He managed to find a new meaningfulness of work in the new framework, i.e. he felt he was much rather supposed to ensure transparency and consistency (as a keeper of rules or administrative expert) than to convince colleagues to accept values he thinks are important (change agent).

*„So if someone is motivated by having a bigger and fancier car, if this under certain conditions, on the other side, you know, I as a, have to ensure the consistence and transparency of benefits within the company, but if they are motivated by having this brand of car instead of that brand, and this big instead of that small, well then okay, I acquiesce, then this is important to them and this is what I'll have to provide to them, because this is what they are motivated by.” (case Viktor1)*

In most of the processed critical cases the questioning of own role can not be associated with the categories of Ulrich's model. In these cases individuals linked critical situations with beliefs they had formed about themselves and asked fundamental questions concerning their work identity, e.g. Am I a manager? If so – what kind? Am I a HR professional? If so - what kind? To this group belong Szilvia's cases, case Rita1, case Léna1, cases Melinda2, Melinda3, case Bence2, cases Csilla2, Csilla3 , cases

Mihály1, Mihály2, case Viktor2, Balázs's cases. Apart from the above cases I also found ones where own role was not even mentioned (cases Norbert3, Norbert4, case Melinda4).

On the basis of all this, we may conclude that some of the critical cases of HR managers also involve the interpretation of HR's role but, at the same time, there are far more cases where the individual's role is being questioned. This notion is in keeping with probably the most characteristic feature of sensemaking which underlines the fact that sensemaking is grounded in identity construction (Weick, 1995; Pratt – Ashforth, 2003).

#### **5.5.4. The practical significance of the research**

Pratt et al. (under publication) and Pratt and Ashforth (2003) paid special attention to the meaningfulness of work and to the introduction and linking of company practices that support them. They highlighted three main practices (Pratt – Ashforth, 2003), which significantly affect the meaningfulness of work: selection, socialisation and organizational culture. In their paper still under publication they elaborated company practices that support the three newly proposed work orientations. They are convinced that company practices which fit to individuals' orientations are quite likely to enhance the probability of finding work meaningful and valuable. If we accept the existence of the five orientations, it becomes obvious that there can be no universal, company solution that would be able to give the same kind of meaningfulness to individuals with different orientations. Therefore, it is worth working out several company practices, or if an organization prefers employees with the same orientation, it should operate that specific company practice.

The new definition of the meaningfulness of work created as a finding of research supports the concepts of Pratt et al. (under publication) and of Pratt and Ashforth (2003) concerning the meaningfulness of work and its application in company practices. This research finding points out that apart from the five orientations the individual may try to reach further meaningful purposes. Exploring purposes should be continued in further research, examining whether present results are confirmed by new findings. Research findings may be used for the reconsideration of existing company practices, similarly to the line of thought followed in the previous paragraph. Retention of staff may be improved by exploring what primary purposes really mean for important staff members (or even the full circle of employees). HR may then be able to take action or implement measures accordingly.

The examination of the change in work meaning reveals what kind of company practices – if any – have a negative effect on individuals, how their work may become



devoid of meaningfulness with the consequence of quitting the organization and perhaps eliciting the change in work meaning as well. Responsible company managers assume responsibility for employees, too. Therefore, they pay special attention to make employees feel valuable and useful at their workplaces, i.e. they should perceive meaningfulness in what they do. It is well worth looking at the manager's perspective on these cases: What kind of factors should be considered when making a managerial or restructuring decision if one wants to retain workforce and to see that employees themselves find work meaningful? According to my findings individuals perceived that their significance and self-esteem had fallen at a greater degree before they eventually opted for change. Individuals thought it was not worth working there either because they did not want to do the demanded job and/or there was no need for what they were able or willing to offer. Those who went for quitting had reached the point where they could no longer accept changed conditions i.e. they could not adjust new conditions to their values and felt the things they were able and willing to do were no longer important for the organization. Managers may draw the conclusion that before or after making a managerial decision colleagues expect a continuous, sincere and personal rapport so that it would be possible for both parties to discover accidental differences in values, or, ultimately, to make colleagues feel important.

These critical situations are of interest not only from a managerial perspective but also from the aspect of coaching as they may even join if managers happen to employ coaching. They also shed light on individuals' typical, personal patterns of thinking, schemas, limits which may have contributed to the individuals' reaching the point where they could not reinterpret the situation, or if they could, they still bore a considerable amount of tension. In my dissertation I had no intention to analyse specific cases from this aspect, yet in certain cases the coach or the manager may hint at schemas of perception and patterns of thinking which, in a sense, may form an obstacle in the individual's attempt to reinterpret the situation in a satisfactory way, without a more radical change and find meaningfulness again in his/her work.

If we look at the process or the phenomenon itself, findings of the research among HR managers may be carefully generalised at several points – as I have also dealt with this aspect in Chapter 4.4. With regard to HR managers I emphasize the need to reshape their approach. By looking at and reading their own processed cases (or if they contributed – other cases, too) they may get a grip on the analysis of the effects of negative company practices and by learn this interpretation method of the meaning and meaningfulness of work – they will probably have a different attitude towards their own company practices. Therefore, the present research may have an educational value or an attitude- shaping effect on HR managers as well.

The methodology applied in the research and the analyses of critical cases may be used well for the determination of the individuals' primary purposes and they can also be used for the reforming of existing company practices. This methodology may also be ideal for personal development and coaching.

### **5.5.5. Summarizing the results of the research**

To date, no researcher has applied the **analysis of critical incidents** when studying the meaning and meaningfulness of work; this is thus a new approach. Through the examination of critical events, I was able to highlight several unique characteristics of the meaningfulness and meaning of work, and of the change in work meaning, which no other study had managed to identify before.

Individuals encountered critical incidents in the social environment of their workplaces – i.e. each event was initiated by the manager of the organization, a direct superior or coworkers. Thus, based on the research, we are able to state that coworkers and the **individual's social environment in the workplace affect the meaning and meaningfulness of the individual's work**. These may transform the meaning of the individual's work, including their work orientation and its mechanisms. In fact, we may go further to state that the individual – as a result of their coworkers and their social environment – changes how they perceive their tasks, job, coworkers, managers, organization, role, profession and the role their job plays in their life. As a result, they may change any of these and could even change professions or lifestyles. Literature dealing with the meaning of work has not examined similar results of the role the individual's social environment in the workplace.

The definition of the **meaningfulness of work** – expounded and expanded based on my research – covered the difference between the meaning and meaningfulness of work, which matches the definitions used by van Rosso et al. (2010), Wrzesniewski (2010) and Pratt – Ashforth (2003). The definition highlights several unique characteristics of the meaningfulness of work which have not been discussed in the past. The research also points to another a novel notion by pointing out that the individual has a primary purpose which they seek to experience and for which they are willing to take even serious risks. I believe that this result, supported by further research, could provide new insight into our understanding of the meaningfulness of work.

Through the examination of the process of sensemaking, I arrived at the **model of meaning of work schemas**, thereby bringing a new perspective to the series of studies examining the meaning of work. I pointed out that the various frames of the perception and interpretation of work are inseparable from the meaning of work. Based on this, it

seemed necessary to add to and detail the concept of orientation and the broader notion of work meaning as they are used in the literature.

Studies examining **work orientation** allowed for the possibility of the change in orientation, but did not however cover an examination of the **nature of this change**; i.e. this is a new topic in the literature.

**Examining the mechanisms** is new in the body of literature. Following the formulation of the concept of mechanisms, no research was conducted, to date, in this framework. Among the mechanisms, I was able to identify – in addition to **lasting changes** – **temporary, unstable changes** affecting the meaning of work. I also found an example of a **mechanism** which has not yet been discussed in the literature, yet whose significance is supported by two cases. The examination of changes to mechanisms and orientations in my research made it possible to explore both the examination of interaction between **orientations** as well as mechanisms, and links between these; this is new in the literature as well. Based on my findings, **self-esteem** plays a key role among the mechanisms; **significance** also plays an important role, which also changes together with several other mechanisms.

The research methodology employed and the results discovered will be easy to use by HR specialists and coaches. **Practicing specialists** may contribute, using the findings of this study, new perspectives to support their colleagues to shape their work more meaningful. The results of the study and the methodology employed may also be used to revisit corporate practices: companies may better retain their employees if they explore what it is that key employees (or all employees) believe is the meaningfulness of their work. By doing so, the company can implement appropriate measures and actions in their HR practices.

### **5.5.6. Potential directions for further research**

At this point I must call attention to the limits of research. The major strength of qualitative research – owing to its nature – is that one can make internal generalizations (Maxwell, 1996) but there is no reason to suppose why the experiences of a valid research could not be valid in other contexts. Let us see how much my sample may be considered typical, how suitable would it be for generalization. The number of subjects is relatively low (eleven persons) and the research sample – owing to the original focus of interest - is relatively homogenous (people with degrees, in leading positions, employees, white collar workers and people of the same profession). Within the selected sample I tried to interview subjects with the most diverse and special backgrounds, i.e. people with great upheavals in their career or an unusual walk of life, people who must

have weighed a number of aspects about the meaning and meaningfulness of work (e.g. Melinda). I also included novices, newly appointed, quite young managers who have a very different perspective on work than those who had spent 20-30 years in managerial positions (e.g. Bence). I also wanted to include subjects who have/had only a few or a very high number of subordinates. Conclusively, we can only make generalizations about the findings of the present research with regard to these limiting factors.

In the light of the above considerations I propose the continuation and extension of the research with the applied methodology, on a significantly different sample:

- beside or instead of highly qualified subjects – subjects with low qualifications
- beside or instead of employees - entrepreneurs
- beside or instead of people in normal working conditions – those in extreme working conditions (e.g. in unpleasant working environments, see Isaksen, 2000)
- beside or instead of white collar workers - blue collar workers.

The following points deserve **further research**:

- Further research is needed on the meaningfulness of work: concerning my finding about the individuals having a primary purpose they want to experience and are willing to take even higher risks to do so.
- Purposes and the meaningfulness of work should be further explored with an extra focus on how primary purposes may be grouped.
- The circle of schemas and frameworks of work meaning: Will new perceptual and interpretational frameworks appear in a sample thoroughly different from the present one?
- The analysis of the cases from a managerial perspective. The extension of the methodology in a way that would be suitable for the revision of organizational practices.
- Further analysis of the cases from the prospective of coaching: Pointing at each individual's own specific pattern of thinking, schemas, limits which may have contributed to the individuals' reaching the point where they could no longer reinterpret the situation or if they did, it still bore a considerable amount of tension.

In the present research **I have not dealt with** the following relevant and very interesting areas which I deem worthwhile to study in the future.

- The meaning of work and the longitudinal tracing of cognitive schema-formulation may be an interesting topic. In this research I had no intention to follow through a specific period of time (e.g. in relation to switching workplaces or starting a new job) or to follow the meaning of work as a process in a previously set period of time.

- The individual's cognitive structure is unseparable from commonly shared or organizational cognitive structures or from the cultural characteristics of the given country. In this research I did not intend to examine the changes of organizational cognitive schemas or the correlations between national characteristics and individual schemas. I focused my research on individual schemas and the social influence exerted on them. I also analysed the way individuals perceive these influences - independently from other people's perception (organizational or team members').

## 6. Appendix

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## 6.1. Interview outline

### Topics to start with

- Introduction
- Review the purpose of the research
- Briefly outline the course of the interview
- Ask for permission to record the conversation; confidential treatment of information

### Demographics – fill in the table

Personal data:

Name:

Age:

Qualification:

Work experience:

| Company | Industry | Comp. size (employees) | Company owned by | Job | Number of subordinates | Years spent there |
|---------|----------|------------------------|------------------|-----|------------------------|-------------------|
|         |          |                        |                  |     |                        |                   |
|         |          |                        |                  |     |                        |                   |
|         |          |                        |                  |     |                        |                   |
|         |          |                        |                  |     |                        |                   |

### Meaning of work (content)

- What does work mean to you?
- Why is it worth for you to work?
- What is it that is important/vital or that you look for/want to find in your work? (give example)

### Meaning of work (process)

- Has the meaning of your work changed since you started working? (if he/she switched to another profession, before/after may be important) How did it evolve?
- Were there any critical/unexpected/surprising events or turning points in your work or how you relate to your work?
  - Was there any positive or not very positive or expressly negative experience that surprised you or maybe even shocked you?
  - Please, tell me what happened.
  - What happened before and after that? Did anything change? What is it that changed?

**Closure:**

- Is there anything important related to this topic that you think we have missed?
- Would you be willing to participate in a follow-up meeting? Would you like feedback?
- Could you recommend an HR manager?



## **6.2. Cases**

### **6.2.1. Unpleasant surprises**

#### **6.2.1.1. Temporary and unstable changes in the meaning of work**

##### **6.2.1.1.1. Changes in beliefs about the organization and the managers**

**Norbert1**

###### **Surprising event**

---

Four years ago he received a negative evaluation.

*„and then my relationship with my boss went bad. Well [unclear speech] my boss, and to me, he always only, how shall I put it, I got nothing but nagging from him. I don't work enough, and my performance is bad. I simply didn't submit to him. That is, I didn't recognize that he's my boss. He did feel that, and he paid me back for that on every possible occasion. There, too, I got a bad annual evaluation four years ago.”*

###### **Encountering tension**

---

Anger.

###### **Questioning own expectations**

---

###### **Creating an explanation**

---

He puts the blame on his manager for the negative evaluation, does not acknowledge his own responsibility, he ascribes the bad performance evaluation to his unwillingness to recognize his boss, as if it had been some sort of revenge from his manager's side.

###### **Reinterpreting the situation**

---

He reinterpreted his job, his duties and how he fulfills them. He repeatedly received feedback that he is not required to do his job so thoroughly and diligently, to put his creativity to work. He realized that there were significant discrepancies between the expectations of his organization and manager and those of his own. Upon that he decided that if his own way of doing his job was not good enough, he would distance himself from the organization's expectations, ignore them and only deliver the minimum acceptable performance level. He protected his self-esteem and his image of

his own valuableness by prioritizing them over his need for creative work and by regarding the organization nothing more than a job. He concluded that through the unfavorable developments in his relationship with his manager, the weight and the significance of his work had also changed. He concluded that his work and its results and consequences would carry less weight now.

*„So the standards changed quite a lot. In the beginning I felt very important, and thought it would be us who would figure out the local things, that it would all be up to us. I see much clearer now, we get everything from headquarters. And by now, I've come to terms with the fact that we have to execute it, that there's no ifs, ands or buts. In the beginning, I wanted to contribute a great deal to it and that cost me a lot of energy.”*

He reinterpreted his relation with his manager and with the organization, he distanced himself from both his manager and the organization as much as he could. He became distant and alienated from the organization.

### **Taking action**

---

He defined his own goals/priorities for himself, did not want to comply with the expectations of his manager or the organization. He wanted a new job, he tried to find a new job. He was constantly on the lookout for a job, but did not manage to find one.

*„There was this intermediary period, when I only wanted to meet my own expectations”  
„I was constantly trying to find a way to flee work such that I find, the appropriate, thus not performing at the maximum, but still have some energy left, but in a way that I can still sell it. Well, I would leave.[...] Yes, this is fine with them. Good. Should finish work, and then I can go home.”*

*„Until then it's just a living, or there's no other ground, I've been looking and applying for various positions all the time.”*

### **Change in beliefs and values**

---

It was his beliefs about the organization and about his manager that changed. Norbert thought it was not worth for him to perform, because his manager and the organization did not appreciate him. He reinterpreted his relation with the organization: he became distant from it and only regarded it as a way of making a living until he found a new workplace.

His beliefs about his job, his tasks and his workplace relationships changed.

### **Change in work meaning**

#### **Mechanism affected**

---

**Before the change: personal engagement, significance, self-esteem deteriorate.** In the beginning, he wanted to add to it a lot, prepared a lot, wanted to really give his best in his work, he wanted to create, but he repeatedly received negative feedback in response. For Norbert, the meaningfulness of work basically resides in expressing and developing his self, in actualizing himself through his work activities. It was the meaningfulness of his work that this unexpected situation affected. Consequently, it was only to a limited degree that he could experience that his work had a purpose, that it had significance, because he could not contribute to the corporate goals with what he was fond of doing.

*„you need to take simplification to the extremes, and very-very visual and simple. Which I don't really like, because it more or less kills that I should be creative, and consider that the others also contributed something, also did something, I need to turn everything into something dull. Do the simplest things possible, in the most visual and apparent way, with the least possible amount of text. Make it well-organized, so that if someone from the outside or from the managers has a look at it, they should get the point at once. And I was a bit prone to complicating things, to talk and to look at each aspect in a more complicated way, to say that okay, this has that effect and that has this effect. They aren't interested in that, it's only the end result that counts.”*

*„Considering the meetings, I read a lot on what such a meeting is about in the literature, I even prepared tables on how a meeting should be conducted. I proposed it, but then it wasn't even presented what this meeting was, so I made it for myself. I thought this was important, and spent a lot of energy on finding out about such processes, or such competences, what sort of competence, how it should be, how important it is to the company. They didn't care about it at all. Very often, I was looking into things and doing things that weren't even important to the company's life. I devoted enormous energy to presenting a spreadsheet or to how I should prepare a presentation”*

**After the change: self-esteem improves slightly.** As a result of the negative feedback, he could not experience a personal engagement in his work, while he also perceived his work to be of less significance, and as a consequence of all these, his self-esteem deteriorated. He reacted by reinterpreting his relation with the organization, became distant and alienated from the organization: he devalued the performance expectations and interpreted them to his own liking, regarded his workplace as a source of livelihood only and was constantly looking for a new job. This acted to somewhat improve his self-esteem.

**Balance. Lack of personal engagement, significance, self-esteem.** He still could not experience that he could contribute to the organization, that is, the significance of his work, which would have provided the meaningfulness of his work to him. All this implies that this change brought about a temporary and relatively unsettled solution, also confirmed by the fact that he was constantly looking for a job and considered the situation to have been temporary.

### **Orientation affected**

---

Norbert could not experience the craftsmanship orientation in the given organization, adjusted his relationship with the organization, he failed to find a new workplace, therefore he now works under a job orientation in this organization. Which, however, does not mean that his orientation is changing, only that it is not his primary orientation that he can experience at this workplace. This case shows us that work orientation has both an organization-level interpretation and a more abstract, general-level interpretation that relates to work as a life-domain.

### **Summary interpretation of the case**

For Norbert, the meaningfulness of work basically resided in expressing and developing his self, in actualizing himself through his work activities. It was the meaningfulness of his work that this unexpected situation affected. As a result of the negative feedback, he

could not experience a personal engagement in his work. He reacted by constantly looking for a new place to work, regarded his workplace as a source of livelihood only and worked in that organization under a job orientation. Which, however, does not mean that his orientation is changing, only that it is not his primary orientation that he can experience at this workplace. What this case shows us is that work orientation has both an organization-level interpretation and a more abstract, general-level interpretation that relates to work as a life-domain.

**Norbert2**

### **Surprising event**

---

The second negative performance evaluation, the potential negative outcome of which (i.e. that he might lose his job) was also mentioned by the manager.

*„this evaluation, that was a pretty strong reflection. Especially of the fact that if I do something, then I can do it extremely well. [...] And he honestly told me that. But he honestly told me, as well, that if I carry on like this, then I might have to leave the company pretty soon.”*

Meanwhile, the context – both the organizational environment and the manager – has changed.

*„And we are becoming more and more of a multinational, because with the previous company, it had the advantage that they wanted to shut it down, in the long run, it turned out by now. That’s why they didn’t pay attention to it, that’s the reason for a lot of things we did. Now during the last two years we’ve been in focus again, that we deliver very good results, because there are investments. [...] We receive attention, then we have to produce again, we have to perform. The new director, he wants to show them.[...] That one had the advantage that they didn’t pay attention, but then again, it was uncertain. Now we have the attention, so now it’s performance above all. They made an investment, of course they want the returns, want it to pay off.”*

### **Encountering tension**

---

Uncertainty and fear.

*„What is, well the negative experience, that is the annual evaluation, when I got such a bad mark.”*

*„I’m afraid, after all, because I would like in the long run, I have a family and two boys, two children”*

### **Questioning own expectations**

---

Norbert became uncertain as a result of the negative evaluation.

*„Because of that, I sometimes feel I’m not multinational-conform. Yes, this really is a serious problem for me now.”*

### **Creating an explanation**

---

He perceived the behavior of his coworkers to be similar to his own, which acted to slightly reduce the tension, for the others were afraid, too and the others worked hard, too.

*„It's interesting, lay-offs are in the air these days at this company. Everyone started to work, because everyone is frightened.“*

His reaction to the unfavorable performance evaluation is different than it was the previous time. Now, he does acknowledge his own responsibility, as well, instead of regarding his bad relationship with the manager to have been the only cause of the performance evaluation and the negative feedback.

*„It bugged me. It really got to me that I am capable of doing it, but I still didn't do it, and someone else noticed, too. Until then, I thought I could weasel out of it. For me, it was like okay, I give it to them, they have other things to do anyways, they won't notice, I'll get away with it. And then it was like absolutely clear that they do notice, and I do see the difference, as well.“*

*„So the manager reflected on it, I got an evaluation, that if I carry on like this, then, that won't be too long, my career won't last very long.“*

### **Reinterpreting the situation**

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The weight, the significance of his work changed through the increased managerial attention and control over his work, compared to the previous period. Upon the potential consequence his manager had warned him about, he reassessed the possible outcomes and reinterpreted his job, his relationships, his tasks and how he performed them. He perceived a larger degree of uncertainty within the organization in general as a result of the changes, and he perceived a larger degree of uncertainty personally, as well, because of the performance evaluation.

*„Attention is directed at us. We receive attention, then we have to produce again, we have to perform. The new director, he wants to show them. That is, he is young, dynamic, squeeze out even more. For this is one hell of a treadmill, after all. Everyone sees it that way, so the managers, too, everyone is shaking like what comes tomorrow? Will they be the one to be replaced? What will happen? It has the advantage that your workplace is less uncertain, but because of that, they squeeze even more out of us. That one had the advantage that they didn't pay attention, but then again, it was uncertain. Now we have the attention, so now it's performance above all. They made an investment, of course they want the returns, want it to pay off.“*

He reinterpreted his relations with his manager and the organization, and re-committed himself to the organization and the manager. He reinterpreted the performance criterion: until then, he did not take his manager's expectations very seriously, but afterwards, he adjusted to the manager's expectations, he wanted to meet them.

*„Now there and then, my primary goal was to improve my commitment.“*

His self-image changed: he re-defined his relationship to responsibility (for details see the section on beliefs).

In the summary interpretation at the end of the case, we will see that the change is not unambiguous, that there is a contradiction.

### **Taking action**

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He adjusted his performance, his tasks (checking) and his relations (relations with the other managers).

*„I changed my attitude. It's just that, as I see it, no matter how well I perform now, such an opinion is hard to turn around“*

*„So there I decided I'd only release high quality work from that point on. Or won't release it at all. I decided I would double and triple check what I release, and I decided, that, then.” „I changed it, that I wouldn't want to leave, but try to do my very best. To meet the quality in my head.”*

### **Change in beliefs and values**

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His beliefs about himself changed. In the previous period, Norbert thought that it was not worth for him to perform, because the organization did not recognize him, and he could afford to do so, as they were not really keeping an eye on him. His new boss made the consequences of his behavior clear to him, he had to face his responsibility. The threat of losing his job and the fact that he was the one to sustain his family acted to change his image of and beliefs about himself, and his feeling of responsibility grew stronger.

*„And now we're sort of trapped, because my wife is at home on maternity leave, so she can't support us, financially. I have to survive two or three years. This also played a role after the annual evaluation. The baby is coming, we were already planning the second, he was already on his way, I really should think it over that it's not entirely up to me. Because I have my family. This also played a role with the annual evaluation, it drew a line that yes, if I carry on like this, this will be the consequence, if I continue like that, then there still is a chance for that, but maybe no, there isn't. [...] Yes, I've turned a bit more responsible. I've been thinking more responsibly since then. It brought me back to reality. Like, after all, I work for a company, and their expectations are enormous. And I can't just hang around all day, just do something here and there. And that really means a lot.”*

His value system changed. Providing for the security of his family became more important to him.

His beliefs about the manager and the company changed, as well. Norbert thought it was already worth for him to perform in order to keep his job. Nevertheless, he still regarded it as a source of livelihood only.

In the summary interpretation at the end of the case, we will see that the change is not unambiguous, that there is a contradiction.

### **Change in work meaning**

#### **Mechanism affected**

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**Before the change: significance, self-esteem decrease.** The recognition received at work is a key issue to him. For Norbert, the meaningfulness of work basically resides in expressing and developing his self, in actualizing himself through his work activities. It was the meaningfulness of his work that this unexpected situation affected. His self-esteem deteriorated as a result of the negative performance evaluation he received from his boss. Because of the warning that he might be dismissed, his job became more important to him, uncertainty increased and control decreased, which had a negative impact on his self-esteem.

*„What is, well the negative experience, that is the annual evaluation, when I got such a bad mark. That affected me very negatively. [...] It's bad when I feel such a bad rejection, or when I get an, so that [unclear speech], external motivation, that I didn't do something, or that I forgot or did something the wrong way.”*

*„I'm afraid, after all, because I would like in the long run, I have a family and two boys, two children, we have to get by, but we have a Swiss franc loan, but I'm not as desperate as I would've been frightened two or three years ago, if they had fired me.”*

**After the change: significance, self-esteem increase.** As a result of changing his attitude, he became more successful, which had a favorable effect on his self-esteem. Paradoxically, his work gained in significance because of the possibility of losing his job and the setting of more specific objectives, that is, because he saw how and what he contributes to.

*“And this might be partly thanks to the more concrete objectives I was provided with after the annual evaluation,[...] There were no indicators. But, after all, it is important to me that I can reflect that yes, now I'm making progress. Since then I got a lot, we jointly agreed on indicators by which I can monitor myself, as well. Well, it may be sort of conspicuous. I can evaluate myself and, well, then I cheer up that yes, we're making progress. There is a kind of feedback for me. Not only from the manager, but through the numbers, too, that they're going up, going down.”*

**Balance. Lack of significance, lack of self-esteem, striving for security increase.** The change in attitude fails to restore his self-esteem because of the constant fear of losing his job, and because of continued negative feedback on his performance – far less frequent than before, though, and accompanied by more positive feedback. Securing a living, striving for financial security become more important; this, nevertheless, is not included among the mechanisms in the literature. Which suggests that the solution this change brought about is still just a temporary and relatively unstable one. In the summary interpretation at the end of the case, we will see that the change is not unambiguous, that there is a contradiction.

*“And what also plays a role is that later, I would like to start some sort of own business. Stand on my own two feet. I realized that this won't work in the long run, I won't work for this company in the long run. I will have to either become self-employed or start up something new using my own resources.”*

### **Orientation affected**

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In this case, the job orientation becomes more significant to Norbert. In the summary interpretation at the end of the case, we will see that the change is not unambiguous, that there is a contradiction.

### **Summary interpretation of the case**

This case is in contradiction with how Norbert interpreted pleasant surprises (cases Norbert3 and 4), for here, he speaks about his commitment and feeling of responsibility following the performance evaluation of his new boss. Having examined the cases Norbert3 and Norbert4, it seems that the two explanations – the one that makes the organization/manager responsible and denies Norbert's own responsibility and the one that does assume responsibility and commitment – prevail simultaneously, and thus induce tension and create cognitive dissonance. Consequently, it would be false to say that the change has completed in the case of Norbert, as both states can be observed in his stories. His relationship with the organization and his manager is, as a matter of fact, ambivalent.

## Hajnal1

### Surprising event

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The regional tasks of her job brought about a lot of extra work, overtime and travelling, and there was an organizational change taking place at the time, as well.

*“Oh, but I think I’ve already told you that I worked in a regional project, which, as a matter of fact, extended my working hours several days a week. And this is rather, well, this doesn’t appear anywhere, it’s not a plus, because after all you do what you have to, but actually it is a plus, as there was a lot of work with it, and there is no one who would do your everyday tasks instead of you. So, but we’ve already discussed this. Things just keep piling up.”*

*“Well, it is, that there were some things and others that I’ve mentioned, this organizational change, which means that Hungary had been independent, here, what went on here, that is not any more completely, not decided here. That is, my role here would have changed pretty much, or I would have had to do some regional thing, so this was quite foreseeable for the long run, after all, and me, upon that, actually this was the very point when I said that this is already something I wouldn’t, because I wouldn’t apply for it, as a candidate, to this regional position, but then again, in the long run, I wouldn’t actually like to do this here, or from here, either, because the tasks of this job here would surely change, too”*

This heavy workload, at the same time, caused a lot of conflicts with her husband and with herself for not being able to devote enough time to her family.

*“of course I don’t specifically remember those things then, what I do know is that my husband told me a zillion times that he would leave for Lake Balaton on Friday afternoon, and then I could try and catch up to them. Well, okay, this is just a joke now, but after all, this was sort of awkward, to be the one they always had to wait for. And then on Friday evening, I arrive home drop-dead tired, and then on Saturday at noon, then it’s like okay, I should do the shopping, and then the weekend is over. So, and for long, I tried to discipline the kids at 9 in the evening, which I don’t think was completely unfruitful, as they turned out quite alright, but well, a little more time.”*

*“Well, so, this was the thing, this was for which, what I had had sort of enough of, and it wasn’t actually me, but I think my husband, too. That is, if he hadn’t told me, I may not have made the move, if he hadn’t said that he would like a bit higher quality of, that is, he would like to go to the theater in the evening sometimes, which had been out of the question until then, and now we’re enjoying it so much that now you can sometimes go to the theater in the evening. We did go to a concert now and again, ’cause you know, they start at half past seven, not seven sharp. But, those were simply, I was always nervous like hell whenever we had tickets for the theater, ’cause I knew I couldn’t make it on time, and, or something would happen, or have to go on a business trip, or what do I know what happens. So it was these, I forgot about it, I couldn’t make it, or was abroad, it was these, the options. Well, okay, this is obviously a bit of an exaggeration now, but this is what the situation was like basically.”*

### Encountering tension

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Rage, anger, fear.

*“I had had sort of enough”*

*“I was nervous like hell”*



## Questioning own expectations

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### Creating an explanation

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Her husband supported her in the decision.

*„if he [husband] hadn't told me, I may not have made the move”*

She clearly puts the blame on the organization for this situation, and believes the cause of the problem to reside in the system, in the conditions: this is what the operation of the organization necessitates, there is no attractive vision for the future, in terms of neither organizational position nor material compensation.

*“So it is completely normal that I always said that I would work, dedicate my life and body and so on, but still, there are a couple of things, parents' evening at the school of the kids, or whatever else, and I would like to be there, there's nothing wrong with that, that is, no one ever thought that I shouldn't go, but still, the case usually was that something somehow happened to be drawn out, and it would've been truly awkward to leave at that very point, so, but you know, these are, everything collapses like that and I really hated that in the end”.*

*“and well, on the other side of the coin, what's the perspective, that if you work on the client service side, then you will eventually become a partner, but if you don't work on the client service side, you'll never be a partner. So that was the other thing, that why should it be others for whom I do all the [silence], whereas I could do it for myself, too.”*

### Reinterpreting the situation

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She reached a point where she could not tolerate the situation any more. She perceived the organizational conditions not to be alterable. Interestingly, she does not talk about having tried to reinterpret her job, reduce or adjust her tasks, as if she had regarded the organizational expectations as given, as unalterable. As if a reinterpretation of any sort had reduced the significance of her job. She reinterpreted her relationship with the organization: she became distant from it.

She reinterpreted her job: she did not feel that her work was important, exciting or inspiring any more. The relatively long duration of her employment, the lack of novelty and that period of excessive workload equally had a role in that.

She reinterpreted her relationship with the managers of the organization, and became distant from them.

### Taking action

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Actually, it was much earlier that she realized that work is less important to her than her private life, and thus wanted to live accordingly.

*“That, how my attitude to work changed, if I'm getting it right that that's your question, I somehow think that I did become more conscious about that, that, so I'm easily carried away by the, that maelstrom of work, or, how should I put it, so, but actually I think that you mustn't, you cannot, and I do really try, and when I left the company this was a part of it, that you should be able to pay some attention to other things in life, and work is just as important, but it mustn't suppress everything else, my family, my children, my friends, sports, whatever.”*

She had actually phrased that for herself long before, she just could not always accomplish it in the everyday.

*“I wouldn’t like this, I hope this won’t be the case, but this has always been a priority of mine, even if when she was five, when it was actually indifferent whether she’s 10 minutes late from the kindergarten, so even if I wasn’t all that consistent about it then, or, well, there were things, there were some daily priorities that did maybe take precedence over it regularly.”*

*“I was still pretty young when I already got into a thing like, requirements, requirements, you try to meet them, and then after a while you start thinking about it, that you don’t actually have to sacrifice anything, for no one will say ‘thank you’ for that. So this is something, you have to be mature that much to yourself, that there are priorities and you should keep to them.”*

She adjusted her actions to her value system (difference between the values held vs. followed). As a consequence of all this, she changed her job, her employer, with a somewhat longer interim period. She resigned from her job, and then they revised her job in cooperation with her managers for an interim period.

*“and that was when I said that, well, I practically resigned”*

*“So, so we discussed it, that this is not my piece of cake in the long run, though obviously, I wouldn’t want to take French leave”*

### **Change in beliefs and values**

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Her beliefs about the company and its management changed, as well. Hajnal changed her beliefs about the company, she saw that it was not worth for her to work there, because she was not willing to assume the tasks (neither because of their nature, nor due to the workload) she would have been required to perform. She reinterpreted her relationship with the organization: left to work for somewhere else.

### **Change in work meaning**

#### **Mechanism affected**

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**Before the change: self-concordance, personal engagement, significance, self-esteem deteriorate.** Lots of overtime and the company’s expectations rendered it hard for Hajnal to keep to the basic priorities she had set for herself, therefore she had many conflicts, internal and marital, as well. For Hajnal, the meaningfulness of her work comes from her personal excitement and enthusiasm while she gets absorbed in her work, and performs interesting and exciting tasks. Early on in the interview, when recalling her work experience as a beginner, she mentioned the interesting nature of her work 15 times within three paragraphs. The meaningfulness of her work was only affected by the situation insofar as she did not perceive her work to be important, exciting and inspiring any more. The relatively long duration of her employment, the lack of novelty and that period of excessive workload equally had a role in that.

*“Well, sure, the enthusiasm definitely faded away after a while, I mean of course, well, if, yes. Sure it faded away, it was a different period obviously, a different, how should I put it, somehow, that, what I said earlier, that as a beginner you felt you’re involved in everything, that you knew about everything, and that you’re close to where the real things happen, well, let me put it this way, I couldn’t really say I feel the same way now (silence).”*

**After the change: self-concordance, self-esteem increase.** In her new job, she can better experience that she is able to reconcile work and family life, which fills her with joy.

*“That is, if he hadn’t told me, I may not have made the move, if he hadn’t said that he would like a bit higher quality of, that is, he would like to go to the theater in the evening sometimes, which had been out of the question until then, and now we’re enjoying it so much that now you can sometimes go to the theater in the evening.”*

**Balance. Lack of personal engagement, significance, self-esteem.** What we can observe here is a temporary change, which affects the significance, self-concordance and self-esteem mechanisms. Concerning her own enterprise, however, she did not talk about the interesting nature of her work or exciting tasks, but only mentioned work–life balance and the security of her work. It seems likely that working in her own enterprise, she cannot experience it to the same extent that she would become personally excited and enthusiastic, and that she would perform interesting and exciting tasks, even though these are the things that provide the meaningfulness of her work. All of the above suggests that the solution this change brought about is just temporary and still a relatively unstable one, as also underpinned by the following quotation.

*“So, but this really is still in the process of taking shape, pretty much. We’ll have to see. Might well happen that the next day, I get enticed by some job opportunity, what do I know. But, but then it really needs to be an exciting one.”*

### **Orientation affected**

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In this case, the orientation does not change, it is the craftsmanship orientation that the surprising event affects. Hajnal could not experience it in the given organization, her switch of jobs was an attempt to restore that.

### **Summary interpretation of the case**

For Hajnal, the meaningfulness of her work basically came from her personal excitement and enthusiasm while she gets absorbed in her work, and performs interesting and exciting tasks. It was the meaningfulness of her work that was affected by the situation: she did not perceive her work to be important, exciting and inspiring anymore; the relatively long duration of her employment, the lack of novelty and that period of excessive workload equally had a role in that. The solution this change brought about is just temporary and still a relatively unstable one, because she could not experience it to the same extent that she would perform interesting and exciting tasks.

#### **6.2.1.1.2. Changes in beliefs about coworkers**

**Szilvia**

### **Surprising event**

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She worked out a beneficial solution for the provision of a sort of education allowance, and some of her colleagues reacted by accusing her of having gained on it.

*“Still in the job before the previous one, there wasn’t such a thing like educational allowance, as it is now, that now it can be provided as a tax-free benefit, or as a tax-efficient benefit, but we didn’t have it at the time I worked there, and the management at headquarters decided that yes, we should provide some sort of support to those who have school-age children, [...] but you know it didn’t cost them anything, ’cause they got, got vouchers worth like 20,000 forints and they could redeem it in his shop. And well, who came was not, so who came to see me weren’t the ones who said that wow, this is awesome, and we’re very happy to have received 20,000 forints, this was, I guess, around ’97, so it was actually worth more than it is now, but those who came to see me were the ones to whine about how expensive it is, that they can’t buy that pen, but only a pink pen, only a blue one, and what do I know what else, so why don’t they have a wider choice, and that I, that somebody – quasi me – must have gained on it, that we entered a contract with this specific person, instead of enabling them to just walk into any one of the shops downtown and spend it there.”*

### **Encountering tension**

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Feeling aggrieved and insulted:

*“this really was like very bad, I was really truly hurt by this part. The other parts as well, by the way, why they always see the negative side, but this, like, personal insult, this really was so embarrassing“*

### **Questioning own expectations**

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She did not question her image of herself, but was very much shocked by the incident.

*“now that is, it really doesn’t even cross my mind, I even feel shocked when it’s someone else about whom it turns out that they accepted, like, 2 forints for something, but me, it really wouldn’t even cross my mind, and then they accuse me of that“*

### **Creating an explanation**

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She told her husband about the issue, and asked him for support.

*“At home, I told my husband, who knows that I would surely never, under no circumstances, “*

She clearly held her colleagues responsible for this, she put the blame on them for it, she felt the accusation was unjust.

*“And then I was just standing there like, how did this, well, come to people’s minds to begin with, so, that yes, that is, how can people have so much malice, and then there were a couple similar incidents, so I’ve been toughened by now, but this really was too much. “*

*“The other parts as well, by the way, why they always see the negative side, but this, like, personal insult, this really was so embarrassing, but then I buried it in myself like, after all this isn’t about me, this is about them. That is, whoever makes such a surmise, it’s about them, and not about me. But this I can’t forget, you know, this happened more than 10 years ago, but it’s still like burnt into my memory. “*

### **Reinterpreting the situation**

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She reinterpreted her relationships and her expectations of workplace relationships: if and when she does something good, she should not expect everyone to appreciate it. It took rather long for her.

She also reinterpreted her job, that is, her beliefs about the HR position changed, she regarded these situations and relationships as part of her job.

*“Well, I’ve been doing this for quite long now, so now these things, I’m immune to them, but in the beginning, and actually not only the beginning, but for quite long afterwards, so even after several years it could feel so frustrating that a lot of people are just plain impossible to do good to, or you can’t, on the one hand, that there’s nothing that you, as part of HR, could do that would be equally good for everyone, and they won’t, those who’ll come to me won’t be the ones who are happy about what happened, but those, who aren’t. “*

### **Taking action**

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She acted accordingly.

### **Change in beliefs and values**

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Her beliefs about her coworkers and the HR position changed. Szilvia changed her beliefs about her coworkers, she thought that there was no sense in expecting everyone to appreciate her efforts. She did not change her relationship with the organization.

### **Change in work meaning**

### **Mechanism affected**

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#### **Before the change: perceived impact–service, significance, self-esteem decreased.**

She did not manage to achieve the expected result, i.e. recognition, people did not react as she had expected, what is more, they even accused her, which made her feel uncertain. For Szilvia, the meaningfulness of work was basically provided by her assistance to others, the development of others. It was the meaningfulness of her work that this unexpected situation affected.

**After the change: self-esteem slightly increased.** She managed to reduce tension by having found a reassuring explanation for what had happened.

**Balance. Lack of perceived impact-service, significance, self-esteem.** She managed to reduce tension by this reassuring explanation, yet she did not succeed in achieving the positive impact she desired, i.e. recognition, through this change. In the long run, she had to prepare for the desired recognition and impact to often remain absent in situations similar to this one; what she managed to achieve by this change was to mitigate the extent of the decrease. This, however, did not induce in her a tension of a degree that would have compelled a greater change.

*“how can people have so much malice, and then there were a couple similar incidents, so I’ve been toughened by now, but this really was too much. I can see it on my colleagues, who are much younger than I am, and now my assistant here, and earlier, too, that they experience this sooner or later, that yes, there’s so much malice coming back to us from people, ’cause you know, it’s very-very rare that they’d come and say ‘thank you’, there are some, but that’s the rare case. When it affects a lot, say, a lot of people from the shop floor, then that’s the rare case, but if someone ever happens to not like something, and then they even suspect some sort of disguised intention, now we’re quite sure to hear about that, and that can hurt so very-very badly, so these can be so frustrating each time. “*

### **Orientation affected**

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There is no change in her orientation in this case, it is the serving orientation (perceived impact) that the surprising event affects.

### **Summary interpretation of the case**

For Szilvia, the meaningfulness of work was basically provided by her assistance to others, the development of others. This surprising event affected the meaningfulness of her work. She managed to reduce the tension by the reassuring explanation that she was not the one who was responsible, but she did not succeed in achieving the desired positive impact, i.e. recognition, through this change, therefore the change resulted in a temporary and unstable situation.

## **Viktor1**

### **Surprising event**

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With immense effort, he managed to achieve that some of the managers of his organization who had not had a company car before could get one. He expected them to be pleased, but instead, they were complaining about the brand of the car not being prestigious enough for them.

*“After all this, when we introduced and announced the whole thing, and said that okay folks, it won’t be tomorrow, but we’ll order them and you’ll get a brand new car, insurance, maintenance and so on all covered, then certain people reacted like oh, wow, great, thank you very much, this is really awesome, while with others, who came to work by, say, bus just that same morning, the reaction was like what, just an Opel Astra? In my position, in my status, I shall drive an Opel Astra? “*

### **Encountering tension**

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He was so deeply moved by the incident that he got stomach cramps.

*“So, I could not at all...I was taken aback by this thing so badly, that I was like okay, I have to go home now, I couldn’t, that is, I just got stomach cramps and all, “*

### **Questioning own expectations**

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He had many disputes regarding cars even afterwards.

*“Well, for example, in the beginning, I had a lot of disputes concerning, for instance, company cars, like what size of car we need and what we need it for and what it means, that car, that it’s a status symbol, and that I need a car of this size, or a car like this or that“*

It took quite long before he started to question and to revise his own presumptions concerning his coworkers’ motivations and values.

### **Creating an explanation**

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He was surprised by the incident so much that at first, he got sick. He just could not accept that for them, it is the brand that matters, and that if brand is what matters, than that is what he will have to provide them with under certain organizational conditions.

*“Well, I went home, laid down for a while, took a rest, and then I said to myself, okay, this was a lesson to be learnt. That is, the car remained the same as it was, obviously, ’cause that was what we had signed for, so it couldn’t be altered, so I just accepted that the people who witness certain occurrences, they do not all share the same image of it. “*

### **Reinterpreting the situation**

---

He reinterpreted his job, tasks and relationships and how he should relate to his coworkers’ values and motivations concerning benefits. Prior to that, he insisted on convincing his coworkers that he was right; he has a more acceptive attitude now.

*“As I said, insofar as I’m trying to be more tolerant, or at least acquiesce and accept that certain people hold different values than I do, and that I have to respect that, to acquiesce, and maybe even resort to making use of it, after all, that must obviously have an important role in their motivation. So if someone is motivated by having a bigger and fancier car, if this under certain conditions, on the other side, you know, I as a, have to ensure the consistence and transparency of benefits within the company, but if they are motivated by having this brand of car instead of that brand, and this big instead of that small, well then okay, I acquiesce, then this is important to them and this is what I’ll have to provide to them, because this is what they are motivated by. Fifteen years ago, I couldn’t have accepted that this is how things work. Now I can accept that this is the way it is. This. “*

He also reinterpreted his role, job and tasks as far as benefits were concerned. He found the meaning of his work in this new framework: what he has to do is to ensure transparency and consistence (keeper of rules – administrative expert), and not to convince his coworkers to accept the values that he himself holds (change agent). Putting the change through, however, carried much more significance for him than the keeping of the rules. But we can clearly see that this reinterpretation of his role is contradictory, that it has not settled: the expressions „try” and „have to” give it away that Viktor’s acceptance of this situation is still partial only.

### **Taking action**

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He acted accordingly.

### **Change in beliefs and values**

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His beliefs about his coworkers changed. Viktor changed his beliefs about his coworkers, he figured that it was not worth waiting for them to accept his value system, and he found out how the organization could benefit from their motivations being different.

His beliefs about his job, tasks and role changed.

His beliefs about himself and his values did not change: he did not become more tolerant in general, it was only in a certain setting that he could accept the differences in people’s values.

*“I was taken aback by this thing so badly, that I was like okay, I have to go home now, I couldn’t, that is, I just got stomach cramps and all, now I’m already over that part, so I, I’m not completely over it, so, for example at this management training I’ve just told you about, what the various role plays and discussions revealed was that I have a certain system of values, which is very important to me, and I come across as a very*

*tolerant, friendly and nice person, exactly as long as I don't feel that someone's about to tread on those values. And then I see red and start acting like a madman. So, it seems I still don't have this thing perfectly under control, and, by the way, I might actually not even want to, so maybe I don't always want to accept this with a dispassionate, calm smile, when things that I consider important, like respect, openness, cooperation, responsibility, when I see that someone practically ignores these, maybe even ridicules them, treads on them, and consequently, treads on their fellow men. Even today, I find it hard to tolerate something like this, but still much-much better than 15 years ago. "*

## **Change in work meaning**

### **Mechanism affected**

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**Before the change: perceived impact-career, significance, self-esteem decreased.** He did not manage to achieve the impact he expected, i.e. the change, people did not react the way he expected them, therefore he began to feel uncertain, and he even got sick. For Viktor, the meaningfulness of work resided in the conveying of values, the putting through of changes of great impact. It was the basic meaningfulness of his work that this surprising situation affected.

**After the change: self-esteem improved.** By having found a way to reinterpret his role in such a way that he could still serve the organization's goals, he could slightly improve his self-esteem.

**Balance. Lack of perceived impact-career, significance, self-esteem.** He managed to slightly ease the tension by reinterpreting his role and job, but he still could not achieve the desired change, the desired effect, therefore he had to give up his goal of effectuating some greater change. Keeping the rules of the organization does by far not provide him with the same feeling of significance as the effectuation of changes. This created further tension. All of this suggests that the solution this change brought about is temporary and still relatively unstable.

*"And then it was rather painful to realize that this is not really the way it is, so no, if I can achieve results and induce changes, if I can do that with certain people, that's already the sort of success you have to be extremely happy about. But with a relatively large group of, say, 150 people, that I could bring about relatively remarkable changes in how they think about what a person's tasks are, or how a workplace community or any other community functions, how one should balance individual and community interests, what responsibility and commitment mean, with that, I really don't feel as if I had achieved truly serious results in the past 15 or 16 years. "*

Because of which he tried to find a job where it would be possible for him to realize the change, the impact he desired.

*"So the point is, what I'm trying to say is that I've already had one such impetus before, that here I come and save the world, right then, I happened to start working for a government body, which lasted full two weeks altogether. So what emerged there was, once again, that the world is not exactly ready to get redeemed by me, so thank God it turned out pretty quickly there, so this misunderstanding, we cleared it up at once, and then I left, too, a.s.a.p. So this, it seems to be returning in, say, 10-year cycles, that is, I expect the next such wave of inspiration of mine to arrive around 20xx. "*

### **Orientation affected**

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There is no change of orientation in this case, it is the career orientation that this surprising event affects.

### **Summary interpretation of the case**

For Viktor, the meaningfulness of work basically resided in the conveying of values, the putting through of changes of great impact. It was the basic meaningfulness of his work that this surprising situation affected. He managed to slightly ease the tension by reinterpreting his role and job, but keeping the rules of the organization does by far not provide him with the same feeling of significance as the effectuation of changes. This created further tension. All of this suggests that the solution this change brought about is temporary and still relatively unstable.

## **Csilla1**

### **Surprising event**

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Due to changes in the management, Csilla had to face two senior managers who did not accept her and wanted her to leave the organization. She had the support of the chief executive.

*“There I was faced with an unpleasant surprise, as the two deputies, Béla Nagy and Katalin Kis wanted to boot me out, telling me in the face, they said, I’m too much for this organization, in their opinion, the company doesn’t need HR services of such quality, they believe I’m a true professional expert, but I should go somewhere else. Right in my face. And then I told the CEO, like okay, shall I pack my things then? He told me, don’t even think of packing, now you will have to fight this battle. And then it took one and a half years. This, you know, was really an unpleasant experience.”*

### **Encountering tension**

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Rage, illness.

*“I didn’t reveal too much of it, but I got myself a tumor, which then had to be removed surgically, but thank God it was a benign one, but I’m sure that it was all those bad feelings I suppressed, so much – well, not rage, but okay, there was some rage – you know, when bloody hell, you think, how dare he criticize me.”*

### **Questioning own expectations**

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Her beliefs about the deputies changed insofar as she realized that there were senior managers who were reluctant to recognize her personal value and that of HR in spite of the apparent results.

*“They could actually make me hesitate whether if senior management exhibit no need for my work in this respect, well then what the heck am I doing here”*

She began to question whether she would be able to convince them given the circumstances, for she had already proved her worth in a number of respects.

### **Creating an explanation**

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She sought support, and her boss backed her.

*“But then as the CEO backed me, and said I would win the battle, I should do my work accordingly, and he stood by me “*

She clearly holds the managers responsible for the occurrences.

### **Reinterpreting the situation**

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She reinterpreted her job, her tasks as well as her relationships. She intended to convince them. Enjoying support from the CEO, she took on the fight, the battle. Her work turned into a battlefield, into a fight. She reinterpreted her relationship with the two managers.

*“But then as the CEO backed me, and said I would win the battle, I should do my work accordingly, and he stood by me, then I said, okay, let’s try. “*

She did not reinterpret the role of HR, her beliefs about the role of HR did not change.

*“I’ve never wavered in my faith in the significance and the value of this profession, that is, I’m so deeply convinced that it does indeed represent value added, that they simply can’t make me doubt it. “*

She reinterpreted her own role (for details, see the section on beliefs).

Her image of herself changed: she re-defined for combat, for attack (for details, see the section on beliefs).

### **Taking action**

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She sought support. She did not fend off the disputes, and supported her team in tackling theirs. She changed her relationship with the two managers, as well. At first she thought she would have to leave, but upon support from the CEO, she decided to stay.

### **Change in beliefs and values**

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Her beliefs about the deputies changed insofar as she realized that there were senior managers who were reluctant to recognize her personal value and that of HR in spite of the apparent results. She began to question whether it is worth for her to work for a company where the deputies exhibit no need for what she has to offer. Csilla questioned, but did not change whether it is worth expecting the deputies to recognize her: whether they will thank her for her work and recognize her personal importance and significance, and that of HR.

*“But then I thought I must be able to convince them after all. “*

Her beliefs about her job, tasks and workplace relationships changed.

She reinterpreted her own role: she had to keep up her team’s morale and enthusiasm in order to protect the entire team from the attacks this way.

*“So, very strong self-discipline, self-control, I had to permanently, and artificially, keep up my enthusiasm, I had to display to my team that okay folks, we’re fighting back. Cause they were insulted, too, they had their part of it all through me. The two deputies, many times they talked to my people in a tone that was, like terrible. “*

Her beliefs about herself changed, she re-defined herself as a „peaceful warrior” in this struggle, which necessitated self-discipline, self-control and artificially maintained enthusiasm.

*“And I didn’t want to actively convince them that I do provide value added, but we really agreed with the CEO that I would just go on working, and then after a while they somehow got it that it’s quite good, after all, to have such high-quality HR in place. “*

## Change in work meaning

### Mechanism affected

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**Before the change: perceived impact-career, significance, self-esteem decrease.** She did not manage to achieve the desired impact, i.e. recognition, the senior managers did not react the way she expected them to, and therefore she became uncertain. For Csilla, the meaningfulness of work basically is to prove that she is able to exert significant influence over the operation of the company, this is what allows her to experience that her work is valuable. It was the meaningfulness of his work that this unexpected situation affected. The criticism she received, that the senior managers did not recognize her and attacked her, made her uncertain (e.g. “let’s try”), and thus her self-esteem deteriorated. In her eyes, the significance of HR’s role did not change.

*“My love for my work has never suffered a setback, that is, in my love for this work, I’ve never wavered in my faith in the significance and the value of this profession, that is, I’m so deeply convinced that it does indeed represent value added, that they simply can’t make me doubt it. They could actually make me hesitate whether if senior management exhibit no need for my work in this respect, well then what the heck am I doing here. But then as the CEO backed me, and said I would win the battle, I should do my work accordingly, and he stood by me, then I said, okay, let’s try. “*

**After change I. Balance. Lack of perceived impact-career, significance, self-esteem.** By taking on the fight, the battle, Csilla was actually protecting herself and her self-esteem. She fought for her importance to the organization – that is, her value added, as she put it – to be recognized.

*“I didn’t reveal too much of it, but I got myself a tumor, which then had to be removed surgically, but thank God it was a benign one, but I’m sure that it was all those bad feelings I suppressed, so much – well, not rage, but okay, there was some rage – you know, when bloody hell, you think, how dare he criticize me. But then I thought I must be able to convince them after all. I didn’t show it, that is, the CEO said that it was nothing short of fantastic that of all this, nothing could be seen, but there was a lot of suppression in me. “*

She did not manage, however, to reduce the permanent tension, which even got her sick. All this suggests that the solution this change brought about is temporary, if drawn out rather long, and still relatively unstable.

**After change II.: Perceived impact-career, significance, self-esteem increase.** It was her endurance that solved the situation; with time, she succeeded in convincing the managers through her endurance.

*“and then after a while they somehow got it that it’s quite good, after all, to have such high-quality HR in place. And then after one and a half years of many-many truly cruel conflicts, all at once they told me, they came to me at a celebration, and apologized for those one and a half years. And that now they see, and they really need me, and I should please forgive them, they truly appreciate me, and let’s have a drink, and they gave hugs and kisses, and everything’s been fine ever since. “*

**Balance.** What we can observe here is an interim change, which lasts long, but is still temporary and affects the perceived impact, the significance and the self-esteem mechanisms.

## **Orientation affected**

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There is no change of orientation in this case, it is the career orientation that the surprising event affects, which Csilla could not experience at the company in question, it was the restoration of this orientation that her endurance and fight were aimed at.

### **Summary interpretation of the case**

For Csilla, the meaningfulness of work basically is to prove that she is able to exert significant influence over the operation of the company, this what allows her to experience that her work is valuable. It was the meaningfulness of his work that this unexpected situation affected. By taking on the fight, Csilla was actually protecting herself and her self-esteem. She did not manage, however, to reduce the permanent tension, which even got her sick; this indicates that the situation is temporary, if drawn out rather long, and still relatively unstable. It was her endurance that solved the situation; with time, she succeeded in convincing the managers through her endurance, thus it was them who changed their relationship with HR and Csilla personally.

## **6.2.1.2. Lasting and stable changes in the meaning of work**

### **6.2.1.2.1. Changes in beliefs about the organization and the managers**

**Léna<sup>2</sup>**

#### **Surprising event**

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The novel management concept of the new manager was accompanied by a series of layoffs, where downsized employees were offered less and less support, and finally even the outplacement program was terminated. She was meant to take an important role in the process.

*„And, well, such a traumatic experience at organization A was when the new CEO arrived, last year, and pretty much destroyed everything. He’s a crisis manager with the fundamental philosophy that fear is the one and only tool in the hands of a manager that’s actually possible to achieve results or motivate people with,”*

#### **Encountering tension**

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Disappointment, anger.

*“And then these were already rifts and disappointments where I had to say that here and now, that development and supportive function of HR is lost. “*

#### **Questioning own expectations**

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#### **Creating an explanation**

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She clearly holds the manager accountable for the occurrences, in her perception, the organizational culture does not allow her to perform the task in a different way, either.

*„this is a very dry, executive function, with no questions asked, that is, the culture didn't allow for any counterarguments,”*

### **Reinterpreting the situation**

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She reinterpreted her relationship with the manager of the organization, became distant from him.

She reinterpreted the role of HR in the organization (for details, see the section on beliefs).

As the downsizing started, she reinterpreted her job, her relationships and her tasks and role. During the subsequent waves of downsizing, however, she did not manage to reinterpret her job, tasks and relationships in a way that would have made them acceptable to her, therefore she reinterpreted her relationship with the organization: became distant from the organization.

*„I was still able to find my place in the first outplacement program” „So no, the order is to fire him, so I can fire him in the rough way, so the choice is, or where the, say, assistance part comes in is that I try to fire him in a way that I still hold his hand and lead him along a certain line, yet when that line is cut, 'cause we don't need it, that is, we don't need outplacement, 'cause it's superfluous, then the only thing that's left is fire that guy there, why?, because I told you so and find some plausible justification, too.”*

Her image of herself changed: she re-defined her relation to development and assistance (for details, see the section on beliefs).

### **Taking action**

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When she succeeded in reinterpreting her job, she adjusted her tasks and relationships accordingly. When she could not anymore reinterpret her job in a way that would have made it meaningful to her, she began to look for another place to work. As a consequence of all this, she moved on to a new job, a new workplace.

*„And then meanwhile, they had been trying to persuade me to leave for organization B, for about half a year, but I felt so attached to organization A that I, well, I didn't really want to leave, but by then, my scope of tasks finally tipped over into such a direction, that I would have had to execute completely nonsense measures, that then I said, okay let's try this and that's how I got back to the SME sector again, in a somewhat different role.”*

### **Change in beliefs and values**

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Her image of herself, her self-definition changed: she realized that she would like to be an HR specialist who develops, supports and helps people, and certain activities are hardly „compatible” with that – so she had to say no.

Her value system changed. Actually she realized how important it is for her to help, develop and support people.

Her beliefs about her job, tasks and workplace relationships changed. In the first phase of the downsizing, she could still find a way to help people: accordingly, she began to relate to her coworkers in a different – expressly supportive – fashion, and performed her tasks in a different manner, as well. Based on what she said, this was the time when assistance, development and support became the focus of her work.

Her beliefs about the role of HR changed. Previously, she regarded it as a function that develops, provides services within the organization. This interpretation of hers involves a sort of initiation and constructiveness, which the change turned into, on the one hand, a role of an executive nature, where you are not supposed to ask questions, but only required to execute decisions and, on the other hand, into something destructive, which discontinues and cripples initiatives and development programs, and takes advantage of people's weaknesses. She could not identify with this executive-deconstructive corporate role of HR, she interpreted her role as that of a helper, a developer.

Her beliefs about the organization and the manager changed. Léna thought it was not worth for her to stay, because her manager and the organization do not appreciate her. Léna changed her beliefs about the company: she found that it is not worth for her to work there, because there was no need for what she could offer. She reinterpreted her role with the organization: started looking for a new workplace.

*“there was no need and they blocked the service side of this entire area. It turned into such an executive function of a purely administrative nature, and of course, back then there had been a great-great need for me to be there, and help, and do my job, but that just went away. “*

## **Change in work meaning**

### **Mechanism affected**

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#### **Before the change: Perceived impact – service, significance, self-esteem decrease.**

The downsizing was a context where it was more difficult for her to find a way to help her coworkers. After the termination of the outplacement program, she could not find any opportunity at all to provide help. For Léna, the meaningfulness of her work comes from helping and serving others. It was the meaningfulness of her work that this unexpected situation affected. Consequently, she could not experience that her work has a purpose and significance, because she could not contribute to the company's goals with what she felt willing to perform.

*„I was still able to find my place in the first outplacement program, and understood the economic reason behind it, but when the next year I had to and would've had to, 'cause there were things when I said I'm not doing this, to fire people and managers without any other reason but to make an example of them, or without even finding any reason at all, that is, they couldn't tell why, but the job was to go and find what they could be fired for, 'cause we need to make examples, but you know, the justification wasn't legally sound, so I said I wouldn't, that is, as an HR specialist, I won't sniff around in people's files to find their soft spots, if I will, then that will be to develop them, to help'em move forward”.*

**After the change: Perceived impact – service, significance, self-esteem increase.** For her, the solution was to find another employer, and in her new job, she could experience this help and service to a much larger extent, the members of the organization are grateful for her work. This was, she could experience that her work is meaningful and significant, and has a purpose, and therefore she could also experience its valuableness.

*„obviously you cannot build up everything, to get a grip on everything at the same time, and I started to do those, to build'em up. And I encounter, you know, this incredible enthusiasm, that is, the managers are very grateful, the people are very nice, so the reactions, to pretty much everything, are just awesome, whatever idea I come up with,*

*that goes off like a firework and the company is as if it was just about to burst with joy, so it's a very receptive organization"*

**Balance. Perceived impact – service, significance, self-esteem increase.** We can observe a lasting change in the mechanisms here, because its significance to her increases.

### **Orientation affected**

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In this case, the serving orientation (perceived impact-service) becomes more significant in Léna's eyes.

### **Summary interpretation of the case**

For Léna, the meaningfulness of her work came from helping and serving others. It was the meaningfulness of her work that this unexpected situation affected. When in the course of the downsizing process, her company terminated the outplacement program, she could not find any opportunity to provide help anymore. For her, the solution was to find another place to work. As a consequence of all this, the help and the services provided to others gained in significance in her eyes.

### **Bence1**

### **Surprising event**

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The company's decision making practice changed, as a result of which second-level management got excluded from decision making, they had no influence on it anymore, and they were not even provided with explanations for the decisions.

*"I don't really like the, so I don't think it was appropriate, the management approach that prevailed there, that they locked them up in a room, two of them, two managers and two assistants and then they made a decision on something there and then you were told by someone unqualified how things should be done and then an assistant told you how she thought the, or how she thought, so the managers made the decisions there and you didn't have the opportunity to, say, tell them right away that well, this is silly, that is, that they should've taken another direction, because of this, this, this and this...so you were told by someone unqualified, whom you could, after all, tell that you don't think it's right, but that wasn't of too much use, either, and that made many of us quite uncertain"*

*"So something concrete related to this was, for example, when we were compiling this decision-making-scope-of-responsibility list, and there were some items there I didn't agree with at all, that methodologically and, that is, as we tried to think it over logically, there were 1 or 2 items in it that were just stupid, and then we handed it over to her, who created, or managed the whole thing, and she might even have understood for a moment why we believed those decisions were wrong, but nothing actually changed afterwards, that is, as we told the managers, they just had a look at it and said that you know, senior management said it was right the way it was, and then the 2 or 3 of us kept ranting that dammit, I know this isn't right, 'cause it's illogical, and why, why do we have to do it this way, and we didn't actually receive a concrete response to*

*why we would be doing it that way, but only answers like just because, and everything will be fine, that is, and this is because of the policy, because of this and that, and well, I did miss the professional arguments why it has to be this way or that way. “*

### **Encountering tension**

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Rage, frustration

*“the second year, these problems were getting so bad that I said either I’ll either get a stress ulcer ‘cause I think this isn’t right this way, resigning to it, well, I just couldn’t do that, so I thought a lot about what and how we could do differently, it’s just that I saw that the people who really wanted and who were really able, they felt the exact same way, “*

### **Questioning own expectations**

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Reports on what was happening inside him.

*“that wasn’t of too much use, either, and that made many of us quite uncertain”*

### **Creating an explanation**

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He perceived the behavior of his coworkers to be similar to his, which acted to slightly reduce the tension, because others seemed to share the his view on the situation.

*„the people who really wanted and who were really able, they felt the exact same way, that is, no, and I talked with them a lot about this and I saw we weren’t getting anywhere.”*

He clearly held the managers responsible for the occurrences.

*“but I do think this isn’t the way things should’ve happened, that is, that we couldn’t take such an active part in decision making as what would’ve been required by our salaries or our statuses as managers. And I didn’t want to work like a, well, a slacker, ‘cause like, I can go with the flow and then they’ll just make all the decisions for me and then it’ll all be alright somehow, so that made me nervous. “*

### **Reinterpreting the situation**

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He reinterpreted his job, relationships and tasks. First, he could not accept the situation, and tried to re-frame and adjust the conditions to make them acceptable to himself, but failed. Therefore he reinterpreted his relationship with the organization, and became distant from the organization.

His image of himself changed: he re-defined his relation to responsibility and management (for details, see the section on beliefs).

He reinterpreted his relationship with the organization’s managers, and became distant from them.

He reinterpreted HR’s role in the company’s life. He perceived his function to have a role of an executive nature in the given organization, and he could not identify himself with that. He wanted to work in a job which is of strategic importance. He wanted to head an HR that is an initiator and has real influence on decision making, instead of one that fulfills an executive role.

### **Taking action**

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He initiated changes, sought supporters who thought along similar lines, and after a series of failed attempts, he started looking for a new job.



*“resigning to it, well, I just couldn’t do that, so I thought a lot about what and how we could do differently, it’s just that I saw that the people who really wanted and who were really able, they felt the exact same way, that is, no, and I talked with them a lot about this and I saw we weren’t getting anywhere, and well, especially that even the project was delayed, that is, the project didn’t start”*

As a consequence of all this, he left for another job, for another unit of the organization.

*“So these were the negative things there that actually made me, that is, I think that switch came just at the right time, ‘cause I hadn’t yet become frustrated, that is, I was still trying, I was still trying to change things and then such a, when I got to the moment when, like, oh, that’s something I can’t change, that I, well, need to do something now, so right then, maybe god, maybe not, but something intervened and it was right then that I received an offer, that is, I didn’t have to wait to become so frustrated that no one ever would take notice of me anymore, after all, a frustrated man isn’t someone, so no one would want to hire a frustrated man. “*

*“Therefore when I was offered to manage more than a thousand people, not just one or two hundred, and not to have one subordinate, but more, then it wasn’t even, well, it was a question for one week, or one weekend only, what it took to straighten it all out for myself what this means after all, but I didn’t hesitate much, no, not that very much”.*

### **Change in beliefs and values**

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His image of himself and his self-definition changed: he realized that he would actually like to be an HR manager that assumes serious responsibilities, that is in a position with serious responsibilities. His beliefs about himself changed, concerning the extent of responsibility he is willing to take.

His value system changed. What he realized was, as a matter of fact, that assuming responsibilities and control over the situation are very important to him, as is the need to do a job where he is involved in decision making as much as possible.

His beliefs about the job, the tasks and the role of the HR manager changed.

His beliefs about the organization and its managers changed. Bence figured that it was not worth for him to stay, because the managers/the organization do not appreciate him. His beliefs about the company changed, as well. Bence changed his beliefs about the company, he found that it was not worth for him to work there, because there is no demand for what he has to offer. He reinterpreted his relationship with the organization: started looking for a new job.

### **Change in work meaning**

#### **Mechanism affected**

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**Before the change: significance, self-esteem decrease.** The fact that he had no say in the management’s decisions, no control over the company’s operation and that his proposals were not considered prevented him from experiencing his impact on the organization, and started to feel being at the mercy of his managers. For Bence, the meaningfulness of work is basically provided by his active contribution. This case made him realize that a practicable means to this end is to have some influence on the

company's operation.<sup>23</sup> He could not experience that his work was significant and had a purpose, because he could not contribute to the company's goals, all of which acted to deteriorate his self-esteem.

*“So this was the negative thing that reassured me that what I need is to be able to make decisions and I do assume responsibility for those decisions and I really try to be a strategic partner, not just someone whom an assistant tells, and that wasn't meant to be an offense against assistants, that I'd look down on assistants or so, but I do think this isn't the way things should've happened“,*

**After the change: perceived impact-career, significance, self-esteem increase.** For him, the solution was to find another place to work, and in his new job, he does have a say in the decisions, he regularly coordinates with his manager. This way he can experience that his work is significant and has a purpose, because he can contribute to the company's goals, and thus he can also experience his own valuableness.

*“And the other thing is that I hate this type of HR role. That is, that HR would be only about me being some sort of second-order caretaker, who is told, after the great decisions have been made, afterwards HR is told to take care of the operational aspects and then HR takes care of the operational aspects. So I'd like to take part in decision making, that is, being like, doing an HR where I have a part in the decisions. So that if I say, we're expanding the company, then I should have a concept, I should be able to have a word in along what lines the company should be expanded, and when I dismiss him, then I should understand why it's done and that it shouldn't just be, like, we need to downsize now and you need to take care of the legal things. And I talk a lot about this stuff with other managers, so I strive to talk with my boss, among others, with whom we have dinner every second Monday, and then we talk about such things. About the company in general, that is, not only HR matters, but everything else. Possibly about the entire group, or about the two companies I now work for. “*

**Balance. Perceived impact, significance, self-esteem improve.** We can observe a lasting change in the mechanisms here, because he now attaches more significance to them.

### **Orientation affected**

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In this case, Bence starts to attach more significance to the career orientation (perceived impact).

### **Summary interpretation of the case**

For Bence, the meaningfulness of work came from his active contribution, this case made him realize that a practicable means to this end is to have some influence on the company's operation, which aspect, therefore, became more significant in his eyes. For him, the solution was to find a new job.

### **Melinda1**

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<sup>23</sup> This had not become clear to him during an earlier case (case Bence2).

### **Surprising event**

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Her boss, with whom she had been working for 20 years, was dismissed and treated in a fashion she thought was unacceptable.

*“When my ex-bosses, with whom I had been working for, well, let’s see...for about 20 years then, and they tossed them out like a piece of shit, and that was already too much to fit my morals. “*

### **Encountering tension**

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Her tension is given away by her use of vulgar language.

*“they tossed them out like a piece of shit, and that was already too much to fit my morals. “*

### **Questioning own expectations**

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She found that this type of HR work does not suit her, the incident left her so badly shaken that she figured she would be too sensitive for it.

*“maybe I invested much too much emotion in this thing“*

### **Creating an explanation**

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She clearly puts the blame on the division manager for the situation.

*“And the way he screwed the former division manager, and the former site manager, I couldn’t tolerate that morally. “*

Who, to top it all off, excluded her from the entire process.

*“So the point is, what they did was that they didn’t even talk about it with us, “*

### **Reinterpreting the situation**

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She reinterpreted her relationship with the division manager: became distant from him. Her image of herself changed: she recognized her own vulnerability and sensitivity (for details, see the section on beliefs).

She reinterpreted her job, tasks and relationships. She decided that she would not take on tasks, take on a job that requires her to deal with dismissals. She re-defined her role in the organization, she wanted to work in HR development so that she would not have any tasks related to dismissals.

*“that was the point when I decided, this was an important thing, that I would leave this area and wouldn’t do the HR partner job, “*

### **Taking action**

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She switched to another job within the same organization.

### **Change in beliefs and values**

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Her beliefs about the division manager changed, she figured it was not worth for her anymore to continue working with him.

Her value system changed. It became more important for her that the work she did be consistent with her value system and sensitivity.

Her image of herself and her self-definition changed: she realized that she is too sensitive for the tasks – the dismissals – that her then job implied.

*“so still, maybe I invested much too much emotion in this thing, but that was the point when I said I wouldn’t take an HR partner manager’s job, particularly not under a manager like that. “*

Her beliefs about her job, her own role, her relationships and tasks changed.

### **Change in work meaning**

#### **Mechanism affected**

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**Before the change: control-autonomy, self-esteem decrease.** She concluded that what occurred was totally incompatible with her values; she was very much shaken by the events. For Melinda, the meaningfulness of work basically comes from coping with difficult tasks, proving herself and achieving success (competence-proving mechanism). The situation affected the meaningfulness of her work insofar as she got excluded, left to the mercy of others, could not control the situation and she did not at all approve of the solution. All this acted to reduce her self-esteem.

*“When my ex-bosses, with whom I had been working for, well, let’s see...for about 20 years then, and they tossed them out like a piece of shit, and that was already too much to fit my morals. You know, actually I can also tell you that as we performed the downsizing measures at the site, one after the other, we always found solutions that were, well, morally acceptable, that is, we didn’t do anything like this, but we consciously tried to see to it that it’s someone at retirement age, who has a chance to get along somewhere else etc., “*

**After the change: control-autonomy, self-esteem increase.** She took on a job where her work was appreciated and where she did not have to deal with downsizing, by which she managed to resolve the tension arising from the situation.

*“There I was in charge of HR development, after the project was over, I liked to do that, it was a creative job after all, thank god it was a relief for me with this human factor, I didn’t have to deal with matters related to the downsizing“*

**Balance. Control-autonomy, self-esteem increase.** We can observe a lasting change in the mechanisms here, because she now attaches more significance to them.

#### **Orientation affected**

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In this case, the craftsmanship orientation (control-autonomy) becomes more significant to Melinda.

### **Summary interpretation of the case**

For Melinda, the meaningfulness of work basically came from coping with difficult tasks, proving herself and achieving success. The situation affected the meaningfulness of her work, after all, she got excluded, left to the mercy of others and could not control the situation, as a consequence of which her need for psychological security and control grew. For her, the solution was to switch to another job.

### **Melinda2**

### **Surprising event**

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In the course of an organizational change, the management decided to assign another manager to her position. They nevertheless wanted to transfer Melinda to a position that suited her; the job she was offered, however, was a position where she would have had to coordinate downsizing measures.

*“That was logical, too, after all, he would’ve wanted me to stay by all means, but I would’ve gotten the human partner position of division B, upon which I said I wouldn’t do it anymore, even if I have to live on bread and water, ‘cause that was a terrible burden, and my job there would’ve been to coordinate such large-scale downsizing measures, too, “*

### **Encountering tension**

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She reports tasks of a similar nature having put her under serious stress on an earlier occasion.

### **Questioning own expectations**

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### **Creating an explanation**

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She accepted the management’s decision concerning her job.

### **Reinterpreting the situation**

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She reinterpreted herself, her relationship with the HR profession and, hence, that with her own role, and decided that she would not continue working in the HR field, but would rather switch to IT. She reinterpreted her relationship with the organization, became distant from it.

*“I said, I’d rather leave, and then I rather opted for becoming a consultant and trying to build an image for me as a person who would be a specialist in info-organization. “*

### **Taking action**

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As a consequence of all this, she switched to a new profession and a new workplace.

### **Change in beliefs and values**

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Her beliefs about the profession changed. She switched to a profession where she would not run the risk of having to deal with downsizing. She took on a consultant role, instead of that of an HR partner, that is, her beliefs about her role changed, as well.

Her beliefs about herself, her self-definition changed: she realized that she would rather like to be an IT consultant, an IT specialist, instead of an HR specialist only; thereafter, she considered herself both an IT consultant and an HR specialist.

Her set of values changed. Doing a job that is consistent with her value system was now more important to her than her security, her subsistence, which had formerly been her priority.

*“I wouldn’t do it anymore, even if I have to live on bread and water“*

Her beliefs about the company changed, as well. Melinda changed her beliefs about the company, she figured that it was not worth for her to work there because she would not

want to take on the tasks that were available. She reinterpreted her relationship with the organization: set off to find a new job.

### **Change in work meaning**

#### **Mechanism affected**

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**Before the change: control-autonomy, self-esteem decrease.** To her, downsizing meant something uncontrollable. For Melinda, the meaningfulness of work basically came from coping with difficult tasks, proving herself and achieving success. The situation affected the meaningfulness of her work insofar as she did not want to get into a situation that would be inconsistent with her principles and that would leave her to the mercy of others, as it had happened on the previous occasion. All this acted to deteriorate her self-esteem.

**After the change: control-autonomy, self-esteem increase.** She took on a job, a profession that certainly would not require her to deal with downsizing measures, thereby she resolved the related tension. By this change, by quitting her job and switching to a new profession, however, she assumed serious risks, which she would not have been willing to do before, because she had been striving for security.

*“If I think something’s wrong, that’ll sooner or later change in the organization, I just felt so sorry for Éva, whether it was worth for her to settle for less, or leave the organization, well, she doesn’t have to go down all the roads I’ve gone down. There was success, too, brought about by my leaving the company, I felt better, I don’t like to get stuck in a situation where I feel bad, morally. I left, in spite of, even if I was much worse off financially afterwards, because all became uncertain at once. While others can keep on doing that – this is human nature“.*

**Balance. Striving for security decreases, control-autonomy increases.** Striving for security, for subsistence decreased, this item is however not listed among the known mechanisms in the literature. We can observe a lasting change in the control-autonomy mechanism here, because she now attaches more significance to it.

#### **Orientation affected**

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In this case, the change affected her ranking of her values: the job orientation lost, while at the same time, the craftsmanship orientation (control-autonomy) gained in importance.

### **Summary interpretation of the case**

For Melinda, the meaningfulness of work basically came from coping with difficult tasks, proving herself and achieving success. It was the meaningfulness of her work that the situation affected, after all, she did not want to be left to the mercy of others again because of downsizing measures, her need for psychological security and control grew further, while her need for financial security diminished. For her, the solution was to find another job.

### **Melinda3**

## **Surprising event**

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She took on a job as an HR manager; the conditions she had been promised were easier than what turned out to be the reality, and she developed health issues because of the stress.

*“Well, in organization C I didn’t have them [secure points to fall back upon], so when I already felt I wasn’t in control of the situation anymore, and I couldn’t, say, ensure that my work is backed by a strong network of relationships, a strong background for decision making, and well, that the CEO is such a bastard, and that such an HR manager is my boss, then you just cannot put up with it anymore, and after a certain age, having worked like a dog all your life, then you gotta face the consequences, and well, yes, I had to face them. My blood pressure skyrocketed to 170, I had chest pains, I couldn’t complete the stress ECG, ‘cause my pulse was so high, so, I felt sick, to put it simply and briefly. I didn’t develop an organic disease, as it turned out after all, but it took one and a half years for everything to return to normal. So, there I acted stupid, in the sense that I believed what he told me about the conditions“,*

## **Encountering tension**

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Her inner tension is given away by her use of foul language: bastard, stupid. Her illness is also proof for the tension:

*“I’m not ready to work in such an environment, but here, I suffered severe health problems, too, ‘cause here, I worked like 10 to 12 hours each day during December, so that we didn’t even dare look at it [blood pressure], so it was that bad, “*

## **Questioning own expectations**

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She even questions her own values.

*“I’m more important than that, this, and that, and the family“*

## **Creating an explanation**

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She put the blame on the manager and also on herself, for falling for what the manager told her about the conditions.

## **Reinterpreting the situation**

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Consequently, she reinterpreted her relationship with the manager and the organization, and became distant from them.

Her image of herself changed, as well as her definition of her role (see the section on beliefs).

Because of these, she reinterpreted her relation to work as a life domain and the role of work as compared to other life domains: now she believed taking care of her family and herself were more important than work.

*“So what I’m saying is that it’s better if a woman has other plans, too, then she can act more low-keyed, she can settle with less. That is, if you know what I mean, that is I knew, that it’s okay, when he offered it, that I can cope with it, and that’s a good feeling, you know, when you see you can cope with it. You know you are, well, not vain, but maybe that’s the right expression, maybe I could do it, and okay, but I’m more important than that, this, and that, and the family, but if I could start over again, I’m*

*sure this is what I would change, that is, I wouldn't take on some much. It was too much and life's too short for that. "*

*"I've already got to the point that I don't take on too much work anymore, it's much more important for me to provide a background for the family, to actively help both of my children, if necessary, after all, they're way beyond their teenage years now, when they still wanted me not to tell them what to do, not to get involved. And, well, my husband's grown old, along with me, it's better for him, too, to bear a somewhat lesser load, and not to have all the household chores to attend to when I'm busy, or for me not having to cope with all the man's jobs when he's busy. This is the way it is now. "*

## **Taking action**

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Upon a change in the organization, she quit her job.

## **Change in beliefs and values**

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Her beliefs about herself changed, as well, about how much stress, challenge and unfamiliar tasks she is willing to take, she recognized her own vulnerability and that she has to take care of herself. She recognized her own vulnerability which brought her caring-mother-of-the-family role into the foreground, who takes care of both herself and her family, that is, her beliefs about her role changed, as well.

There was a change in her value system. The life domains other than work – her own health and family – were now more important to her.

Also, her beliefs about the company and the manager changed. Melinda changed her beliefs about the company, she figured that it was not worth for her to work there, because she would not want to take on the tasks that were available. She reinterpreted her relationship with the organization: set out to find a new job.

## **Change in work meaning**

## **Mechanism affected**

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**Before the change: competence-proving, control-autonomy, significance, self-esteem decrease.** For Melinda, the meaningfulness of work basically came from coping with difficult tasks, proving herself and achieving success. In this unfamiliar and difficult organizational environment, she lost control and she developed health issues because of the stress. She could not experience that her work is significant and has a purpose, because she felt exploited and deceived. All this had a negative impact on her self-esteem.

**After the change: control-autonomy, significance, self-esteem increase.** She re-evaluates the role of work in her life: now, taking care of her family and protecting her own health provide the purpose and the significance of her life, this is what her self-esteem is built upon. By taking on less responsibilities she has more control over work-related situations.

**Balance. Competence-proving decreases, significance, control-autonomy, self-esteem increase.** In this case, the competence-proving mechanisms lost in significance to her, while we can observe a lasting change in the control-autonomy mechanism, as she attaches more significance to it now. As a matter of fact, it is the significance of her work, her main work-related purpose that changed: the role previously held by competence-proving was taken over by control-autonomy. This is also confirmed by her explanation of a later situation.



*“There are, there were points in my life, and this was one such point, when I said that my work and that I could experience success, that was not at all a decisive factor, it was already pure rationality that made me, that makes me take on certain tasks. I’m not willing to take on unrealistic requirements, while in the past, I was quite willing to, but it has changed quite a lot how I relate to that. You can find other ways to spend your time, your time, I was very badly behind with the household and family and all, so, well, why I told you these, I just thought you might find it interesting. Not because (silence), so that you understand why I’m not that active, why I quit taking on certain situations, but whenever I quit a situation, the reasons were primarily personal. “*

### **Orientation affected**

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In this case, it was her ranking of her values that changed: work as a life domain is now less significant to Melinda. Concerning orientations, the significance of the career orientation (competence-proving mechanism) deteriorated, while that of the craftsmanship orientation (control-autonomy mechanism) increased.

### **Summary interpretation of the case**

For Melinda, the meaningfulness of work basically came from coping with difficult tasks, proving herself and achieving success. In this unfamiliar and difficult organizational environment, she lost control and she developed health issues because of the stress. She could not experience that her work is significant and has a purpose, because she felt exploited and deceived. All this had a negative impact on her self-esteem. As a result, the significance/main purpose of her work changed from coping with difficult tasks (before) to taking on realistic requirements, viable tasks (afterwards). This case is an example for a change in the significance, in the meaningfulness of work.

#### **6.2.1.2.2. Changes in beliefs about coworkers**

##### **Rita1**

### **Surprising event**

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She was not anymore invited to after-work get-togethers of the type she had used to be invited to.

*“In the beginning, there was a time when there were about 10 or 12 of us, and if there was some sort of gathering, everyone just let everyone else know. Then it really was like, let’s go to, for example, Pótkulcs, and have a beer, or anything, after work. And as the headcount expanded, at one point I noticed that they were talking about activities I wasn’t invited to, and I really felt miserable, why they didn’t tell me if they had always invited me before, after all. “*

### **Encountering tension**

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## **Questioning own expectations**

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First, she was inclined to put the blame on herself:

*“Then I really thought they might not like me at all. Maybe I’ll have to behave differently in the future.”*

## **Creating an explanation**

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Initially, she put the blame on herself, she tried to figure out what she should do differently, but later she realized that all this was related to her becoming a manager. She even considered her own practice, that she did not usually invite certain managers in a similar situation, either.

*“It was somewhat later that I got to understand that our relationship had changed, that I was a manager now. They don’t look at me the same way anymore, they themselves, as a group, regard me as a part of the company’s management now. So they don’t necessarily want me to be there when they’re making jokes of each other or making fun of the owners or anything like that, ‘cause they feel that these things now affect me, too, ‘cause I’m not a member of their circle anymore. And then I got it, that this is the normal way of things, and that I have a lot of activities, too, that I don’t invite the director of whatever to, ‘cause I just don’t want him to be present. Or it’s not adequate that he participate, and then I could already deal with it“.*

## **Reinterpreting the situation**

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Her image of herself changed: she re-defined her relation to responsibility and management (for details, see the section on beliefs).

She reinterpreted her relation to her role and her job: now she already considers herself a manager, assumes the tasks of a manager and regards her job as a management job, and not an expert’s job. She reinterpreted how she related to her coworkers. In the beginning, she strove to be loved, but later to be recognized.

*“In the beginning, when I was just starting out with HR, I wanted, or I wished everyone would love me, each one of my coworkers, and then my job would be so easy. Though I have a rather strong influence on whom we hire, still, the decision isn’t made based on whether I personally find the candidate likeable or not. Whether I would like them as a friend? I think, people usually realize this pretty soon. And therefore there are some coworkers who aren’t perfectly compatible with me. So I decided the goal wasn’t to make everyone like me, but the goal is to make them recognize me, and that’ll be more than enough. They should accept what I say, consider it a professionally justified or well-founded decision, should have trust that if I make a decision this way or that way, I do so in their behalf. That is, I started to strive for a different type of relationship. And then it seemed it would be much easier this way, than making everyone love me, and then this all had an influence on other domains of my life, ‘cause I managed to do without it, that it wasn’t necessary to make everyone love me, and I believe you can really enjoy life this way. It worked out for me, at least, I like myself to be this way, to work and live this way. “*

## **Taking action**

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This was what she realized in her HR work: for instance, she attended trainings and courses to be able to meet relevant professional standards.

## **Change in beliefs and values**

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Her image of herself, her self-definition changed: she realized that others regarded her as a manager, so now she regards herself as a manager, too.

It is her ranking of her values that changed. Before the change, it was acceptance and close personal relationships that were important to Rita, while afterwards, she was more focused on performance, professional knowledge and recognition.

It was her beliefs about her coworkers that changed. Rita changed her beliefs about her coworkers, she figured that it was not worth for her to expect them to love her; instead, she expected her coworkers to recognize her efforts. She did not change her relationship with the organization.

Her beliefs about the HR manager's job, tasks and role changed.

## **Change in work meaning**

### **Mechanism affected**

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**Before the change: interpersonal connectedness, significance, self-esteem decrease.**

The small family enterprise started to grow and they hired more and more people with whom she did not have such a good personal relationship, and she was appointed a manager, as well. All this contributed to her becoming distant from her coworkers, which prevented her from experiencing the familial and friendly workplace atmosphere to the same extent as before. For Rita, the meaningfulness of her work basically originated from her loving personal relationships with others. It was the meaningfulness of her work that this unexpected situation affected.

**After the change: self-esteem increases.** She changed her personal relationships, she does not strive for close, loving, soothing relationships anymore, but expects them to regard her as a manager: recognize her performance and expertise. She considers herself to be more important, thus her self-esteem improves.

**Balance. Interpersonal connectedness decreases, significance, self-esteem increase.**

We can observe lasting changes in the mechanisms. The familial atmosphere and close social relationships are not that important to her anymore, because she found it harder to experience these as a manager of a growing company. What brought about the change was that she now considers herself a manager, and others do so, as well, and it is her performance, her managerial work through which she experiences the value of her work, which enhance her feeling of valuableness. Actually, it is the meaningfulness, the significance of her work, her main work-related purpose that changed: the role previously held by interpersonal connectedness was taken over by self-esteem.

### **Orientation affected**

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Concerning orientations, the significance of the career orientation (performance-self-esteem) increased, while that of the kinship orientation (interpersonal connectedness) deteriorated.

## **Summary interpretation of the case**

For Rita, the meaningfulness of her work basically originated from her loving personal relationships with others. She changed her personal relationships, she does not strive for

close, loving, soothing relationships anymore, but expects them to regard her as a manager: recognize her performance and expertise. She considers herself to be more important, thus her self-esteem improves. Consequently, the significance of her work, her main work-related purpose changed: the role previously held by loving personal relationships was taken over by self-esteem. This case is an example for a change in the significance, in the meaningfulness of work.

### **6.2.1.2.3. Changes in beliefs about oneself**

#### **Léna1**

##### **Surprising event**

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Experiences related to managing a company, which did not turn out as she had expected. This kind of management work involved a lot of responsibility, which she found hard to tolerate. It was very time-consuming, too, which was too much for her. Therefore she could not devote time to the things she missed, like actual HR work.

*“so I had just finished college, in '97, spent one year at a headhunter firm, and I was, like, I can do that myself, just look, I'll show you, and I started my own enterprise, with zero capital, but a lot of utopian dreams about how it all would be perfect. “*

*“Then that, that it's, it wasn't necessarily the service part of the job, but this, this functioning as a manager, so I started the company when I was 25, and I had hardly ever been a subordinate of someone, so it was there that I had to grow up, that I'm in a management role, and how I should relate to the coworkers, and what is effective, what is efficient, what makes them stay there, so like everything, I had to find out for myself, to experience myself, and then keeping, you know, keeping the company alive, that is, to take care of people, to make sure the company has the revenue, and the orders, to pay for their salaries, well, that was, you know, that was a tough period, too, that wasn't easy, no “*

*“not like that, that I have my own enterprise to look after, maybe I invested too much time anyways“*

##### **Encountering tension**

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She felt burdened.

*„and that was, you know, too much, that is, I felt I don't want this much“, „you have to prove it again and again, like, but I can do it and rest assured, you can leave it to me“*

##### **Questioning own expectations**

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##### **Creating an explanation**

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The responsibility she bore put a very heavy load on her. She did not feel satisfied in professional terms by the managerial work she performed, she missed the expertness and the assistance/service that HR work represented for her. She realized that actual HR

work, which was actually important to her, accounted for a smaller and smaller share of her everyday duties, that she did not have the time for it. She did not blame anyone, she accepted the situation and set out to find a solution.

*„but I wanted to become an HR specialist, that is, I had this idea that this is the profession I want to learn [...] so yes, I realized it, that I won't learn this profession here, that is, not by myself, not as an autodidact, given that my duties, meanwhile, require that I meet the accountant, the lawyer, potential new clients, so, I won't be able to make it this way”*

### **Reinterpreting the situation**

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She reinterpreted both her role and her job. Concerning her job, she figured that she would not be any less valuable by stepping back from certain managerial duties, that her duties as a manager and as an HR consultant could be reconciled and linked with each other, and that certain managerial duties could be surrendered to others. She opted for working as an expert, and not as a manager, that is, she changed her role in the organization. She adjusted both her tasks and her workplace relationships accordingly. Her image of herself changed: she re-defined her relation to responsibility and management (for details, see the section on beliefs).

### **Taking action**

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She increased the share of professional tasks at the expense of management tasks. She also adjusted the circle of stakeholders she would keep in touch with: cut back on her contact with the accountant and the lawyer.

*„And then, also in the company, I started to follow that, you know, to step back and have someone else take care of the operational matters of the company's management, so that he is the one to arrange for the accountant-lawyer, I don't know, to keep the office running, and I started, I got more involved in the projects themselves, that is, to deal with the human audits, now, that was one such serious turning point.”*

### **Change in beliefs and values**

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Her image of herself, her self-definition changed: she realized that she would not be able to reconcile the tasks related to managing the company with actual HR work, and that she would actually like to be an HR specialist and not a managing director, so afterwards, she rather regarded herself as an HR professional instead of a managing director/businesswoman. Her beliefs about herself changed, concerning how much responsibility she was able/willing to take.

Her value system changed. She actually realized that the ambition to show the world what she was capable of was less important to her than the feeling of authenticity and expertise.

Her beliefs about her job, tasks, relationships and her role all changed.

### **Change in work meaning**

### **Mechanism affected**

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**Before the change: control-autonomy, identity affirmation, self-esteem decrease.**

It seems that because of the responsibilities associated with managing the company, the challenge was greater than what she would have felt comfortable with, she probably

could not experience the desired degree of control, all of which contributed to the deterioration of her self-esteem.

*„and that was, you know, too much, that is, I felt I don't want this much, I don't need this, that is, I don't wanna be a successful businesswoman,"*

It was difficult for her to experience authenticity as a manager, as a businesswoman. She reported on certain difficulties she faced in her sales efforts. All these factors contributed to the deterioration of her self-esteem.

*„And that, what was another such difficult experience, and period, that was when I was very young, and I knew I am capable of getting the job done, but they just didn't believe that I went to meet the client. And so I pretty often, well, I don't know, so, I was wearing those very formal clothes, those truly conservative pieces, all the time, and I remember having a briefcase, I use a backpack these days, I've changed, but that like this, this very-hard-to-become-authentic thing, and that felt so bad, that you have to prove it again and again, like, but I can do it and rest assured, you can leave it to me, the fact that I'm not 50 but only, say, 28, that doesn't, so, I'll still cope with this task, and they looked at me, they had that look on their faces, mainly like, how's this gonna turn out right, and of course I knew, too, that okay-okay, I understand, 'cause I also saw that, well, one has to mature, but those services, they weren't about such all-encompassing, you know, comprehensive systems, but like, you know, let's find 5 developers, that is, that's a function that someone 28 or 29 years of age is perfectly capable of doing.”*

**After the change: competence-proving decreases, identity affirmation, control-autonomy, self-esteem increase.** At the time she started her enterprise, she was very much driven by a desire to prove herself, to succeed. As she was becoming more and more experienced, she had to face more and more difficulties; managerial work became less and less valuable to her, and HR duties and the HR profession became more and more important, as compared to management work.

*„not like that, that I have my own enterprise to look after, maybe I invested too much time anyways”*

Actually, it was HR work which she felt she could be authentic in, something she had not found in management work. Working as an HR professional does not constitute more of a challenge for her than what she can feel comfortable with. Having adjusted her scope of duties, she now feels more authentic, which then again act to improve her self-esteem, as well.

*„When I saw that I can indeed be authentic, that is, managers accept what I say, that I see it right, that is, that my insights on one or the other assessment are valuable, I saw that I can point them into directions that allow for the organization to operate more effectively or more efficiently, or that afterwards, that manager can better coordinate his team, or suddenly grasps something and has these a-ha experiences, and then from those feedbacks, I had a lot of positive experiences.”*

**Balance. Identity affirmation increases, control-autonomy increases, competence-proving decreases.** As a consequence of the difficulties, it became less and less important to her to succeed with her enterprise, to show the world what she was capable of. What she did feel was more important than before was a higher degree of authenticity and more control over her work.

### **Orientation affected**

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In this case, the change affected her ranking of her values: the career orientation (competence-proving) lost, while at the same time, the craftsmanship orientation (control-autonomy, identity affirmation) gained in importance.

### **Summary interpretation of the case**

For Léna, the meaningfulness of work basically originated in helping and serving others. It was not the significance and the meaningfulness of her work that this conflict affected. In her management job, she lost control and she did not feel authentic, which filled her with tension. Following a number of difficult situations, she re-evaluated what was important to her and found that managerial work and success with her enterprise were not important anymore, but authenticity and control over her work were.

### **Balázs1**

#### **Surprising event**

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His first great conflict with one of the new CEOs even before the CEO officially entered into office.

*“Well, what always comes to my mind about him, this, well, this will be a completely personal thing, that is, that my mother died just at the time when this buy-out and merger and everything were going on, and unexpectedly, for us at least, company B didn't leave the market, but company B decided to found an independent company and start building its business from scratch. [...] Well, whatever, to sum it up, exactly because of my personal reaction [he rejected the offer], I didn't expect that a number of managers wouldn't make the same decision, and thus would leave, along with him [former CEO]. And that this would make it difficult for us to keep the remaining company running. And the new CEO had not officially entered into office yet, so before that, I could only talk about these things with him extremely unofficially, and, as unfortunate as it may have been, the funeral of my mother took place on the same day when, the last, that is, on that last day of the common past, I was, obviously not in the bank, and my colleagues kept calling me that he's quit, he's quit, she's quit, and that practically key figures, key managers submitted their resignations one after the other, [...] Now, partly because of my private matters, and partly because it was obvious that we can't turn this around, and we can't react, those who have made the decision have made the decision, we can't make anyone revoke that, so I indeed didn't do anything about it that day, except for resigning myself to the news of newer and newer resignations, and then that dearest of all people called me, well, after a number of resignations had been submitted, and, as the very start of our potentially wonderful work relationship, I was, well, practically dressed down like a bloody schoolboy by him for not having informed him about the goings-on, whereas formally, I wasn't even allowed to, 'cause he hadn't entered into office yet, what is more, he wasn't even employed yet by us. So, practically, this was my first experience with him, the first true conflict of ours. And he did all that knowing, I think, the reason why I wasn't at the bank that day, so this was something that, obviously, remained stuck in my mind for all the 4 years we spent there together, but we somehow managed to get along, after all. “*

#### **Encountering tension**

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His tension is given away by his use of vulgar language.

*“as the very start of our potentially wonderful work relationship, I was, well, practically dressed down like a bloody schoolboy by him“,*

### **Questioning own expectations**

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He does not actually question his presumptions, only whether he had reacted the right way, he only questions his action/reaction, not what is beyond that, not his perception of the situation.

*“Well, sure, I’d do it differently now, that is, there was a lot of other things going on then, in parallel, and a great many things were unclear. But, after all, I did sense, or understand, the criticism from his side, what he came up with that day. Not the way how we cooperated afterwards, not that much. With time, and with my career, and my age, of course, and partly also as a consequence of these unpleasant occurrences, I believe, I’m unwittingly becoming more and more tactical. And maybe more cautious, oftentimes. Which I’m not necessarily very happy about myself, but now, I’m not shooting from the hip, not responding to everything at once anymore, now I tend to think it over twice to whom, what and how...And when, and how not, and by what means, and what the reaction might be. So, these days I can better keep my cool in such situations, maybe. “*

### **Creating an explanation**

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He actually held both the manager and himself responsible for the situation that emerged.

*“But this isn’t actually my relation to work, so this isn’t the right answer to your question. (silence) But it is related to the extent that when I’m refraining myself this way, that is, when what I’m saying isn’t exactly what, or how, or not right away, or not, or refine it a bit, and playing a bit of diplomacy, I do that in order to, and this is where we get back to the original question, be able to achieve the result that’s important to me, the goal that’s important to me or the change I’d like to effectuate. So, under that aspect, I’ve become more of the calculating type, if you like, that if I believe that it better serves the goal to be met, I’ll give more thought to formulating what I’ve got to say than I would have done many years ago. And in these, so these situations, and conflicts, and not-always-so-supple-minded bosses, or my not-always-so-smooth relationship with them, so these, these must have changed me quite a bit over all the years. [...] No, that I want to achieve results and that I want to give myself a pat on the back, and to somehow make others give me pats on the back, that hasn’t changed. “*

### **Reinterpreting the situation**

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He reinterpreted his relationships, how he should relate to his managers and coworkers: he can now handle conflicts in a more self-collected manner.

Both his image of himself and his definition of his role changed (for details, see the section on beliefs).

### **Taking action**

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Accordingly, he became more tactically aware in his handling of conflicts.

### **Change in beliefs and values**

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As a result of the tough conflicts with the managers, he changed his image and beliefs about himself, and became more cautious, more tactical.

His beliefs about his own role changed: in order to achieve his goal, he had to relate to his coworkers, his fellow managers and to the manager he reported to in a novel way: the role he took on was not that of the confrontative manager who puts the success of the change in jeopardy, but that of the diplomatic manager who carries through the change process.

His system of values changed. It became more important to him to achieve the goal/result/change he had set for himself, thus the way he related to his coworkers, his managers was subordinated to these. That is, he changed his workplace relationships, as well.

## **Change in work meaning**

### **Mechanism affected**

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**Before the change: perceived impact-career, significance, self-esteem decrease.** The tough conflicts with his manager made him realize that he handled those situations in the wrong way and that these incidents may jeopardize the realization of his personal goal. For Balázs, the meaningfulness of work basically comes from achieving results, carrying through changes and receiving recognition for these, both from others and from himself. This case made him realize how important his goal was to him and that he was the one who had to change in order to achieve that goal.

**After the change: perceived impact-career, significance, self-esteem increase.** It was cautiousness, tactics and diplomacy in his relations with his coworkers and managers that aided him in realizing his goal.

**Balance. Perceived impact-career, significance, self-esteem increase.** We can observe a lasting change in the mechanisms here, because he now attaches more significance to them.

### **Orientation affected**

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In this case, the career orientation (perceived impact) gained in significance for Balázs.

## **Summary interpretation of the case**

For Balázs, the meaningfulness of work basically came from achieving results, carrying through changes and receiving recognition for these, both from others and from himself. This case presents a more serious conflict. Balázs did not manage to reconcile the goals that provide the meaningfulness of his work with his personal principles, so he had to choose between the two. He prioritized his goal and adjusted his principles in order to reduce the tension arising from the cognitive dissonance he experienced. The case Balázs2 presents a less significant conflict, where Balázs questions both his goals and his principles, and then argues that this is the way for him to experience self-concordance and that it is positive feedback that he can draw energy from – and manages to reduce his cognitive dissonance this way, without having to change anything.

### 6.2.1.3. No change in the meaning of work

Balázs2

#### Surprising event

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Unpleasant workplace conflict concerning an HR-related issue.

*“but what specifically comes to my mind, exactly from yesterday, which clearly doesn’t suggest that this really is the way one should work, the attitude one should apply to everything, and to these questions in general and that accordingly, that you would need to approach all situations this way and to always want to achieve something, to always want to solve something. Yesterday, this was exactly such a minor conflict, where one of the managers, in a difficult conflict situation, responded to one of his coworkers with some pure bullshit that put all the blame on HR. Less surprisingly, since the matter was quite important to him, the guy contacted me, well, contacted his “generalist” first, and having received the same response as the one he didn’t like the previous time, either, he contacted me, then contacted me again, and then asked to meet in person, and it was at this meeting that after a while, after about ten minutes, when I felt we weren’t getting anywhere, ‘cause I repeated three times the same thing that my colleague had told him twice already, and I didn’t feel there was too much sense in dragging it out any further, given that I know that I won’t say anything else, now then it just slipped out of my mouth, ‘cause he responded to something by, like, but your boss backed it, and then I said, well yes, I might do that, as well, Jenő, to tell you that you have my deepest sympathy, your arguments are logical, what you say is logical, your arguments are rational, I do even like you, and I accept all that you’ve just told me, and I’ll support your case, your issue and I’ll promise to get back to you on that in a week or so, but, and then I won’t do anything for a week, and I’ll call you after a week and just lay it on someone else’s door, the board or the owner, or some rule that I obviously cannot possibly influence, why I won’t be able to do what he’s asking for. But, I said, I won’t do all this, I don’t want to hand feed you bullshit, I’d like this to be, even if the response is unfavorable for you, transparent and I’d like you to understand, even if you don’t agree, but understand why I gave you the answer I gave you. And, though it would be much more convenient, but I still won’t opt for doing what I’ve just outlined, but will say no to you straight away, and if you ask twelve more times, I’ll say no to you twelve more times. And that was more or less where we finished the meeting. Of course he’s not happy, and I won’t be his favorite, obviously. “*

#### Encountering tension

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Situations like this tend to get him down.

#### Questioning own expectations

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The individual conflicts make him uncertain, whether he represents his principles in the right way, whether his principles are right, but after having questioned them, he convinces himself that yes, he did it the right way, because that is the way he can feel consistent with his values, with himself, and this way, he reduces his cognitive dissonance.

*“What I thought afterwards was that I wouldn’t be able to look myself in the eyes if I hadn’t proceeded this way in the given situation. And still, I kept thinking, was this, with*

*all due considerations taken into account, really the ideal approach to this situation? How much simpler it could have been to just say, now, Jenő, look, you've got to understand, you know, what I've just told you. And then I could've just withdrawn from the situation as the good guy, to cop out of the whole thing as the one who tries to help, who's empathic and understanding. Which might even have made it easier for me to find my way with this area, or with this guy in the next couple of encounters, but it wouldn't have been me if I had done so, and you know, to tell you the truth, this is what this line of thought always leads to, that it's just right this way, and that not behaving as if I was someone else is exactly what makes me the way I am. "*

### **Creating an explanation**

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He puts both unpleasant and pleasant situations in the balance, and can handle the unpleasant situations by drawing energy from the pleasant ones.

*"But these stories occur on a say, well, say on a daily basis, obviously not one, not two of them, so this always makes me wonder whether I'm actually right about my principles, and whether you really need to always want to achieve something, whether you truly need to always be sincere, well, at least more sincere than not, and transparent, and straight, and to always enter these unpleasant situations. At the end of the day, the answer is always yes, yet, you know, these keep spoiling your mood all the time. And there are the positives, too, more or less each day, fortunately, when they say, or don't say but you feel that hmm, this act or this decision or the result of this project of yours, they truly appreciate it. Fortunately, there is plenty of both, as long as the former is less frequent and the latter happens more often, it's good, then you have something to recharge from, to maintain all this from. "*

### **Reinterpreting the situation**

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The conflict did not change his interpretation of the situation, of himself or of his work. There was no change, no reinterpretation.

### **Taking action**

#### **Change in beliefs and values**

#### **Change in work meaning**

#### **Mechanism affected**

#### **Orientation affected**

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### **Summary interpretation of the case**

For Balázs, the meaningfulness of work basically came from achieving results, carrying through changes and receiving recognition for these, both from others and from himself. This case presents a less significant conflict, where Balázs questions both his goals and his principles, and then argues that this is the way for him to experience self-concordance and that it is positive feedback that he can draw energy from – and manages to reduce his cognitive dissonance this way, without having to change

anything. Contrasting this case with the case Balázs1, the conflict there is a far more serious one. There, he did not manage to reconcile his goals with his personal principles, so he had to choose between the two. He prioritized his goal and adjusted his principles in order to reduce the tension arising from the cognitive dissonance he experienced. That is, what this case has shown us is a situation where the surprise is too little in extent to lead to any sort of change, the individual can manage to reduce his cognitive dissonance within a short period of time.

## **6.2.2. Pleasant surprises**

### **6.2.2.1. Lasting and stable changes in the meaning of work**

**Bence2**

#### **Surprising event**

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Bence received a mediocre evaluation from his professional supervisor. His boss from the business area – to whom he provided services as an HR employee – found he was better than mediocre and he did stand up for that opinion, too, he was ready to clash with the HR manager over this issue in favor of Bence.

*“So the [first year] was such a, that was truly a year when, like, I look around, get to know what a company is really about, and I really tried to learn how to do it [...]. Actually, when these positive feedbacks came, that was in the HR partner’s position at organization D. So, there I had a boss, whom I then, well, so he was quite a tough guy, who, whom everybody feared, so then, as we had the management meeting, people in their fifties submitted their reports with their hands shaking, because, and not because he was a moron, but because he was terribly consistent in calling people to account, that is if they agreed on something, and he was terribly good at asking questions, and this is the other thing, so he wasn’t afraid to ask what is this here, or why is this exactly like it is, and etc. And (pause) sometimes it happened that the, so more specifically, for example, that during the performance evaluation in 200X, the HR director, I mean, at headquarters, it was performed by the then HR director and Béla, my boss at organization D, that is, he was the managing director. I received a standard evaluation and he had the courage to confront, dared to confront, that is, he confronted the, ‘cause they were on the same level, more or less, so he confronted the HR director and said that the business, and that he believes Bence deserves better than standard, that is, what he offers to the business side, like HR support, that is above the standard. “*

#### **Encountering tension**

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There is a sort of tension in the story, given that the managing director took on an unpleasant conflict because of him.

#### **Questioning own expectations**

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## **Creating an explanation**

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The recognition and the positive feedback – which was, in this very case, surprisingly positive, given that the manager was even willing to take on an unpleasant conflict with his fellow manager in Bence’s favor – reassured him on the one hand and, on the other hand, appeared as a sort of expectation he would have to meet.

*“Well, positive things, yes, there have been in the sense, and several ones actually, that they always placed their trust in me, so that inspired, inspired me not to remain what I had been, say, a couple of years ago, but to try to advance to some, and I don’t only mean the career ladder, some sort of imaginary ladder, but, that is, personally, as well, to not only deal with the things I’m quasi-obliged to deal with, but to try to do a bit more than what is explicitly required. And this, as I said, this trust that they placed in me ever since 200X, I believe, ever since I was hired to the Organization, these reinforcements have always been absolutely positive, and that ...”*

*“And that reassured me that the work I do, it does have a yield, it does give palpable results. “*

## **Reinterpreting the situation**

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He reinterpreted his job, his tasks and himself. He took on new tasks, not only tasks that belonged to his job, assumed responsibility for his own advancement, committed himself to his manager and the organization.

His image of himself changed: he re-defined his relationship to responsibility (for details, see the section on beliefs).

He reinterpreted his role in the corporation (for details, see the section on beliefs).

## **Taking action**

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He took on new tasks, initiated new things, assumed responsibility for his own development.

## **Change in beliefs and values**

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His image of himself, his self-definition changed: he became responsible, he became an initiator.

His value system changed. He is willing to take action, to take on extra tasks in order to facilitate his own advancement. Advancement got more important to him, so he was willing to make sacrifices.

His beliefs about his role changed. He turned into someone who assumes responsibility for his own fortune and advancement and takes on the initiator’s role, for which he is willing to perform additional, extra tasks. The role of HR has not cropped up yet, it is his own role that he reinterprets here.

His beliefs about the organization and his managers changed. Bence figured it was worth for him to stay because his managers/the organization appreciate him. Bence changed his beliefs about the company, and found that it was worth for him to work there, because there is a need for what he has to offer. He reinterpreted his relationship with the organization: he committed himself to the organization.

## **Change in work meaning**

## **Mechanism affected**

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**As a result of the surprise: significance, self-esteem increase.** For Bence, the meaningfulness of work is basically provided by his active contribution. Having experienced that his work is appreciated, he felt an even stronger motivation to take on additional tasks and responsibilities for the organization. It made him take the first steps on the route to improve his performance and take on additional tasks that is rewarded by recognition from the organization. All this improved his self-esteem and reassured him. This way he could experience that his work is significant and has a purpose, because he could contribute to the company's goals, and thereby he could also experience his valueness.

**Balance. Significance, self-esteem increase.** We can observe a lasting change in the mechanisms here, because he now attaches more significance to them.

### **Orientation affected**

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In this case, the career orientation (significance, self-esteem) gained in significance for Bence.

### **Summary interpretation of the case**

For Bence, the meaningfulness of work comes from his active contribution, it is through that that he can experience that his work is valuable. By having re-defined the situation, he could experience to an even greater extent that there is something to work for, that his work is significant and that it has a purpose and, hence, that his work is valuable. What actually happened was that he interpreted the external events and feedback in a way that made him ascribe even more meaning and meaningfulness to his work, which acted to improve his self-esteem.

## **Csilla2**

### **Surprising event**

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She had anticipated that she would also have to leave the organization along with her CEO, who was about to be replaced, but the new CEO wanted to have her in his team, as well.

*“Well, what really was a great big surprise was that when the CEO’s employment contract was about to expire, I was already all packed up, too, I already knew whom I was supposed to hand over current matters, and then – I mean, he wouldn’t be the new HR manager, but, just as long as the new CEO finds a new HR manager – and that’s how everyone thought it would be. That is, half a year before the CEO was scheduled to leave office, I was hired the same day as the CEO, so I’ll leave the same day, too, it’s so, you know, a common thing what we did here. And, one week to go till the change, the new CEO called me that, like, let’s meet in a café, and that he’d like to work with me. And I asked him why. (laugh) [...] And he said, ever since he had known he would be CEO, he’s been asking around everybody with whom and how it should be, that is, who should stay and who should leave, and that he asked some 15-20 people about me and not a single one of them said anything bad about me, so therefore he would like to have me on his team. So this truly was a big-big pleasant surprise for me. “*

*“Well, when the new CEO made this offer, then the real positive thing was that I could disappoint everyone. That is, everyone thought I had to leave, the great many changes I had carried through here. [...] They were already thinking about what they should undo. ‘Cause, you know, it had been more convenient for them. [...] So one of my great experiences was that there was a sort of restoration going on, and when it turned out that I would stay, all that went silent. Like, okay, if I stay, so does the institution. And they were happy. So people didn’t feel sad about my staying with the company, I experienced being a truly significant figure, like, if I take leave, some other things gonna happen, too. “*

### **Encountering tension**

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There is no tension.

### **Questioning own expectations**

### **Creating an explanation**

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She interpreted the new CEO’s decision to keep her as a value judgment; actually, it was this choice, this decision that she considered the real value judgment. A value judgment on her work, a value judgment about her.

*“And then I think, this is the two big things I mentioned, when they kept me even without language skills, and, so, you see, it’s always related to that, that you keep working and working, and the occasion when you’re truly judged is always the one when they have to choose. There is this saying of mine, that of course, you pretty frequently get feedback on your work, but the true feedback is when they have to choose, whether they stick with you or ask for someone new. That’s the true choice, the evaluation of my work. (more silent) Both of my stories are related to this change. “*

### **Reinterpreting the situation**

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She reinterpreted this decision, because she did not interpret it as something that concerns her past performance, but as a sign of the new CEO’s subjective trust in her, which would compel her to prove that she deserved it. Therefore she reinterpreted her job: defined new and even more challenging expectations towards herself and her job; her relationships: defined new and even more challenging expectations towards her team; her tasks: sought for new opportunities.

Her image of herself changed: she re-defined her relation to self-esteem and self-efficacy (for details, see the section on beliefs).

She reinterpreted the role HR and she personally have in the organization (for details, see the section on beliefs).

*“Well, what else, maybe that when they, like, kept me, appointed me, I always remained very humble, so I’ve never let high-handedness or self-satisfaction get a grip on me. Rather, it’s always inspired me to prove’em all. And this is extremely important, I believe, that is, that I didn’t feel, like, hmmm, I got praised now, I got a pat on the back, so I’m the new hotshot now, but I rather fell back 5 levels in self-confidence, and said I need to earn this, ‘cause this choice doesn’t originate in the past, they’ve made it for some reason, but that I need to reassure them that they’ve made the right choice, therefore I started, again, working like a dog, you know, 12 hours and so, and it was only when I felt that they now feel convinced that they made the right choice that I*

*returned to the normal level.[...] But I'm absolutely sure that if I go to work somewhere else, I'll do the exact same thing there. So, you know, this provides such inspiration for my work, for proving again that I'm worth the money, or that they made the right choice, and I radiate this to my team, and we fly, and keep going forward. [...] but that I was always on the lookout for newer and newer opportunities, and then, folks, now we have to show them again that we're doing some real hard work here. "*

### **Taking action**

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Acted accordingly: worked twelve hours a day and proved her capability.

### **Change in beliefs and values**

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It is her beliefs about the choice and about the expectations towards her and her job that changed: she considered them to have become much more serious than they had been before. Therefore her beliefs about her job, her work duties and her workplace relationships changed.

She reinterpreted her beliefs about herself: in comparison to the re-defined expectations, her self-esteem decreased. Accordingly, she re-defined the role that she and the HR team have in the organization: interpreted herself and the HR function as an actor that substantially contributes to the organization's goals and that is always on the lookout for new opportunities and in continuous renewal.

Her value system changed. Proving herself to her bosses became more important to her, therefore she made sacrifices.

### **Change in work meaning**

### **Mechanism affected**

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**As a result of the surprise: perceived impact-career, significance, self-esteem increase.** For Csilla, the meaningfulness of her work basically comes from proving that she is able to influence the company's operation to a significant extent, this is what allows her to experience that her work is valuable. By having re-defined the expectations, she could experience to an even greater extent that there is something to work for, that her work is significant and that it has a purpose and, hence, that her work is valuable.

**Balance. perceived impact-career, significance, self-esteem increase.** We can observe a lasting change in the mechanisms here, because she now attaches more significance to them.

### **Orientation affected**

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In this case, the career orientation (perceived impact-career, significance, self-esteem) gained in significance for Csilla.

### **Summary interpretation of the case**

For Csilla, the meaningfulness of her work basically comes from proving that she is able to influence the company's operation to a significant extent, this is what allows her to experience that her work is valuable. By having re-defined the expectations, she could experience to an even greater extent that there is something to work for, that her work is significant and that it has a purpose and, hence, that her work is valuable. What



actually happened was that she interpreted the external events and feedback in a way that made her ascribe even more meaning and meaningfulness to her work, which acted to improve her self-esteem.

### Csilla3

#### Surprising event

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She was allowed to stay with her multinational employer even though she did not speak the official language initially; they gave her time to learn it. Furthermore, they wanted to appoint her HR manager for Europe, which she did not accept. She was greatly surprised by both events.

*“Pleasant surprises, well, there was one more, actually, when this, you know, I had a lot of English coworkers, they accepted me really fast, that is, I was the only Hungarian there, and the only woman in the management, for a while, who, to top it all off, didn’t speak English for a while, just Russian, that was a great big surprise, too, that, like, why on earth do they stick with me, who could, you know, only speak Russian, and the official language was English. I had to work with twenty expats, and that sort of tolerance, that they have to, with me, in Russian, for six months, ‘cause I did start learning English, you know, that they were ready to communicate with me in Russian for six months, and that they waited for me to learn to speak English, and they really had great respect for me even though I didn’t speak English. This, I didn’t understand, for example.[...] I stayed in this international system, and it’s always been such a positive experience that these people believe in me. Without me speaking their language, so what the heck do they see in me. And then I kept asking, and they said that it’s the way [...] we re-designed the operation of the company, and the HR systems I contributed to the process, these all convinced them that as unfortunate as it may be that I don’t speak English, things need to remain unchanged, ‘cause I can do it, just in another position. What’s more, they offered me, can you believe that, now that was a VIP, too, I only got to know that he was a VIP afterwards, the position of HR manager for Europe, for this entire multinational. Just two years after the English arrived here in Hungary. And how I got to know this, for example, was like, a man called me from headquarters that he’s coming to see me, I scheduled it, okay, so he’s coming, I’m not the type that’s easily awed by authority, I haven’t the faintest who’s who. [...] And as he was leaving, he was the one to make the offer, and I told him I wouldn’t go nowhere, I’m Hungarian, it’s the Hungarian culture I know, and in my opinion, HR needs to be deeply embedded in culture, neither does my family, no one, and when he was gone, the English came back and asked what he wanted. ‘Cause he didn’t see anybody else, he simply arrived, asked me, did an interview and then left. So, these are the positive experiences, that they see something in me, those who see me operate, you see, even without language skills, even on a European level, and this is, you know, pleasant for me, but I still don’t know what it comes from, though it must come from performance, I think. They, you know, see what you do, and then they figure that you might prove useful somewhere else, too. (silent) “*

#### Encountering tension

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There is no tension.

## **Questioning own expectations**

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She did not really understand what the managers based these decisions on, even though she does suspect that it was her performance, which she is however unwilling to accept, because it does not concur with her own beliefs about decisions and proving herself. For her, the purpose and the significance of her work come from proving her capability.

## **Creating an explanation**

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The two cases (Csilla2, Csilla3) are accompanied by one common explanation, the individual parts and the analysis of which can be found in the case Csilla2.

## **Mihály1**

### **Surprising event**

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Mihály told us about two positive surprises. One of them was when the downsizing and the selection for the new positions were accepted even by those negatively affected, while feedback from those who stayed was expressly positive.

*“Well, you see...there’s one thing I’ve never been able to get rid of. That all these years, downsizing has always lurked around the corner. [...] So, I have to say, there hasn’t been a single period when you didn’t have to deal with that, in addition to developing, organizing, so on, you’ve always had to work to somehow reduce the headcount, too. That hasn’t changed, and that’s not good. So, this is, I say, the negative part of the job, this cannot be truly good, you can’t find any beauty in this part of the job. I don’t think having to downsize people could make anyone happy. The most we could do, that we’ve always done, was to execute these downsizing measures in an honest, upright way.[...] So this is how we tried to help, and well, the terminations, they were done under, well, absolutely different circumstances, as much as it was possible. So these are very important, that my colleague, and all his predecessors, too, they all were psychologists, so in the case, if necessary, they can handle such issues, as well. [...] But thank god we haven’t had any big hoo-hah, if I might put it this way, around the downsizings. There has been, however, a truly positive thing in recent years, which I’ve really experienced as something positive, though it’s still related to downsizing.[...] So the people who had to leave, they weren’t angry. That is, we had a conversation with each one of them before they left, and they truly seemed to understand. And those who stayed with us, they didn’t criticize HR’s work, either, but were expressly positive about it. And that’s good. And it’s also good, by the way, that it’s very frequently that I, I personally, receive, in spite of the downsizing, such positive feedback from people. So this is a really good part of the work. Though they usually say that everyone, everywhere hates HR. “*

### **Encountering tension**

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There is no tension.

### **Questioning own expectations**

### **Creating an explanation**

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The recognition and the positive feedback acted to increase his self-esteem, and he interpreted them as a confirmation that he had made a good choice with the HR profession.

*“So I can say, I can really say that I don’t regret that back then, when HR, when it turned out like this, that I went with the flow for a while, ‘cause when they put me there, to head the financial department, I didn’t know that I would pretty quickly, say, be reassigned to HR, or more accurately, that HR would be reassigned to me. This wasn’t the result of conscious planning. [...] So it’s pretty sure that if I had stuck with any other position, any previous position of mine, and not taken this path [HR], then, then I couldn’t, couldn’t possibly call myself a, well, successful man, whatever has happened. “*

### **Reinterpreting the situation**

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His beliefs about the profession and his own role changed (for details, see the section on beliefs).

His image of himself changed: he is more and more inclined to regard himself as an HR professional (for details, see the section on beliefs).

### **Taking action**

#### **Change in beliefs and values**

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He reinterpreted his beliefs about himself: his self-esteem improved, he regarded the positive feedback as if it would also concern his past decisions, and thereby he felt reassured that he had indeed made the right decisions in the past, as well (though not consciously, because they had been difficult to foresee). That is, the repeated positive feedback made him feel more and more as an HR professional, and as a successful man, a successful HR professional. In accordance with that, he also changed his role, he became more and more committed to the HR manager’s role.

His beliefs about the profession changed. Even though the HR profession was not a conscious choice of his and the tasks he was assigned were not easy, the positive feedback strengthened his commitment to the profession.

His value system changed. Helping people, dealing with people in a fair, ethical, acceptable and humane fashion gained in significance for him.

#### **Change in work meaning**

#### **Mechanism affected**

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**As a result of the surprise: Personal engagement, significance, self-esteem increase.** Mihály strives to find the interesting and beautiful aspects of his work, and such feedback tends to facilitate these efforts.

*“So, this is, I say, the negative part of the job, this cannot be truly good, you can’t find any beauty in this part of the job. “*

For Mihály, the meaningfulness of work basically comes from his personal engagement in work<sup>24</sup>, that he can always find an interesting task he can feel enthusiastic about.

*“Maybe there’ll be a strike tomorrow, maybe the day after tomorrow, I’ll leave the company, but after all, I’m already close to retirement. So this is, I can still see, there’s still fantasy in this work. That is, if I’m sad because of something else, or if I’m tired, or desperate, or if certain things don’t, because of me, ‘cause they don’t turn out the way I think they ought to, in spite of all that, I can, well how shall I put it, I can always revive. Because there’s something interesting, something always crops up, and then I can start working on it with some great enthusiasm. And no, I wouldn’t say, damnit, I’m too old for that, I don’t care. If you think that way, you should give it up. You mustn’t continue doing this work then. So, for the time being, this is the way I think. “*

The repeated positive feedback confirmed that his work is indeed meaningful. Work is meaningful to him if he can feel enthusiastic about coping with it, and such positive feedback helps him finally find beauty, find something good even in the tasks – like downsizing – he was not positive about initially.

**Balance. Personal engagement, significance, self-esteem increase.** We can observe a lasting change in the mechanisms here, because he now attaches more significance to them.

### **Orientation affected**

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In this case, the craftsmanship orientation (personal engagement) gained in significance for Mihály.

### **Summary interpretation of the case**

For Mihály, the meaningfulness of work basically came from his personal engagement in work, that he could always find an interesting task he could feel enthusiastic about. The repeated positive feedback confirmed that his work is indeed meaningful. Work is meaningful to him if he can feel enthusiastic about it, and such positive feedback helps him finally find beauty, find something good even in the tasks – like downsizing – he was not positive about initially.

### **Mihály2**

#### **Surprising event**

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Mihály told us about two positive surprises. The first one was described in the previous case, while the second one was when he was voted person of the year at his company in spite of the repeated downsizing measures.

*“And in my previous job for example, near the end of my time there I think, around 2000 or so, maybe, the, and I’m very proud of that title, that the workers could vote who*

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<sup>24</sup> the meaningfulness of work originates in the feeling that arises as the individual gets personally excited and becomes absorbed in their work

*should be elected person of the year. And they chose me. That is, a manager, to begin with, well, okay, it's the managers whom everyone knows best, that's true, you've got to admit that. So, clearly, the choice is smaller. It's the managers that are known by the most. But that such a title, that it was awarded to, say, an HR manager, I'm really-really proud of that. This truly was a moment of pure joy. "*

### **Encountering tension**

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There is no tension.

### **Questioning own expectations**

### **Creating an explanation**

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The two cases (Mihály1, Mihály2) are accompanied by one common explanation, the individual parts and the analysis of which can be found in the case Mihály1.

## **Viktor2**

### **Surprising event**

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For Viktor, the recognition from his coworkers was a positive surprise: as a good-bye present, he received a small booklet in which his coworkers put down their thoughts on all the good things they had from working with him.

*"That is, partly, that I have quite a lot of colleagues with whom we still keep in touch, to this day, which quite often also works like, if they have to face a choice in their lives, or a dilemma, or a difficult situation, it still happens to this day, that a former colleague I don't work with anymore, they still contact me, ask me, ask for my opinion, which is important to me, and it's a good feeling, too. And this, you know, reassures me that surely, obviously not everyone, but there are people, that from time to time, I meet people whom I have something to offer, whom I can offer something that is important to them, as well, that helps them develop, to achieve something and maybe even enjoy doing so. It was a very-very good experience, which actually also provided in this, provided a reinforcement, when, at the time when I left one of my former employers, I had a bigger team there, 24-25 people, who prepared, when I left, as a farewell, such a little booklet. Each one of them wrote a couple of lines, my voice still quivers, 'cause it really made me feel so good, and it still does, that they wrote down a couple of thoughts on what it meant to them that they worked with me, that it was me who worked with them as their manager, and how they experienced it all, and, as I said before, I can still feel my voice quivering, 'cause it was such an incredibly good feeling to experience this, and to receive this present from them. "*

### **Encountering tension**

---

There is no tension.

### **Questioning own expectations**

### **Creating an explanation**

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Viktor felt reassured by the situation that he does indeed have an effect on his coworkers, he can show them the right direction, and that they appreciate his doing so.

*“So that meant a lot to me and it still does to this day. And also, these are, well, very important, when a situation hits you in the face, ‘cause there’s a lot to learn from that, too, but obviously, these positive feedbacks give you a lot of energy and joy, which help me, help me also feel, or maybe recognize, which are the elements of my work or my life that can, even if to a tiny-little extent only, but can provide some value for others. [...] And, well, what this little booklet reflected was, also, that they did sense it, they did appreciate it, and you could see there that they have indeed started their journey on a path, that, which will, obviously, become something of their own sooner or later, but still, in the beginning, there must be a little direction, a little teaching, support, help in this thing. “*

### **Reinterpreting the situation**

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The positive surprises and feedback all contribute to his reinterpretation of his role and that of HR (for details, see the section on beliefs).

His image of himself changed: he appeared to himself to be more and more of a supportive, development manager (for details, see the section on beliefs).

### **Taking action**

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He acted accordingly: devoted much more time and energy to development.

### **Change in beliefs and values**

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His beliefs about his role and that of HR changed. The positive feedback reinforce his role as a supportive HR manager: his personal goals are more and more in line with this role, he can identify with this role to a larger and larger degree, which role enables him to effectuate changes in others’ lives, changes that are actually appreciated by those affected.

*“I think, the real feedback in an HR specialist’s work is when you realize that managers have started to come to you, or subordinates, your coworkers, that is, with questions, problems, dilemmas, and these are not just those well-defined, like what’s in that internal regulation, or how do you interpret that, but far more complex and much softer stories, like, I have a problem with one of my colleagues, how shall I begin to cope with this, I have a bit of a difficulty meeting some managerial task of mine, what could we talk about it, or there is a reorganization that I should do, where I should begin. That is, this is another feedback that, like, if you trust the person, that, you know, no one ever comes to have a talk with me if they don’t count on benefiting from that conversation in some way. And what I see here as a tendency is, that there are more and more people coming to have a talk, and not less and less of them, so that, once again, makes me feel that this original, say, goal of mine that I want to help others cope with their own tasks, problems and lives, then I think it’s good, that maybe I’m doing something right about what I’m trying offer through my work. “*

His beliefs about himself changed: his self-esteem improved, he considered the positive feedback to pertain to both himself and his role, which reassured him that it is worth to support his coworkers as a personal development HR manager.

His system of values changed. Developing, helping and supporting others gained in significance for him, these are now part of his personal goals.

## Change in work meaning

### Mechanism affected

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**As a result of the surprise: perceived impact-service, self-esteem increase.** For Viktor, the meaningfulness of work resided in the conveying of values, the putting through of changes of great impact. He needs the positive feedback to his development work in order to be able to experience that through his work, he creates value for others.

**Balance. Perceived impact-service, self-esteem increase.** We can observe a lasting change in the mechanisms here, because he now attaches more significance to them.

### Orientation affected

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In this case, the serving orientation (perceived impact-service) gained in significance for Viktor.

### Summary interpretation of the case

For Viktor, the meaningfulness of work resided in the conveying of values, the putting through of changes of great impact. The repeated positive feedback he received from the individuals to his personal development work acts to strengthen the serving orientation, quasi-offsetting the negative feedback reported in the case Viktor1, which pertained to the perceived impact-career mechanism and made him uncertain. As a matter of fact, Viktor appears to have a dual goal: first, to effectuate great changes, great impact, in which he experienced some failures – as presented in the case Viktor1, in relation to the perceived impact-career mechanism. The other goal pertains to personal development, which is a new goal of his (he participated in a management course just before the interview, that is where he set this goal for himself), which is presented in the case Viktor2, in relation to the perceived impact-service mechanism. The two goals co-exist: the development goal is among those formulated by the organization, as well, and he experienced success on several occasions in realizing this goal, which he felt reassured by; the effectuation of great changes is, however, not an official goal of the organization, there were some failures associated with it, which made him uncertain and filled him with tension. Contrasting the two goals, we see that even though the great-change goal is continuously losing in significance, it is still more important to him, than the development-related goal is. This is also confirmed by Viktor having said, referring to his development work, that he created value for others, and not that it was what provided the meaningfulness of his work.

## Szilvia2

### Surprising event

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She managed to defend the employees' interest in a way that was accepted by the management of corporate headquarters, even though there appeared to be no chance for that initially.

*“and one more thing that's very important in HR, or in relation to HR, is that, well, some kind of diplomacy, or this how should we communicate thing, and how. That is, you have to very exactly know how you should present things, and how to do it upstream and downstream, and how you should try to have something accepted, carried*

*through, accepted, or understood, or, whoaaa, it's hard to phrase this. So, yes, diplomacy is probably the best word for it, that both upstream and downstream, I mean, to the bosses when I want to achieve something, or to my fellows, and the other managers, and the people, how I should convey what, how I should convey to them what I, say, I don't agree with but it's a must, or how I should try to make them, make headquarters accept what I want, how it needs to be presented so that it serves the purpose. [...] that is, I feel much better when I could tell them the pay raise is this much and that much, and we give this and that in addition to that, and then it didn't feel all that good when they, after I've said all these, then they said, how come it's only that much, 'cause the price of the whatdoiknow type of meat increased this much, and then why isn't their pay raised to the same extent as was the price of the meat. So, this is, once again, that side, that you can't do good to everyone, and that negative voices tend to propagate faster.[...] And, well, to, say, to give an example from the other side, too, and I did already mention that I believe it's pretty important how I present things upstream, whenever I want to have something accepted. A pay raise, again, it's a crucial issue at such places. So, not here, but at my previous workplaces, it was a serious procedure to figure out about the annual pay raise how much it should be, how, based on what, what sort of data we need to collect, why exactly that much, what's the proposal. [...] At my previous companies[...] So, there, that, after I while I figured it out, or it was suggested to me, that yes, if I can support it with data then I can achieve that the pay raise be this amount or that amount, if they, so if they think that it was this much initially, but I can support that that much is needed, and if I'm cunning enough, then they'll accept it. You had to learn it, so, and I did receive assistance in that, from HR at HQ, at my previous companies, but that was a good learning opportunity, like, yes, you can do that, too, that is, how much it, so, that it also depends on you to some extent, it's not just dictated from the outside. [...] so to find these ways, and to follow them, it was so good that it's possible, that is, that you can achieve that and then I tried to make use of this, this type of knowledge in my later jobs, and yes, you don't have to submit to their having said so, but we should try how we can, with support from multiple sides, make them accept something else. “*

### **Encountering tension**

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Tension would arise if she did not manage to defend those interests, because then she would have to make the employees accept that. But the employees, should she not succeed in defending their interests and achieve e.g. a somewhat higher pay raise, will make their disappointment be heard, which would hit Szilvia in her soft spot. The positive surprise was actually related to having carried through, contrary to expectations, the desired positive change at corporate headquarters.

### **Questioning own expectations**

### **Creating an explanation**

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A later question of hers suggests that these positive events/surprises reassure her that she should continue working the way she has been.

*“so obviously, what you mean to ask about now is the things that reinforce me that I should go on with this, and... “*



That is, she needs these moments of diplomatic success in order to experience that through her work, she actually helps others: makes the lives of low-wage workers a little bit easier. A lack of success in this field makes her uncertain about that.

### **Reinterpreting the situation**

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By reinterpreting the opportunities and the limits of her work, she actually reinterpreted her tasks: she saw an opportunity for re-negotiating a certain limit that was previously believed to be untouchable: the limit for pay raises.

Her image of herself changed: she considers herself more and more of a diplomat, as well (for details, see the section on beliefs).

### **Taking action**

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Acted accordingly.

### **Change in beliefs and values**

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It was her beliefs about her scope of duties and opportunities that changed.

Her beliefs about herself changed: she experienced that she was able to change things that had been believed unchangeable.

*“and if I’m cunning enough, then they’ll accept it“*

*“it was so good that it’s possible, that is, that you can achieve that and then I tried to make use of this, this type of knowledge in my later jobs, and yes, you don’t have to submit to their having said so, but we should try how we can, with support from multiple sides, make them accept something else“*

Her beliefs about her role changed: she, as a diplomat, who can achieve goals, is able to improve the financial situation of her coworkers, to make her coworkers accept unpleasant news.

Her value system changed. Diplomacy, the ability to make people – both upstream and downstream – accept things gained in significance for her.

### **Change in work meaning**

#### **Mechanism affected**

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**As a result of the surprise: perceived impact-service increases, self-esteem increases.** Having managed to achieve the positive impact she desired reassured her, and reduced her inner tension. For Szilvia, the meaningfulness of work is basically provided by her assistance to others, the development of others. It was the perceived impact mechanism, and her significance and self-esteem that this surprising situation affected.

**Balance. Perceived impact-service, self-esteem increase.** We can observe a lasting change in the mechanisms here, because she now attaches more significance to them.

#### **Orientation affected**

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In this case, the serving orientation (perceived impact-service) gained in significance for Szilvia.

### **Summary interpretation of the case**

For Szilvia, the meaningfulness of work was basically provided by her assistance to others, the development of others. The actual reason why creating new opportunities, representing interests and diplomacy turned particularly important for Szilvia was that this was one of those areas regarding which she received a lot of criticism and negative remarks – given that she worked for manufacturing firms that basically employed low-wage, low-qualified employees. And criticism meant inner tension for her, made her uncertain, as we already saw in the case Szilvia1. That is, her diplomatic success actually brought about a reduction in the frequency of negative remarks and thus had a tension-reduction role, as well, and reassured her that she would be able to effectuate changes, to help his low-qualified, low-wage coworkers.

### **6.2.2.2. No change in the meaning of work**

**Norbert3**

#### **Surprising event**

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In reaction to a negative, critical feedback, his performance was so good the next time that it was recognized both by his manager and internationally.

*“And positive, that, when I received praise from even some guys from other countries, and the workers, too, so they felt good at the same time, ‘cause through the ideas. Idea competition that I did, I came up with it, that we should have reward points, and the workers could redeem their points. And news about this reached other countries, too.”*  
*This idea competition. I prepared a very complicated presentation for the director. “Which he, no, he wanted to present it to all the country directors, and asked me to prepare, and then bounced it, said it was horrible. Then, two days later, I came up with a presentation that, which he delivered, received feedback, and of course it was him who received praise that it’s so very good. Illustrated with pictures, what we realized. With such a very simplified reality. That is, focused on the result, little bit of processes only, goals. And that was a very good feedback. He kept asking it for six months that, like, how could you. It’s, like, black and white, he got a bad one, and then he got a quality that he could boast about. This is something that’s often present in my work, these great differences. “*

#### **Encountering tension**

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There is no tension – though the anger felt because of the negative feedback is present in this part of the story, as well.

#### **Questioning own expectations**

#### **Creating an explanation**

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This situation reassured him that had no fault in it, that this was just the way he functioned. If he is able to perform well, then the fault must lie with the organization,

because it is them who cannot take advantage of his capabilities, who cannot provide him with tasks that he would be interested in. That is, he interprets positive feedback, and this particular act of surprisingly positive recognition as a sign that it is the organization that is to be held responsible for the situation.

*“My performance, it fluctuates a lot. I see that now that we’re talking. It completely depends on whether I’m interested or not. Am I interested and regard it as a challenge, performance is high. If I’m not interested, if it’s just that I have to comply, then I do comply, but at a very low performance level. I’m something of the hysterical type, I guess (laugh). So, whatever I like, I can do very well and I can deliver. Whatever I don’t, well, that’s just short of unacceptable. And multinationals, it seems, multinationals don’t really tolerate that, or find it hard to accept that. So, it’s constant performance you need, constantly high performance. Therefore I sometimes feel, I’m not compatible with multinationals. And this is why my managers tend to have no idea what that strange thing about me is exactly. That is, they do, most probably, feel something, but I’m not the truly multinational corporate type. Yes, this constitutes quite a problem for me now. What will the next 10-20 years bring? In my job, in my private life? But, it’s not only that I’m faced with some expectations, but oftentimes, I have to initiate a lot of things myself. And when I see that my initiative was in vain, they wouldn’t authorize the resources, or it would be even worse for the workers, even more workload, then I just lose interest in the initiative, and then my motivation is already lost. That’s when the bad feedback comes, that I should deliver even better results, even faster, even better. “*

### **Reinterpreting the situation**

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Positive feedback and recognition did not change his interpretation of the situation, of himself and of his work. Even this positive surprise makes him return to the line of thought we saw in the case Norbert1. That is, the idea of distancing himself from the organization – the organization that represents the world of multinational corporations – is still lying dormant in him.

### **Taking action**

#### **Change in beliefs and values**

#### **Change in work meaning**

#### **Mechanism affected**

#### **Orientation affected**

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### **Summary interpretation of the case**

This case is in contradiction with what Norbert told us about assuming responsibilities and his commitment following the performance evaluation by his new boss (case Norbert2). It seems that the two explanations – the one that makes the organization/manager responsible and denies Norbert’s own responsibility and the one

that does assume responsibility and commitment – prevail simultaneously, and thus induce tension and create cognitive dissonance.

For Norbert, the meaningfulness of work basically resided in expressing and developing his self, in actualizing himself through his work activities. As a result of the negative feedback, he could not experience a personal engagement in his work. Norbert interpreted the positive feedback, which took him by surprise, by returning to the negative feedbacks he had felt hurt by, so practically neglected the former. Consequently, he interpreted none of the recognitions or positive feedbacks in a way that would have lent even more meaning and meaningfulness to his work, which would have improved his self-esteem.

#### **Norbert4**

##### **Surprising event**

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Besides the idea competition (case Norbert3), another item that Norbert recalled as one of his particularly positive experiences was the organization of the trainings. The pattern was the same: he received a negative feedback, reacted with good-quality work, which was followed by recognition.

*“For example, something like that, well, apart from the employee’s ideas thing, there was the organization of the employee trainings. I received very bad feedback, that I should organize it, afterwards, okay, with the pictures, and there was the table, it was comprehensible, then they said this is really something extraordinary. Well, it’s there, who’s been trained so far, and who will, in a small circle, those waiting to be trained, those who have been trained and those who are being trained. And you can look it up on the computer in a matter of seconds who is authorized for what, just a simple table, and everyone can see who’s trained to work on which. This was a good feedback, too, but bad in the beginning, that I won’t do it. So, it’s as if I’d like to save my energy, that’s what keeps occurring, I’d like to economize a bit. And then some sort of external requirement boosts it. Okay, then, if that’s what you want, here you have it. “*

##### **Encountering tension**

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There is no tension – though the anger felt because of the negative feedback is present in this part of the story, as well.

##### **Questioning own expectations**

##### **Creating an explanation**

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The two cases (Norbert3, Norbert4) are accompanied by one common explanation, the individual parts and the analysis of which can be found in the case Norbert3.

#### **Melinda4**

##### **Surprising event**

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Melinda does not consider awards and bonuses to be pleasant surprises, she simply does not even take them into account. What took her by surprise was that she kept receiving offers from a headhunter and that he recognized her as an expert, as a manager.

*“well, if I only consider work [positive effect that influenced the meaning of work], well, whatdoiknow, award, and bonuses, and there was a period when, well, a series of coincidences brought about this situation, I was participating on a course, and there was this headhunter guy there, and he somehow really spotted me, and then a lot of offers, go to work here, go to work for them, which I was totally surprised about, that is, I didn’t think I was all that very talented, that is, okay, I do know that I’m laborious and that I always do whatever task I’m assigned, but, he was certain that I should go here, to Audi, to Kecskemét and things like that. So I wouldn’t have taken a senior manager’s position, by no means, ‘cause that would’ve meant even more, much more commitment than this, so this is positive, “*

*“ [some more positive occurrences] Well, it was important to me, that is, I’m pretty much the self-directed type, so I think, for example, that awards, and a lot of these externals, they can easily be fortuitous, that is, I thought it was a much bigger, a much more important thing that my colleagues respected me and appreciated my work. Which was manifest in everyday things like, that is, if, and they trusted me, that is, they knew that they don’t have to fear turning their back on me, they can do anything, what we agreed on is set and settled, so these things were much more important to me. “*

### **Encountering tension**

#### **Questioning own expectations**

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She does not question her own presumptions, she does not believe herself to be any more talented than she did before.

#### **Creating an explanation**

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The positive feedbacks and the recognition did not change her interpretation of the situation, of herself and of her work. She did not regard this surprisingly positive evaluation as realistic, she did not even take it into account, she continued to rely on her own judgment. She did not appreciate the awards she received. She reinterpreted both the surprising evaluation of the headhunter and the awards and recognitions she had received. She reinterpreted the headhunter’s evaluation by regarding herself as hard-working, but not talented, and she was not interested in the offers she received anyway, so she simply devalued this judgment. She devalued the recognitions and awards she received by labeling them possibly fortuitous.

#### **Reinterpreting the situation**

#### **Taking action**

#### **Change in beliefs and values**

#### **Change in work meaning**

#### **Mechanism affected**

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## **Orientation affected**

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### **Summary interpretation of the case**

For Melinda, the meaningfulness of work basically comes from coping with difficult tasks, proving herself and achieving success, this is what makes her experience that her work is valuable. Melinda interpreted these positive feedbacks that surprised her by raising some sort of objection against each one of them, that is, she did not actually take them into account. Consequently, she interpreted none of the recognitions or positive feedbacks in a way that would have lent even more meaning and meaningfulness to her work, which would have improved her self-esteem.

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