Millenials experiences of meaningful and engaging work – a study conducted at Finnish ICT and Social- and Health Care organizations

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Abstract: The social- and health care and the ICT-sectors will within the next 15 years have a shortage in staff. The retention is a problem among millennials. It is important to study how to engage recently graduated employees at work. The article aims at answering questions related to meaningfulness at work for millennials through adapted approaches involving Appreciative Inquiry and Autophotography. The research involves 20 recently graduated from five related organizations. The results indicate that psychological safety, values, appreciation, self fulfilment and growth seem to create meaningfulness and construct drivers to hinder retainment and enhance engagement. Collegial support was valued, and interest was expressed in getting to know your peers also through after work, in order to collaborate better. For millennials meaningful work is a value of

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importance. Learning at work was not only seen as a prerequisite for development, but also as an appreciated priviledge.

Keywords: millennials at work, social- health care, ICT-sector, meaningful work

1. INTRODUCTION

In future Finland there will be a shortage of employees in the fields of ICT, and social- and health care (Skillspanorama, 2016). According to the Finnish Nurses Association as many as 25% of nursing students consider a career change (Sairaanhoitajaliitto, 2019). A possible effect is a shortage of nursing staff (Flinkman et al. 2013). Nurses' voluntary turnover is a worrying global phenomenon which affects service quality. Retaining nursing staff within a hospital is important (De Simone et al. 2018). According to Emerging Europe (Istrate, 2019), also the tech industry in the Nordic countries is struggling with talent shortage. It is hence, of outmost importance to research what engages and retains millennials in the two sectors. One measure that has been suggessted to solve retention is work engagement, as work flow and positive emotions have proven to have a direct impact on organizational productivity, retention, innovations and sickleave rates (e.g. Hakanen, 2009). Further, a good emotional work culture supports wellbeing, and reduces the feeling of stress (Dackert, 2010). Negativity is dangerous in multiple ways, and ´negative footprints´ can have long and sometimes even physical effects on young recently graduated employees.

The article is related to a research project labelled ´Engaging Talk´ in which we collected data in 2020 from millennials applying an appreciative inquiry approach, using autopho-

tography and group discussions as methods. The article aims at answering what engages and brings meaning at work for millennials within the ICT- and Social- Health care sectors in order to hinder retention.

1.1 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Numerous studies on employee engagement at work has been introduced by Kahn (1990, 1992). Kahn claims that employees should be seen as true partners, making them constantly involved in dialogues and processes about their job roles, including tasks and working relationships. Duffy (2018) argues that one should not treat employees like an employee, but 'as a real person'. Kahn's theory of employee engagement rely on three aspects -meaningfulness, safety and availability. Kahn (1990, p. 703) defined psychological meaningfulness as a "feeling that one is receiving a return on investments of one's self in a currency of physical, cognitive, or emotional energy". Hence, the employee needs to practically understand the value and impact her role has on the organisation as a whole (Young, 2018). Further, it is this genuine appreciation of employee contribution that enhance workers to engage themselves fully to their role. Psychological safety is assumed in this article to have impact on retainment and engagement, defined as "feeling able to show and employ one's self without fear of negative consequences to self-image, status, or career" (Kahn, 1990, p. 708). Psychological availability is the "sense of having the physical, emotional, or psychological resources to personally engage at a particular moment" (Kahn, 1990, p. 714).

Google, the tech giant conducted a massive two-year study on team performance, which revealed that the highest-perform-

ing teams have one thing in common: psychological safety, the belief that you won't be punished when you make a mistake. Studies show that psychological safety allows for moderate risk-taking, speaking your mind, creativity, and sticking your neck out without fear of having it cut off. (Delizonna, 2017.)

Engagement is proposed to hinder retention, and defined by Schaufeli & Bakker (2004) as a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption. Work-flow on the other hand is as a state in which the employee is both physically, cognitively and emotionally present at work (Kahn, 1990). An employee who experience work-flow is often proud of her work, and resilient in challenging situations.

Otala and Ahonen (2005) distinguish between six levels of work related needs applying Maslow´s hierarchy of basic human needs, ie: Physiological needs (health, physical shape), Safety needs (physical and social safety, continuation of work), Need of closeness (teams, colleagues, peers, community), Appreciation (professional and own contribution), Self Fulfillment and growth needs (continuous development of one´s own work), Mental needs (flow, own ambitions and values). These fulfil the basics of work-related needs including mental, social, physiological and physical needs.

Committment is seen as psychological affiliation between human and target, a person's attitude and adherence (Hietamäki, 2013, p. 38; Lämsä & Hautala, 2005, p. 92). The concept of committment has been used in work-life studies, in reference to organization, aims, behavior, motivation, emotional committment, content, work centredness and career (Mamia & Koivumäki, 2006), but few studies have empirically substantiated generational differences in work values (Twenge et al. 2010).

Based on a comprehensive literature review, Martela and Pessi (2018) have concluded that meaningfulness means significance as a subjective evaluation of work as intrinsically valuable and worth doing. Significance can be further divided into two sub-dimensions: 1) work as serving some greater good or prosocial goals and 2) self-realization as a sense of autonomy, authenticity and self-expression at work (Martela and Pessi, 2018).

Zemke et al. (2000) have divided meaningfulness between generations as follows: The aging baby boomers (born 1946-1960) find meaning through high work moral, diligence and success at work. The so called generation X (1961–1979) is interested in renumeration, career- and continuous learning prospects. Technology being part of their lives. The Y generation or millenials (born after 1980-1994) find meaning in networks and virtuality. Hobbies may be equally or more valued than work. Further, the millenials have grown in a more egalitarian society (Twenge et al, 2010). These elements are reflected by the values of the millenials, who are more tolerant, more open and more diverse than any other known generation in for example the US (Greenberg & Weber, 2008), a generation that stress questions regarding sustainability, peace and cultural diversity. In their view, the traditional workplace does not exist; they prefer horizontal communication and collaborative working, based on projects and clear objectives, not on a strict working schedule (Erickson, 2008, p. 60). **Loveland** (2017) on the other hand claims that the Z-generation (born 1996-2010) consist of initiative taking young individuals, who value social questions and hope for a better word. Hence, there are gaps between generations, also in relation to work committment and length of career. Whereas the older generations tended to stay for an

extended period with one employer, the millenials is the generation most likely to switch jobs (Gallup, 2016).

Both the Youth Barometer (Haikkola & Myllyniemi, 2020) and Gallup (2016) have conducted large studies on millenials. Further, the Innovation Fund Sitra (Lettenmeir et al, 2019) has conducted a study on Finnish lifestyles, and report among other things, that when 37% of the respondents claim to work actively towards environmental friendly approaches and solutions, a much larger percentage (44 %) of the 30 year olds and younger work for the environment. At work and during studies about a fourth actively support user friendly solutions, whereas 34 % of the below 30 year olds act upon user friendly solutions correspondigly (Hyry, 2019).

Millennials, wish to be unattached, connected, unconstrained and have idealistic views on life. Work ambience, ecological values, supportive supervisor and flexibility in addition to interesting work tasks create meaning at work for millenials. For well educated millennials work often means competence development. Millennials want to be free of old workplace policies and performance management standards, and they expect leaders and managers to adapt accordingly. Millennials look for work that fuels their sense of purpose and makes them feel important, as work must have meaning. They want to work for organizations with a mission and purpose. Back in the old days, baby boomers didn't necessarily need meaning in their jobs. Millennials care about having managers who can coach them, who value them as both people and employees, and who help them understand and build their strengths. (Gallup, 2016.) According to the Youth Barometer (Haikkola & Myllyniemi, 2020) 88 % wish their work to aligned with their own values. The expecta-

tions regarding supervision is often based on feedback and fairness (Pakka & Räty, 2010.) Much has hence been claimed about the millenials, however, the voice on meaningfulness at work of millennials is largely absent (Rentz, 2015).

1.2 RESEARCH

The method of research was inspired by autophotography, adapted from Glaw et al. (2017) and the practice of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) adapted from Watkins & Mohr (2001). Both are based on positive psychology and engagement at work (Hakanen, 2011). The AI-method include an appreciative inquiry cycle in which the research team (1) Choose the positive as the focus of inquiry, (2) Inquire into exceptionally positive moments, (3) Share the stories and identify life giving forces. Autophotography is asking participants to take photographs of their environment. Autophotography captures the world through the participant's eyes with subsequent knowledge production (Glaw et al, 2017). We asked the informants to bring along three photos that for them express; joy, engagement, meaning and wellbeing at work. To put them in the right mood and mindset, we encouraged the informants to think about the following questions upon participation. We did not conduct the interview directly and chronologically through these questions, but conducted the open dialogues through their photos, related meanings, and follow-up questions:

· what brings joy to your work?
· in which situations do you feel joy and engagement?
· what puts you in a good mood?

- what happens in those situations?
- give examples on moments that stimulated you emotionally, positively?
- depict your dreamday at work?
- what do you consider important in your work?
- what gives you meaning at work?
- are the organizational values aligned with yours?
- how important for you is professional development and learning at work?
- describe your career prospects
- how do you enhance wellbeing at work?

In total, 20 millennials from five social- and health care and ICT-organizations were interviewed. We met with 14 of the young employees twice. In the first phase, groups of 2-6 recently graduated employees or millenials from each organization were invited and encouraged to talk about positive, significant, engaging and meaningful work experiences. We asked the informants to bring with them photos taken at work. The photos were not only excellent icebreakers, but increased reflexivity and safety among informants. Photos capture particulars that the researcher would not otherwise know to ask about or the participant would not think to mention (Tinkler, 2013, p. 179). We hence applied photos (autophotography) and Appreciative Inquiry as a method for engaging the recently employed to talk about positive and meaningful experiences at work. In the second phase, in-depth focus-group interviews took place with the same groups on certain topics, for example values, that emerged from the first phase. In the third phase, supervisors from the respective organizations responded to an e-inquiry on how to engage, shape and create

an organization that encourages engagement, commitment and engaging talk. The dialogues were conducetd in Finnish and Swedish, taped and transcribed.

Appreciative inquiry and autophotography as adapted methods were found to be effective tools for understanding millenials engagement and meaningful work propositions and values in day-to-day work. Visual methodologies can be used on almost any population by allowing participants to express their ideas in a nonverbal way, but have until now been underutilized in engagement and values research among millenials in social-, health care and ICT-work.

An abductive research approach seemed most suitable given the nature of the research objective. Unlike inductive and deductive reasoning, abductive research can explain, develop or change the theoretical framework before, during or after the research process. In fact, abductive research moves back and forth between inductive and open-ended research settings to more hypothetical and deductive attempts to verify hypotheses (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). In the following an analysis is provided through theoretical reading and thematic analysis.

2. FINDINGS

The following four themes and sub-themes sprung out of the data, through thematic analysis, categorization and iteration. The themes evolved in an abductive process through interaction between data, analysis and theory. The citations are embedded in the theoretical reading and analysis. Citations expressed in italic evolved from data.

Wellbeing is contructed among other things through **appreciation** (Otala & Ahonen, 2005) **and safety** needs. Kahn (1990,

1992) claims that employees should be seen as true partners, making them constantly involved in dialogues and processes about their job roles are designed or altered, including tasks and working relationships. Duffy (2015) argues that one should not treat employees like an employee, but 'as a real person'. *For me it is important that I am treated well and kindly. In retrospect I do the same, I am honest, and treat everyone equally.* It is important for management, staff and supervisors to create a psychologically safe environment where employees dare to speak about their work experiences, concerns and development ideas openly. *My closest supervisors give responsibility, are trust in me and my work. Our supervisor pursues matters, listens to everyone regardless of position, gender or race; cleaner, kitchen staff or caretaker.* Psychological safety is defined as "feeling able to show and employ one's self without fear of negative consequences to self-image, status, or career" (Kahn, 1990, p. 708).¨ *We have a trully good team leader who does not control but gives space, and everyone is allowed to develop in her own way. Respect, inclusion and responsibility go hand in hand. Appreciation and safety needs are created through equality and trust.*

The Safety needs also involve the **need of closeness***,* teams, peers, colleagues, community which here also includes AW (after work) and joy: *We have good selection of clubs here. It is fun to meet different people through a hobby, even if we are here in the same building. AW matters, you learn to know people. We have an annual event, where we go to meet each other outside or work. When you learn to know a person it is easier to collaborate.* Happiness has not been much researched in the context of work, but has recently gained some interest as an influential variable in managing the employment relationship, as stud-

ies have suggested benefits for productivity and performance (Suojanen, 2017). *What brings joy for me is a good team, I have fantastic colleagues, and because of them it is fun to be here.* The need of closeness through teams, peers, colleagues and community were endlessly emphasized through expressions of joy: *Joyful, happy moments when we laugh together. Satisfied customers bring joy. When the customers are content, the whole team feels joy.* According to Hakanen (2017) the ones who feel joy, engagement and professional pride are more creative and social. The need of closeness and safety needs are fulfilled through peers at work, happiness and after work.

Another theme that evolved from data was **feedback** and **competences,** how to give it or the lack of it. *When I do not hear back, I wonder if I did well or poorly, and if I do not receive new tasks I wonder if that is a statement.* The need for feedback is human and relates to emotions and the continuous need of competence development. The expectations regarding supervision is often based on feedback and fairness (Pakka & Räty 2010.) Even if the negative and positive feedback are in balance, humans often hear the negative feedback as criticism, harder and more sensitive to it. To give critical feedback demand emotional intelligence and skills. The feedback giver need to steer her own emotions and have the ability to also sense empathy. (Ruben, 2009.) *Flexibility and good management, to be able to bring your own ideas, develop your own work.* This requires a psychologically safe environment. *To have the mandate to learn and be able to develop my competences* builds motivation, learning and development. *At this work I can grow as a human.* Continuous, supportive feedback and competence development supports a person´s work-identity and the perception as employee. Human

growth and pratication in organizational development is like cement that creates a psychologically safe emotional state. Feedback and competences in this study is shaped through safety and the mandate to learn and develop.

Flexibility and safety at work. *To be able to effect your own workschedule.* The traditional workplace does not exist; the millenials prefer horizontal communication and collaborative working, based on projects and clear objectives, not on a strict working schedule (Erickson, 2008). *Distance work is based on a balance between trust and responsiblity. The feeling of safety is important and the feeling that you are trusted both as a person and professional is crucial. It gives freedom that is not given in 'normal' situations. Instead of control, the focus is on content and results. I value distance working. To give responsibility and to show trust strengthens the employee´s committment to work. (Salmenperä, 2007.) To collaborate across teams, to sheare experiences and meet people is both engaging and committing.* Engagement and committment are also enhanced by trust at management, experience of own work´s significance, development possibilities, diversity of tasks, recognition of success, independence, instant feedback, client work and social support (Hakanen, 2011). Flexibility at work is based on trust.

In the following the results evolved from the analysis are presented below.

3. RESULTS

Martela and Pessi (2018) concluded that meaningfulness means significance as a subjective evaluation of work as intrinsically valuable and worth doing. Significance can be further divided

into two sub-dimensions: 1) work as serving some greater good or prosocial goals and 2) self-realization as a sense of autonomy, authenticity and self-expression at work.

The intrinsically valuable values for a greater good include:

1) *Appreciation* and *safety* needs at work: to be seen, heard, and respected on equal basis, and equal measures
   · kindness
   · honesty
   · listening
   Appreciation and safety needs are created through equality and trust

2) *Need of closeness at work*; to be allowed to laugh, collaborate and network at work
   · happiness
   · after work
   · peers
   · respect, collaboration, networking, belonging, wellbeing
   The need of closeness and safety needs are fulfilled through peers at work, happiness and after work.

The worth doing values for myself include:
3) *Feedback and Competence at work*; to be encouraged to develop, grow and learn at work
   · continuous feedback
   · the mandate to learn
   · participation in organizational development processes

Feedback and competences is shaped through safety and a mandate to learn and develop.

Worth doing values include:
4) *Flexibility and safety at work*; to be able to affect your own work and schedules
   - organizational culture, trust and management
   - distance work
   - emotional trust
   - work schedules
Flexilibility at work is based on trust.

In conclusion, good introduction to work, a positive, supportive colleagial attitude combined with interesting, value created work assignments, diversity and flexibility at work supports engagement. Young employee need to have the mandate to learn and develop, grow, be part of development, and shared experiences. A good work athmosphere, joy, laughter, and customer, supervisor and peer feedback are essential, as well as, flexibility, safety and functional team-work, after work and values such as diversity and equality supported by the organizational structure. It is question for millenials to be both seen and heard on equal basis.

Hence, safety, appreciation, need of closeness, competence development and flexibility at work seem to create meaningfulness and construct drivers to hinder retainment and enhance engagement among our respondents.

4. DISCUSSIONS

The article aims at answering questions related to meaningfulness at work for millennials. The approach stemmed from positive psychology, the questions posed and the discussions held concentrated on the positive aspects of work, i.e. on what brings joy, meaning, positive emotions in work engagemenon on a daily basis. The approach was justified through previous research in which involvement in dialogues about one´s own work and work roles, appreciation and work culture can hinder retention and enhance wellbeing at work. Further, according to Rentz (2015) the voice of millennials regarding meaningfulness at work is largely absent.

There were a some differences between social- and health-care as well as ICT- millennials at work in their talks on meaningfulness. Clearly, the ICT millennials value distance work, and argued that distance work enhance their quality of life, allowing a successful combination of family life and voluntary work. The ICT millenials work primarily in projects suited for distance work which is not an option for social- and health care workers, who stressed respectful relationships and ethics in client work. Both groups were equally keen on learning and in developing themselves, advocating flexibility and partaking in cross-sectoral teams. Also a shared interest in receiving continuous feedback, good supervision, happiness and after work was reported. Collegial support and peers were mentioned endlessly, but the interest in getting to know your peers after work, in order to collaborate better, was a novel aspect and unexpected outcome of this research. Another outcome was the need for safety, i.e. to be able to express yourself withouth being punished, disrespected, disregarded or diminished.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The selected methods of research, including appreciative inquiry and autophotography proved to be successful. The participating organizations approved of the approach and the photographs brought added value to the scene among informants. The photos functioned as icebreakers and eyeopeners. The informants shared information they would not otherwise have shared, and the photos created a base for trust building.

The Millenials are different, and for them, in contrast to previous generations, meaning at work is a value to be taken seriously. In addition, learning at work, personal competence development was not only seen as a prerequisite for development, but also an appreciated priviledge. The millenials wish to be treated equally, as professionals. They wish to be seen and heard, included and be part of teams. Inclusivity and diversity as well as climate change matters, as well as safety and trust, the need of closeness and flexibility.

Coaches, mentors and onboarding were reported in vague terms, as well as a more thorough approach and process for feedback. To research on those questions further would benefit organizations that wish to further learning, competences and equality.

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