Meaning of Work Across Different Generations of Tourism and Hospitality Employees

Anne Törn-Laapio and Marianne Ekonen
JAMK University of Applied Sciences, Jyväskylä, Finland
anne.torn-laapio@jamk.fi
marianne.ekonen@jamk.fi

Abstract: This research aims to understand the meaning of work for four generations of employees in the tourism and hospitality sector. A quantitative survey study based on open-ended questions was conducted in 2019. The generations were divided into Generation Z born in 1999 and after, Generation Y born in the period 1980-1998, Generation X born in the period 1965-1979 and the Baby Boomer generation born in the period 1946-1964. The questionnaire was sent to employees of companies participating in an ESF-funded project. The data includes 15 (9.1%) Generation Z, 92 (56.1%) Generation Y, 42 (25.6%) Generation X and 15 Baby Boomer (9.1%) employees in Finnish tourism and food sector SMEs. According to the results of a content analysis, the responses were categorized into four categories, which were self, other, work context and spiritual life. These categories were divided into sub-categories based on the responses. The findings from the Generation Z answers were divided between getting work experience and a regular income as the main sources of meaning of the work. Generation Y, Generation X, and the Baby Boomers reported a balance of work and non-work domains, and the way work improves the quality of their life as the main sources of meaning of work. The social significance of work was an important part of the meaning of work for Generation Y and Generation X. All other generations, except the Baby Boomers, also valued monetary rewards. By taking into account the views of different generations, tools and operating models can be developed to support management, invest in employee engagement and commitment and also enhance well-being at work. In the long term, this will improve customer satisfaction and companies' profitability.

Keywords: tourism industry, hospitality industry, workforce, generation, meaning of work, work value

1. Introduction

1.1 Meaning of work

The meaning of work has been hailed by researchers for a very long time (Rosso et al, 2010). In their review article Rosso, Dekas and Wresniewski (2010) analysed "the mechanisms through which work is proposed to become meaningful". It has been criticized earlier that the concepts of meaning, meaningfulness and work values are highly confounding terms that need to be clarified in different studies. In this study, we use the concept of the meaning of work because the question of where the meaning of work comes from is fundamental (Brief and Nord, 1990). Research on the meaning of work has focused on work motivation (Hackman and Oldham, 1980), engagement (May, Gilson, and Harter, 2004), job satisfaction (Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin and Schwartz, 1997), individual performance (Hackman and Oldham, 1980), personal fulfilment (Kahn, 2007), the purpose and significance of work (Pratt and Ashforth, 2003), and wellbeing (Ryan and Deci, 2001).

Meaning is defined by Pratt and Ashforth (2003) as the output of having made sense of something, or what it signifies; as in an individual interpreting what her work means, or the role her work plays, in the context of her life. In this study, we employ a psychological perspective to the meaning of work, i.e. individual perceptions of the meaning of work (Rosso et al, 2010). According to Rosso et al (2010) we need definitional clarity between the concepts of meaning and meaningfulness. Meaningfulness refers to the amount of significance something holds for an individual (Pratt and Ashforth, 2003). In that case, meaningful work is work experienced as particularly significant and holding more positive meaning for individuals (Rosso et al, 2010).

In the tourism and hospitality sector, research related to the meaning of work has mainly focused on work values (e.g. White, 2005; Papavasileiou, Lyons, Shaw and Georgiou, 2017; Hoole and Bonnema, 2015) and work motivations. In addition, the studies have often approached issues to do with motivational factors, job involvement (e.g. Chan, Kong and Lei, 2019) and work engagement (Liu, Cho and Putra, 2017).

1.2 Different generations as employees in tourism and hospitality sector

Although there have been a plethora of studies examining attitudinal factors and hospitality as a career choice among the Baby Boomers (1945–1964) (e.g. Kupperschmidt, 2000; Paxon, 2009), Generation X (1965–1979) (Zemke et al, 2000), and Generation Y (1980–1998) (Cennamo and Gardner, 2008), there is a lack of studies investigating the career perceptions of Generation Z (1995–2009) (Randstad, 2017). There has been disagreement in the definition of Generation Z in the scientific discussion (e.g. Williams, Kaylene and Page, 2011). One difficulty in understanding different generations has been that there are several opinions on the specific birth years of each generation (Hansen and Leuty, 2012). For example, Tapscott (2010) separates four generations from 1946 to the present day. This study focuses on the Generation Z (GenZ) born in 1999 and later, Generation Y (GenY) (Cennamo and Gardner, 2008), Generation X (GenX) 1965-1979 (Zemke et al, 2000) and Baby Boomers (Boomers) born between 1946 and 1964 (Paxon, 2009). Specifically, in the tourism and hospitality sector the workforce represents these four generations.

Tourism and hospitality industry is facing an increasing challenge to attract and retain employees, therefore the commitment and engagement of employees in different generations is crucial. When describing work in the tourism and hospitality sector, long working days and shift work arise often as the fundamental characteristics of work, as well as poor working conditions in the sector (e.g. O'Leary and Deegan, 2005). The tourism sector is often seen as a sector employing women and young people (30% in 2017) especially in the hospitality sector (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, 2019). In addition, in the whole hospitality sector work is often related to seasonal, low pay, anti-social working hours, a lack of work-life balance and also lack of professional human resource management (Brandt, 2015; Jolliffe and Farnsworth, 2003; Martin, Mactaggart and Bowdern, 2006).

Before the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 there were four consecutive years of growth and internationalization in Finnish tourism. The turnover of enterprises in the tourism industries has developed positively between 2015 and 2020. Tourism has become a nationally significant export industry and employer (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has critically affected the tourism sector globally and in Finland since March 2020. The number of laid-off and unemployed people in the tourism sector has increased significantly because numerous companies are in financial difficulty. The general economic outlook and employment expectations in the industry are weaker than in the whole country and other industries. It is estimated that it will take at least a few years for tourism to return to its pre-coronavirus levels (Business Finland, 2020). In order to respond to the shortage of skilled labour in tourism and the hospitality sector and to improve the image of the work and work attractiveness of the sector, it is important to understand the perspectives of different generations on the meaning of work. This is significant also in developing management practices which take different generations' perspective into account.

2. Methodology

The purpose of this study is to understand the meaning of work for GenZ, GenY, GenX, and Boomers. The study examines the perceptions of the employees working in tourism and the hospitality industry. The research questions are: What are the sources of the meaning of work for these generations? How do different generations experience the meaning of work? Are there differences and similarities between different generations?

The study carried out in 2019 was quantitative in nature. A questionnaire with open-ended questions was prepared in order to collect data from employees in Finnish tourism and hospitality sector SMEs located in Central Finland. Approximately 330 questionnaires were sent to employees of ten companies participating in an ESF-funded project. A questionnaire was sent by email to the contact persons of the companies involved who sent it to all employees. 164 responses were returned, and the response rate was 49.4%. In this study the generations were GenZ, GenY, GenX and Boomers. The study respondents were divided as follows: 15 (9.1%) GenZ, 92 (56.1%) GenY, 42 (25.6%) GenX, 15 Boomers (9.1%).

A qualitative content analysis was used as a data analysis method, based on an inductive-deductive approach. The aim of a content analysis is to systematically describe the meaning of qualitative data (e.g. Mayring, 2000; White and Marsh, 2006). Collected data is examined systematically using a content analysis (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980). According to White and Iivonen (2001, 2002), a content analysis is a relevant method to

analyse the responses of open-ended questions in questionnaires. Data categorisation was used in the analysis of this study (Weber, 1990).

3. Findings

In this study we categorized the data into essential categories which were organized according to the main sources of meaning of work that the extant research has focused on: the self, others, the work context, and spiritual life (Rosso et al, 2010). The categorization is summarized in Table 1 and presented and discussed below according to the generations.

Table 1: Categories of the data

Essential categories	Essential sub-categories	Examples of essential sub-sub-categories
SELF		
	Balance of work and non-work domains	Balancing work and family
		Separating work and non-work domains
		Combining work and leisure
	Work centrality	Way of life
		A fundamental part of life
		Passion
	Career and personal development	Developing skills, competence
		Developing professional identity
		Challenging myself
		Self-fulfilment
		Achieving work goals
	Quality of life	Creating well-being
		Feeling safety
		Enriching life
		Maintaining good lifestyles
	Self-reflection	Feeling respected
		Feeling useful
OTHERS		
	Social relationships	Co-workers as co-workers
		Co-workers as friends
		Work community as a family
		Relationships with customers
		Networking
WORK CONTEXT		
	Objective outcomes	Monetary reward, income
	Subjective outcomes	Developing workplace
		Serving customers
		Possibility to influence
		The content of work
		Success at work
		Achieving work goals
SPIRITUAL LIFE		
	Carrying out meaningful work	
	Finding purpose in life	
	Life is meaningful	
	Responsibility for society	Developing responsibility
		Equality
	Helping other people	

3.1 Generation Z

According to data, most of the GenZ respondents were part-time workers and mentioned their careers and personal development as the most important source of the meaning of work. Careers and personal development were mentioned in expressions of getting work experience for future career and developing skills at work. The second largest response category was objective outcomes, which was mentioned in expressions of monetary rewards. One respondent wrote:

'I gain experience in working life and balance in my own life. Work is important to me because my life situation requires a regular income because of living alone.'

Other responses mentioned creating wellbeing, finding a balance of work and non-work domains, and work centrality as important sources of meaning of work. The work improved GenZ's well-being and they felt more energized also in their leisure time. The essential categories of Others and Spiritual life were not mentioned in GenZ responses.

3.2 Generation Y

For GenY the balance of work and non-work domains, the way work improves the quality of life, and careers and personal development were the most often mentioned categories in their responses. The balance of work and non-work domains was described in the respondents' answers describing how work gives life a rhythm and regularity and supports the rest of life, for example, one respondent wrote:

'It keeps life in order and brings the content of everyday life. Successes at work cheer me up.'

In addition to that, the way work positively affects the quality of the respondents' lives was a very general response among GenY. This was often described as how work gave meaning to life, and that work allowed the respondents to do things that they enjoy in life, and how work brings content to their Lives. Here is one example of a typical answer:

'Work essentially brings meaning to life. It is miserable to have to live on the subsidies of society without wage income. We live in a culture where work is valued - and rightly so - and that is largely also a question of status. Unemployment is mentally difficult, even if it is financially viable. Work that is clearly meant to provide people with joy and experiences is very rewarding.'

Career and personal development also played a significant role in the GenY answers. Developing skills and achieving personal goals appeared to be important factors at work. In the responses it was often reflected that the work helps to develop other skills needed in life and realizing oneself in work that one likes to do. As one respondent wrote about meaning of work in her life:

'A cornerstone of everyday life and life that makes living meaningful and helps to achieve both material and individual developmental goals.'

For GenY work is a central part of life. This was described as work being a fundamental part of life, and work as a way of life and work as a passion. The responses showed that the line between work and the rest of life had blurred and work had even gone before everything else. Some of the respondents felt that work did not always even feel like work. Below is an illustrative comment of this sort of sentiment:

'Work is like living a double life. Half of life is spent working with other friends and doing things and spending free time with others. Yes, work is also a hobby and a way of life. When it's relaxed and comfortable at work, you don't even think you're at work.'

For GenY the social significance of work was a key part of the meaning of work. Relationships with co-workers and customers, networking, seeing co-workers as friends and family members were often reflected in the answers as an important social side of the work. These respondents felt that people they work with can become very close. One of the respondents expressed this as:

'Many of my co-workers are also my friends. The work community is another family.'

In addition to these above categories, the work context and especially monetary rewards were important factors for GenY. However, it was only one factor among others, although it was often mentioned. The money seemed to be one measurable reward for work, but work was given another much greater significance than that. Namely, there were also responses about helping other people, developing responsibility, doing meaningful work, and work giving a meaning to life.

3.3 Generation X

For GenX, work plays a very important and central role in their lives, which was often reflected in the answers as an appreciation of the work, and also described as a central part of life. In addition, it was reported to be a

basic element of life and described with the word 'meaning'. The importance of balancing work and leisure time and work rhythms with the rest of life were identified as the essential aspects of the meaning of work for this generation. Some respondents felt that when working, they started to appreciate their leisure time more. As one respondent wrote about meaning of work in her life:

'I value the work as very important in terms of the overall quality of life for many reasons including financial reasons. Working keeps your mind refreshed and gives you a good rhythm to life. At the same time, you are able to stay 'on the map in the world'. Although working part-time is hardly economically viable. You get almost the same income if you get unemployment daily allowance.'

For GenX the social significance of work was also often highlighted, which was reflected in the answers the respondents provided on the importance of the work community, working and learning together, and in particular the importance of belonging to a social community. Some of the responses highlighted colleagues as a social community, and some pointed out partners, customers and networking. One descriptive example which is representative of GenX is highlighted below, in which the respondent raised issues were common to the responses of several other respondents:

'It gives you a point of reference, a rhythm and financial security for life. It allows you to do things that bring joy to life. It brings social relationships, good minds, and feelings of success. It provides opportunities, responsibilities, constraints, and goals. It is also about getting to know new people, giving your own work input, challenging yourself and taking responsibility. Work enables life planning in the long term, except for a temporary job contract. It is important to enjoy your leisure time. Work has a positive impact on your whole life.'

The importance of work as a factor creating and increasing personal well-being and as a tool for achieving personal goals was most significantly highlighted in the factors affecting the quality of life for GenX. In addition, GenX representatives pointed out the objective outcomes in relation to the working context, the most relevant of which was financial revenue. Whereas, in terms of work context, the subjective outcomes highlighted by the respondents also included the objectives of work, enjoyment and success at work, and the possibility to influence your own work.

3.4 Baby boomers

Many responses from the Boomers indicated the centrality of work, which was interpretable from expressions about the role of work in their personal lives. Issues concerning the balance of work and non-work domains, the quality of life and careers and personal development were also pointed out in the responses from the Boomers. Below is an illustrative example of the issues mentioned by the Boomers about the meaning of work in their lives:

'The work is enormously important to me because I have just started to work in the tourism and hospitality sector, and I am curious to learn everything from my work community. Social connections at work are extremely important to me. I want to do my job as well as possible.' Some Boomers were already retired or working part-time. This had a remarkable effect on results and responses. Work was done voluntarily and often for the respondents' own pleasure or desire.

4. Discussion and conclusion

The purpose of this study was to understand the meaning of work for GenZ, GenY, GenX, and Boomers. The study examined the perceptions of employees working in the tourism and hospitality industry on the meaning of work. From the perspective of the tourism and hospitality sector it is essential to create new kinds of knowledge to support employment, recruitment, and employee engagement in the sector.

The findings from the GenZ answers were divided between gaining work experience and having a regular income as the main sources of meaning of work. This finding seems to suggest that for the GenZ their current job is just one of many jobs that provides work experience for the next job in the future. This finding supports previous studies which have indicated that the younger generations have shown to have lower commitment to organisations, and they expect equality and enjoyment from their work (Broadbridge, Maxwell and Odgen, 2007), place more value on social aspects of work (Lyons, 2003), and that the financial part of work is more important for them (Yu and Miller, 2003). For the younger generation work in a tourism and hospitality

company is often their first official workplace which does not require commitment for a long time, and which may improve career opportunities through training and development skills (Langan, 2000).

The findings reveal that GenY, GenX, and Boomers reported the balance of work and non-work domains, and the way work improves the quality of their life as the main sources of meaning for work. While GenY also highlighted careers and personal development. In addition to that, the social significance of work was a key part of the meaning of work for GenY and GenX. Additionally, the work context and especially the monetary rewards were important factors for GenY and GenX. These findings are in accordance with the findings of previous studies indicating strong motivation to work and to be socially active (Ryan, 2000), in addition to valuing the room and facilities for growth at work (Kultalahti, 2015). Most of the GenX and Boomer respondents pointed out the centrality of work as the main factor in the meaning of work. Work centrality has been described in the literature as the general importance of work in the life of an individual (Dubin, 1956; England and Whitely, 1990; Smola and Sutton, 2002).

All other generations, except the Boomers, valued monetary reward highly in the meaning of work. According to Jung and Yoon (2015) satisfaction with pay levels affects an employee's psychological state of mind, and satisfaction with pay was of great importance for commitment to work. In particular, employee benefits played an important role in the employee's commitment to the workplace. As it is rare today for employees to remain in the same job throughout their careers, so employee benefits are a good way to encourage employees to commit to a particular job.

The study is not without its limitations. One inevitable limitation concerns the generalizability of the findings. As the data was collected from employees of Finnish tourism and hospitality sector SMEs located in Central Finland, these findings cannot be generalized to other organisations globally. For this reason, there is a need for future research that would cover other regions to provide more in-depth knowledge of this subject. The other limitation is that the data from GenZ and Boomers was small compared to GenY and GenX. Therefore, we need more data from these two generations in order to get reliable results.

This study contributed to the paucity of studies investigating the perspectives of representatives of Generation Z as employees in the tourism and hospitality industry on the meaning of work. On the other hand, this study calls for future research to get an in-depth understanding of perspectives of all generations as employees. The tourism and hospitality sector may provide insights into how to attract, recruit and commit employees better to industry and workplaces and also how to support employees' wellbeing at work. In order to find solutions to these recruitment and engagement problems in these sectors, it is crucial to provide current knowledge based on research of work values and careers in tourism and hospitality. After COVID-19 companies need to be resilient in order to attract and engage employees. It is critical to improve the image of work in the tourism and hospitality sector and pay attention to the development of human resource practices. Companies should produce positive work experiences through human resource practices in the workplace, which help to attract and retain workers of all generations in the industry.

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