
Keeping Meaning Alive as Your Workload Surges



By Winnie Jiang , INSEAD

These days, we're all expected to do more. But that doesn't mean the psychological fulfilment we get from our work has to suffer.

In this period of quarantined **workload surge**, exhaustion is an ever-present risk. The first line of defence against burnout is, of course, supportive and empathetic management. However, research shows there is one class of employees who might have a built-in psychological buffer against burnout: those who derive a strong sense of meaning from their work.

Meaning takes many forms. It could be the rush that follows the first taste of real leadership – the desire to challenge yourself and grow. Meaning could also come from simply doing what you love. Or it could evolve from doing something positive for the world, contributing to a cause larger than yourself.

Because so much of themselves is wrapped up in their work, meaning-driven employees are more likely to show grit in the face of difficult conditions. For them, the emotional stakes are much too high not to. Their intense identification with their job has its downsides: It can destroy their work-life

balance and make them susceptible to exploitation by unscrupulous employers. Still, they seem better able to absorb workplace shocks and setbacks and keep going than those who are in it mainly for the paycheck.

My new paper in [*Administrative Science Quarterly*](#) looks deeper into how meaning-motivated workers stay that way under pressure-cooker conditions that could easily prove spirit-crushing. It turns out that meaning is a fungible concept for these workers. Revising their beliefs about meaning and its origins for the duration of the crisis helped them persevere. Crucially, this was not an automatic psychological process for all employees, but was initiated and guided by managers.

Refugee resettlement

The subject of my research was a refugee-resettlement agency called Refugee and Immigrant Services (RISE), located in a north eastern city of the United States. RISE's 20 employees specialise in helping recently arrived refugees adapt to life in the US. Because the US government expects refugees to achieve financial self-reliance within six months, RISE frontline staff have their hands full helping them secure affordable housing, employment and English-language instruction within a tight timeframe.

In mid-2015, then-President Obama responded to the exploding crisis in Syria by ordering the resettlement of at least 10,000 refugees from the war-racked nation before the end of the next fiscal year. The plan, however, was dogged by delays owing to insufficient staff in asylum countries such as Jordan and Turkey. By the time the bottleneck was removed, the fiscal year was already two-thirds gone. The result was that over three times more Syrian refugees came into the US in the final third of FY2016 than had done so in the preceding eight months. For RISE and its peer agencies across the country, it was an almost mind-boggling increase in workload.

To find out how refugee services workers managed this, I interviewed and closely observed all 20 part- and full-time RISE employees at the height of the Syrian influx. I also gathered complementary insights by meeting refugee families and collecting information on their adjustment to life in the US. Sometimes I conducted this research alone; other times I shadowed RISE workers and volunteered in the agency's offices.

“Situational purpose”

All 20 RISE employees spoke to me of the powerful sense of meaning they derived from their job. Seven of the 20 answered yes to my question, “Do you consider your work a calling?” But an additional nine spontaneously used the word *calling* to describe their work before I could ask the question. For example, one interviewee said, “Being part of refugee resettlement is my calling. I don’t care what I do with refugees. I can do anything, anything that can change and better their life.”

From their comments about what RISE was like before the astronomical escalation in workflow, it was clear that the employees’ sense of meaning had been largely invested in the profound change they could make in the lives of each and every client. In other words, they were motivated by **achieving depth of impact rather than scale** – to use terms borrowed from my INSEAD colleague **Jasjit Singh**.

As their refugee caseload grew, the amount of personal attention RISE staff could give each client diminished considerably. In many cases, the hand-holding approach they had used to guide refugees through intimidating processes such as a job search was replaced by a brusque, bureaucratic style aimed at pushing as many people as possible through the system.

Yet the interviews revealed that for most RISE employees, the meaningfulness of their work had not dissipated. Rather, the centre of meaning had shifted from the quality of services delivered to their quantity. One interviewee told us, “I know we are not providing refugees with as good services as before, but the ability to help a large population of refugees is equally important ... I still love what I do and think what I’m doing is extremely meaningful.” They had adopted what I call a “situational purpose” – a revised *raison d’être* – enabling them to maintain the psychological fulfilment they derived from their work while accepting the new circumstances.

Some employees switched to the situational purpose – to resettle as many refugees as possible – almost immediately after the workload surge began. Others initially resisted and clung to their pre-existing definition of “meaning”, which was to ensure a smooth transition for each refugee. The interviews uncovered the reasons behind this. The early adopters, we found, were those who more frequently associated their work with a solemn duty, such as the employee who proclaimed “refugees are victim of a broken society and we, the privileged, should help them as much as we can”. RISE

employees who talked about how the work gratified them personally – e.g. through the fascination of learning about the refugees’ stories – took longer to transition from quality to quantity as their main purpose.

Leaders’ sensemaking

For the latter group of holdouts, the efforts of RISE leaders to help reframe and recontextualise this period appeared to contribute to the situational purpose taking hold. Managers successfully imparted a renewed sense of mission, stressing the nobility and societal importance of the refugee-resettlement sector. They described refugees’ desperate need for resettlement in stark life-or-death terms. Their motivational speeches were nakedly emotional, prompting an interviewee to enthuse, “[Our leader] is awesome, and he’s a great supervisor; he’s our fearless leader; he goes out there and he loves what he does. And he gets us excited.”

This wave of positive energy and warm feeling appeared to compensate for the rewards that the more hedonic RISE employees used to get from close, one-to-one interaction with clients.

The managers did their inspirational job so well that when the surge abruptly ceased – due to President Trump’s 2017 executive order widely known as the “travel ban” – RISE staff did not revert to the quality-based mission. Instead, they employed a mixed approach where both quality and quantity were seen as important. As one employee phrased it, “Refugee resettlement is about both making sure our current clients adapt well and bringing more refugees to safety.”

The outcome for refugees

Sadly, the fairly speedy (if not always easy) psychological adjustments of RISE employees could not prevent the workload surge from negatively affecting their clients’ adjustment to life in the US. In interviews, refugees recounted how at the height of the crisis, RISE workers were often reduced to little more than messengers bearing grim warnings of bills to be paid and impending benefits cut-offs.

My surveys found that Syrian refugees who came into RISE’s orbit during the surge were worse off after six months – in terms of employment and quality of life – than those who arrived earlier or later. For instance, only 23 percent of the crisis cohort had found full-time minimum-wage jobs six months after

arrival, compared to 93 percent pre-surge and 64 percent post-surge.

However, four refugee families beat the odds and became fully self-reliant despite the minimal services RISE was able to provide. Their outlier performance, I found, was related to their understanding of the situational purpose and the wider context for it. This understanding, in turn, could be traced back to specific RISE employees who made a special effort to explain what was happening at the agency.

For example, one client complained to a RISE staffer named Emily about the discrepancy between the year of free housing his sister, a refugee in Canada, received and the relatively meagre support he was getting in the US. Emily took the opportunity to explain that the magnitude of the Syria crisis was straining an already brittle and convoluted system, and that the agency was doing the best it could under the circumstances.

Even for the most meaning-oriented employees, disruptions caused by crises like Covid-19 and the war in Syria can be threatening. My research shows that a situational purpose can help prevent their emotional investment in work from being swept away by adverse winds. It can even deepen their sense of meaning once the crisis passes. If the shift in meaning remains internal and known only to the actors themselves, however, there's always the danger of disappointing external stakeholders, such as the clients who expect things to be as they were. Meaning should be communicated as well as felt.

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-organisations/keeping-meaning-alive-your-workload-surges>

About the author(s)

Winnie Jiang is an Assistant Professor of Organisational Behaviour at INSEAD. She studies the dynamics of meaning-making at work, work as a calling, career mobility and transitions, and personal and professional development.

About the research

"Sustaining Meaningful Work in a Crisis: Adopting and Conveying a Situational Purpose" is published in *Administrative Science Quarterly*.