

Our Future of Meaningful Work Manifesto

In short – “what we assert”

More detailed – “Toward a research agenda at the intersection of technology, agency, and organization”

What we assert

Work is undergoing a profound and irreversible transformation. The convergence of artificial intelligence, algorithmic governance, and accelerating organizational change is reshaping not only how we work, but also why we work and for whom. This manifesto responds to that transformation with a set of foundational convictions and a clear research agenda.

We assert that meaningful work is neither a static ideal nor a purely individual pursuit. It is a socially situated, contested, and collectively produced phenomenon, shaped by organizational practices, technological systems, and structural power relations. As such, it cannot be reduced to a motivational variable or a wellbeing outcome. It must be treated as a central, politically charged, and empirically urgent problem for management and organization theory.

Our core convictions are clear:

- **Meaning is not a luxury; it is a necessity.** Every individual should be able to see the value of their contribution and connect it to a deep personal purpose beyond profitability alone.
- **Autonomy drives responsibility.** Trust placed in people unleashes initiative, commitment, and creativity. Only where individuals have real authority over decisions can work be meaningful
- **Work must be inclusive and fair.** No organizational transformation is legitimate if it deepens inequalities in access, recognition, or opportunity.
- **Ethics must guide every decision.** Economic and technological progress cannot come at the expense of human dignity, transparency, social justice, or ecological sustainability.

Technology must enhance people, not erase or diminish them. AI and automation must free up time, enrich roles, and strengthen human creativity, not commodify or surveil it.

We further assert that meaningful organizations, defined as those capable of sustaining these conditions, are not characterized by a single model. What unites them is a commitment to treating meaningful work as a collective co-construction, sustained through democratic governance, inclusive design, and ongoing contestation. This manifesto is both a theoretical framework and a call to action for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers.

Toward a research agenda at the intersection of technology, agency, and organization

The question of what makes work meaningful has long occupied the margins of management and organization theory. It has typically been framed as an individual disposition, a motivational lever, or a wellbeing outcome. We argue that this framing is no longer adequate. In an era defined by artificial intelligence, algorithmic governance, and accelerating global ecological and geopolitical crises meaningful work must be repositioned as a central, politically charged, and empirically urgent problem for the field. This manifesto sets out the theoretical commitments and research questions that define our programme.

Four Foundational Propositions

Proposition I: Ontological

Meaningful work is a socially situated, contested, and collectively produced phenomenon

Dominant approaches in management and organizational behaviour have long treated meaningful work as an individual experience, something workers either have or lack, seek or find. We reject this framing. Meaningful work is socially and historically situated. It is produced, constrained, and transformed by organizational norms, management practices, and the broader socio-economic structures in which work is embedded. What individuals and collectives find meaningful is not determined by task characteristics alone; it is shaped by what they value, what they can imagine as possible, and the power relations that govern their working lives.

Crucially, meaningful work is not inherently good or ethical. It is constructed through narratives and mediated by organizational power, which means it can sustain domination just as easily as it can enable flourishing. Meaningfulness is paradoxical: pervasive yet episodic, individually felt yet collectively achieved, enabling yet constrained. Management scholarship must take these paradoxes seriously rather than dissolving them into linear models of engagement or motivation.

Proposition II: Political

Meaningful work is structurally threatened by algorithmic governance and demands a democratic response

The datafication of work is not a neutral process. Algorithmic management, enacted through automated task allocation, performance surveillance, and visibility systems, restructures the very conditions under which coherence, purpose, and significance can be experienced at work. When workers lack agency over the technologies that shape their labour, the experiential foundations of meaningful work are systematically eroded. This is simultaneously a management problem, an organizational design problem, and a political problem, and it requires theoretical frameworks equal to that complexity.

We assert that meaningful work in datafied organizations is possible only where algorithms are transparent, contestable, and democratically governed. This demands new organizational forms in which workers participate in the design, deployment, and auditing of the technologies that govern their work. It also requires management scholarship to develop normative and empirical tools capable of evaluating these forms, moving beyond efficiency-centred logics toward frameworks that place human agency at their core.

Proposition III: Organizational

The future of meaningful work depends on building and studying meaningful organizations

Hierarchical, paternalistic, and bureaucratic organizations struggle to generate meaningful work for their employees. They may even undermine it altogether due to a managerial system based on command and control. By contrast, producing work that is truly meaningful requires managing through trust and allowing employees to co-construct organizational life autonomously and responsibly. The challenge for management scholarship and organization theory is to identify, theorize, and assess the conditions under which meaningful organizations emerge. These are structures that recognize worker autonomy, distribute power equitably, and sustain the conditions for coherence, purpose, and significance across diverse roles, career paths, and social positions.

Meaningful organizations are not defined by a single model, they may be (radically) decentralized, participatory, inclusive, “liberated”, platform-based, or hybrid. What unites them is a commitment to treating meaningful work not as a managerial gift but as a collective co-construction, one that requires active organizational design, sustained governance, and ongoing contestation. Understanding how such organizations are built, how they persist, and how they fail is among the most pressing tasks for contemporary management scholarship.

Proposition IV: Normative

Sustaining meaningful work requires an ethics of trust, autonomy, and shared purpose, not merely better management

Meaningful work cannot be reduced to an output to be optimized. It is a commitment to be honoured, and honouring it demands a normative reorientation of how organizations are conceived, governed, and led. We assert that the structural conditions for coherence, purpose, and significance are inseparable from the values that shape them: trust over control, genuine autonomy over centralized decision-making, transparency over opacity, cooperation over siloed performance, and leadership conceived as service rather than command.

This normative proposition applies with equal force to technology. AI and automation hold genuine promise by freeing workers from bureaucratic load and opening space for more creative, purpose-driven labour. That promise, however, is conditional. Technology must be deployed with ethics and discernment, in the service of what is distinctively human. Organizations that treat dignity, equity, and transparency as the foundations of performance,

rather than as constraints upon it, are the only ones capable of making meaningful work a durable reality.

Core Research Questions

1. How do organizations mediate the relationship between technological transformation and workers' experience of meaningful work, and which managerial practices enable or restrict that experience?
2. How do workers, and in particular creative and knowledge workers, reappropriate generative AI and automation technologies to preserve, reconfigure, or contest their experience of meaningful work?
3. Under what organizational and governance conditions does algorithmic management erode or enhance workers' sense of agency, dignity, and meaningful contribution?
4. What organizational forms, structures, and management practices constitute meaningful organizations, and how are they built, sustained, and contested in practice?
5. How are the paradoxes of meaningful work, between individual experience and collective production and between enabling and constraining forces, reproduced or resolved within meaningful organizations?

Four Sites of Inquiry

Technology & Work Design How AI reshapes task structures, evaluation systems, and the experiential conditions of work — and how human-machine collaboration can be designed to centre rather than displace worker agency.	Algorithmic Governance The organizational and political conditions under which algorithmic management becomes a site of democratic contestation — and the mechanisms that render technological governance transparent and accountable.
Meaningful Organizations The structures, practices, and values that constitute organizations capable of sustaining meaningful work as a collective achievement — and the conditions under which such organizations emerge, persist, or fail.	Narratives & Power How organizational discourse, managerial narratives, and collective imaginaries construct — or foreclose — shared visions of meaningful work, and the role of power in shaping what counts as meaningful.

This responsibility does not end at the boundaries of the field. The future of meaningful work is a societal question that concerns workers and citizens, policymakers and public institutions, educators and civil society. Technological transformation is not governed by organizations alone. It is shaped by regulation, by the expectations of democratic publics, and by the collective imagination of what work could and should be. Scholars have a role to play in this

wider conversation, not as neutral observers, but as engaged voices capable of connecting rigorous inquiry to the political and ethical stakes that surround it.

Meaningful work is not an individual aspiration, a managerial tool, or an academic subspecialty. It is a collective achievement and a shared responsibility, one that must be built, protected, and continuously renegotiated across organizations, institutions, and societies. The time has come to treat it as such, not as a peripheral concern but as a defining commitment of our field and of the world it seeks to serve.

The manifesto was jointly written by Eve Saint-Germes, Isabelle Billot and Johanna Vuori on behalf of the Ulysseus research group “Future of Meaningful Work”.