

Meaning at Work

Nava Ashraf

Abstract :

Firms traditionally use incentives to align their goals with the workers'. In this paper, we evaluate a firm's attempt to do the opposite by encouraging employees to reflect on what gives their life meaning and whether this can be achieved at work. We randomize the rollout of a "Discover Your Purpose" intervention among 3000 white-collar employees and evaluate their outcomes over two years. The intervention guides workers through a reflection process of pivotal life experiences, to promote a greater understanding of personal purpose by linking past memories and present work in a coherent narrative. We find that performance increases because the bottom performers either leave the firm, laterally move, or do better. Consistent with the intervention reducing the cost of effort of the workers who remain, we find that it flattens the trade-off between meaning and pay, as it is the highest paid among the low performers who either leave the firm or report higher meaning.