

# What Makes Work Meaningful?

## Findings from the Skills and Employment Survey 2024

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### HEADLINES

The pursuit of meaningful work has deep historical roots, spurred by both individuals' intrinsic needs for psychological fulfilment and organisations' drive to enhance work motivation, performance, and competitive advantage. Over the past decade, the alleged growth of roles which are useless – so-called 'bullshit jobs' – has prompted public discussion of the meaning of work. Using new questions asked in 2024, this report examines the prevalence, distribution, and antecedents of meaningful work in the UK. The findings show:

- Most employees consider their work as meaningful: nearly 70% reported their jobs gave them the feeling of a job well done either always or most of the time, and three-quarters consistently had the feeling of doing useful work. By contrast, only around 5% doubted the value of their work. This suggests that 'bullshit jobs' are relatively rare.
- There are notable differences in perceptions of meaningful work by gender and age. Women reported higher levels of meaningfulness than men, whereas young workers were less likely than older workers to find their work meaningful, reporting lower levels of achievement, usefulness, and sense of belonging.
- Work tends to instil a deeper sense of meaning when it involves directly enhancing the health and well-being of others. The highest levels of meaningful work are found in health, education, and construction, while the lowest are seen in accommodation, transportation, sales, and financial services.
- The factors that foster a sense of meaningfulness largely reflect intrinsic aspects of job quality such as managerial support, skill utilisation, and participation. In contrast, perceptions of meaningful work are only weakly associated with pay.

The Skills and Employment Survey 2024 is funded jointly by the Economic and Social Research Council, the Department for Education, and the Advisory and Conciliation and Arbitration Service with additional funding from the Department for the Economy to extend the survey to Northern Ireland (ES/X007987/1).

## 1. The Importance of Meaningful Work

The concept of meaningful work has intrigued researchers for decades. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Marx introduced the concept of alienation to describe how extreme division of labour and restrictive working conditions can lead to a profound sense of estrangement and meaninglessness. More recent research emphasises meaningful work as a critical source of employee well-being. Although hedonic well-being, conceptualised in terms of pleasure and pain, has received most attention, there is a growing emphasis on eudaimonic well-being, centred on purpose, significance, and virtue, as a deeper and more enduring source of fulfilment and happiness. In business management, a burgeoning body of evidence highlights the benefits of meaningful work for desirable organisational outcomes such as employee engagement, performance, retention, and innovation. Hence, the promotion of meaningful work is seen both as a humanistic demand for enriched work experience and personal fulfilment, and as a means of enhancing organisational performance and competitive advantage. As such, it lies at the interface of labour market policies to improve economic growth and social rights. This report examines perceptions of meaningful work in the UK, how they vary across different labour market groups, and the types of work environment that effectively foster a sense of meaning.

## 2. Previous Evidence

Extensive research has explored the factors that influence the degree to which people derive a sense of meaning from their work. The meaningfulness of work is shaped by individuals' values and work orientations, job characteristics, organisational environment, and the broader institutional and cultural context in which they are embedded. For instance, high involvement management practices which encourage employees to exercise initiative and participate in wider organisational decision-making have been found to instil a strong sense of meaning. However, much of the existing research is based on samples drawn from specific industries and occupations, limiting the generalisability of these findings across the broader labour market.

Moreover, the literature on meaningful work often distinguishes between two conceptual perspectives. The 'self-realisation perspective' emphasises the importance of work for satisfying fundamental human needs. It suggests work is more meaningful when individuals are able to use and develop their skills through performing complex, autonomous, and integrated job tasks. In contrast, the 'social justification perspective' highlights the moral contributions that make a job meaningful. It underscores the objective value of work in terms of improving other people's welfare and making a positive contribution to society. Work can be meaningful in one sense but not the other. For instance, developing deepfake technology to spread misinformation may require high levels of skills, autonomy, and creativity. Even though it may provide a sense of personal satisfaction, few would consider such work as meaningful due to its harmful consequences.

To date, most empirical evidence has centred on the self-realisation perspective, possibly due to its longer theoretical tradition and readily available data.

Consequently, there is limited evidence on the prevalence of meaningful work that encompasses both self-realisation and social justification based on nationally representative datasets. To inform policies on meaningful work, we need to conduct a comprehensive assessment of how perceptions of meaningful work vary across the labour force and identify the job characteristics and work environments that cultivate a sense of meaning, in both senses of the concept.

## 3. The Skills and Employment Survey 2024: A New Source of Evidence

The Skills and Employment Survey 2024 (SES2024) is the eighth in the SES series, which has been conducted periodically since 1986. Past surveys were carried out in 1986, 1992, 1997, 2001, 2006, 2012 and 2017, involving a total of 29,132 participants. SES2024 allows us to examine for the first time the prevalence of meaningful work in a nationally representative sample of individuals in paid work. The complete survey consists of three types of data collected from working adults aged 20-65 years old. The first is a face-to-face survey of those working in Britain. The sample of 2,824 people was drawn using random probability principles stratified by several socio-economic indicators. Two eligible respondents per address were randomly selected for interview; 32% of those selected were interviewed and most were completed in 2024. The second is an online survey of eligible workers who agreed to join a panel of respondents recruited from previous NatCen surveys (including the British Social Attitudes Survey). The third is a fresh push-to-web sample of eligible workers living in Northern Ireland supplemented by a smaller number of panellists who resided in Northern Ireland and were eligible to take part. Both online surveys were carried out in 2023.

For this report, we use both the face-to-face and online surveys. Hence the data, with a total sample of 5,465, relate to 2024/2023 and present a picture of the United Kingdom. All parts of the data collection process were directed by the research team and the fieldwork was carried out by NatCen. Weights were computed which correct for differential probabilities of sample selection, the over-sampling of certain areas and response rate variations between groups (such as sex, age, occupation and qualification level). All the analyses that follow use these weights.

## 4. Indicators of the Meaningfulness of Work

There is no agreement on the measurement of meaningful work. The lack of consensus may arise from the interdisciplinary nature of this field, as well as the relatively recent ascendance of the topic on the research and policy agenda. A recent review identified twenty-eight measurement scales across fifty-six studies, most of which appeared in only a few studies. While varied definitions emphasise different perspectives on what makes work meaningful, a few common themes can be observed across most operationalisations. Meaningful work typically involves performing job tasks which are seen as worthwhile, significant, useful, and valuable. More specifically, it often comprises a sense of purpose (making a positive contribution to society), a sense of significance (doing important work that matters), and a sense of belonging (having opportunities to build and

maintain valued social relationships at work). Reflecting these dimensions, SES2024 asked respondents how frequently they experienced the following feelings:

- ‘Your job gives you the feeling of a job well done’.
- ‘You have the feeling of doing useful work’.
- ‘Your job gives you a sense of belonging’.

Each statement was rated on a five-point scale ranging from ‘never’ to ‘always’. Although the three items are highly correlated, they capture slightly different facets of meaningfulness. The first statement addresses personal achievement (reflecting self-realisation), the second focuses on the broader value of work (reflecting social justification), and the third emphasises social connections, a recognised source of motivation and well-being. Given these distinctions, we first present descriptive statistics for each item separately and then introduce a combined summative index that incorporates all three items.

## 5. Findings

### Variations in the Meaningfulness of Work

Overall, the majority of the UK workforce perceive their work as meaningful. Figure 1 shows that half of respondents said their job gave them the feeling of a job well done most of the time, while a further 18% said this was always the case. Three-quarters had the feeling of doing useful work either always or most of the time, and around two-thirds felt a sense of belonging at work.

**Figure 1: Perceptions of the Meaningfulness of Work**

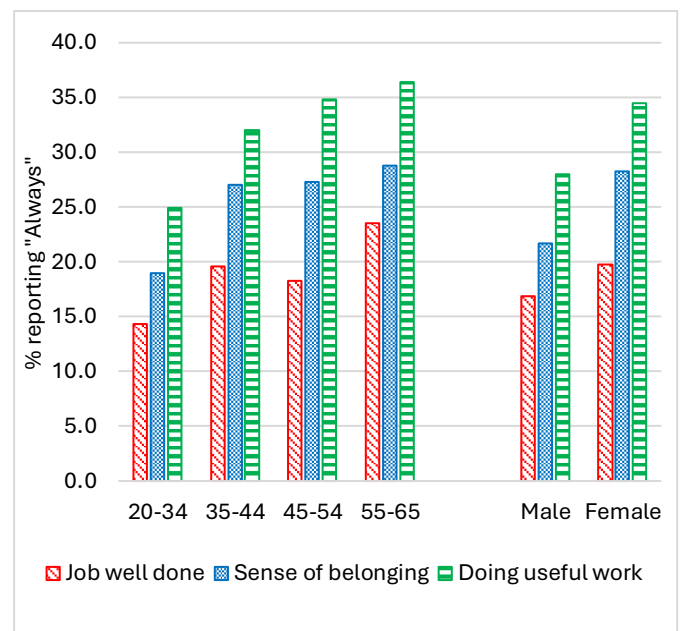


Conversely, the proportion expressing the opposite view is small. For instance, only 1% said they never had the feeling of a job well done or the feeling of doing useful work, and 3% said their job never gave them a sense of belonging. Taking those who answered ‘never’ or ‘rarely’ together as a proxy of meaningless work, the proportions are small across all three measures (6% for job well done, 5% for doing useful work, and 11% for sense of belonging). These findings are consistent with the [European Working Conditions Survey](#), which indicates that meaningless work is relatively rare – contrary to the popular notion that many are employed in so-called ‘bullshit jobs’. Most people consider their work as motivating, useful, and socially rewarding.

There are notable variations in perceptions of meaningful work by gender and age (Figure 2). Taking those who answered ‘always’ as a stronger indicator of meaningful work, women reported higher levels of meaningfulness than men across all three items. While the gap in the feeling of a job well done is modest (20% for women and 17% for men), women are more likely to report that they do useful work (34% versus 28%) and that their work gives them a sense of belonging (28% versus 22%).

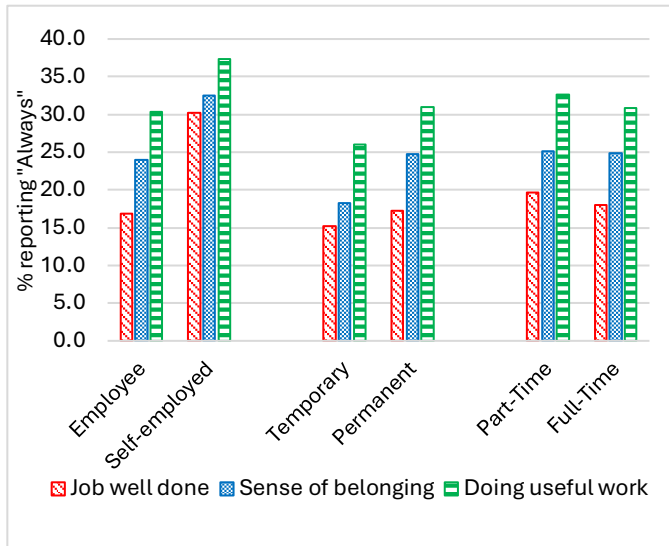
Figure 2 also reveals a clear age gradient. Young workers aged 20-34 consider their work less meaningful than their older counterparts. For instance, only a quarter of young workers said they always had the feeling of doing useful work, while the proportion rises to 36% among those aged 55-65. Similarly, young workers are less likely to have feelings of a job well done or a sense of belonging in the workplace. These findings align with the widely publicised ‘quiet quitting’ phenomenon, with young workers openly admitting on social media that they ‘soft pedal’ at work. Furthermore, the data suggests that young workers have greater difficulty in finding meaning in their work.

**Figure 2: Perceptions of the Meaningfulness of Work by Age and Gender**



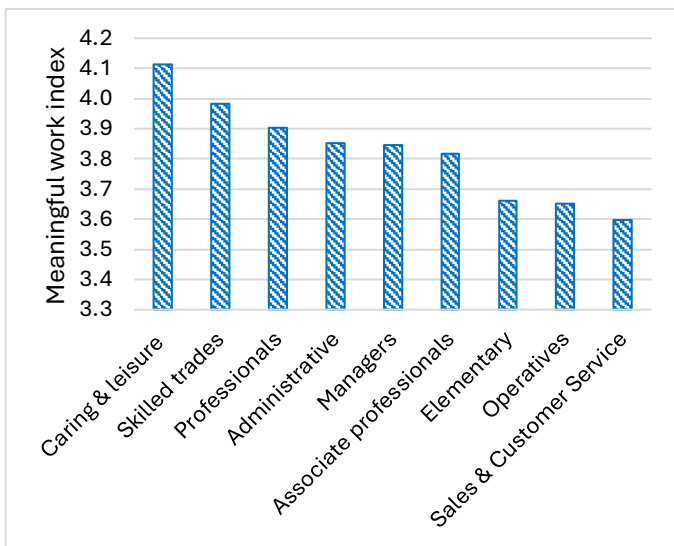
Apart from demographic characteristics, the experience of meaningful work also depends on an individual’s employment status and type of contract. As can be seen in Figure 3, self-employed workers reported higher levels of meaningfulness than employees across all three indicators. They are nearly twice as likely to report the feeling of a job well done (30% versus 17%), and also reported stronger feelings of doing useful work (37% versus 24%) and a greater sense of belonging (33% versus 24%). On the other hand, temporary workers are less likely to experience meaningfulness in work than permanent workers. Interestingly, whether an individual holds a full-time or part-time contract does not seem to matter. The differences between full-time and part-time workers are small in general, and where differences emerge, they tend to favour part-time workers.

**Figure 3: Perceptions of the Meaningfulness of Work by Type of Contract**



How is meaningful work distributed across occupations and industries? To offer a comprehensive perspective that captures all individual components of meaningfulness, we constructed a summative index by averaging responses across the three items. As Figure 4 shows, there are notable differences in the meaningfulness of work between occupational groups. The highest scores are reported by workers in caring and leisure occupations, followed at some distance by those in skilled trades. Professional, administrative, and managerial roles occupy an intermediate position, while elementary workers, machine operatives, and sales and customer service workers reported the lowest scores.

**Figure 4: Meaningful Work Index by Occupation**

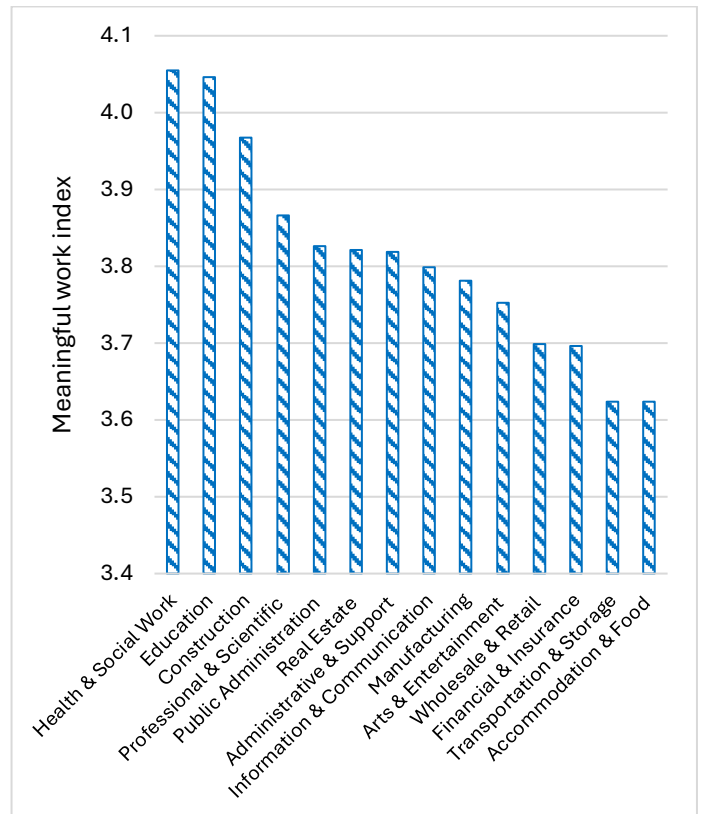


The average meaningful work index for those working in caring and leisure occupations is 4.1, which suggests that they find their work meaningful most of the time. In contrast, those in sales and customer service roles have an index of 3.6, indicating they experience meaningful work somewhere between sometimes and most of the time. These findings broadly align with the industry-level patterns shown in Figure 5, which suggests that the highest levels of meaningful work are found in human health and social work, education, and construction.

In contrast, the lowest levels are found in accommodation and food services, transportation and storage, financial and insurance, and wholesale and retail. In summary, the findings reveal substantial differences in perceptions of meaningful work across various labour market groups.

Women, older workers, self-employed individuals, and those in occupations and industry sectors that deliver tangible benefits to others reported higher levels of meaningfulness.

**Figure 5: Meaningful Work Index by Industry**



**Job Quality and the Meaningfulness of Work**

What job attributes and organisational characteristics are associated with the perception of meaningful work? A prima facie examination of occupational and industrial distributions suggests that pay does not play a dominant role. To gain further insight, we next investigate a wide range of job attributes and working conditions. SES2024 provides rich information on both intrinsic and extrinsic aspects of job quality, as well as on social relationships within the workplace, which allows us to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the antecedents of meaningful work.

Table 1 shows the percentage of respondents who reported *always* feeling their work is meaningful, broken down by each aspect of job quality. Job quality was divided into three levels – low, medium, and high – with each level containing a similar proportion of workers. The final column of the table presents the bivariate correlations between job quality and the overall meaningful work index.

A striking pattern revealed in Table 1 is the predominant role of social relationships and intrinsic job quality in shaping the meaningfulness of work. Taking managerial support for example, among workers who enjoyed strong managerial support, 29% always had the feeling

of a job well done. This figure is only 8% among those who had low managerial support. The contrast is equally striking for the sense of belonging (41% versus 10%) and the feeling of doing useful work (44% versus 19%).

Having opportunity to use skills at work is another critical factor. Where employees reported limited opportunity to use their skills, only 16% always had the feeling of doing useful work. By contrast, the proportion rises to 42% among those who had plenty of opportunities to use their skills. The perceived usefulness of a job depends thus not only on its objective nature, but also on whether individuals feel they can actively contribute to work by applying their skills and abilities. Also, task variety, organisational participation, and task discretion emerged as important determinants of the meaningfulness of work.

Work intensity has a positive correlation with meaningfulness, although the effect is small. Job insecurity, as expected, is linked to lower levels of meaningfulness. Among those who believe they might lose their jobs in the next 12 months, only 11% had the

feeling of a job well done, compared to 20% of those who felt secure in their positions. However, the size of the effect is modest compared to the indicators of intrinsic job quality. Finally, the level of pay hardly makes any difference. Among the highest paid third of respondents, 28% always had the feeling of doing useful work, where the figure is 34% among the lowest paid.

These findings are consistent with the industry and occupational analyses, which suggest that many of the most meaningful jobs, such as social work, healthcare, education, and construction, typically offer modest financial rewards. Conversely, highly paid jobs do not necessarily feel more meaningful. Managers, the highest paid occupational group, only occupy an intermediate position in Figure 4, whereas financial and insurance services emerged as one of the least meaningful sectors in Figure 5. Overall, the evidence indicates that the meaningfulness of work primarily hinges on intrinsic job quality and the nature of work itself, especially with respect to whether it involves directly improving other people's health and well-being.

**Table 1: Percentage Reporting Always Doing Meaningful Work for Individuals with Different Job Characteristics**

		Job well done (%)	Sense of belonging (%)	Doing useful work (%)	Meaningful work index	Correlation with meaningful work index
<i>Managerial support</i>	Low	8	10	19	3.4	0.5***
	Medium	13	20	28	3.9	
	High	29	41	44	4.2	
<i>Skill utilisation</i>	Low	6	8	16	3.2	0.4***
	Medium	11	17	22	3.7	
	High	27	35	42	4.1	
<i>Task variety</i>	Low	13	16	23	3.6	0.3***
	Medium	16	25	30	3.9	
	High	30	40	46	4.2	
<i>Organisational participation</i>	Low	14	18	28	3.6	0.3***
	Medium	16	24	29	3.9	
	High	34	48	52	4.3	
<i>Task discretion</i>	Low	12	17	25	3.7	0.3***
	Medium	18	27	31	3.9	
	High	30	37	44	4.1	
<i>Work intensity</i>	Low	18	24	27	3.8	0.1***
	Medium	17	24	29	3.8	
	High	20	28	38	3.9	
<i>Job insecurity</i>	No	20	27	34	3.9	-0.2***
	Yes	11	14	20	3.5	
<i>Level of pay</i>	Low	22	27	34	3.8	0.03*
	Medium	16	24	30	3.8	
	High	14	23	28	3.9	

## 6. Policy implications

This report shows that most workers in the UK view their jobs positively, with only a small minority doubting the meaning of their work. The so-called 'bullshit jobs' are the exception rather than the norm. However, young workers are more likely than older workers to question the value of their roles, reporting lower levels of achievement, perceived usefulness, and sense of belonging. Further analysis of the antecedents of meaningful work highlights the critical role of intrinsic job quality and social support. Employees who can apply their skills, exercise initiative, and count on supportive managers are much more likely to find their work meaningful than those in less intrinsically rewarding positions. Additionally, meaningful work is highly concentrated in healthcare, social work, education, and skilled trades – sectors that typically focus on improving others' welfare.

These findings suggest that work is more likely to become a source of meaning when it meets individuals'

fundamental needs for competence, autonomy, and social connectedness, while also yielding outcomes that make a positive contribution to the community. The concern that work may sometimes lack meaning needs to be addressed by policies designed to improve intrinsic job quality – particularly by developing skills, participation, and social support. From a social justification perspective, the meaningfulness of work depends not only on intrinsic job quality and the opportunities it offers for self-realisation, but also on the extent to which it contributes to the common good. This calls for policies to create, protect, and expand jobs in sectors that directly enhance public health and well-being. The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence technologies presents both opportunities and challenges, as they can be used for beneficial or detrimental purposes. Policies that steer technological progress towards augmenting human capabilities and improving societal welfare will play a pivotal role in shaping how prevalent meaningful work will become in the future.

### Further reading

Gallie, D and Zhou, Y (2025) *The Meaning and Meaningfulness of Work – the View from Sociology*, in Nikolova, M (ed) *Work Meaning and Motivation - Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Work Well-being*, Springer, forthcoming.

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All titles are downloadable free from the survey website: [wiserd.ac.uk/project/ses/ses2024](http://wiserd.ac.uk/project/ses/ses2024). The [NatCen SES2024 Technical Report](#) which outlines in detail how the data were collected along with the questionnaires used is also available. You may also like to take the [www.howgoodismyjob.com](http://www.howgoodismyjob.com) quiz which is based on some of the questions used in the survey.

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This report may be cited as: Zhou Y, Davies, R, Felstead, A, Gallie, D, Green, F and Henseke, G (2025) *What Makes Work Meaningful? Findings from the Skills and Employment Survey 2024*, Cardiff: Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research and Data, Cardiff University.