



## When Work Becomes Empty: Explaining Meaning Loss in Algorithmic Organizations

Agung Wahyu Ginanjar<sup>1\*</sup>

\*Corresponding Mail:

agungwahyuginanjar@poltektriguna.ac.id

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### Abstrak

*This article addresses a growing paradox in contemporary organizations where technological advancement enhances efficiency while simultaneously diminishing employees' sense of meaningful work. Despite extensive research on meaningful work and digital transformation, existing literature remains fragmented and lacks a process-based explanation of how meaning deteriorates over time. To bridge this theoretical gap, the study aims to develop a mechanism-driven conceptual framework that explains the dynamic process of meaning loss in algorithmic and digitally mediated work systems. Drawing on an integrative analytical approach, the article synthesizes insights from meaningful work, digital work, and organizational behavior literature to conceptualize "meaning erosion" as a cumulative and structurally embedded process. The framework identifies key mediating mechanisms, including work fragmentation, depersonalization, instrumentalization, reduced autonomy, and identity disruption, that translate structural transformations into subjective experiences of declining meaning. The study contributes theoretically by reframing meaningful work as a dynamic construct, introducing meaning erosion as a novel explanatory mechanism, and offering a unified model that connects digital transformation to human sustainability outcomes, thereby providing a foundation for future empirical testing and organizational intervention.*

### Keywords

meaning erosion; meaningful work; algorithmic management; digital work systems; work alienation; organizational behavior

<sup>1</sup> Banking and Finance Program, Politeknik Triguna Tasikmalaya, Indonesia

# 1. Introduction

The contemporary world of work is undergoing rapid transformation driven by advances in digital technologies, artificial intelligence, and algorithmic management systems. Organizations increasingly rely on data-driven processes, automated decision-making, and digitally mediated workflows to improve efficiency, scalability, and performance. These developments have significantly enhanced productivity. At the same time, they have introduced a critical paradox. Work is becoming more efficient, yet less meaningful for those who perform it. This paradox is reflected in rising levels of disengagement, burnout, and psychological withdrawal across global workforces, suggesting that technological progress does not necessarily translate into improved human experience in organizations.

Meaningful work has long been recognized as a central determinant of employee well-being, motivation, and performance. It is commonly defined as work experienced as significant, purposeful, and intrinsically valuable (Rosso *et al.*, 2010; Martela & Pessi, 2018; Lysova *et al.*, 2019). Empirical research consistently shows that meaningful work is positively associated with engagement, commitment, and resilience, while negatively related to burnout, disengagement, and turnover intentions (Allan *et al.*, 2019; Steger *et al.*, 2012). However, emerging evidence suggests that the structural conditions of digitally mediated work environments are increasingly undermining employees' ability to experience their work as meaningful. Features such as algorithmic control, task fragmentation, and reduced human interaction alter how individuals perceive their roles, contributions, and identities at work (Kellogg *et al.*, 2020; Wood *et al.*, 2019; Meijerink & Bondarouk, 2023).

Despite the growing importance of this issue, existing research remains fragmented in explaining how digital transformation affects the experience of meaningful work. Studies on meaningful work have primarily focused on psychological states and individual perceptions, often treating meaningfulness as a relatively stable condition. In parallel, research on digital work and algorithmic management has examined changes in autonomy, control, and work design, but has paid limited attention to how these changes influence the construction and sustainability of meaning. As a result, current understanding is largely descriptive and lacks a coherent explanation of the processes through which structural transformations in digital work systems translate into the loss of meaningfulness over time.

This limitation reveals a critical theoretical gap. The literature lacks a process-based and mechanism-driven account of how meaningful work deteriorates in contemporary organizational contexts. While prior studies acknowledge that meaningfulness can be threatened under certain conditions (Bailey *et al.*, 2017; Oelberger, 2019), they do not sufficiently explain how technological, structural, and psychological factors interact to produce a gradual decline in meaning. Without such an explanation, it remains difficult to understand why disengagement and burnout persist even in highly optimized and technologically advanced work environments.

To address this gap, this study introduces the concept of meaning erosion, defined as the gradual weakening of an individual's sense of purpose, significance, and identity in work as a result of sustained structural and psychological transformations in digitally mediated environments. This concept shifts the focus from whether work is meaningful to how and why meaningfulness is lost over time. It conceptualizes meaning not as a static attribute, but as a dynamic and fragile experience that evolves under changing organizational conditions.

Building on this conceptual foundation, the study develops a mechanism-based framework that explains how digital work systems reshape the experience of meaningful work. Specifically, it identifies key mechanisms through which meaning erosion occurs, including work fragmentation, depersonalization, instrumentalization, reduced autonomy, and identity disruption. These mechanisms capture the pathways through which structural features of

digital transformation influence employees' perceptions and experiences, leading to progressive meaning loss.

This study contributes to the literature in three important ways. First, it introduces meaning erosion as a novel construct that extends existing theories of meaningful work by emphasizing its dynamic and processual nature. Second, it integrates previously disconnected research streams, including meaningful work, digital work, and organizational behavior, into a unified explanatory framework. Third, it advances a mechanism-based approach that provides a clearer account of how and why meaningfulness deteriorates in digitally mediated organizational contexts.

By offering a process-oriented and integrative perspective, this research provides a foundation for understanding the human consequences of digital transformation. It highlights that the challenge of contemporary organizations is not only to optimize performance through technology, but also to preserve and sustain the meaningfulness of work in increasingly complex and mediated environments.

## 2. Reframing Meaningful Work: Toward a Process Perspective

Meaningful work has been widely recognized as a central construct in organizational research, reflecting the extent to which individuals experience their work as significant, purposeful, and intrinsically valuable (Rosso *et al.*, 2010; Martela & Pessi, 2018; Lysova *et al.*, 2019). Foundational theories consistently emphasize three core dimensions underlying meaningfulness: a sense of purpose, the perception of contributing to something larger than oneself, and the integration of work with one's identity. These dimensions position meaningful work not merely as an individual preference, but as a socially embedded and context-dependent experience shaped by both personal and organizational factors.

Research on work orientation further deepens this understanding by highlighting the role of calling in shaping how individuals interpret their work (Wrzesniewski *et al.*, 1997; Duffy *et al.*, 2018). Individuals who perceive their work as a calling tend to report higher levels of engagement, satisfaction, and resilience, as their work is aligned with a broader sense of purpose and identity. However, this perspective also reveals an important vulnerability. When organizational conditions fail to support that sense of purpose, individuals with a strong calling orientation may experience greater frustration and psychological strain. This suggests that meaningful work is not inherently stable, but contingent on the alignment between individual orientations and structural conditions.

Recent developments in the literature have also drawn attention to the potential downsides of meaningful work. Studies on existential labor and the dark side of meaningfulness show that sustaining a sense of purpose can require significant emotional effort, particularly in environments characterized by high demands or value misalignment (Bailey *et al.*, 2017; Oelberger, 2019). Under such conditions, meaningful work may become a source of tension rather than fulfillment, reinforcing the idea that meaningfulness is fragile and context-dependent rather than inherently beneficial.

Despite these advances, the dominant orientation of the literature remains largely state-based. Meaningful work is typically conceptualized as a condition that individuals either experience or lack at a given point in time. This perspective has been useful for identifying antecedents and outcomes, but it offers limited insight into how meaningfulness evolves under changing structural conditions. In contemporary work environments shaped by continuous digital transformation, this limitation becomes increasingly significant. Job roles, task structures, and interaction patterns are constantly reconfigured by technological systems, making it difficult to assume that meaningfulness remains stable over time (Kellogg *et al.*, 2020; Meijerink & Bondarouk, 2023).

This gap calls for a shift toward a process-based perspective. Rather than treating meaningful work as a static state, it becomes necessary to understand it as a dynamic experience that is continuously constructed, reinforced, and potentially weakened through ongoing interaction between individuals and their work environment. Such a perspective allows for a more nuanced explanation of contemporary work phenomena, where declines in engagement and well-being often emerge gradually rather than abruptly.

By reframing meaningful work as a dynamic process, this study provides the conceptual foundation for introducing meaning erosion as a mechanism through which meaningfulness can deteriorate over time. This shift enables a more precise examination of how structural transformations in digital work systems reshape the conditions under which meaning is sustained or lost.

### **3. Core Concept: Meaning Erosion**

#### **3.1 From Meaningful Work to Meaning Erosion**

As outlined in the preceding section, existing research has made substantial progress in identifying the conditions under which work is experienced as meaningful. However, this literature remains largely oriented toward explaining the presence of meaning rather than its deterioration. In digitally mediated work environments characterized by continuous structural change, this limitation becomes increasingly problematic. Meaningfulness cannot be assumed to remain stable when job roles, task structures, and interaction patterns are constantly reshaped by technological systems (Kellogg *et al.*, 2020; Meijerink & Bondarouk, 2023).

To address this limitation, this study shifts the analytical focus from the presence of meaning to the process through which meaningfulness is gradually weakened. This shift reflects the need for a more dynamic understanding of work experience, where declines in engagement and purpose often emerge through cumulative exposure to changing work conditions rather than through discrete events.

#### **3.2 Defining Meaning Erosion**

Meaning erosion is defined as the gradual weakening of an individual's sense of purpose, significance, and identity in work as a result of sustained structural and psychological transformations in digitally mediated work environments.

This definition highlights three key characteristics. First, meaning erosion is gradual and cumulative. It unfolds over time through repeated exposure to work conditions that weaken the individual's capacity to construct meaning. Second, it is multidimensional, affecting core components of meaningful work, including purpose, perceived significance, and identity integration (Rosso *et al.*, 2010; Martela & Pessi, 2018). Third, it is structurally embedded. Meaning erosion does not arise solely from individual differences, but from the interaction between individuals and evolving work systems shaped by digital transformation.

#### **3.3 Distinguishing Meaning Erosion from Related Constructs**

To establish conceptual clarity, meaning erosion must be distinguished from related constructs that have been widely studied in organizational research.

Meaningful work refers to a positive experiential state, whereas meaning erosion captures a negative dynamic process. While meaningful work explains what makes work significant, meaning erosion explains how and why that significance declines over time.

Meaninglessness is typically treated as a static absence of meaning, often measured at a single point in time. In contrast, meaning erosion emphasizes temporal progression and

cumulative change, focusing on the transition from meaningful engagement toward diminished significance.

Work alienation is commonly conceptualized as a condition of disconnection from work, characterized by a lack of control, purpose, and identification (Nair & Vohra, 2010; Chiaburu *et al.*, 2013). Meaning erosion differs in that it captures the process through which such disconnection develops, positioning it as a precursor rather than an outcome.

Burnout represents a psychological state of exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced efficacy. Although burnout may result from prolonged meaning erosion, the two constructs are analytically distinct. Meaning erosion reflects the weakening of meaning as a foundational experience, whereas burnout reflects the psychological consequences of that weakening.

### **3.4 Meaning Erosion as a Processual and Mechanism-Based Construct**

A central contribution of this study lies in conceptualizing meaning erosion as a process driven by identifiable mechanisms. Rather than treating meaning loss as an abstract outcome, this perspective specifies how structural transformations in work systems translate into changes in subjective experience.

Meaning erosion emerges from the interaction between structural transformations in digital work systems, psychological processes related to interpretation and identity, and behavioral responses such as disengagement and withdrawal. This mechanism-based perspective enables a more precise explanation of how digital transformation affects the human experience of work.

Importantly, meaning erosion is not assumed to be inevitable. Its emergence depends on how work systems are designed and managed, suggesting the possibility of moderating conditions and interventions that can mitigate or reverse the erosion process.

### **3.5 Positioning Meaning Erosion in Digital Work Contexts**

The relevance of meaning erosion becomes particularly evident in digitally mediated work environments. Features such as algorithmic coordination, task modularization, and reduced social interaction reshape how individuals engage with their work (Kellogg *et al.*, 2020; Wood *et al.*, 2019; Meijerink & Bondarouk, 2023). These structural conditions alter the processes through which meaning is constructed, often weakening the connections between individual effort, social recognition, and identity.

By conceptualizing meaning erosion as a process embedded within these structural dynamics, this study provides a critical link between digital transformation and the experience of meaningful work. This perspective moves beyond descriptive accounts and establishes a foundation for identifying the mechanisms through which meaning is progressively diminished.

## **4. Mechanisms of Meaning Erosion in Digital Work Systems**

### **4.1 Work Fragmentation and the Loss of Perceived Contribution**

A primary mechanism through which meaning erosion occurs is the increasing fragmentation of work in digitally mediated environments. Algorithmic coordination and platform-based systems tend to decompose complex tasks into smaller, standardized, and measurable units. While this enhances efficiency and scalability, it alters how individuals perceive the significance of their contributions.

The literature on meaningful work highlights the importance of task significance, defined as the extent to which a job has a substantial impact on others (Grant, 2008). When work is fragmented into discrete micro-tasks, this sense of impact becomes less visible. Individuals

may complete tasks efficiently without understanding how their efforts contribute to broader organizational or societal outcomes. Over time, this weakens the cognitive and emotional link between individual effort and perceived contribution.

This mechanism does not eliminate meaning immediately. Instead, it gradually dilutes the perception of contribution through repeated engagement in isolated tasks. As individuals lose sight of the broader purpose of their work, the foundational dimension of meaningfulness is progressively weakened.

## **4.2 Depersonalization and the Erosion of Relational Meaning**

Meaningful work is inherently relational, constructed not only through task execution but also through interaction, recognition, and social connection (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009; Rosso *et al.*, 2010). Digital work systems, however, often mediate or reduce these interactions through technological interfaces, replacing direct human engagement with automated processes.

Algorithmic management systems frequently substitute human supervision with data-driven feedback, while remote and platform-based work arrangements limit opportunities for meaningful interpersonal exchange. As a result, individuals may experience a reduced sense of being seen, valued, or connected within their work environment.

The absence of relational interaction weakens key sources of meaning, including recognition, belonging, and shared purpose. Research on workplace loneliness suggests that reduced social connection undermines both well-being and engagement (Özçelik & Barsade, 2018). In digitally mediated environments, where interactions are often transactional, this effect is amplified. Over time, the erosion of relational meaning contributes to a growing sense of detachment from work.

## **4.3 Instrumentalization and the Reduction of Work to Output**

A third mechanism of meaning erosion is the increasing instrumentalization of work. Digital work systems emphasize performance metrics, efficiency, and quantifiable outputs, framing work primarily as a means to achieve measurable results. While such systems improve accountability, they also risk reducing work to a purely instrumental activity.

The meaningful work literature emphasizes the importance of intrinsic value, where work is experienced as worthwhile in itself (Michaelson *et al.*, 2014). In highly instrumented environments, however, attention shifts toward external indicators such as productivity scores, ratings, and algorithmic evaluations. This shift can crowd out intrinsic motivation, as individuals become more focused on meeting system-defined targets than engaging with the deeper purpose of their work.

As work becomes increasingly defined by output rather than meaning, individuals may begin to interpret their roles in utilitarian terms. This reorientation weakens the intrinsic dimension of meaningful work, contributing to the gradual erosion of purpose and significance.

## **4.4 Algorithmic Control and the Loss of Autonomy**

Autonomy has long been recognized as a key condition for meaningful work, as it enables agency, self-expression, and ownership over one's tasks (Grant, 2008; Rosso *et al.*, 2010). In digitally mediated work systems, however, autonomy is often constrained by algorithmic control mechanisms that regulate task allocation, pacing, and evaluation.

Algorithmic management systems operate through data-driven optimization, frequently with limited transparency or human discretion (Kellogg *et al.*, 2020; Meijerink & Bondarouk, 2023). As decision-making authority shifts from individuals to algorithms, workers may experience a diminished sense of control over how their work is performed.

This reduction in autonomy alters the experiential quality of work. Tasks may still be completed effectively, but the sense of ownership and agency is weakened. Work becomes externally directed rather than internally enacted. Over time, this loss of agency undermines the capacity for self-expression and personal engagement, which are central to the experience of meaningful work.

#### 4.5 Identity Disruption and the Weakening of Self–Work Integration

Meaningful work is closely tied to identity, as individuals use their work roles to define who they are and how they contribute to the world (Pratt *et al.*, 2013; Rosso *et al.*, 2010). Digital transformation, however, can disrupt this relationship by reshaping job roles and reducing opportunities for identity expression.

Standardization, automation, and task modularization may limit the extent to which individuals can apply judgment, creativity, or unique expertise. When work becomes highly standardized, individuals may perceive their roles as interchangeable, weakening the sense of personal distinctiveness. This undermines the integration between self and work, which is a critical source of meaning.

Repeated exposure to such conditions can lead to identity disruption, where individuals no longer experience their work as an extension of who they are. Although they may continue to perform their roles effectively, the connection between work and self becomes increasingly attenuated. This represents a deeper stage of meaning erosion, where work loses its function as a site of identity affirmation.

#### 4.6 Integrative Mechanism: From Structural Transformation to Meaning Loss

Taken together, these mechanisms illustrate that meaning erosion emerges through the interaction of multiple, interrelated processes. Digital work systems do not directly remove meaning. Instead, they reshape the conditions under which meaning is constructed, progressively weakening its core dimensions.

**Table 1.** Mechanisms of Meaning Erosion: Structural Triggers, Experiential Effects, and Impact on Meaning

<b>Mechanism</b>	<b>Structural Trigger</b>	<b>Experiential Effect</b>	<b>Impact on Meaning</b>
Work Fragmentation	Task decomposition, modularization, micro-tasking	Reduced visibility of overall contribution	Weakening of perceived significance and purpose
Depersonalization	Reduced interpersonal interaction, algorithmic mediation	Loss of social connection and recognition	Erosion of relational meaning and belonging
Instrumentalization	Emphasis on metrics, outputs, performance tracking	Shift from intrinsic to extrinsic evaluation	Decline in intrinsic value of work
Reduced Autonomy (Algorithmic Control)	Algorithmic task allocation, monitoring, decision automation	Diminished sense of agency and control	Weakening of ownership and self-expression
Identity Disruption	Standardization, automation, role interchangeability	Reduced alignment between self and work role	Breakdown of identity

*Source: Developed by the author*

Table 1 clarifies how each mechanism operates as a distinct but interrelated pathway linking structural features of digital work systems to the erosion of meaningful work. By explicitly mapping triggers, experiences, and impacts, Table 1 strengthens the analytical precision of the framework and directly supports the transition from conceptual development to empirical testing. It also ensures that the mechanisms are not treated as abstract categories, but as clearly defined processes with identifiable effects on the core dimensions of meaningful work.

Each mechanism targets a different aspect of meaningful work. Fragmentation reduces perceived contribution, depersonalization weakens relational meaning, instrumentalization diminishes intrinsic value, algorithmic control constrains autonomy, and identity disruption undermines self-work integration. Their combined effect produces a cumulative and reinforcing process in which meaningfulness gradually deteriorates.

This integrative perspective shifts the analysis from isolated factors to causal pathways. By identifying how structural features of digital work systems translate into subjective experiences, it provides a mechanism-based explanation of why meaning loss emerges in contemporary organizational contexts.

## **5. Conceptual Framework: A Mechanism-Based Model of Meaning Erosion**

### **5.1 Linking Digital Work Systems to Meaning Loss**

Building on the preceding analysis, this study proposes a mechanism-based framework that explains how structural transformations in digital work systems translate into the erosion of meaningful work. Rather than treating meaningfulness as a direct outcome of technological change, the framework conceptualizes meaning loss as the result of intervening processes that reshape how individuals experience and interpret their work.

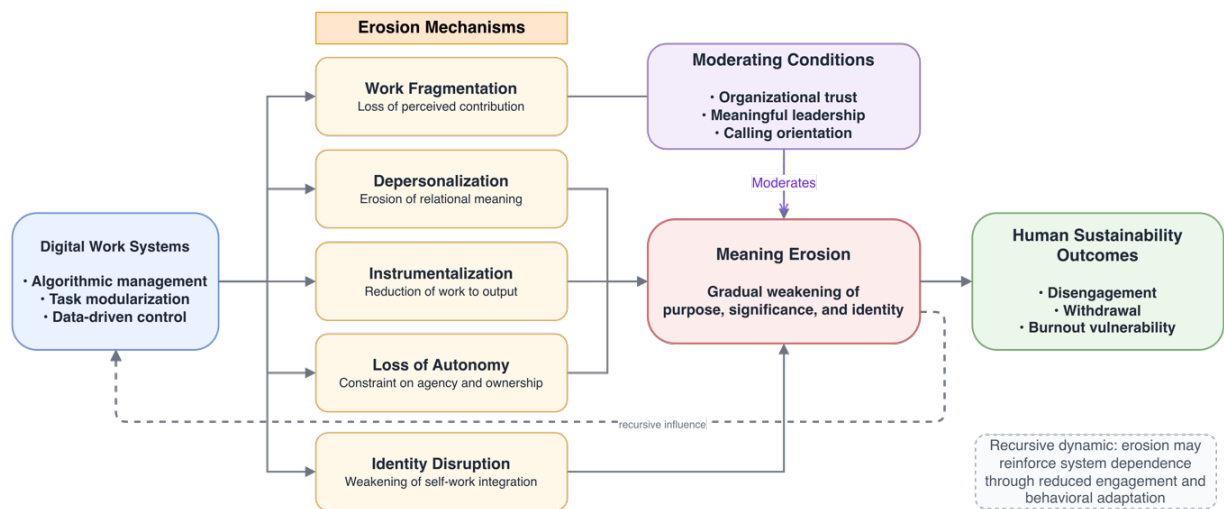
Digital work systems are characterized by algorithmic coordination, data-driven decision-making, and task modularization (Kellogg *et al.*, 2020; Meijerink & Bondarouk, 2023). These features alter the structure of work without necessarily removing its functional value. However, they transform the conditions under which meaning is constructed, creating the basis for a gradual decline in perceived purpose, significance, and identity.

### **5.2 Mechanisms as Mediating Processes**

At the core of the framework, meaning erosion is driven by a set of mediating mechanisms that translate structural characteristics into subjective experience. These mechanisms operate as processual pathways through which digital work systems influence how individuals perceive their roles, contributions, and relationships.

Rather than acting independently, these mechanisms are interrelated and cumulative. Their combined effect progressively weakens the core dimensions of meaningful work. This mechanism-based perspective shifts the analytical focus from identifying isolated predictors to explaining how structural conditions generate meaning loss through identifiable causal processes.

Building on this conceptual foundation, the study proposes a mechanism-based framework as illustrated in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** A Mechanism-Based Model of Meaning Erosion in Digital Work Systems  
 Source: Developed by the author

Figure 1 illustrates the proposed mechanism based model linking structural characteristics of digital work systems to the process of meaning erosion. Digital work systems reshape how work is structured and experienced, activating a set of interrelated mechanisms including fragmentation, depersonalization, instrumentalization, reduced autonomy, and identity disruption. These mechanisms operate cumulatively to weaken core dimensions of meaningful work, leading to a gradual decline in purpose, perceived contribution, and identity integration. The model also incorporates moderating conditions that shape how individuals interpret and respond to these structural changes.

### 5.3 Outcome: The Experience of Meaning Loss

The outcome of this process is conceptualized as a continuum of meaning loss, ranging from diminished engagement to deeper forms of psychological withdrawal and alienation. As meaning erosion progresses, individuals experience a gradual decline in purpose, perceived contribution, and identity integration.

This decline manifests in behavioral and psychological outcomes that have been widely documented in the literature, including reduced engagement, increased disengagement, and heightened vulnerability to burnout (Allan *et al.*, 2019; Steger *et al.*, 2012). Within this framework, these outcomes are not treated as isolated phenomena, but as consequences of an underlying erosion process driven by structural and psychological dynamics.

### 5.4 Moderating Conditions

Although the framework emphasizes the mechanisms of erosion, it also incorporates moderating conditions that shape how individuals respond to digital work systems. These conditions influence whether structural changes lead to meaning loss or are absorbed without significant erosion.

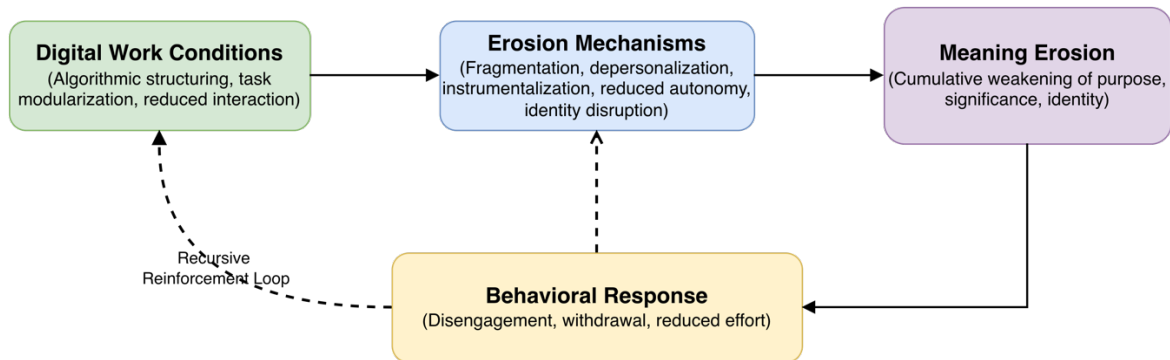
Organizational trust can mitigate negative interpretations of algorithmic control by enhancing perceptions of fairness and legitimacy. Meaningful leadership can sustain a sense of purpose by framing work within a broader narrative and recognizing individual contributions. Similarly, a calling orientation may provide an internal source of meaning that buffers against structurally induced erosion (Duffy *et al.*, 2018).

These moderating factors highlight that meaning erosion is contingent rather than inevitable, and that organizational practices can play a critical role in preserving meaningful work.

### 5.5 A Dynamic and Recursive Process

A key feature of the proposed framework is its dynamic and recursive nature. Meaning erosion is not a one-time event, but an ongoing process in which structural conditions and individual responses continuously interact. As individuals experience declining meaningfulness, their behavioral responses, such as disengagement or reduced effort, may reinforce the very structural conditions that contribute to erosion.

A key extension of the proposed framework lies in its dynamic perspective. While the preceding model explains the structural and mechanism based pathways of meaning erosion, it does not fully capture how these processes unfold over time. In digitally mediated work environments, exposure to structural pressures is continuous, and individuals' responses evolve through repeated interaction with these conditions. This calls for a dynamic representation that makes explicit the temporal and recursive nature of meaning erosion.



**Figure 2.** Dynamic and Recursive Process of Meaning Erosion

*Source: Developed by the author*

Figure 2 illustrates the dynamic and recursive process through which meaning erosion develops over time. Structural conditions initiate mechanisms that weaken meaningfulness, but the resulting behavioral responses such as disengagement and withdrawal reinforce these conditions, creating a self-reinforcing cycle. This recursive pattern explains why meaning loss often intensifies rather than stabilizes. It also highlights the possibility of intervention, as changes in structural conditions or individual responses may interrupt the cycle and restore meaningfulness.

This recursive dynamic suggests the potential for both negative and positive cycles. Unchecked erosion may lead to self-reinforcing patterns of disengagement, while targeted interventions may disrupt these cycles and restore meaningfulness. This perspective provides a more realistic representation of contemporary work environments, where outcomes evolve over time rather than remaining static.

## 5.6 Theoretical Contribution of the Framework

The proposed model advances the literature in three key ways. First, it reframes meaningful work as a dynamic process rather than a static condition. Second, it integrates insights from meaningful work, digital work, and organizational behavior into a unified explanatory structure. Third, it provides a mechanism-based account of meaning loss, offering a clearer understanding of how and why meaningfulness deteriorates in digitally mediated contexts.

By linking structural transformation to human experience through identifiable processes, the framework establishes a foundation for both empirical testing and practical intervention.

## 6. Proposition Development

The mechanism-based framework proposed in this study conceptualizes meaning erosion as the result of interactions between structural characteristics of digital work systems and the processes through which individuals construct meaning in their work. To translate this

framework into a testable research agenda, this section formulates a set of propositions that specify the relationships between structural antecedents, mediating mechanisms, outcomes, and moderating conditions.

## 6.1 Digital Work Systems and Meaning Erosion

Digital work systems reshape how work is structured, coordinated, and evaluated through algorithmic management, data-driven monitoring, and task modularization (Kellogg *et al.*, 2020; Meijerink & Bondarouk, 2023). While these systems enhance efficiency, they may weaken the structural conditions necessary for sustaining meaningful work, particularly those related to autonomy, social interaction, and perceived contribution (Rosso *et al.*, 2010; Martela & Pessi, 2018).

**Proposition 1:** *The greater the intensity of digital work system characteristics, the greater the likelihood of meaning erosion among employees.*

## 6.2 Mechanisms of Meaning Erosion

The effects of digital work systems on meaning are not direct, but operate through a set of mediating mechanisms that reshape how individuals interpret their work experiences.

Digital work systems are associated with increased task decomposition and modularization, which fragment work into discrete units and weaken the perception of holistic contribution (Grant, 2008; Wood *et al.*, 2019).

**Proposition 2:** *Digital work system characteristics are positively associated with work fragmentation.*

**Proposition 3:** *Work fragmentation is negatively associated with perceived contribution and positively associated with meaning erosion.*

Digital work environments also reduce opportunities for direct interpersonal interaction, leading to depersonalized work relationships and diminished relational meaning (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009; Özçelik & Barsade, 2018).

**Proposition 4:** *Digital work system characteristics are positively associated with depersonalization.*

**Proposition 5:** *Depersonalization is negatively associated with relational meaning and positively associated with meaning erosion.*

In addition, the emphasis on quantifiable outputs and performance metrics promotes the instrumentalization of work, shifting attention away from intrinsic value toward external evaluation (Michaelson *et al.*, 2014).

**Proposition 6:** *Digital work system characteristics are positively associated with the instrumentalization of work.*

**Proposition 7:** *Instrumentalization is negatively associated with perceived intrinsic value and positively associated with meaning erosion.*

Algorithmic control further constrains employee autonomy by embedding decision-making within technological systems, reducing opportunities for agency and self-expression (Kellogg *et al.*, 2020).

**Proposition 8:** *Digital work system characteristics are positively associated with algorithmic control and negatively associated with perceived autonomy.*

**Proposition 9:** *Reduced perceived autonomy is positively associated with meaning erosion.*

Finally, structural standardization and automation may disrupt the alignment between work and identity, weakening the integration of self and work roles (Pratt *et al.*, 2013).

**Proposition 10:** *Digital work system characteristics are positively associated with identity disruption.*

**Proposition 11:** *Identity disruption is positively associated with meaning erosion.*

### 6.3 Outcomes of Meaning Erosion

Meaningful work functions as a psychological resource that supports engagement, well-being, and performance (Allan *et al.*, 2019; Steger *et al.*, 2012). As this resource is progressively weakened, individuals are more likely to experience disengagement, withdrawal, and psychological strain.

**Proposition 12:** *Meaning erosion is negatively associated with employee engagement.*

**Proposition 13:** *Meaning erosion is positively associated with psychological withdrawal and work alienation.*

**Proposition 14:** *Meaning erosion is positively associated with burnout vulnerability.*

### 6.4 Moderating Conditions

The impact of digital work systems on meaning erosion is not uniform. Certain organizational and individual factors may buffer or amplify the effects of structural change.

Organizational trust can mitigate negative interpretations of algorithmic control by enhancing perceptions of fairness and legitimacy. Meaningful leadership can sustain purpose and recognition, while a calling orientation may provide an internal source of meaning that offsets structural deficiencies (Duffy *et al.*, 2018).

**Proposition 15:** *Organizational trust weakens the positive relationship between digital work system characteristics and meaning erosion.*

**Proposition 16:** *Meaningful leadership weakens the positive relationship between erosion mechanisms and meaning erosion.*

**Proposition 17:** *A stronger calling orientation weakens the positive relationship between erosion mechanisms and meaning erosion.*

### 6.5 Summary of the Proposition Set

Taken together, these propositions specify a coherent causal structure in which digital work system characteristics influence meaning erosion through mediating mechanisms, leading to behavioral and psychological outcomes, while being shaped by moderating conditions. This structure provides a foundation for empirical testing and positions meaning erosion as a central explanatory construct linking digital transformation to human sustainability outcomes in organizations.

The following table translates the conceptual framework into a structured set of theoretically grounded propositions. It is necessary to make explicit how structural conditions, mediating mechanisms, and outcomes are linked in a testable form, thereby strengthening the analytical rigor and empirical applicability of the model.

**Table 2.** Theoretical Propositions and Conceptual Relationships

	<b>Proposition &amp; Conceptual Relationship</b>	<b>Theoretical Logic</b>
P1	Digital work system characteristics → Meaning erosion	Structural intensification of algorithmic and data-driven work weakens conditions necessary for sustaining meaningful work
P2	Digital work system characteristics → Work fragmentation	Task modularization increases decomposition of work into discrete units

	<b>Proposition &amp; Conceptual Relationship</b>	<b>Theoretical Logic</b>
P3	Work fragmentation → Meaning erosion	Reduced visibility of contribution weakens perceived significance
P4	Digital work system characteristics → Depersonalization	Technological mediation reduces interpersonal interaction
P5	Depersonalization → Meaning erosion	Loss of relational connection undermines meaning construction
P6	Digital work system characteristics → Instrumentalization	Emphasis on metrics shifts focus toward output
P7	Instrumentalization → Meaning erosion	Intrinsic value is replaced by extrinsic evaluation
P8	Digital work system characteristics → Reduced autonomy	Algorithmic control constrains individual agency
P9	Reduced autonomy → Meaning erosion	Loss of agency weakens ownership and engagement
P10	Digital work system characteristics → Identity disruption	Standardization reduces role distinctiveness
P11	Identity disruption → Meaning erosion	Weakening of self-work integration diminishes meaning
P12	Meaning erosion → Reduced engagement	Decline in meaningfulness lowers motivational investment
P13	Meaning erosion → Psychological withdrawal and alienation	Erosion produces disconnection from work
P14	Meaning erosion → Burnout vulnerability	Sustained loss of meaning increases psychological strain
P15	Organizational trust moderates (Digital systems → Meaning erosion)	Trust buffers negative interpretation of structural control
P16	Meaningful leadership moderates (Mechanisms → Meaning erosion)	Leadership reframes purpose and reinforces meaning
P17	Calling orientation moderates (Mechanisms → Meaning erosion)	Internal sense of purpose offsets structural deficiencies

Source: Developed by the author

Table 2 consolidates the full propositional logic of the framework by explicitly linking structural antecedents, mediating mechanisms, outcomes, and moderating conditions. Unlike Table 1, which clarifies how mechanisms operate conceptually, Table 2 translates the model into a coherent set of testable statements. This strengthens the article's contribution by demonstrating that the framework is not only theoretically integrative but also empirically actionable, thereby positioning meaning erosion as a viable construct for future quantitative and longitudinal investigation.

## 7. Discussion

### 7.1 Reframing Meaningful Work in the Digital Age

This study advances the literature by reframing meaningful work as a dynamic and processual experience rather than a static psychological state. Prior research has established the importance of meaningful work for engagement, well-being, and performance (Rosso *et al.*, 2010; Martela & Pessi, 2018; Lysova *et al.*, 2019; Allan *et al.*, 2019), but has largely focused on identifying its antecedents and outcomes at a single point in time. Such a perspective is increasingly limited in digitally mediated work environments, where structural conditions are continuously reshaped by technological systems.

By introducing the concept of meaning erosion, this study shifts the analytical focus toward the gradual and cumulative processes through which meaningfulness is weakened. This

perspective provides a more temporally sensitive understanding of work experience, capturing how declines in purpose, significance, and identity emerge through ongoing interaction between individuals and evolving work systems. Meaningful work is thus repositioned as a contingent and fragile construct that requires continuous reinforcement rather than a stable condition that can be assumed.

## **7.2 A Mechanism-Based Explanation of Meaning Loss**

A central contribution of this study lies in its mechanism-based explanation of how digital transformation affects the human experience of work. Existing research on digital work has primarily focused on issues such as control, autonomy, and performance (Kellogg *et al.*, 2020; Meijerink & Bondarouk, 2023), while meaningful work research has emphasized psychological experience without fully accounting for structural change. This study bridges these perspectives by specifying the causal pathways that link structural features of digital work systems to subjective experiences of meaning.

By identifying mechanisms such as fragmentation, depersonalization, instrumentalization, reduced autonomy, and identity disruption, the framework moves beyond descriptive accounts and provides a structured explanation of how and why meaningfulness deteriorates. This mechanism-based approach aligns with recent calls for more explanatory theorizing in organizational research, where contributions are increasingly evaluated based on their ability to clarify underlying processes rather than simply identify relationships.

## **7.3 Integrating Fragmented Research Streams**

Another key contribution of this study is the integration of previously fragmented research domains. The literature on meaningful work, digital work, and work alienation has developed largely in parallel, each offering partial insights into the nature of contemporary work experience. Meaningful work research has focused on positive psychological states, digital work research on structural transformation, and alienation research on disconnection and disengagement.

The proposed framework integrates these perspectives into a unified explanatory model. It positions meaning erosion as the process that connects structural transformation to experiential outcomes, thereby providing a missing link between technological change and human consequences. This integration extends existing theory by showing that disengagement and burnout are not isolated outcomes, but manifestations of a deeper erosion process shaped by the design of work systems.

## **7.4 Implications for Organizational Theory and Practice**

The findings have important implications for both theory and practice. From a theoretical standpoint, the study suggests that meaningful work should be conceptualized as a strategic resource embedded within organizational systems. Just as organizations invest in technology and human capital, they must also consider how work design influences employees' sense of purpose and identity.

From a practical perspective, the framework highlights specific areas for intervention. Organizations can mitigate meaning erosion by designing work that preserves visibility of contribution, fosters social connection, and supports autonomy. Transparency in algorithmic systems may enhance trust, while leadership practices that emphasize purpose and recognition can help sustain meaningfulness even in digitally mediated environments.

These implications suggest that digital transformation should not be evaluated solely in terms of efficiency and performance. Its success also depends on the extent to which it preserves or enhances the human experience of work.

## 7.5 Boundary Conditions and Theoretical Scope

Despite its contributions, the framework is subject to several boundary conditions. First, it is primarily developed in the context of digitally mediated work environments. While some mechanisms may apply more broadly, their intensity is likely to be greater in contexts characterized by algorithmic management, platform-based labor, and reduced interpersonal interaction.

Second, the framework assumes that meaningful work is an important driver of employee experience. However, individuals differ in their work orientations. Those who approach work primarily as a job rather than a calling may be less sensitive to meaning erosion (Wrzesniewski *et al.*, 1997; Duffy *et al.*, 2018). This suggests that the impact of meaning erosion may vary across individuals and contexts.

Third, cultural and institutional factors may shape how meaning is constructed and experienced. The extent to which digital transformation leads to meaning erosion is likely to differ across societies with varying norms, values, and labor market conditions. These factors highlight the need for contextual sensitivity in applying the framework.

## 7.6 Future Research Directions

The framework opens several avenues for future research. First, empirical validation is needed to test the proposed relationships between structural conditions, mechanisms, and outcomes. Quantitative studies using structural equation modeling can examine the relative strength of different pathways, while measurement development for meaning erosion represents a critical step.

Second, qualitative approaches such as interviews and netnography can provide deeper insight into how individuals experience meaning erosion in practice, particularly in relation to identity and social interaction. Third, longitudinal research is needed to capture the temporal dynamics of erosion, as the process unfolds over time rather than at a single point.

Finally, future research may explore conditions under which digital transformation enhances rather than undermines meaningful work. Identifying such conditions would contribute to a more balanced understanding of the relationship between technology and human experience.

## 7.7 The Human Challenge of Digital Transformation

At a broader level, this study highlights a fundamental tension in contemporary organizations. Digital transformation enables unprecedented levels of efficiency, scalability, and innovation. At the same time, it reshapes the conditions under which individuals experience meaning in their work. If left unaddressed, this tension may lead to organizations that are technologically advanced but psychologically unsustainable.

The findings suggest that the central challenge of the digital age is not only to build more efficient systems, but to design work that remains meaningful within them. Understanding and addressing meaning erosion is therefore essential for sustaining both human engagement and organizational performance in an increasingly digital world.

## 8. Conclusion

This study develops a process-based understanding of meaningful work by introducing the concept of meaning erosion as a mechanism through which meaningfulness is gradually weakened in digitally mediated work systems. Rather than treating meaningful work as a static condition, the study demonstrates that meaning is continuously shaped by the

structural design of work and can deteriorate through cumulative exposure to specific organizational conditions.

By proposing a mechanism-based framework, the study explains how features of digital work systems reshape the experience of work through processes that weaken purpose, perceived contribution, and identity integration. This perspective provides a more comprehensive explanation of why disengagement, withdrawal, and burnout persist despite increasing technological sophistication.

The findings underscore a critical implication for contemporary organizations. Digital transformation does not automatically lead to better work. Without deliberate attention to how work is experienced, organizations risk creating environments that are efficient but psychologically unsustainable. Meaningful work should therefore be recognized as a central dimension of organizational design and long-term performance.

Ultimately, the future of work depends not only on how effectively organizations leverage technology, but on how well they preserve and reconstruct meaning within increasingly digital systems. Addressing meaning erosion is essential for sustaining human engagement and ensuring that technological progress aligns with the broader goal of meaningful and sustainable work.

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