

# Do what you love or love what you do?

## The perception of Millennials on work meaning and engagement

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### ABSTRACT

**Purpose** They are the upcoming workforce in organizational life: The Millennials. While a significant amount of studies already placed emphasis on the characteristics of this young generation in comparison to previous generations and how workplace demands change, limited empirical research has been done in the field of Millennials on work meaning and engagement in work and organizations. How are these concepts defined specifically by this generation?

**Value** Expanding prior research, the present study connects existing fundamental mechanisms regarding work meaning and engagement in a way that is not yet studied, resulting in several novel understandings.

**Design** By means of a qualitative study in the form of twenty interviews among the Millennial generation in The Netherlands, this study offers a framework and practical implications how organizations can anticipate on this upcoming prominent force in the workplace.

**Findings** Results indicate Millennials' perception concerning work and organizations covers three key themes, that is freedom, egomania or self-centeredness and hedonism. Besides being dominated in their liberating character, freedom is expressed in work-life balance and how Millennials engage with organizations. Their self-centered focus is conveyed in various aspects of work meaning and how the generation engages with work. Finally, hedonism prevails in their base of work choice and overall perspective on life.

**Keywords:** work meaning – work engagement – organizational engagement  
Millennials – generation Y

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## 1 – INTRODUCTION

In the beginning of 2016, The Washington Post wrote an article about individuals who are rather buying experiences than buying stuff. Millennials – or Generation Y – are born between 1980 and 2000 (Beekman, 2011; Eisner, 2005; Jones, 2007; Stein, 2013) and are the offspring of both Baby Boomers (born between 1945 and 1960)(Eisner, 2005) and the early set of generation X (born between 1965 and 1980)(Eisner, 2005; Kehrli & Sopp, 2006; McGlynn, 2005). With headlines as: *“Why are Millennials never happy?”*, *“Millennials want jobs to be development opportunities”* and *“Millennials not connecting with their companies’ mission”*, The Internet is filled with articles about this young generation. Thus, what is it about the Millennials we do and do not know yet?

Above articles are just few of the many examples presenting that the influence from Millennials expresses itself in many areas. Ikea shows its customers living rooms from 35m<sup>2</sup> to show that a happy home does not depend on its size. Videos ([theminimalists.com/tedx](http://theminimalists.com/tedx)) and books (e.g. *Stuffocation*, *living more with less* from J. Wallman) give us guidelines to life up to the ‘less is more’ principle. Not merely in daily life, also in organizations the influence from this upcoming generation is noticeable. Putting their energy more into experiences than things, Millennials differ from their ancestors in multiple ways. Where Generation X retrospect on their careers and come to notice that workhours took toll of the rest of their lives (Chalofsky, 2010) and just as Baby Boomers have a reputation of being workaholics (Alsop, 2008; Eisner, 2005), their children are now joining the workforce and are wanting to create more balance between work and life (Alsop, 2008; Tapia, 2008). The generation focuses on meaningfulness and fun in their jobs (Eisner, 2005), while also creating a meaningful existence beside their work (Ng, Schweitzer & Lyons, 2010), resulting in flexible career paths (Carless & Wintle, 2007). What are the Millennials’ perceptions on work meaning and engagement with work and organizations, when we look from their point of view?

Millennials and their ancestors are currently both active members of organizations. Where their ancestors are slowly but surely ‘sweeping off’ the work field and perhaps even heading towards retirement, members of the Millennial generation are graduated and therefore the most recent demographic cohort to enter the workplace (Eisner, 2005). As Millennials are becoming the leading force in organizations, it is vital for managers to gain insight in the way they engage with their work and what satisfies them in a job (Kaifi, Nafei, Khanfar & Kaifi, 2012).

Not only companies, as well institutions (Oblinger, 2003) and facilities (Jones, 2007) derive value from understanding this new generation. A main reason might be to create stronger engagement with the company, resulting in a lower job transfer rate. Thus, what are the key drivers of work meaning and engagement among this young generation and how are they perhaps related? As mentioned, prior research has placed focus on the characteristics of Millennials and how they wish to be treated in organizational atmospheres (Kaifi et al., 2012). However, most prior research regarding Millennials has been done mainly in the form of reviews (cf. Eisner, 2006; Meister & Willyerd, 2010; Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010) or questionnaires (cf. Kaifi et al., 2012; Ng, Schweitzer & Lyons, 2010). To create new insights, this present study offers a qualitative approach to deliver better understanding of the concepts of work meaning and engagement by Millennials.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to describe the perception of work meaning and engagement for Millennials, resulting in the following research questions:

1. What is 'work meaning' for Millennials?
2. What are Millennials' perceptions on engagement with their work and organizations?

By means of twenty interviews this study delivers an empirical contribution done in the field of work meaning, engagement and the potential relationship between these concepts. In addition, by in particular focusing on the definition of these concepts through the lens of Millennials, this study offers new theoretical perspectives and practical implications for employees and organizational life.

## 2 – WORK MEANING AND ENGAGEMENT

### **Work meaning**

*‘The meaning of life is to give life meaning’*

– Viktor E. Frankl

Individuals seek for a sense of purpose, value, self-efficacy and self-worth in their lives (Baumeister, 1991). Purpose – or meaning – is a tool for individuals to achieve stability in life (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002). However, prior scholars show that finding a clear definition of meaning is quite challenging (Rosso, Dekas & Wrzesniewski, 2010). Thus, to come to a more concrete understanding of work meaning, a wise decision may be to first exclude what meaning is *not*.

### **What meaning is not**

Meaningfulness is not the same as happiness. Although there is an overlap, there are also some important differences. Where happiness is related to individuals being a ‘taker’ with their main focus on basic needs being fulfilled, individuals that consider their life as meaningful are characterized by being a ‘giver’ and mention their life has purpose and value. Moreover, where happiness puts the emphasis on the present, a meaningful life involves events from the past, present and future. Individuals with a meaningful life tend to frequently think deeply and reflect on past challenges and battles (Baumeister, Vohs, Aaker & Garbinsky, 2013).

Stereotypes describe Millennials as being self-centered and self-absorbed (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010). In their process to give more meaning to their work and life outside their jobs, Millennials might be characterized by being a giver rather than a taker or vice versa. Furthermore, does this generation reflect on meaning as a present event or do they integrate past and future events as well? Yet, although Millennials blend work with the rest of their lives (Meister & Willyerd, 2010), the meaning of life differs from the meaning of work.

### **Work meaning**

Having general meaning in one’s life fosters well-being and health (Steger, Frazier, Oishi & Kaler, 2006), higher psychological adaptability (Jung & Yoon, 2016) and more satisfaction with the organization (Geldenhuys, Laba & Venter, 2014). Therefore, it makes sense that scholars are also interested in studying meaning in the workplace.

The majority of adults spend almost half of their waking life at work (Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin & Schwartz, 1997). *'If you are going to spend most of your life at work, why not enjoy it?'* (Chalofsky, 2010, p. 11). Morse & Weiss (1955) already found that work has a function that goes beyond simply 'earning a living'. Even if employees would have enough money to provide themselves they were still willing to work, because work gives individuals the feeling of being part of a bigger community and perhaps most important, *'having a purpose in life'* (p. 191). Work meaning plays an important role in how employees experience organizations (Berg, Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2003) and enact with them (Rosso et al., 2010).

Studies show a shift from considering meaningful work to exist in a 'vacuum' (Chalofsky, 2003) to reconsidering meaningful work as an 'evolving construct', implying that every life is different, the place of work in every life is different and aspects of life constantly change over time (Chalofsky & Cavallaro, 2013). As Aristotle already said: *'the whole is bigger than the sum of its parts'*. Drawn from this holistic view, meaningful work is only a small piece of the larger context. Thus, to understand what purpose someone puts to their work, try to see how work fits to the broader aspect of one's life. A meaningful life consists of devotion to something bigger than you are as an individual (Seligman, Rashid & Parks, 2006). Rather than seeing it as an isolated activity, Millennials perceive work as an essential part of life (Meister & Willyerd, 2010). If so, how do Millennials in particular place meaning to their work?

Not only the definition of work meaning is different for every individual (Rosso et al., 2010) also its occurrence. Work meaning can resolute both internally (i.e. by the individual self) and externally (i.e. by the job and broader context). Thus, meaning of the job, the role and the self all form the meaning of work (Wrzesniewski, Dutton & Debebe, 2003). In addition, work meaning is also created by interactions with other individuals.

**Work and broader context** One of the primary ways to position work in the broader context of life and to increase meaning to one's work is through what Wrzesniewski & Dutton (2001) describe as job crafting. Job crafting gives employees the opportunity to do the work they love without having to switch jobs and is considered to be a positive process. Reorganizing your job the way it suits you best is a powerful force to stay satisfied with your current work situation and leads to various positive outcomes for both organization and employee (Wrzesniewski, Berg & Dutton, 2010). Not only does it

lead to more engagement and satisfaction in one's work, it also contributes to the well-being and resilience of employees (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001; Wrzesniewski, Berg & Dutton, 2010), making them for example more resistant to organizational change (Meyer, Srinivas, Lal & Topolnytsky, 2007). Because of the harsh economy, it might not always be possible to escape from one's work. Job crafting gives employees the opportunity to redefine their jobs and shape them the way they want to. This process occurs through changing boundaries – task related, relational and cognitive. Employees who actively craft their jobs and the social environment provide more meaning to their work by meeting their personal goals, values and skills (Berg, Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2010).

Millennials want to learn about creativity and innovation and strive for freedom (Martin, 2005; Meister & Willyerd, 2010). However, the degrees of freedom to craft a job are restricted by both the opportunity to shape one's job and by job features, like task interdependence and freedom (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Knowing they foster this aspiration, it is important to know what kind of organizational structure and hierarchy is preferred by Millennials and how important the concept of freedom in their work is for them.

***The self and the role*** Another way to position work in the broader context is to look at an individual's interpretation about what work means (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). Pratt and Ashforth (2003) claim that meaningful work fulfills a role or function in the context of life. Even though meaningfulness is related to higher levels of stress and anxiety, it also reflects an individual's personal identity and expression of the self (Baumeister et al., 2013). Having a role fulfilled in work leads to questions concerning one's identity as 'Who am I?' and 'What do I do?' (Rosso et al., 2010). Values, motivations and beliefs about one's work shape this form of work meaning, also known as the self-concept. The self-concept can be defined as '*the totality of a person's thoughts and feelings that have reference to himself as an object*' (Rosso et al., 2010, p. 95/96). Beliefs about work form the relation individuals hold to their work.

According to prior research, employees can view their work either as a job, a career or a calling. For employees who consider their work as a job, work has an instrumental function and the focus is on extrinsic motivation (you work because you need something, e.g. money or security). In a career, the goal is beyond the work and focus lays on advancement. Ultimately, employees who perceive their work as a calling consider the

motivation for the work the work *itself* (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001; Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler & Tipton, 2007). As they hold the highest level of intrinsic motivation, people who feel called to their work generally perceive it as socially valuable (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997), seeing it as a moral duty (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009) and providing us with a 'better world' (Wrzesniewski, 2003). Because of their high level of *transcendence* – i.e. the feeling to contribute to something greater than the self (Lips-Wiersma, 2002) – they tend to deliver the best performance to a company (Judge, Thoresen, Bono & Patton, 2001) and hold the highest life and job satisfaction (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). Naturally, these employees form the holy grail for employers. Also, the fit between an individuals' self-concept and their role in an organization ('work-role fit') effects in meaningfulness and engagement (Van Zyl, Deacon & Rothmann, 2010). *"The tightness of the 'fit' between self and work can determine how meaningful one's work is perceived"* (Chalofsky & Cavallaro, 2013, p. 331). Since individuals justify their actions compared to moral values (Baumeister, 1991), activities that are in line with an individuals' values and strengths can create meaningfulness and engagement in their work (Van Zyl et al., 2010).

Millennials were raised by tight parental involvement (Alsop, 2008) in an uncertain economic time (Eisner, 2005). Since they grew up with a globalizing 24/7 world rotating around media, the generation has seen a lot in an early stage of their life (Eisner, 2005). Nevertheless, the generation is characterized by being optimistic, team-oriented (Alsop, 2008; Myers, 2010) and holding values regarding morality (Eisner, 2005). Nowadays, to create a sense of balance, *"instead of living to work, people are working to live"* (Chalofsky & Krishna, 2009, p. 197). The Millennials generation is sociable and has their emphasis on family and home (Eisner, 2005), helping them to create a balance between work and life (Alsop, 2008). Therefore, it seems interesting to investigate if Millennials feel related to the traits and values of the demographic cohort they are classified to.

Millennials are perceived to have different values regarding work than prior generations (Wey Smola & Sutton, 2002). Even though they strive for intellectual challenge (Eisner, 2005) and learning new skills (Meister & Willyerd, 2010), for this young generation *'doing is more important than knowing'* (Alsop, 2008, p. 40), resulting in placing more emphasis on action than the simple enumeration of facts. The generation prefers to act in a job that 'better the world' (Eisner, 2005) and feeling connected to a higher purpose (Meister & Willyerd (2010), which might mean this generation more than ever chooses their work based on perceiving it as a calling.

**Others** People endeavor establishment from others to be seen as worthwhile individuals (Baumeister, 1991). Although various relationships are formed in the workplace (Dutton & Ragins, 2007), not only interactions with others at work (e.g. co-workers and communities), also connections in personal life influence work meaning (e.g. family)(Rosso et al., 2010). Relationships are a vital part of organizational life and how workers experience their workplace (Kahn, 2007) and they can strongly influence work meaning (Wrzesniewski et al., 2003). Due to the significant time spent at work, connections can leave a great impression on individuals (Hochschild, 1997). Positive relationships and meaningful connections help individuals to get attached to their organization and allow them to be their truly selves (Kahn, 2007). Of course, the type of connection is crucial to the outcomes for both individual and organization. High-quality connections lead to various positive outcomes for both individuals as the organization (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003; Ferris et al., 2009) and mark individuals in different ways. Recurrent relationships not only serve new and valued resources (e.g. trust) and create our '*work identity*' (e.g. making sense of who we are and what we are doing at work), they also establish human development and growth and help us learn about novel thoughts. For individuals, this can help them craft an identity that fits to who they want to be. As a result, high-quality relationships establish tensility, higher emotional carrying capacity and a degree of connectivity (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003).

Stereotypes of Millennials portray them as being self-centered, disloyal and unmotivated, raising questions about how it affects organizational communication and how they foster relationships with other member within organizations (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010). Prior research examined the ability for this generation to build functional relationships at work (cf. McGuire, By & Hutchings, 2007). To what degree do Millennials seek confirmation from other individuals to be seen as worthwhile themselves? What characterizes a significant relationship for them, and how do they nurture interactions within organizations and outside the workplace?



## Engagement

### Work engagement

If you ever had the feeling time ‘flew by’ while doing a task it might have been due to the fact that you felt engaged. Seligman (2011) describes engagement as *‘losing ourselves to a task or project that provides us with a sense of ‘disappeared time’ (p. ?)*. However, engagement in one’s work is more comprehensive than just having the feeling of losing ‘track of time’. Work engagement is a positive state of fulfillment featured by vigor, dedication and absorption (Schaufeli et al., 2006). Vigor is shaped by high levels of both energy and resilience. It captures the persistence towards difficulties, not being worn-out easily and the will to invest effort in one’s work. Dedication includes enthusiasm in one’s work, marked by strong involvement and a feeling of pride and inspiration. Finally, absorption is known as a pleasant condition of involvement marked by swiftly passing time and the disability to detach oneself from work (Schaufeli et al., 2006).

Employees who sense engagement feel an *‘energetic and effective connection with their work activities’ (Schaufeli et al., 2002, p.4)* and feature the ability to deal with the overall demands of their work. Maslach and Leiter (1997) found that engagement is marked by involvement, energy and efficacy. People seek self-efficacy and control over their environment (Baumeister, 1991). Efficacy captures the belief of an individual that they deal with the ability to influence their life events. Self-efficacy occurs through mastery experiences, but also through setting goals and reaching them. A major underlying source of efficacy is seeing similar individuals succeed in a task and come to the belief that you have what it takes yourself to succeed too (Bandura, 1997). Seligman et al. (2006) found that an engaged life (i.e. *Eudaimonia*) is characterized by identifying your strengths and use them as far as possible. Knowing your talents, values and what drives you are significant ingredients for a purposeful life (Leider, 2015).

Work engagement got scholars attention over the past decade (e.g. Luthans, 2002), mainly in the field of positive organizing. Work engagement is supposed to be the antipode of burnout (Schaufeli, Bakker & Salanova, 2006; Schaufeli, Taris & Van Rhenen, 2008) and increased work meaning and engagement can even be used in depression treatments (Seligman et al., 2006). As a result, engaged employees spend more time at their work and are considered to be happier (Schaufeli et al., 2006).

Meister and Willyerd (2010) found that Millennials who are engaged will be happy to perform exceptionally in organizations. Therefore, it seems interesting to have clear definitions about these constructs and their underlying mechanisms to understand Millennials and keep them attached to the organization. To measure their own success, personal goals and professional development are what matters to Millennials (Eisner, 2005). What are typical role models that Millennials look up to and possibly not less important: what are they striving to become *not*? What makes Millennials a proud or satisfied feeling regarding work and where do they draw their energy from? Since work engagement specifically refers to levels of energy and attachment to one's work, how do Millennials engage with organizations?

### **Organizational engagement**

Previous research uses terms as work engagement, job involvement and organizational commitment interchangeably (cf. Jung & Yoon, 2016). Yet, Hallberg and Schaufeli (2006) found that these constructs reflect different aspects of attachment to an organization and thereby can be distinguished from each other. This raises the question: *what is organizational commitment precisely?*

Mowday, Steers and Porter (1979) already stated that the definition of organizational commitment varies in research. However, they explored a noticeable trend among previous studies regarding commitment to organizations. One trend emerging from theory is that commitment can be defined in terms of an attitude, in that case reflecting *"the identity of the person (is linked) to the organization"* (Sheldon, 1971, p. 143) or when *"the goals of the organization and those of the individual become increasingly integrated or congruent"* (Hall, Schneider & Nygren, 1970, p. 176). Mowday, Steers and Porter (1979) themselves describe organizational commitment as *"the relative strength of an individual's identification with and involvement in a particular organization"* (p. 226).

In their three-component model of commitment, Meyer and Allen (1991) conceptualized organizational commitment as a psychological state, distinguishing three types of organizational commitment, i.e. a desire (affective commitment), a need (continuance commitment) or an obligation (normative commitment). In contrast to various research on organizational commitment on the individual level, Barrick et al. (2015) examined

the concept of collective organizational engagement, in which members are engaged as a whole (e.g. in work teams), which increases the success of an organization.

Commitment between organization and employee decreases the chance of an employee's decision to leave the organization (Meyer & Allen, 1991). One predictor of organizational commitment is the employees' opinion about values within a company (Finegan, 2000). An overlap between values, norms and interests of the organization and the self-concept increases identification with the organization (Van Knippenberg & Sleebos, 2006), thereby making it interesting to examine which values are favored by Millennials in organizations.

Opportunities for training and career developments are important factors for employee engagement among this relatively young generation (Lockwood, 2007), which is noticeable by the increasing amount of traineeships that companies offer. Even though upward movement in an organization is referred to as being successful (Ng, Eby, Sorenson & Feldman (2005), because of their love for flexibility and freedom (Martin, 2005; Meister & Willyerd, 2010), rather than working their way up on the professional 'ladder', Millennials are considered to be 'job hoppers'. For organizations it seems unavoidable to go along with these trends, manifesting itself in more flex work and temporary contracts than ever. However, based on prior literature, it could be that increased organizational engagement leads to more attachment from Millennials with the organization.

To foster a unified indication of concepts, this research labels 'work engagement' as the levels of involvement in work, aspects of energy in the job and efficacy and 'organizational engagement' as the attachment and commitment to the organization.

### **Work meaning and engagement taken together**

How individuals perceive work meaning is significantly linked to their level of engagement and their performance. Employees within organizations actively search for meaning in their work and are likely to quit if the organization does not provide them with this sense of meaning (Holbeche and Springett, 2003). Higher work meaning leads to more engagement in one's work (Jung & Yoon, 2016), contributes to engaged and committed employees (Geldenhuis et al., 2014) and enhances organizational

commitment (Morse & Weiss, 1955). Wrzesniewski, Berg and Dutton (2010) found that redesigning one's job through job crafting increases work meaning and raises not only job satisfaction, thriving and resilience, but also engagement at work. Although based on prior research can be stated that in general increasing one's work meaning will lead to more engagement with an organization, this study aims to find if this is also the case for Millennials or whether the relation between work meaning and engagement among this specific generation has a different shape.

### **3 – METHOD**

This qualitative study describes the perception of work meaning and engagement for Millennials. Since both the definition and occurrence of work meaning is different for individuals (Rosso et al., 2010), to come to a profound understanding of these concepts for Millennials, the method has a qualitative research design in the form of interviews. According to Pope and Mays (1995), qualitative research is *“development of concepts which help us to understand social phenomena in natural (rather than experimental) settings, giving due emphasis to the meanings, experiences and views of the participants”* (p. 311). Prior research regarding Millennials has been mainly done in the form of reviews or questionnaires. The focus of this present study is to deliver empirical evidence concerning work meaning and engagement through the eyes of Millennials. By means of semi-structured interviews, twenty individuals from the Millennial generation were questioned about their work meaning and engagement with their work and organization.

#### **Sample and procedure**

Since the many various methods for qualitative sampling known in literature, sampling for qualitative research is a very complex matter (Coyne, 1997). As its name already declares, qualitative research focuses more on the quality of obtained data than merely on numbers (Sandelowski, 1995). To generate a sample, this study applied purposive sampling – also known as criterion-based sampling – where *“units are chosen ‘purposively’ for the ability to illuminate the subject area”* (Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls & Ormston, p.143, 2013). Using this strategy, units are carefully chosen on the basis of their *‘symbolic representation’* (p. 143), for that they carry out characteristics that are expected to be salient in the relevant study (Ritchie et al., 2013). Although the meaning of work is often examined in specific areas (e.g. healthcare), the main characteristic for

the sample of this study is a proper reflection of the Millennial generation in working areas which are not yet empirically studied and to describe and place emphasis on different aspects of work meaning for one specific generation. To create a homogeneous sample and to generate valid results from found data, the sample is additionally characterized by other significant criteria, which are described below.

**Participant selection** All participants were asked in advance if they wanted to participate in this study through personal contact with the researcher. It was assumed that a number of twenty participants would reveal a certain trend in data collection to answer the research questions. Therefore, 20 members of the Millennials generation who are currently residing in The Netherlands were interviewed. Participants had to meet the following selection criteria: First, all participants were operating in an equivalent branch, namely the communication, psychology, HRM branches or a similar position. Based on these criteria, the researcher made a selection that delivers a valid comparison between the participants. Second, participants were already practicing in an initial job in their branch, which means they are not performing the work as a side job – which is often based on earning money. To perceive organizational engagement and ensure homogeneity, instead of being freelancers, participants were employed within an organization in their branch. Thorsteinson (2003) found that there is slight difference between fulltime and part time employees on job satisfaction, commitment to the organization and intents to leave. However, fulltime employees are considered to perceive more involvement with their job. Based on this, participants operated at least 32 hours per week in their position. Last, to ensure homogeneity and consequently to create generalizability, participants had graduated either from college [HBO] or university [WO]. Employees graduated with such degree or certificate mostly exercise in more strategic or managerial positions within an organization than individuals holding a lower degree.

The final sample consisted of 20 participants, including 7 male participants and 13 female participants. The age of participants ranged from 22 to 31 years, with a mean age of 26 years. Of all participants, 65% held a college [HBO] degree, 5% an undergraduate university [BSc] degree and 30% a graduate university [MSc] degree. The number of years working in the branch ranged from less than a year up to ten years, with an average number of 5 years working in the field or branch.

**Data collection** Appointments were set concerning the date and location of the interview through personal contact with the researcher. Only the researcher and the participants were attending the interview. Naturally, participants were interested about the topic of the study. Hence, prior to the interview participants were informed about the topic by means of an informed consent form and additional information from the researcher.

The used method in this study was in the form of semi-structured interviews. Where a questionnaire can seem rather superficial, interviews offer more profound information regarding asked topics (Oppenheim, 2000). By making the interviews semi-structured, a list of topics was asked during the interview, leaving the interview not entirely structured nor entirely open and thereby increasing validity from answers (Boeije, 2010). Interviews occupied up to one hour of participants' time. Since a qualitative interview captures itself in a mutual relationship (Boeije, 2010) and conducting in-depth interviews may be tiring due to the level of mental concentration, an hour appeared to be enough time to collect the right degree of depth (Ritchie et al., 2013).

The topic list of the interview was based on concepts regarding work meaning and engagement from above theoretical framework. Furthermore, general questions were asked regarding age, education, number of years working and current work position. To examine the concept of work meaning, interview questions were asked about the job and broader context, the role, the self and others. Moreover, the place of work in one's life was examined. Additionally, questions were asked about the overall meaningfulness of the participant's life and their primary motivation to work.

Although our experiences in daily life are a range of dimensions which are valuable to explore, not all knowledge can always be brought back to language and simply be expressed in words (Eisner, 2008). Therefore, a set of 28 association cards was presented to the participants, since for some individuals work meaning may appear as an abstract concept. The cards consisted of random photographs in which participants were free to make an own interpretation to the images. Including this form of a non-linguistic dimension gave participants the opportunity to rely on other expressive possibilities than merely words (Bagnoli, 2009). Thus, presenting participants association cards provided them the opportunity to express their perception on the meaning of their work in a less abstract way, leading to an in-depth view of their meaning on work.

Questions regarding work engagement were based on a set of questions from a Work and Well-Being Survey (UWES) from Schaufeli et al., (2006). In their questionnaire, individuals are asked regarding their feelings of engagement in their job. Since the method of this study has a qualitative design, questions were rephrased in open questions to receive more extensive information from the participants regarding work engagement. Doing so led to questions resulting as e.g. ‘Does your work give you a proud and/or satisfied feeling? Which aspects?’ as well as energizing and energy-depleting aspects in the current job. Questions regarding organizational engagement were based on involvement and attachment with the organization, leading to questions as e.g. ‘Why did you choose this organization?’ and ‘How important is this organization to you?’. An overview of the topics and related example questions can be found in table 1.

Topic	Question (examples)
Work meaning	‘When you think about your job, what is the main drive you go to work in the morning? Why?’
Work-life balance	‘Are you satisfied with your current work-life balance? Could you explain why?’
Work engagement	‘Could you explain why you think you are good at the work that you do?’
Organizational engagement	‘How do you picture your future regarding work? Would it be at this organization? Could you explain why (not)?’
Millennials	‘According to you, what are characteristics of your generation? Could you give examples?’
General meaning	‘Do you think your life has gained more meaning because of the work you do? Could you explain why?’

**Table 1.** Topic list and example questions

An overview of the complete interview protocol can be found in appendix A.

### Data analysis

For data analysis all recorded interviews were transcribed word by word (verbatim), leading to a transcript of 234 pages. Full transcription of all interviews increased reliability from the study, giving the researcher the opportunity to analyze the exact answers given by participants. After transcription, data was coded by means of Atlas.ti software for qualitative data-analysis, increasing the study’s reliability by systematically

coding. Since the first attempt of coding seldom appears to analyze the data perfectly, it is known to be a cyclical act (Saldaña, 2015). The analysis consisted of three rounds of coding: open coding, axial coding and selective coding.

**Open coding** First, half of the interviews were analyzed through open coding. Open coding provided the opportunity to stay close to the exact words stated in the answers given by participants. This round led to extraction of main concepts named by Millennials during the interviews. Since the interview had a semi-structured feature based on existing literature, the majority of code categories created in this round were in line with the known concepts of work meaning, work engagement and organizational engagement. However, open coding also led to creation of new concepts that might not have been explicitly asked by the researcher nor named by the participant (e.g. characteristics of the organization as unicity and structure and the vision on life in general). Based on the variety of answers from participants, this round of coding led to numerous subcategories. For example, on the concept of work meaning, open codes emerged as 'personal growth' and 'personal development' or 'helping others' and 'making others happy'. Therefore, to reduce the significant amount of subcategories and thereby creating more overview for coding the second half of the interviews, the following round included a merge between equivalent codes, namely axial coding.

**Axial coding** Through axial coding, the list of created codes was proceeded to merge codes which appeared to be synonyms (e.g. codes as 'progression' and 'advancement' or 'personal success' and 'personal thrill' were merged). Moreover, in this round was decided to not proceed further with codes that appeared irrelevant to be generalizable for the entire group of participants. Yet, in this round the decision has been made to occasionally highlight strong deviant answers as well, for example when participants gave contrary answers regarding a specific topic. This decision has been made not only to illustrate possible contradictions, also to pull out essential statements made by participants. Through axial coding, the amount of codes decreased, leading to a clearer overview and thereby creating a systematical manner to code the second half of interviews. For example, during this round, on the concept of work meaning four key purposes emerged, namely 'personal purposes', 'purpose for others', 'purpose for organization' and 'fun and satisfaction'. On the concept of drivers for work meaning, six key drivers arose through merging synonyms. However, axial coding still led to numerous categories, which appeared to be possible to combine in main categories, leading to the last round of data-analysis: selective coding.



**Selective coding** Selective coding provided the opportunity to seek for possible relationships and links between different categories. Several main categories emerged in all concepts regarding work meaning, work engagement and organizational engagement. Selective coding led to the emergence of three common themes which became visible during all aspects of the interviews: freedom, egomania and hedonism. For example, the four purposes of work meaning and six key drivers for work meaning appeared to be classified under ‘egomania’, since they all included statements that clearly revealed a need for self-centeredness. Concepts which could be classified under the theme of ‘freedom’ all revealed statements regarding autonomy and independence. Last, codes which appeared to could be classified under ‘hedonism’ included statements about a short-term view regarding future perspectives and life in general. Since these themes were so excellent, it has been decided to categorize all concepts regarding work meaning and engagement under these three themes. Since the meaning of work is such a comprehensive matter, the result section describes the most prominent concepts and categories that have emerged through data analysis. An example of the three rounds of coding can be found in table 2. The complete coding scheme can be found in appendix B.

open coding	axial coding	selective coding
‘for personal development’	personal aspirations	egomania
‘continue to develop myself’		[self-centeredness]
‘fulfillment of ambition’		
‘gaining social contacts’	belongingness	egomania
‘for the relationships in your life’		[self-centeredness]

**Table 2.** Example of coding rounds on the concept of ‘key drivers for work meaning’

## 4 – RESULTS

Results of the study are defined by the three key themes that have emerged from data analysis, namely freedom, egomania or self-centeredness and hedonism. Based on these themes, the concepts of work meaning, work engagement and organizational engagement are defined. Traits and characteristics of the generation carried out by Millennials themselves are as well described.

### I. Freedom

Millennials portray themselves as a generation of flexibility and freedom with a liberating charm, characterized by technology and a *“fast paced lifestyle.”* They prefer a sense of less hierarchy in organizations and more own responsibility than their ancestors. Results clearly indicate that Millennials perceive freedom as a precious value. Some denote this given value should not be taken for granted by them and that freedom is a reciprocal act:

*“I get a lot of freedom and one should not exploit this freedom.” [1]*

*“The freedom that I get, therefor I want to give something back [...] I must not abuse it and remain doing my best.” [2]*

Yet, their need for freedom not only reflects in individual characteristics and preferences regarding organizational structure, management and job features. The most important themes in which this need for freedom, autonomy and independence were expressed was when participants talked about creating a work-life balance and when they talked about the ways in which they engage with their employing organizations.

**Work-life balance** Generally, work captures a great role in the life of Millennials. It is a *“daily activity”* that *“you are busy with most of the time”*. Yet, a few participants suggested they are struggling with which place work should play in their life:

*“Often I think: ‘there is so much more to life, what am I doing?’” [3]*

*“I prefer to keep it [the role] as small as possible [laughs]. But it does not work that well, I think” [...] I do not want work to become the most important thing in my life, even though it actually is [...] That is a pity.” [4]*

Above assertions reveal that, although Millennials perceive work to be a major part of life, they do not wish to let it consume too much of their time nor energy, since there is more to life than work. Although fixed work hours may provide Millennials structure, the urge for freedom ensures they generally perceive nine-to-five jobs as outdated, giving them a required and from time to time even imprisoned feeling of 'having to work':

*"I find an eight-hour during working day a bit old-fashioned, really [...] I am much more of working on your own times [...] I would find that more comfortable than when I am sitting eight hours in the office. Almost a bit imprisoned..." [4]*

Even though claiming to be satisfied with the current work-life balance, if they would have the opportunity to change something, they would undertake some noteworthy adjustments. Modifications to one's work were mostly based on the feasibility to own the freedom and flexibility to work where and whenever one wants:

*"We live in 2016, you can basically work anywhere you want." [6]*

Thus, if they could change anything, it would be creating their own schedules and workplace. One participant rendered the concept of a company in New York which is open 24/7. As long as deadlines are achieved, employees are free to decide at what time they want to work at the office. A significant amount of other participants also mentioned the concept of creating own working hours, for some causing work to go beyond initial expectations:

*"Actually even better than I expected. Also due to the fact that I can work very independently. I can work anywhere [...] I can work from home. I am completely free in organizing my tasks [...] So I do not have a fixed structure that I need to do every day [...] It goes beyond my expectations [...] That I have the freedom to work where I want, how I want and how I manage my time." [2]*

The possibility to achieve freedom in work elaborates on the idea of job crafting. Results show that Millennials perceive freedom as a precious value in their work and overall life. Not only the opportunity to work in renewing ways compared to traditional ways of working (i.e. a solid workplace, office-hours and hierarchy) is valuable to Millennials, the possibility to redesign one's job too:

*“Every time you choose again what is best for you, I guess [...] It is just a different interpretation of how to reorganize your function.” [3]*

*“Things [tasks] I pick up; I only take them on me if I know I can do it. In that way I am actually creating my own perfect job within the organization.” [9]*

Since job crafting is built on changing boundaries – task related, relational and cognitive (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001) – it can be asserted that based on their need for freedom and their liberating character, this generation likes to behold as less boundaries as possible regarding work. Most vital outputs in changing aspects in work-life balance and thereby creating degrees of freedom were to meet a calm mind and gain more creativity and energy. It also gives them the opportunity to have time for friends and family, travel or simply have off-time from work, corresponding to the statement that Millennials pursue a certain level of work-life balance (Alsop, 2008; Tapia, 2008). Few also state that they would choose to work less.

**Organizational engagement** What ties Millennials to organizations? Besides reflecting in work meaning, their needed freedom as well applies to the way they engage with organizations. Although they generally perceive themselves as major part of the organization they operate in and entitle the organization as important, not many are working at the same organization for years. While many of them describe themselves as loyal, in their future perspective regarding work, participants often made statements about the uncertainty to remain at the current organization, partly due to the range of possibilities they are confronted with:

*“You are constantly exposed to what else is possible.” [3]*

*“I think you should not want to spend your entire life at the same organization.” [7]*

What clearly revealed in their commitment to the organization was the necessity for renewal and need to be challenged. Frequently mentioned was the concept of already “*knowing the trick*”, with the effect of becoming bored to the routine and asking for innovation and challenge. Perspective on career opportunities within the organization as well play a great part:

*“I am somebody who needs to be challenged.” [4]*

Even if it can be found in the current position the need to be challenged is clearly emphasized:

*“Of course, a new challenge is always nice. But if you can find this challenge every day in your current job, why would you leave?” [1]*

During the interviews, most participants somewhere mentioned aspects of the unicity of their organization, in which they underscored distinguishing aspects of their organization in comparison to other organizations. Although some claim larger organizations may provide more security and stability regarding their career, overall, a “down-to-earth” organization is preferred in which one feels welcome, valued by other organizational members and experiences only little hierarchy:

*“I am sitting in a place that is familiar to me and where I can be who I want to be.” [1]*

Participants unanimously claimed that previous generations hold a different view towards work and thereby their commitment to organizations. Participants often referred to their parents’ view on work, who are part of Generation X. According to Millennials, past generations grew up with more frameworks in which they entered the same lines as their ancestors. Before, the world was smaller, resulting in less possibilities, and work had a prominent feature based on security and safety (e.g. taking care of your family). Thus, Millennials argue that organizational commitment is connected to changes in life and society outside the organization:

*“I also feel full commitment [...] I think that in the past the world was smaller.” [4]*

Answers reveal Millennials consider themselves as job hoppers. Consistent with freedom and flexibility, doing the same work – and thereby remaining at the same organization – is no longer for a lifetime:

*“People do not see their job as guiding anymore.” [5]*

*“I believe that work is no longer for life.” [12]*

As previous literature already found (cf. Martin, 2005; Meister and Willyerd, 2010), their need for flexibility and freedom clearly captures a significant part in Millennials’ (organizational) life.

## II. Egomania [self-centeredness]

Results clearly indicate that Millennials champion their own needs. The concept of self-centeredness manifests in several aspects of work meaning. It reflects in the way they engage with work too.

Millennials describe themselves as the renewing generation with endless of opportunities – maybe from time to time even too many. They describe themselves as easily bored, impulsive and on the constant move towards something new to trigger them. Even though being part of the same generation, participants do not all perceive themselves as a typical Millennial and sometimes even consider themselves to be an outsider. The ones who do feel part are not all fully aware of it or say they are made a part of the generation through technologies as television, the Internet or simply ‘joining the rest’. Noticeable is a slight part of participants questioned if it is even possible to generalize this generation, regarding their vision on both life and work:

*“Can you judge a generation merely on age or rather on mindset? [...] I think it is because of things like the television. That there is a certain image imprinted in someone’s head of how it is supposed to be.” [6]*

*“I think that in the beginning – from 1980 – a lot of people are still working in a way they are ‘supposed to work’. Consistent with previous generations. But the younger you are, the more you look at something that excites you and makes you happy.” [7]*

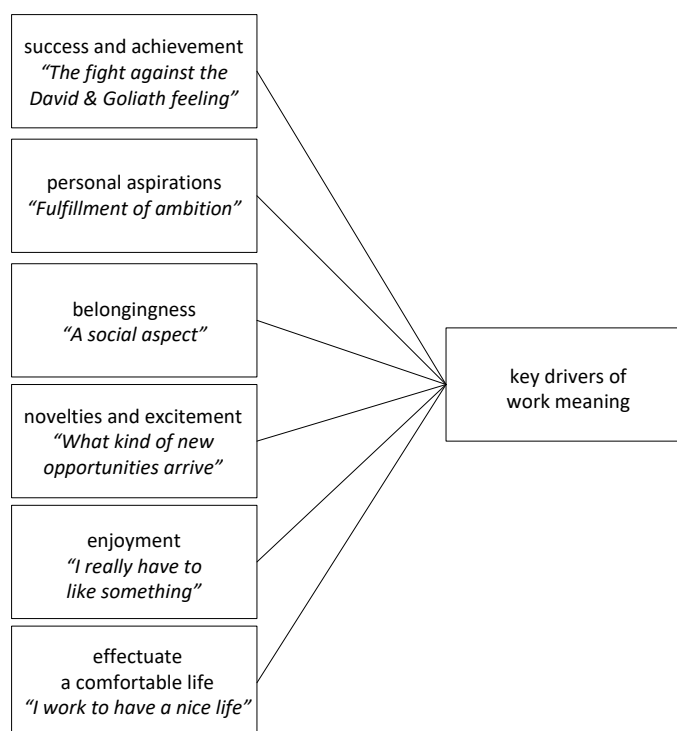
In combination with the significance of freedom, above statements reveal Millennials foster a certain kind of individualization. Since there need for autonomy, some argue this generation perhaps focuses more on being independent instead of part of organization and society:

*“I think we are very individualistic [...] I think not many people feel part of how the world is [...] That is how they grew up. That it is important to know what you want instead of being part of something and that we should also realize things together.” [18]*

Thus, due to their self-centeredness, not all participants view themselves as a typical ‘Millennial’. As statements reveal, the main reasons that were named for this phenomenon were the aspect of individualization and the question if it is possible to generalize an entire generation based on an era they are born in. Several participants spoke of their younger brothers or sisters stemming from the same generation, of whom

participants were convinced to have a different vision on work. Moreover, a certain kind of personal uniqueness is preferred by Millennials, again emphasizing the aspect of egomania.

**Key drivers of work meaning** Why do they work? Results indicate that Millennials generally perceive six key drivers for work. Some participants perceive one of these factors to be the main drive, others perceive multiple of these factors as a stimulus to work. Key drivers for work are presented in figure 1, clarified by relevant quotations and described below.



**Figure 1.** Six key drivers of work meaning for Millennials

Success and achievement is primarily based on experiencing a personal kick or feeling of success from the work due to reaching a certain goal. However, it might also refer to *“the drive to complete something and doing it as good as possible”* or reaching a goal for the organization (e.g. sales volume). Personal aspirations include fulfillment of ambition, personal development and doing what you are good at. It also includes a sense of pride the participant has over one’s work. Belongingness endorses the drive to work because of the work environment, enjoyment of being at the organization and maintain relationships. One participant named the main work drive as *“getting to know the working world.”* An often mentioned stimulator for work is learning new things, seeing new opportunities and feeling excitement about it. Last, receiving enjoyment out

of the job is important. Elaborating on this matter, a significant number of participants specified money is not the most important and often inferior to enjoying work:

*“A lot of people would say ‘to earn money’. Yes, of course it is like that. I think earning money is a side effect of doing what I really like.” [6]*

*“I would rather earn 1000 euro less than sensing every day that I perform work I do not like.” [10]*

As visualized above, money is not considered to be the primary drive for work. However, almost all participants claim they do work to earn money to effectuate a comfortable life outside work: *“I work to have a nice life.”* Frequently mentioned in relation to work drive was satisfaction, mostly deriving from above stimulators to work (e.g. achieving a goal, meeting personal aspects or experiencing enjoyment). Yet, satisfaction *itself* could be the work drive too:

*“Why does one work? I work because I receive satisfaction from my work.” [12]*

**Work role** Equivalent to drivers of work meaning, participants explicitly mentioned earning money does not fulfill the most important role of work. Still, most participants mentioned work *does* perform the function of receiving an income to create a comfortable life besides work:

*“The function is to live a nice life [...] I do not live to work; I work to live” [12]*

This unanimously confirms the statement made by Chalofsky and Krishna (2009) who claim that nowadays, to create a sense of balance, *“instead of living to work, people are working to live”* (p. 197). Although in some cases working can derive from intrinsic motives, for Millennials, work has a feature for own development and a stepping stone for personal purposes (e.g. networking, learning possibilities and promotion opportunities).

*“From the moment I came there, it is a learning process.” [8]*

Since not working would lead to boredom and a sense of *“not making any progression”*, work gives Millennials the feeling of being useful. In that case, for some participants, making work a mood determinant as well:



*“I notice it has a lot of influence on who I am and how I feel. It is very mood defining.”*  
[10]

Based on their vision regarding the role of work, it can be stated that for Millennials, work both has an instrumental function of effectuating a comfortable life and is perceived as a career with the feature of personal means.

**The self and values** Work role is not only based on the feature of work. Since values, motivations and beliefs about one’s work shape an individual’s self-concept (Rosso et al., 2010), the role of work is as well expressed in how an individual sees oneself concerning work. Even though it seems important to Millennials for values to recur in their job, they argue it is not always given and it might sometimes be necessary to bring out core values in work by yourself:

*“Happiness, I think you should always create that yourself in a job. It is not necessarily that I am happy with the content of the work. But I can create situations in such a way that I can bring happiness out of it.”* [3]

*“It does not happen automatically [...] You have to ask for it.”* [12]

Although they cherish a variety of values in both life and work (e.g. personal growth, respect, friends and family), results reveal fun and happiness as primary core values of Millennials:

*“I think joy is important. You should have that in your work, otherwise you are not happy.”* [1]

Corresponding to the way they engage with organizations, the importance of a value-fit between the self and the work became visible as well when participants made statements about the unicity and features of the organization:

*“Because we pursue a noble goal [...] I consider the purpose of the organization as beautiful. And also the products and services that go with them.”* [2]

*“It is harder to identify with the company if you are not necessarily involved with the core-business. That makes it sometimes difficult, I think.”* [13]

**Work meaning** Millennials behold four factors that make their work meaningful, namely personal purposes, a purpose for others, fun and satisfaction and purpose for the organization. Where some participants experience only one of the factors as important to work meaning, others perceive several factors as their meaning of work. These factors of work meaning are displayed in figure 2 and described below.



**Figure 2.** *Work meaning by Millennials*

On the meaning of work, there appears to be an overlap with the concept of drivers of work meaning concerning the significance of personal purposes and fun and satisfaction in one's work. However, when explicitly asked about what makes their work meaningful, answers reveal a remarkable addition which appears contradictory to their self-centered focus; namely the purpose for others and the organization.

Numerous participants claimed their work to be meaningful for the purpose of others, giving them the feeling of helping individuals in society to achieve *their* goals. A few participants named the impact of helping other individuals or groups on society as a whole. When helping one individual, it has a "*snowball effect*" on reaching an entire society. However, other participants also mentioned their work to contribute to others well-being in work and overall life. Thus, results show Millennials ambition some degree of reciprocation:

*“I think that – to the fullest extent – it becomes meaningful, because you truly give something back to people.” [12]*

*“I hope I can return something to people who face greater difficulties.” [5]*

Noticeable is merely one participant noted self-transcendence on the concept of work meaning, stating:

*“I feel useful and I am glad that I could mean something that is greater than myself, most of the time.” [17]*

Being triggered by visible results and tangible outcomes, Millennials as well want to contribute to the success and worth of their organization, leading to fulfillment of a purpose for the organization.

*“The company is also growing and I like to be part of it [...] To flourish together.” [2]*

The added value of meaning something to another or the organization is perhaps the most striking discrepancy in Millennials’ perception on what makes their work meaningful in comparison to their drive of work meaning and work role. It is noteworthy to mention that in their overall view of meaningfulness in their job Millennials do not place great emphasis on their contribution to others, while when specifically asked this is pointed out by participants. Could this mean that Millennials are not aware of their significant self-interest and actually do want to accomplish needs for others as well?

As mentioned, similar to drivers of work meaning, personal purposes capture a significant share in what Millennials perceive to make their work meaningful. Personal purposes range from both personal development (e.g. learning) as opportunities for growth within the organization (e.g. career opportunities). However, advancement and a kind of “coolness-factor” are also important personal ends to this young generation. Receiving an individual boost out of one’s job and a feeling of personal satisfaction are mentioned frequently by participants as well:

*“If we do not do something cool every day, somebody overtakes us.” [6]*

*“I consider the company kind of like subordinate. More as a means perhaps.” [4]*

Besides above clear purposes, Millennials also foster fun and satisfaction as vital aspects in their job. Consistent to drivers of work meaning, satisfaction often derives from above stated purposes. However, receiving some degree of satisfaction may also be the meaning itself for work. Corresponding to Eisner (2005), enjoyment and fun is a quite often named factor in the meaning of work.

*“In my previous job I thought: ‘Is this it? Is there not more in life that can make me happier regarding work?’ [15]*

*“You have to keep liking it. Then it is worth it to spend so much time on it and do it.” [9]*

**Work engagement** What ties Millennials to their job? Results indicate Millennials are influenced and triggered by tangible results as visible progression and growth; either personally, regarding others or concerning the organization. They prefer to see what they are doing through clear results and outcomes:

*“You just see your turnover [...] You immediately see what you are doing [...] I imagine a large American bell. That when you reached this, the weekend starts [laughs] [...] We have an agenda and at the beginning of the day everything is red. And when you achieve a signature, it turns green. And it is cool if after a day of major projects, you see that your entire agenda has become green.” [4]*

When asked why they are good in doing their work, any participants named personally traits (e.g. loyalty, creativity, honesty, enthusiasm etc.) and own experience. Frequently mentioned was the trait to assess other individuals needs and requirements well. Though, Millennials most often refer to the appreciation and recognition from others as the valuation of their own work. Others include both internal (e.g. supervisors, colleagues) as external (e.g. clients and customers) individuals.

*“They [the company] are full of praise [...] I get that particularly from the reaction of my colleagues.” [9]*

*“The boss is satisfied. I get enough compliments. I always see that as a sign that I am doing it well. My colleagues give good feedback. And clients as well.” [2]*

*“Sometimes I hear from my colleagues: ‘good job’. Through feedback. You may have to consciously ask for it. And if clients thank you.” [5]*

*“Sometimes it becomes kind of normal for yourself [...] But again, your environment and the reaction of others raises some sort of awareness.” [16]*

Some Millennials claim the branch they perform in to be an inspirational factor (e.g. influences, others performing in the same field or the branch itself). However, the work itself is not the primary drive. Moreover, only two participants mentioned the way you engage with work should derive from the self. This leads to the conclusion that for Millennials intrinsic motivation nor the work itself is a primary way to engage with their job, again suggesting this generation does not perceive their work as a calling (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). As mentioned, in work engagement, approval and appreciation from others seems to capture a major part for Millennials. Lack of feedback might even lead to insecurity whether one carries work well. Thus, what is precisely the role of others?

**Role of others** The estimation from others is evident as well in the role other individuals hold for Millennials. Though Millennials argue that others capture a great role in work, others often have the role to ‘fill up’ one’s own requirements, needs and perhaps even insecurities in work. The most prominent role of others in the professional life is to acquire feedback concerning work issues and to level with them. Colleagues are used for working together and being a team. They are perceived to play a major role in creating atmosphere in the work place, with the effect of influencing one’s own performance:

*“You should feel fine with the people around you in order to function as well as possible.” [16]*

*“If you have a pleasant work environment, great colleagues, you will find it more fun to go to work and you can achieve more.” [8]*

Above statements reveal Millennials do not enter into profound relationships at the workplace. Some even deliberately decide to keep work and personal relationships separated. Although in most cases others at work are considered merely as colleagues, co-workers occasionally become friends, resulting into relationships in non-working spheres as well.

**General meaning** Do Millennials believe their life has been given more meaning through work? Some participants argue it has. It provides them the opportunity to help others, do what you studied for and the chance of leaving a footprint. It moreover affords social contacts. Work gives “clarity to life”. However, most prominent was the impact of work on personal means rather than general meaning, stressing again the importance of own needs and the self for Millennials:

*“I have more of a goal for myself now. Whether it has given more meaning I do not know [...] I want to become the best in what I do, what I can do. And who I am in that regard. I myself would like to leave my mark in such a way as the people who inspire me.” [8]*

*“It has contributed a lot to a positive revolution in my own development.” [1]*

Then again, others state work does not provide life with more meaning. In these instances, life meaning captures aspects of life outside work rather than the work itself (e.g. friends and family). One participant even claimed life has become less meaningful through work:

*“I am not my work [...] If I have a look on my life and my personal life, the meaning is in my relationships with my partner, friends and family.” [12]*

*“No, I think less. Because work is something that has to be done each day [...] And if you do not work, you can do something different every day and seek freedom.” [16]*

Still, even when they did not have to work a day longer as for winning the lottery, all participants unanimously claimed they would keep operating in some sort of work. Perhaps not directly the next morning, in first instance giving them the opportunity to travel or make a career switch (e.g. become a freelancer, invest energy in a personal project). Commonly referred to was entering in volunteer work. Nevertheless, Millennials mean to stay productive, useful and pursuing a goal:

*“I cannot sit still. I cannot do nothing for a long time.” [11]*

*“I would not know what else to do [smiling]” [14]*

Thus, even though Millennials are willing to work, one can not necessarily conclude the meaning of life unanimously lies in their work.

### III. Hedonism

Results imply Millennials have the tendency to hold a short term perspective on life. Answers reveal they do think about their future; they just do not want to think about it *too often*. Their short-term outlook manifests in several aspects of working and personal life. However, they are most perceptually in work choice, future perspective and the general meaning of life:

*"I am not somebody who makes plans far ahead for the future. I just start with something and see where it ends." [9]*

**Base of work choice** Millennials generally do not make a deliberate choice regarding work. Terms as 'accidentally' and 'by chance' significantly came forward during the interviews. In addition, a considerable number states they got familiar with the field or drawn to the job by friends and relatives. Does this indicate Millennials themselves do not attempt much effort in orienting on a job they desire? However, occasions in which work choice is considered are rather based on job features (e.g. career opportunities and challenge potential) than the organization itself, since merely few participants named features of the organization as a key consideration in work choice (e.g. structure, size and certification of the organization). Although some participants base their study on the work field they want to perform in, only few participants mentioned intrinsic motivation as a decisive factor in work choice. Based on whether individuals view their work as a job, career or calling, the concept of callings in work choice excelled. Only two out of twenty participants mentioned the concept of calling, merely to underline this is not the case for them regarding work:

*"As a child I did not really know what I wanted to do, I did not have such a thing. A lot of people have something like 'that is what I want to do for the rest of my life'. I never had and still do not have that." [11]*

*"You know what is funny? When someone decides to be a doctor, he or she already chooses this when they are 16 years old, in high school. And basically you choose this path for the rest of your life. Which means that by the time you are 60, you already made a decision 44 years earlier, while you have not seen anything from the world yet when you are only 16 years old. Which is actually a crazy thing, right?" [6]*

**Future regarding work** Their short-term perspective is noticeable in their future perspective concerning work too. As described in organizational engagement, participants mentioned a variety of answers regarding their future perspective at the same organization. However, during interviews, participants announced several other statements about the future and overall life which reveal a clear near future focus:

*“I do not dare to say that I will continue working here my entire life, but at this moment I am sitting in the right place.” [8]*

*“I do have a person who inspires me. It is a good friend of mine and he has no steady job. He basically goes through life ‘playing’ [...] And he always does what his heart tells him. I find that very inspiring. He always reminds me on what is important in life.” [17]*

Even though career opportunities seem to be important in their future regarding work, somehow, answers imply Millennials stick to the present rather than focusing intensively on the future.

## 5. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of present study was to describe work meaning, work engagement and organizational engagement for Millennials with thereby providing new findings regarding these concepts through the eyes of this young generation.

As Baumeister (1991) already stated, individual beings seek a sense of purpose and value in their lives, seek self-efficacy and pursue a sense of self-worth by others. This research delivered empirical evidence on how Millennials place meaning to their work and life by including these elements of a meaningful life (Baumeister, 1991). This study found that three key dimensions reflect in Millennials’ perception regarding work meaning and engagement with work and organizations: freedom, egomania and hedonism.

Although there appears to be an overlap, Baumeister et al. (2013) found existential differences between meaningfulness and happiness. Millennials tend to have a short-term perspective on life in general and particularly focus on the present, which conforms to happiness rather than meaningfulness. However, this study found Millennials do consider their work to be meaningful, which might suggest a reconsideration in looking at the differences of a meaningful versus a happy life specifically based on this generation. It might be that Millennials have a different interpretation on the concept



of meaning by just 'sticking to the present', for it appears that Millennials consider meaning as a hedonistic matter, raising the question if meaningfulness indeed requires a reflection on the past and future as well. Moreover, this study found that because of the importance of their personal life outside of work as well, it is clear that work is often just a 'piece of the puzzle' in the broader context of life (Chalofsky & Cavallaro, 2013), thereby suggesting that the meaning of life for Millennials not particularly lies in work. When they do not consider their work to have added value, they sometimes even perceive their life as less meaningful. Thus, although claiming their work has meaning, whether life becomes more meaningful through work remains a question.

This study confirms research claiming Millennials are a self-centered generation where the focus mainly reflects on the "me" (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010; Stein, 2013). Contributing to prior research, on the meaning of work and engagement with organizations the generation focuses mainly on personal needs and interests. The generation has a "*sense of entitlement*" (p. 213), which is not only related to individual characteristics, but also to broader social and cultural contexts, such as parenting (Alsop, 2008; Chatrakul Na Ayudhya & Smithson, 2016; Sinek, 2016). Though, when explicitly asked for the meaning of work, Millennials claim work gains meaning by returning something to others and society, thereby making work meaning a reciprocal act. Some indeed wish to make an impact and perform in a job that "betters the world" (Eisner, 2005; Sinek, 2016). Therefore, it remains somewhat unclear if they are really as 'egomaniac' as they seem or if the generation is unconsciously focused on the self until they are recalled on their self-centeredness.

Since work plays a great role in their lives, Millennials indeed perceive work as an essential part of life (Meister & Willyerd, 2010). Expanding research from Wrzesniewski et al. (1997), Millennials use job crafting as a tool to shape and (re)design their jobs. Through the struggle with work-life balance and the question which role work should capture in their lives, a pursuit for creating an own 'perfect' job by changing boundaries appears relevant for this generation, which is mostly based on the feature of working anywhere at any time.

Furthermore, for Millennials, work goes beyond simply 'earning a living' (Morse & Weiss, 1955). The motivation to work and the way they engage with their jobs is not necessarily an intrinsic matter, but rather a stepping stone for personal purposes (e.g. career opportunities) and achieving a comfortable life besides work. Therefore, it can be stated

that for Millennials work is not necessarily perceived as a calling (Bellah et al., 2007; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001).

Millennials are convinced that previous generations hold a different vision on work. They even claim that within the Millennial generation there are different visions on work and life and argue about generalizing an entire generation based on the 20-year range they are born in. With synonyms as The Internet Generation, The Nintendo Generation and The Digital Generation (Raines, 2002), Millennials state to be influenced by technology and sometimes suggest they are made a part of their generation through technologies as television and the Internet. Even though this might happen unconsciously, this ultimately reflects in how they practice their jobs too. However, are they really that different from previous generations?

Pfau (2016) claims that Millennials have many of the same goals regarding career as their ancestors. Even though there might not be a significant difference between Millennials and other generations about what they *want* at work, there might be differences in *how* they work. Thus, questions remain if Millennials are really that different from their ancestors or if it is just shifts in society and organizational life that perhaps forces them to behave differently in professional life. This study reveals some interesting findings regarding this subject.

When it comes to their perspective on work-life balance and organizational engagement the aspect of choices is clearly noticeable. Changes in both society (e.g. the world has become 'smaller') as in organizational life provide Millennials with a range of opportunities to choose from. Zaki (2016) already found *"Millennials are given more options than we can possibly consider" (p. 1)*. Whether this wide range of opportunities is either a curse or a blessing is something Schwartz (2004) describes as "the paradox of choice". Elaborating on this, present study found Millennials indeed experience some form of 'choice stress' and not all of them are convinced endless possibilities are always a benefit, which might form an explanation of them to live up to the 'less is more' principle.

Millennials claim work should not be time-consuming and although they view their organization as important, they are not planning to remain at the same organization for a lifetime. However, although they are considered as impatient (Sinek, 2016), characterize themselves as easily bored and call themselves job hoppers, is this enough evidence to suggest they are? Research shows this generation is actually less itinerant

when it comes to professional aspects (Pfau, 2016). Moreover, this study found that job transfer rate not necessarily suggest that they are less committed to their organizations or feel less attachment. Rosso et al. (2010) already state that limited research focused on the context of the organization in regard to work meaning. Sinek (2016) indicates that the (corporate) environment is an important factor in how Millennials act in the workplace. This study elaborates on these statements by having found that shifts in society and organizational life influences Millennials engagement with organizations.

Even though Millennials prefer to have freedom to 'do what they want' and are keen to be autonomous, others capture a great role in organizational life. Both in work engagement as the meaning of work Millennials seek confirmation and rely on recommendations from others, either internal or external to the company. However, others are often perceived as a tool for personal needs as well. Chiaburu and Harrison (2008) already found that co-workers "*make the place*" (p. 1082). Although others shape the work environment, due to their hedonistic perspective, Millennials are not likely to make profound relationships in the workplace. Sinek (2016) assigns the constitution of superficial relationships to the impact of technology and social media, impatience and as well reflects on the significance of the confirmation from others for this generation. This raises the question on how organizations could manner bringing employees close to each other (e.g. in work teams) and yet remain them to be autonomous.

Besides findings from Sinek (2016) who states that some things in life simply just 'take time', this study argues whether the impatience of Millennials is linked to their focus on the present, by not observing aspects of life in the long run. Furthermore, impatience and hedonism might form an explanation for them being triggered by tangible results and the need for confirmation from others.

However, are Millennials really that "*tough to manage*" as Sinek (2016) claims them to be or can organizations anticipate on this generation by simply understanding what meaning they place to their work? This study has delivered novel thoughts on the concepts of work meaning and engagement among Millennials. However, one important question remains: do Millennials love what they do based on work meaning or do what they love based on engagement?

## PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The present study contributes to the extensive known literature on work meaning, work engagement and organizational engagement. In addition, acquired knowledge of this study produces practical implications for organizational life (e.g. organizations, employers and employees) as well. As previous generations are becoming less salient in the workplace, the focus for organizations is on the requirements these future employees demand.

Chalofsky & Krishna (2009) suggest that organizations can uphold excelling human resources and better organizational commitment through new approaches as increasing work meaning. Since the Millennial generation is relatively 'new' in organizational life, it is a given fact that members of previous generations will hire this new flow of employees. The deluge of stereotypes research holds over them may work as a disadvantage to them. Therefore, this study hopes to have delivered insights for managers and organizations into the perception of Millennials regarding what work means to them and how they engage and commit to work and organizations.

One of the most prominent implications this study delivered is the importance of establishing work environments for Millennials in which they perceive a welcoming ambience and a sense of autonomy. Since they view themselves as independent, organizations may reconsider organizational structures on the interdependence between different units within the organization. Moreover, organizations can anticipate by considering the generation is influenced by tangible outcomes and structural feedback.

By searching today, January 12, 2017, on the term 'Millennials', the Internet brings forth a headliner: *"Can Millennials in corporate jobs achieve work-life balance?"*. Corresponding with findings from this study, another practical implication might be to contemplate on aspects of work-life balance from employees. Hall (1990) introduced the so called 'flexible career path', where policies were introduced to meet both men's and women's needs in a balance between work and family life. Providing work-life balance policies for employees raises competitive advantages and organizational benefits (e.g. organizational performance, sales volume) (Carless & Wintle, 2007; Perry-Smith & Blum, 2000). The present study indicates that for Millennials, work should not consume too much of their time or they at least should not perceive it as time-consuming.

This study hopes to have offered insights for organizations on work meaning and engagement of this young generation, so employers can hire the best potential for their companies.

## **LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH**

This study has a few limitations and potential recommendations for future research.

Since the context of this study included The Netherlands, it is unclear to say if findings as well apply for the Millennials generation in other countries. However, Stein (2013) claims that even though Millennials differ over countries worldwide, the generation appears to be more similar to each other than previous generations due to factors as social media, globalization and rapid change, which might narrow the possible bias of the context of this study. Nevertheless, for future research it might be fruitful to explore Millennials in different countries besides The Netherlands. Moreover, Kaifi et al. (2012) found that for Millennials with a graduate degree it seems more probable to stay at the organization than for Millennials without this degree. Since participants in this study all held a college [HBO] or university [WO] diploma, future research may observe Millennials with a different qualification.

One of the aims of this study was to deliver evidence on Millennials in branches differing from existing literature which is mostly based on fields of work which perhaps require more human involvement (e.g. healthcare). However, future research should consider exploring Millennials in branches that are more typically known for individuals to be perceived as a calling, to exclude that for this generation the motivation for work can derive strongly from within as well.

On the concept of egomania, a note must be placed that the self-centered focus may be due to the way of questioning during the interviews. Obviously, when talking about the self, a more self-centered focus may appear than in a setting of questioning with a different approach.

Coding during the data analysis was not performed by a second researcher. Therefore, no Cohen's Kappa was calculated on the agreement between two researchers, which might have had an influence on the reliability of the study. Future research might consider performing in a research team with a check-up on the analysis phase.

One of the main limitations of this study is the phenomenon of overgeneralization. Even though this study examined work in the broader context of life, aspects of life continuously change over time (Chalofsky & Cavallaro, 2013). As findings of this study show, is it really possible to generalize an entire generation based on a 20-year era they are born in? Perhaps not every member of the Millennial generation grew up with the same parenting or access to technology and therefore think, act and behave in different ways. Future research could look into the possible differences within this generation and how they change over a certain timeframe.

Further research might examine different concepts of work meaning, work engagement and organizational engagement by a different approach, since it seems there is still plenty to investigate on Millennials in the workplace. However, despite possible limitations, the present study delivered numerous novel thoughts on concepts of work meaning and engagement with work and organizations among Millennials.

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## **APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**

### **Introduction**

First of all, could you tell me something about...

- your current position?
- your primary tasks and activities?
- when you decided you wanted to do this job?
- to what degree your job fit to your expectations?
- how satisfied are you with your job? [grading]

### **Work meaning**

1. When you think about your job, what is the main drive you go to work in the morning? Why?
2. How would you describe the role of work in your life? Could you give an example?
3. **ASSOCIATION CARDS:** Which photograph reflects the meaning of your work the best? Could you give examples?
4. A list of values is presented. Which values are most important to you? Do these values recur in your job? How?
5. What is the role of colleagues in your (work)life? Could you give an example?  
*Additional: do you integrate relations from work in your personal life?*  
*And vice-versa?*
6. What makes your job meaningful? Why? Could you give examples?

### **Work-life balance**

7. Are you satisfied with your current work-life balance? Could you explain why?
8. How would the ideal work-life balance look like for you? Why? How would you notice?

### **Work engagement**

9. When you wake up in the morning, which feeling do you experience when you think about going to work?  
*Additional: Which aspects in your work deliver you the most energy?*  
*Which aspects cost you the most energy? Why?*
10. Could you explain why you think you are good at the work that you do?

11. Does your work give you a proud and/or satisfied feeling? Which aspects? Why (not)?

12. What inspires you in your current job?

### **Organizational engagement**

13. Why did you choose this organization?

14. How important is this organization to you? To what degree do you consider yourself as a part of the organization?

15. When someone would offer you the same job at a different organization, would you take this job? Why (not)? What would be the consideration?

16. How do you picture your future regarding work? Would it be at this organization? Could you explain why (not)?

### **Millennials**

*Introduction:* The following questions concern the generation you belong to – also known as ‘The Millennials’ – born between 1980 and 2000.

17. According to you, what are characteristics of your generation? Could you give examples?

18. To what extent do you feel part of your generation? Could you explain why (not)? Could you give examples?

19. Do you think this generation has a different perception on their work in comparison to previous generations? Why (not)? Could you give an example?

20. Is there a specific person that inspires you? Who? Why?

### **General meaning**

21. Do you think your life has gained more meaning because of the work you do? Could you explain why?

22. Tomorrow you will win the lottery. Would you go to work tomorrow? Could you explain why (not)?

### **Final questions**

23. Are there any relevant issues you would like to add regarding this subject?

24. Demographics: age, education, number of years working, position, organization / branch.

## APPENDIX B: CODING SCHEME

Key theme	Category	Sub category	Code
Freedom	work-life balance	current work-life balance	satisfied various aspects of dissatisfaction
		optimal work-life balance	create freedom and flexibility changing boundaries output(s)
	organizational engagement	choice of organization	organizational characteristics possibilities of position no deliberate choice branch other...
		importance of organization	important somewhat important not important
		feeling part of organization	big part of organization several degrees of importance
		switch organization	depending on conditions yes no
Egomania	drivers of work meaning		success and achievement novelties and excitement belongingness personal aspirations enjoyment effectuate a comfortable life
	work role	role of work	role of work regarding life [great / small]
		feature of work	effectuate a comfortable life personal purposes money is not the most important
	work meaning		personal purpose purpose for others purpose for organization fun and satisfaction
	work engagement	being good at work	recognition of others personal characteristics tangible results
		proud and satisfied feeling work	tangible results recognition of others achieving a goal personal aspects other...
	role of others		great role feedback define atmosphere influence on own performance
	general meaning		more meaning through work less meaning through work impact on personal means meaning of life lies in aspects outside work
Hedonism	work choice		no deliberate choice familiar with field through friends and family extension of study job features features of organization
	future perspective		short-term perspective
	winning lottery		continue working
Millennials		Millennial characteristics	freedom novelties and excitement technology other...
		previous generations	frameworks smaller world less possibilities