

Transcript for S17, E5 – Finding meaning at work with Professor Amy Wrzesniewski

Intro: Welcome to the future of internal communication podcast. I'm Jen Sproul, CEO of the Institute of Internal Communication.

Since we launched this series in 2021, the world of work has been disrupted by event after event. A pandemic, geopolitics, AI, extreme weather events, remote and hybrid working, generational shifts, inclusion, diversity - the entire nature of how we work needs transformation.

This podcast explores opportunities for internal communication in the future of work. Internal comms is a critical function that helps organisations achieve lasting change, building trust and relationship between people, in pursuit of shared goals.

Please, join me, Dominic Walters and Cat Barnard as we dissect what this means for internal communication.

With relentless change the new norm, it's time to reimagine our profession.

Cathryn Barnard [00:01:01]

Hello and welcome to a brand new episode of the Future of Internal Communication podcast. I'm Cat Barnard, as ever, joined by Jen Sproul and Dominic Waters, and we've got a brilliant topic to discuss today. I think it's not unfair to say that most of us struggling to find and keep momentum at the moment, there is just too much going on in the world that is now bamboozling, that is incomprehensible. And wherever you are, whether you are in the North American continent, whether you're in Europe, whether you are listening to this from Australasia or Asia Pacific, there is always something to preoccupy us and keep us in a state of, would say, perennial anxiety now. And so having a conversation about meaning and finding meaning from work at work seems absolutely apposite for the time that we're living in. So without further ado, I am super excited to welcome Amy Wrzesniewski, who is the William and Jacalyn Egan Professor and Professor of Management at Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. So she's coming in live to us from the United States this morning. Welcome, Amy. I'm just going to say a few words, if I may, about your credentials. So Amy has a bachelor's from the University of Pennsylvania, where she graduated magna cum laude with a honours degree in psychology. She then received her PhD and master's degrees in organizational psychology from the University of Michigan. So she's been working academia for her entire career. She's won the IBM Faculty Award for her research and won



awards for undergraduate, graduate, and teaching. Her research on the meaning of work has been published in a wide range of top academic journals and highlighted in several bestselling books and popular press outlets, including The New York Times, Harvard Business Review, U.S. News and World Report, and The Economist, as well as and This Is Where I go. Read this one, not read that one, as well as bestselling books including Drive by Daniel Pink, The Happiness Advantage by Shawn Achor, Authentic Happiness by Martin Seligman, and The Art of Happiness by the Dalai Lama and Howard Cutler. Wow. So her current work involves studying how employees and colleagues shape their tasks, interactions, and relationships with others in the workplace to change the meaning of their jobs. And I have no substance for what I'm about to say, but I would wager that there's an awful lot of people doing that at the moment just to get by psychologically and emotionally.

Amy Wrzesniewski [00:04:08]

I would bet your right.

Cathryn Barnard [00:04:10]

Amy, I'm so pleased to have you come join us. It just feels like the right time to be having this conversation, if not a little bit overdue. Would you start by telling us a little bit more about your research? And actually, because I like to always think about succinct definitions telling us what is meaning. And then obviously why is why is finding meaning at work so important? Right.

Amy Wrzesniewski [00:04:39]

Great question. And a tough one. Tougher than it seems. So. Meaning is one of these slippery concepts that once you kind of try to drive right into it, it's almost like looking at the sun and people start reaching for increasingly abstract definitions and words and so on. And so I'll try to keep it very simple. All meaning is, when you come down to it, is the association someone has made between one thing and another. So I'll give you an example using work. So work means different things to different people because people associate their work with different entities, outcomes, values and so on. So for example, you could imagine three people working in the same organisation doing the same job. for whom one of them. The work signifies or means way to make a living. It's a means to an end. It's a way to get a pay cheque. The meaning of that job for them, of doing that work, doing those activities, is this more externally motivated, outcome based relationship between the work and what it's throwing off that allows them to support the rest of their life outside of their job, whereas someone sitting next to them doing exactly the same work could signify the relationship between that work and what it means to them as being about advancement and moving up a ladder and getting promotions and becoming eventually the head of the group and maybe the head of the department or whatever that might look like in their profession or in their occupation. Whereas a third person could see that work not as a means to a financial end or a means to career advancement, but rather as an end in and of itself, that there's something about the work itself that to them signifies impact value, something that they find



challenging and engaging, where the meaning of that work for them signifies the value that they see in the work itself. And so all of these people can see the work that they do as being meaningful, but the reasons they see it as being meaningful, the actual meanings that are attached to the work can vary quite a

Cathryn Barnard [00:06:40]

Which in the context of internal communication, immediately what comes to mind for me is there is no one size fits all because and I can't remember whether you and I discussed this on our on our prequel, but couple of weeks ago I read a really good book called The Psychology of Money by an American author, Morgan Horsell. And right at the beginning of the book he said very assertively, when it comes to trading or savings and investments, every single one of us will have a different outlook on money, because we've all been raised in different families at different times with different ways of thinking about money. So there is no universality at all when it comes to thinking about money. Hence writing this book on the psychology of money. But the link, the intersection between money and financial security and work is you might say differently, but I would have thought that's quite hard to even put a cigarette paper between the two. And therefore it must follow that everybody's, attitude to work and how they and if they derive meaning from their work must be, again, completely unique. Right?

Amy Wrzesniewski [00:08:03]

So quite unique, quite wide ranging, which is to me fascinating. So I have spent my entire research career chasing questions that have to do with how can the same work, the same job, the same job, design the same organisation, what have you? Means such different things to different people doing that work? And what where do they come from? Where do these different meanings come from? What are the implications of them for the people who hold them? What are the implications for their groups? What are the implications for their organisations? This has long fascinated me because it's in my own research field. For a very long time, there had been a view that if you tell me about the work. Tell me about the job, what's involved, how hard is it, how challenging, how much social interaction and so on, how much variety. And then I can tell you about the meaning of that job. I can tell you how meaningful that job is, how motivating that job is. And that's actually quite limited. It turns out it doesn't explain a whole lot, because whether we're talking about people working at the highest levels of their occupation and of kind of societal, respect and so on, or the lowest, you see these very wide ranging associations and meanings that people attach to their work and their consequential they're consequential for how satisfied people feel with the work that they're doing. They're consequential for how satisfied people are with their lives overall. They're quite consequential for how they end up showing up at work, how often they show up to how hard they're working when they're there, how well they're performing in the job, their impact on the other people that they're working with. in a study that I've done, looking at people who have entered the elite military ranks. So the US military Academy at West Point, which has over the history of our country, typically been the place where our army leadership has been educated. If



you look at why they're there, are they there? Because this is kind of more of a calling to them that they want to serve the country and be an army officer, or are they kind of thinking about it a little bit more in this sort of career or sort of job way, that this is a ticket to someday quite a lucrative career, once they are finished with their military service, what you find is the reasons that people attach to what it is that they're doing end up shaping, in this case, things like, do they even make it through West Having made it through West Point, how long do they stay with their military career and then how high performing are they as officers? So it shapes our trajectories, it shapes our levels of performance and it shapes our levels of engagement, which is why it has kept me fascinated for all these

Cathryn Barnard [00:10:39]

I say this with absolute respect and admiration, but you can only be scratching at the surface of what there is to discover and uncover because of the way in which materialism, consumption and capitalism have kind of taken hold quite literally, only in the last 40 or so years. The rise of Reaganism, the rise of Thatcherism, certainly in, English speaking countries is a manifestation of that. Right? so actually what we're talking about also is, through a very modern lens.

Amy Wrzesniewski [00:11:16]

At work is a fascinating domain of life generally. It's one that takes up so much of our time and focus. We invest enormous amounts of time, energy, worry depending on the country you're in, money, on education, and on how far we can get someone to go and how not stringent, but how rigorous can that education be? and often that is increasingly with the lens towards, well, where will that land them professionally? What kind of work will that set them up to But Joanne Chula, who is a philosopher whose work I love, has written this fantastic book on the history of work essentially through human times and this same domain of what you're doing for your work. It used to be something that only people who couldn't avoid working would work. Everyone else would try to figure out a way to kind of float themselves along make it through with respect to the resources they needed without having to work whatsoever. And so it's very interesting to think about and study over epics and eons and so on. What is it that has changed, that has now hitched work so closely to our sense of self-worth, to our sense of identity, to how, even if we don't think of it as our own sense of identity, certainly have other

Cathryn Barnard [00:12:29]

Right?

Amy Wrzesniewski [00:12:31]

shaped by this. And so it has freighted work with so much pressure around the kinds of meaning people make of it, how well they do in it, what their level of sort of accomplishment and so on is in it, how respected they are for doing it, which is very different from how work had been thought of



in different eras of humanity, and certainly also even in different cultures across the world. And so that's a fascinating question and one that's worth holding that it wasn't always this way.

Jennifer Sproul [00:12:59]

And when you say that and listen to it, it's fascinating. Just all the way you've described it as well as really helps with great clarity. And what is meaning? I don't know whether it's my reflection, but it feels like and it's from the work that we do at the Institute, when we look at the role of communication and how it helps people feel valued, seen, heard, they have belief, they have strategy, they have understanding. And we talk about shares meaning. But but I think the question is where is meaning shared and where is meaning personal and where do they collide and where do they come together? And it certainly feels as well that, as you say, we're looking back into the way you just talked about it. Is it I don't know, it feels like work is more emotionally charged than it used to be. It's got higher emotional baggage, voltage impact on all those sorts of things than it used to. And from the sense of how I see myself, how I see myself compared with other people in my age, my gender, my category, how I expect a colleague to be. Because why don't you have the same meaning as me? And why do you approach that differently? And why don't you care as much as I care? Because shouldn't you care as much? I care, but we don't actually have a shared meaning because meaning is is sensibly personal, right? So if we now all our in, then if you like these jobs and like you say, many people could be in the same job but have different meanings to it. And we're trying to obviously in our work create communication that helps shared meaning or understanding or helps people see identity in the rise of that, in how are people sort of job crafting and changing so that their work, both their work identity and their meaning derived from the same thing? Because it feels more complex. It feels like a spider web of complexity, of role doing, personal shared. And then we're all going to craft and move it to our own personal needs. And how does that block a future? That sounds like a very strange question that I really hope you had some understanding from.

Amy Wrzesniewski [00:15:08]

to me. And I think on the one hand, one extreme, we can sort of despair and say, oh my goodness, for as many employees as we have, we have that many meanings. And how in the world are we going to try to get people on the same page and have some sense of shared meaning, or shared enterprise, or what have you? If they're all holding sort of different meanings of what it is they're doing here and what it signifies to them. And I think the role of internal communications is fascinating and really important in this, because there are a couple of things before I turn to job crafting that internal communications can do, right. So on the one hand, it can provide narratives of and and stories is stories is how we connect. It's how we learn is how we come to understand things. It can offer us different stories and different instances, whether it's from the leadership, whether it's from the front lines of the organisation, of how it is people are making this organisation and this work a site of meaning and meaningfulness to them. And so it's possible then, to offer to people mission relevant takes or ways of approaching this work that are deeply



meaningful to the people who are sharing them, that can offer to their colleagues. Oh, that's an interesting angle of insight or angle of entry to thinking about what how that person thinks about what it is they're doing here. And that helps me sort of think about or evaluate how I'm thinking about it, and maybe expands for me a bit what might be possible if I sort of try to take on, for example, more client relationships, because this person seems to drive so much meaning from that. Maybe I should try to connect with a few more clients, or connect with my clients a little bit differently too, right? So it creates it opens possibility. It's an invitation, if you will, opposed to at the other extreme. There is one meaning that we want you to be thinking about with respect to your time here and one set of associations between the work you're doing and what this ought to be signifying for you. And I think that really gets organisations into trouble, because you can't force people to desert the kinds of things that make the work they're doing meaningful to them, and pick up other things and expect that they're going to experience them in the same way, which is why people job craft. So job crafting was something that I started studying with Jane Dutton and Goliath many years ago, when we were studying people who clean hospital rooms in a large university hospital system, and we studied this occupation, in part going back to something I said earlier, because the work had been described as being highly unlikely to be experienced as meaningful. You're handling sort of odious sorts of, body substances and so on. You're at the bottom of the totem pole of the organisation. This is unlikely to be seen as very meaningful work. And I suspected differently given the work that I had been doing. And in fact, when we went into this organisation and started collecting data from people who did this work, we found that people derived very different kinds of meaning from the work that they were doing, talked about the level of skill, and involved their feelings about the work in different ways. And when we sort of backed off those answers to look at, how did they describe what they were actually doing on each shift, we realised they were altering the tasks they were doing, how they were doing those tasks. They were altering the interactions and relationships they were forming on the job and composed them sort of quite differently across these groups that saw the work as sort of highly skilled or low skilled or highly meaningful or less meaningful, and they thought about what they were doing there in the organisation differently. And so they did this knowing what their managers were wanting to make sure they were getting done. So they were doing the job right. So I want to be really clear about that. They were doing their jobs across the board. All of them were doing their jobs, but the ones who were engaging in job crafting were customising how they were doing that job, who they were seeking out relationships and interactions with, and how they thought of themselves in the organisation in ways that supported very different ways of thinking about the meaning of that work. And so I'll give you a couple of quick examples. One, on the one hand, we had people who would say their job title is, know, C2 very, and when we ask them, what are the tasks in your job? Basically recited their job description, which they faithfully did and talked about not interacting very much with that many people in the organisation, which was essentially the design of that job as given to them. And on the other hand, we talked with people who, when we asked them, what is it that you do here? Their mind you in the exact same job would say, I'm an ambassador for the hospital. Or in the most extreme case, I'm a healer, which, when you're in an interview, that kind of puts you on your back foot a bit. And so we said, sorry, could you say a little



more about what you mean, that you're a healer? And the person said, I create clean and sterile spaces in which patients heal, but I also do anything I can to support them and their families along that healing journey. In the course of doing my work, and what that meant was the kinds of tasks they were engaging in, the nature of their interactions with patients and their parents or children or what have you, their relationships with the nurses to learn. How could they better help support this person in their hospitalisation? All of that looked very different in ways that were authored by the cleaning staff themselves. No one was telling them to do this. No one was asking them to do this. They sort this out as a way to support the kind of experience they wanted to have, of what it felt like to do this work, and who they felt like they would be if they were carrying it out in these ways that they had, customised to the kinds of meanings they sought.

Jennifer Sproul [00:20:55]

That, such a clear example of it as well. And it makes you talk about it. It makes me think about there's a phrase that often, I've heard repeated at many internal communication conferences, when we talk about our work and what we're there to do, particularly our North Star and vision and strategy and etc., etc., and a workforce of humans who are complex and psychologically, emotionally different. It's the phrases that when someone ask the janitor at NASA, what do you do here? And they said, my job is to get a man on the moon. And it makes you think about that, that side of it. But it also makes me think about two other things and how we view communication and how we view how work has changed situationally as well, constructively, and just the way relationships are formed and workflows and how we have the ability to customise differently than perhaps we once did. And I wonder, what was interesting is while you were talking about they built these relationships, they could understand it more. That enabled them to customise, and therefore it must take deep relational work to understand how you do that. And how do we think about the implications of a relationship and understanding deeply each other? And then from a, I guess, a mass where possible, can mass communication of meaning ever really work, or does it all need to be customised to that person?

Amy Wrzesniewski [00:22:21]

customisation to each individual employee feels like the road to hell to me. I mean, term there, but it feels impossible, right? I mean, that's just how do you get into the psyche of each individual employee? So what I do think is that offering people the idea or the possibility that this is a place where, in executing the mission of the organisation, right, in helping the organisation accomplish its strategy at the utmost level of excellence that it can, that what it is that people sort of care about who it is they want to be in that work. What is it about this that matters to them is possible, there is welcomed. There is what the organisation wants them to be and to become who it is that they see themselves as being in that work. job crafting is not deciding that you want to be the company guitarist and that you're just going to strum your days away, because that's really how you think about what it is you want to be doing there. It is about accomplishing what it is that you've been hired to do. But can you do it in ways that end up feeding the sense of meaning that



you most want to carry as you do that work? So we're talking about internal communications. Most organisations have an IT arm of some sort or another, and many of them have kind of an internal help desk where your laptop is blown up or what have you. The internet's not working. You can go and put in a ticket. And often the structure of that is they rotate kind of who has to staff that desk, if you your phone. And if you think about two people doing that job where the job description is the same, they're helping the organisation execute its mission. Two people can think about that very differently. You can have someone who thinks of it as being essentially a firefighter, that they just keep getting problems piled on their lap. They're trying to put out these fires, fix them as fast as they can, and get people back to work is a very different person, is a very different set nature of interaction, style of interaction than someone who sees their time on the help desk as they're there to be a teacher. So yes, I could put the fire out send you right back on your way. Now, your laptops no longer smoking or whatever it might be. Or I could see it as this is an opportunity for me to teach you why every time you run this and then launch this at the same time, your system is going to crash, it's because this is what's happening behind the scenes. So here are a few tricks where you can do the things you're trying to do going forward. But you can do it in a way that keeps your system stable. And here's why it works this way. It doesn't take that much more time than just fixing it and handing it back, but it's a small moment. So it's not to your question, Jen. It's not forming a deep relationship and really going out to lunch with all the people that you're doing it work for. It's a small shift in how that interaction unfolded. And if you think about these two types that I've just sort of painted behind the help desk in a year, in two years, in three years, the nature of their relationships with people in that organisation will look really different. How they feel relationally in that organisation, how they feel about what it is they're doing at work that day, when they're it's their turn on the help desk. The likelihood that they've been asked by different departments, come and do a workshop for us on how to use X, Y, z new technology. My bet is it's the second person that's got the relationships that, again, have not taken a huge amount of time investment, but it's just been the nature of that interaction that has shaped what became possible. There between people is kind of thing that could really make a

Dominic Walters [00:26:02]

A couple of things on what you just said. Just pull together two thoughts. said The whole thing about meaning is a very slippery concept, correct way of describing it. And it's the connection between two things that people make. And I've heard meaning described before. Nothing has meaning. Nothing in the world has any meaning at all, apart from the meaning that we give it. Which I guess is another way of saying that. And so listening to you describe what you found. Should we be talking? Do you think about helping people establish meaningful life? Because that seems a bigger concept. And then they can decide what chunk of their life work takes. And I think you were saying this, that, for some people their meaning is not derived from work at all. It's something they probably have to do. And you talked back to the house in days, perhaps when we didn't have to work or not. Everyone had to work. And so, I guess, first of all, to what extent have you found that where organisations help people establish meaning in life insofar as they can.



That's had an impact over how they view work? Or should we just stay in our lane? If you like, as organisations and focus on the one thing that we can directly influence? If that makes any sense at all.

Amy Wrzesniewski [00:27:10]

does. And it's it's a profound question because now we've gone from kind of the domain of work to all of life. Right? And, one of the things that we certainly have found is that for people who particularly for people who view their work more as a job. So this first category I had given, where you essentially see the work as a way of making the income that you need to support your life outside of work. It's not that those people are poor performers. They're not. It's not that they don't care about doing a good job. They do, but they do often freight other parts of their life as being higher priority for them than the work. Right? The work is in service of the other stuff. Now, what organisations tend to want, right. And this makes sense. Organisations are greedy institutions often is. They want people to be attaching all of their meaning to the work, because that's the person who's not going home at 5 p.m. they're going to log back in on weekends, they will work overtime shifts. They will do anything they can for the organisation, because the work is so primary and central to them as a source of meaning in their lives, and it's just not practical that you can select for people who all see their work that way, that you can keep people who see their work that way, seeing the same way over a long period of time. And so I think, to your question about what organisations may be better off helping people think about how they find meaning in their life. Sort of more generally, I have found that organisations have tended not to trouble themselves typically with that question. But I do think increasingly, as there have been lots of shifts happening around how people are positioning work with respect to its importance in their lives and so on, that some recognition of employers and organisations trying to support the whole person is probably a good investment to make. I want to go back to something that was inherent in your question, which is research would suggest that about 20% of the variance, or 20% of what you need to explain about how people experience the quality of their lives generally is explained by their relationship to work and how how they feel about the domain of So that's not 80% of the variance, but 20% is. It's significant. And that's true whether work is the best part of your life or the worst part of your life. And so for me, part of my initial motivation for wanting to understand these questions came from observing. And I think this is something we've all seen and maybe experienced, observing people for whom work was clearly a source of great pain and alienation in their life, and watching. What did that do to the rest of their life outside of work, versus people who saw their work as a great source of challenge and fun or fulfilment and meaning, and what those spillover effects seem to be on their home life, their life and their sort of communities, their way of showing up in their relationships off the job feels you can when you think of it that way, you can, I think, viscerally sense. Oh yes it does. Regardless of how much we might want to box it and concentrate on the rest of our lives, that there's feedback there. there's a flow between these domains that matters, which makes for me work a consequential and worthwhile place to try to understand what's happening



Dominic Walters [00:30:45]

Yeah, that's very interesting. So when people miserable at work, it has far greater influence on their wider life than when they're not, I guess. And the benefits are much broader than just for the organisation. And it's also interesting what you said about maybe organisations, sometimes they get a bit blinded to it, and they think that getting people to bring their whole selves to work and be totally engaged in what they're doing and to take massive meaning and and going back to Jen's quotation, I know I've been in workshops where we've tried to get everybody to be like the famous NASA toilet cleaner. And I think maybe I'm getting old and cynical. I don't think we can get there. I think we need to a make a call it sometimes and say, look, there's only a certain amount we can do. We can help people. But there are going to be some people, perhaps, who don't get their meaning from work, and they'll do a very good job. And that leads me on to the whole area around job crafting, because it'd be interesting to know just your thoughts on this, really, because when you were describing job crafting, I thought, well, some of this is people just bearing with their job. I mean, you could think, I hate my job. I can't imagine that. But people saying, I hate my job, I'm going to do all I can to make it bearable. And or people saying, I'm going to make it as straightforward, as effective as possible. So I want to do it well, but I don't necessarily take meaning from it. So when people are job crafting, what's your experience of that? How much of it is meaning? How much of it? Just I want to get to the day. How much does I just want to get this job done?

Amy Wrzesniewski [00:32:04]

question and I think it varies quite a bit. And so it varies from the point of view of exactly as you said, there are people who are crafting their jobs to make it possible for them to keep going, that they're trying to remove the things that are completely draining them, or spend less time on them, or park them all at the end of the day, or park them all at the very beginning of the day so they can just rush through it. Kind of taking medicine that doesn't taste good, and then they can get to the better stuff or the good stuff. So part of it is, is about that sort of managing what it is that makes the work maybe tough, but part of it is also thinking about, for the things that give you a sense of more of a sense of the kind of meaning you're seeking. What would it look like to try to dial those up a bit, to spend a little bit more time there, to get assigned to projects or shifts or units or what have you? However, the work might look like that would give you a little more access to that. Even a little more access to that seems to make a difference for people. And if, as you put it, part of your lens is wanting to do the work as effectively as possible and in a straightforward way, that also looks like, how do you then tweak the kinds of things you're spending your time on, the kinds of customers, clients, or coworkers you're spending your time with so that you can maximise the likelihood that that's going to be your experience of every day, ends up making a big difference for how what the experience is of feeling the day to day reality, of what it is to do that job. And I think part of it is how it changes what it is you're actually doing, it has implications for not just how you're thinking about it, but who you're spending time with, what tasks your front loading or back loading or trying to maybe delegate, or maybe just backing off of because you don't really have to spend as much time on it. Maybe management's not paying as much attention to it as you thought



they were, but part of it is the actual changes. But the other part, I think, is just the exercise of agency is just decided. Oh wait, I'm not just a passive recipient of this job design that I now just have to kind of trudge through and carry out, like I can think about what is it that they want me to get done here? And then in the bounds of that, generally speaking, how do I want to go about doing that? How do I go about doing that in a way that feels more like me, that feels more like I'm getting time with the things I care the most about, and I'm maybe minimising my time or or isolating the time that I have to just eat the stuff that I don't enjoy as much, which is present in practically any

Dominic Walters [00:34:29]

Element of control, that personal control. And we know that stress is driven by lack of control, often rather than just following with work. Isn't it? I suppose one more quick question that I will pass on to Cat, because when you've got people adverse circumstances, either at work or in life, and as Cat was saying earlier, and there's lots of pressures on many people at the moment, the world is a very odd position in general. What do you notice about how people can make meaningful work in those circumstances? So what do they do when other parts of their lives perhaps are collapsing? Or the organisation itself is not ideal? What sort of things do people do to bring meaning to that situation?

Amy Wrzesniewski [00:35:05]

love this question because I have long been drawn to trying to study people working in circumstances or structures that would likely make it really hard for them to either find the work to be meaningful, or to derive the kind of meaning they might be seeking in that because I feel like those are the context that stand to teach us the most about what it is that sustaining meaning might depend on. And from that work, generally speaking, what I would say is the thing that I think sustains people best through hard times, through unstable times, through loads of uncertainty, which I certainly think characterises the way the world has felt for some time now, is feeling as though you are having an impact on something that you care about, I think becomes more and more central. And the evidence for this, I think, comes out of moments, maybe more collective moments that we've all experienced where you can see that question get called for everybody or for most people in real time. So I'll give a local example first here in the US, and then I'll give a global example. So in the US now coming up in two weeks time or so, 25 years ago, the nine over 11 terrorist attacks, I was a faculty member at New York University. I was a mile from ground zero. And this happened, and it was obviously a terrible disaster and tragedy this happened. The world went through this with us in a way we very much felt at the time. And one of the things I'm going to bring this back to work, one of the things that happened for people, particularly people who felt I think more affected by this event, was suddenly in the realm of work. You started seeing things like on subway advertisements and so on in New York City, advertisements that had to do with things like, dear spreadsheets, ever write you and tell you the impact that you've had on them? And it's an advertisement to recruit teachers. And so this, this kind of phenomenon started happening where



people going into. Emergency services so help like firefighting, police work, emergency medical technicians, teaching occupations basically that are all about much more sort of direct impact on other people that is positive got so much more attention. People were leaving occupations that they felt like, wait a minute, what am I doing? I'm just kind of pushing paper here. I want to do something that matters. And when people were seeking that kind of meaning, what they sought or what they reached for was, where is my opportunity to have an impact on someone that is more tangible, visceral and alive for me? And so that was, I think, a profound thing to watch for someone like me. So when times get very tough, we go to these sort of core questions of who am I having impact on? And is it impact that that I think matters? And in the pandemic, my next example global, unfortunately. And so we got to see it on a very broad scale. I think part of what happened with the pandemic is that because it disrupted the work of so many people, where suddenly for people who had the privilege of being able to continue in their work and work, could continue in safer way, meaning they could be home, they were not on the front lines of, interacting with people and taking on great risk. What happened was suddenly you're home and it's just you and the work. And so if the work that you had always been doing was for you, something that was meaningful, something that you felt had impact, that you cared about, I think people really thrived because they could sort of get rid of all the distractions of meetings, these other kinds of things. They could just kind of lean into that work. Whereas people for whom the work itself was not at all what was meaningful for them or were they derived meaning it was their conversations with colleagues and travelling to clients and going into the office. And, these kinds of things made the work tolerable. Suddenly, that work felt much less tolerable to them. And I think that was part of what drove people to try to change their working situations or change their jobs. It's called the Great Resignation and sort of other things. I think part of what was driving that was people feeling like, wait a minute, the tides gone out. I can kind of see. Now all I'm really holding here is stuff that made the work bearable. But the work itself is not something I really care about. And so maybe I ought to go seek something where even if all the other stuff was stripped away in the meetings, the travel, the witty repartee with my colleagues and so on, that the work itself is something that really feels worthwhile

Dominic Walters [00:39:54]

And I think that's something which we can help as communicators. We can help leaders do, because quite often we do a lot of work with leaders and they'll say, well, how can I engage people? All that sort of stuff. I think the essence of what you said is help them understand they are influencing something they care about. I think that's brilliant, and I know it's more than that, but that's a really good place to start. Thank you.

Cathryn Barnard [00:40:14]

It is so entirely fascinating, though, and I'm really, really intrigued by your example of the pandemic, because one of my reflections often is that we've moved on from that period of time without any kind of public interest section and reflection on the enormity of what we went



through. And of course, the pandemic, the experience of the pandemic was different for everybody. And it disrupted anything and everything. One of the things that I've just written down, because it does feed into the next question I have for you, Amy, is that we know now because there is data to show it, that the pandemic it inequality financial inequality massively. So we know some years after the fact that those who were already in that kind of billionaire Khadra are now even more wealthy, whereas those who were struggling financially are struggling even more. And that must have some huge bearing on how people feel about work in what some pundits now call late stage failed capitalism and overlaying like, we couldn't have this conversation without bringing up the inevitable question that relates back to AI, right? I find AI just so fascinating because it is a digital work tool on the one hand, but it has come to mean so much more than that for so many people who are worried about, burgeoning climate crisis and the impact of these super data centres on water consumption and electricity consumption. And I don't know whether you've been reading similar articles in the US press, but our UK press and some quarters are reporting spikes of temperature around the data centres. So I read something a couple of weeks ago. We have a lovely town in the south of England called Slough, which has always been a very industrial centre, and there's big data centres being built out there. And at some points in our most recent heatwaves, it was being reported that there was degree difference in heat adjacent to those data centres than elsewhere. And it was already pretty blooming hot. But so, people are worried about the environmental implications of artificial intelligence. we are witnessing significant tail off in the number of graduate openings, which is to some degree, being linked to an uptick in demand for AI to do the basic entry level work that you would have otherwise hired a human being to do. think, maybe it's just, again, I think you said it done, age and cynicism. But I feel like there's been a really kind of almost like over exaggerated media narrative in the last decade or more about finding purpose, finding purpose everywhere. we have to have purpose in our lives, which what you were saying, some people just are quite happy to just get through the day and don't really attach too much meaning to their things. But all of these things intersect. The idea that AI will completely decimate the labour market in developed countries is a real and present danger for most of us until proven otherwise. And so that begs a huge question what? What when you think about it, and obviously none of us can predict the future, but what impact do you think AI is going to have on the ability to find meaning at work?

Amy Wrzesniewski [00:44:27]

think about this a lot about the impact of AI on work. I leave the question of what's the impact going to be on labour market dynamics and employment dynamics to my my economist colleagues, because I feel like they have better insight into what that's like, and they're kind of duking it out right now over these giant advances in technology. Don't remove employment so much to shift what the types of employment are versus no, no, this one's different. It really is going to undermine, continue to undermine employment in really serious ways. That to me feels still like a bit of an open question. So I'm just not I'm not sure where that's going to go. But with respect to thinking about what's the impact on work and meaning, one of the things that I will say that I've



been thinking quite a bit about is that AI changes if you're using AI in the conduct of your work, right? So you used to write the analysis, now AI writes the analysis. You used to do the research on your clients. Now AI does the research on your clients. You used to write the notes to, X, y, z folks who you're having to reach out to. Now, AI takes care of that, right? That you're just you're managing kind of a stable of agents and you're just sort of holding these puppet strings and checking their work and so on. In an environment like that, or in a situation like that. The thing that I keep coming back to in thinking about is that the person is no longer the one executing the actual work you are, you are prompting, guiding, shaping how other entities or they're not even really entities. Models are doing the There's now a layer between you and the actual work that has been produced. It's no longer from your hands. The words are no longer really yours. Even if you kind of tweak what's been, spit out at the end of a set of queries. And that, I do think is consequential. I think that people's ability to think through, puzzle through come up with a solution, execute the solution is in large part how we come to understand who we are in the conduct of our not just our working lives, but our lives in general. And so if we're no longer directly engaging in those activities, but are in fact guiding or prompting again, something else to engage in or produce those activities, I think there's automatically kind of an alienation between the self and the work in ways that concern me, in ways that I think will become sort of quite interesting to study as time goes on. I mean, the thing that we've gotten most of our focus around is what happens to building expertise. So I'm, I put my whole life into the realm of education, into that sector. And there's a lot of worry about a student who can write great prompts and write beautiful papers on the basis of their ability to guide. AI does not. Actually if there was a worldwide outage, doesn't actually know anything because they've never had to struggle with or master that material. And I feel like we're seeing this debate between, well, no, no, no, that's for suckers. Like now we don't really need to do that. But when it comes down to it, if you had someone who was in your house kind of fixing some sensitive system. Do you want someone who actually understands how these systems work, or someone who is just kind of sitting there prompting, right, for what's happening, but doesn't have the deep pattern recognition that when there's a rumbling near the street like this and there's this kind of situation happening with the lights, it usually means one of two things, which is a very different kind of thing than just kind of running scripts it's telling you to do next. And so I this alienation of if job crafting essentially removing the layer between the job description you write that it's you kind of showing up to do that work, you're doing it the way you want to do it. You're engaging people the way you want to engage them. You're focusing and emphasising the tasks that you most want to be engaged in. AI, in some sense, is pulling us in the opposite direction. That's pulling us particularly further away from the work in ways that I think because it's so tempting, because it's so easy, because so many organisations are encouraging slash, insisting that their employees use this for more and more and more things is potentially quite troubling.

Cathryn Barnard [00:48:51]

will pass over to the guys to wrap up, but I think this is a really interesting point, and I just want to float it as an idea. hyper focused on the choice of language here. Crafting. Crafting to me denotes



making something that hasn't been made before. And when I think about generative AI, it is nothing much more sophisticated than a mash up of everything that is known about the world. So the algorithms are sophisticated, and we'll give the Silicon Valley tech rose creds for that. They have developed sophisticated software, but they have built the technology and feather everything that is known and everything that has been published in the world. We have a professor at Oxford University here in the UK, who is one of the country's leading experts on AI, Professor Michael Wooldridge, and he gave a series of lectures back in 20 2324. Whenever it was saying, biggest challenge that we face is that what these llms have been fed is the internet, and that is every single tweet and Facebook opinion and subreddits and so on and so forth. So the whole kind of house of cards is built on everything that is known about the world. Whereas a crafter and a creatives whole reason for being is to bring new things to life. so this crafting thing for me holds real weights, because actually that's the job. We live in a world where to some degree, since the arrival of the commercial internet, commercial internet is a big reference library telling us how things should be. But that's not how things turn out in reality. And it is this ability to your point about, the plumber being able to discern and sense make. Okay. Well, I know from my lived experience and from my acquired mastery that this novel situation is possibly going to have stemmed from these things. I think, the thing that is just so fascinating to me is that the whole sphere of AI, as we understand it today, is based on no knowns, whereas we have got so many novel wicked. I'm using my air quotes for those who can't see this wicked problems that we have to try and address in order to maintain some semblance of societal cohesion. And we cannot use the thinking that got us to this point, right? I mean, it just it seems such an anathema to me that we would be relying on a technology that is only based on known knowns.

Amy Wrzesniewski [00:51:55]

Yes. a colleague of mine asked a question to a workshop that a research workshop I was in that was extremely revealing, even of the known knowns, and said, how many of you have gone to AI to ask it a question about something that is absolutely in your area of expertise? We were all academics. A few people raised their hands and he said, how did it do? And they said it was pretty awful, actually, like lots of inaccuracies and so on. And then he asked, how many of you have ever gone to AI to ask a question about something that you know basically nothing about? And everyone raised their hand and he said, how did it seem with the response? And people said, seem pretty good. And he said, right, exactly. So do you go to your point, even the known knowns, right. The more expertise you have about the known that it is weighing in on, the more you realise how imperfect and complete, lacking, sometimes dead wrong it can be about something that you, as an actual expert on something know sort of better, right? And so the question even goes beyond the unknown unknowns to, there's limitation in the known knowns. And to me, that speaks to not just the benefit to others of developing expertise and so on, but it's it's how a self is developed.

Outro [00:53:10]

I love that,



Jennifer Sproul [00:53:11]

Yeah, I love that as well. As you both were just talking about, there was a couple of things that I was just thinking of, and I'm going to pass the Dom as well, is that when you talk at the very beginning of, we'll talk about what is meaning to one to another, right? So meaning to me could be my pay cheque, meaning someone else could be meaning to someone else could be the impact, the value, the things that I create. AI could destroy those meanings because they become no longer available to people. Because if you're meaning as a pay cheque, there's no routine task that's no longer required. Then your meaning is gone, right? And I think it's this piece as well. I've heard something really interesting as well about. Had a conversation earlier with somebody about this is that it was communication specifically as well. And what the future of our profession is, where we're trying to create expertise of how we create content, words, language, actions, behaviours that create a feeling and emotional reaction within us, a meaning and understanding, a belief, a change, whatever that, might be, is that we are now going to create a future set of people that don't actually understand the expertise of that, to use AI to create it, to then review AI. But we know how to review AI because they're not an expert at it. And then people that are experts and makers are getting more and more papers on things they should look at that are of lower level quality that they're having to do. So therefore, that impacts what I was thinking of. Well, that impacts my ability and my meaning of I don't feel advancing here. I'm just doing more treasury. I don't feel like I'm being challenged here because I'm just having to course correct. Poor practice. I feel like I'm not meaning here because I can't do the task or the job or the craft that I wanted to, because they've taken that away and I don't feel I'm able to have the impact anymore, because I don't feel like I've got the expertise to keep passing it around. My final question is I think about meaning with all of that in mind and all the things that we've talked about, why do you think businesses should care about creating meaning at work?

Amy Wrzesniewski [00:55:14]

Why do I think they should care about creating meaning at work, or the kind of meaning people derive from the work they do, because it ends up relating to or driving everything from employee motivation, absenteeism, engagement, satisfaction, sense of empowerment, how they handle stress, how much they identify and care about the organisation itself, how their careers develop, their performance, their sense of fulfilment. So to the extent that the enterprise can't be run just by AI, but needs to be run by people paying attention to what it is that keeps people cemented to the work and or attached to the work, and attached to the organisation in which it's happening is critical.

Jennifer Sproul [00:55:58]

And that's what AI is destroying, I think, in that relationship to that is I think there's going to don bring us in to land, as you always do, so

Dominic Walters [00:56:05]



Well, I mean, what a fantastic conversation and thank you for making everything so practical and accessible and usable. I think lots of obviously decades of research, but in ways applying it in ways that we can find useful. I think so often actually in our conversations it boils down to our role as communicators. I think in getting people to help think things through. Is having conversations help you make sense of stuff? And one of the strong messages I've taken from our conversation is that meaning is different from person to person And I know many organisations have been guilty of this and jumping on the bandwagon saying, here's what your job means and beating them over the head metaphorically until they either accepted or pretend they accept it. And I think you've helped us understand that we have a role as communicators in helping people have that discussion with themselves. Where do I get meaning? What do I love doing? How can I do that within my role? Or even as Jim was saying, it isn't that it's more about I can do things in my role that helps me do stuff I love other parts of my life, bring it into context. So I think that's been a very, very helpful. But I'm going to have to go back and listen now because there's so much in what you said. I want to make sure I haven't missed any, but they'll be for now. Anyway. Thank you very much for taking taking part in the podcast of your great thoughts.

Amy Wrzesniewski [00:57:19]

A wonderful thank you. This was so much fun.