Work remains meaningful despite time out of the workplace and chronic pain

SARA SAUNDERS PHD, OT(C), ERG.
DIRECTOR, OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY PROGRAM
ASSISTANT PROFESSOR (PROFESSIONAL)
MCGILL UNIVERSITY
Plan

1. Meaning of work and work disability

2. Study findings
   ◦ The meaning of work drives effort to return to work.
   ◦ Effort not optimized

3. Strategies to address the meaning of work in a work rehabilitation context.
My background

Occupational Therapist
- Worked as return to work coordinator
- Questioned the nature of work disability
- Returned to school to learn more

Doctorate in Rehab Science, McGill
- Studied the meaning of work and work disability

Director of the Occupational Therapy Program and Professor at McGill


Saunders, S.L., MacEachen, E., & Nedelec, B. (2015). Understanding and building upon effort to return to work by the long-term work disabled and unemployed. Work, 52(1), 103-114. DOI: 10.3233/WOR-141977

dara.saunders@mcgill.ca
Background

MEANING AND WORK
Work is healthy and meaningful

Work is healthy

Work contributes to health and well-being (Waddell & Burton, 2006)
- provides financial independence, psychosocial well-being
- source of identity, roles and social status

Work is meaningful

“what we do in life is intimately connected to the meaning that we find in life” (Hasselkus & Rosa, 1997, p. 365)
The meaning of work

Take a minute and reflect on what you find meaningful about the work you do.

Meaning is personal (MOW international research team, 1987)
- Financial
- Contribution
- Identity
- Status
- Balance

Work values
- Intrinsic: accomplishment, creativity (Georgel & Jones, 1997)
- Extrinsic: providing for the family, social relationships (Hall, 1986)
Work disability

Being unable to meet the requirements of a job due to limitations from a health condition

Interaction between the person and their overall context in which they live (WHO, 2011)

Return to work more challenging with prolonged time off work and job loss
Work Disability

Workers with chronic pain, long-term work disability and unemployment due to a musculoskeletal injury:
- expensive, challenging and poorly understood (Loisel et al., 2005)
- faced with complex barriers to return to work

Despite rehabilitation efforts, return to work is difficult to achieve (Durand et al., 2002; Soucy et al., 2006)

Those with chronic work disability continue to remain off work
- Stakeholders may be led to believe they do not want to return to work
Work disability and meaning

Meaning can change
  ◦ person’s values and meanings can change over time due to work and life experiences (unemployment) (Hall, 1986; Isaksson et al., 2004)

Does the meaning and value of work change due to the time away from work caused by disability?
Meaning of work for people experiencing disability

Scoping review (Saunders & Nedelec, 2014)

Research aim:
◦ To explore what is known from existing literature on what work means to people with work disability following temporary or chronic unemployment due to illness or injury.

Results: 52 articles
◦ Mental illness (13)
◦ Cancer (9)
◦ Mixed physical and mental disorders (8)
◦ HIV/AIDS (6)
◦ Brain injury (6)
◦ Musculoskeletal disorders (5)
◦ Spinal cord injuries (3)
◦ Epilepsy (1)
◦ Guillain-Barré syndrome (1)
Important conclusions

Most people with disabilities want to work

The desire to work is not different from everyone else
  ◦ relationships with others, a sense of stability, and to have purpose in life

Meaning associated with work
  ◦ Motivate participation in rehabilitation and return to work

Returning to work:
  ◦ Allowed them to leave the disability identity behind, reclaiming their worker identity
  ◦ Associated with an improvement in self-esteem, and physical and mental health

(Saunders & Nedelec, 2014)
The study

METHODS AND PARTICIPANTS
Study

Purpose: To understand and describe the meaning of work for injured workers living with chronic pain, long-term work disability and job loss.

Recruitment
- Work rehabilitation and chronic pain programs – outpatient rehabilitation center in Montreal
- Working age (15-60), MSK injuries, unemployed for at least one year, returned to work or not

Data collection:
- 3 in-depth interviews (approximately 1 week apart)
- First interview: the meaning of work prior to accident.
- Second interview: meaning of work from time of accident, through lost of job, and rehabilitation
- Third interview: meaning of work for the participant at the time of the interview

Participants
- 9 people who had sustained a MSK injury and were experiencing long-term work disability
Findings
Work is meaningful

Meanings were diverse
- Financial security for themselves and their families and opportunities to enjoy leisure activities: “It’s the security to know that you have a roof over your head, you’ll have food and you’re comfortable” (Jaime, Interview #1)
- Social environment of the workplace
- Communicating and connecting with people

Meaning came from a number of sources
- From parental influence
- Use of skills to produce a product or service
- Acknowledgement of workplace superiors: Jaime stated that her job in the travel industry gave her “some self-worth, I was worth something because, you know for my boss to pay my trips, and let me go negotiate contracts, he had to have trust in me” (Jaime, Interview #2)

Meanings their identities were based upon
“You find your identity when you work” (Jennifer, Interview #2)
Search for meaning

When no longer able to work, participants experienced a loss in meaning:

- “I want to go out there and I want to work. I don’t want to sit because you know, I find my...life is...drifting away. I’m losing...myself” (Mel, Interview#1)
- “If I had the opportunity to not work, I’d probably still want to work because it gives you a purpose and gives you that satisfaction” (Jennifer, Interview#2)

Choices for new work were found to be grounded in past work meanings

- Jaime worked in the travel industry but following her accident dreamed of being retrained in human resource management - linked to interest in providing a family atmosphere within a workplace
- Brian was a professional musician who chose a new career in ecology based on past work on his childhood farm and within National Parks
Motivation to push past barriers

Physical barriers

◦ Pain:
  ◦ Brian persisted in volunteering endeavours: “If you want to start feeling validated and feeling good about yourself then... hang around places that might give you that opportunity... get up, get the hell out the door, even if you’re in a bit of pain” (Brian, Interview#2)
  ◦ “I’m in more pain sitting at home [because] you’ve got time to dwell [on pain]. But when you’re out and you’re doing something, you have to focus on what you’re doing” (Moriah, Interview #3).

◦ Addiction to pain medication

System barriers
System barriers

Insurance system barriers
- Negative attitudes of insurance agents
- Disagreement or misunderstandings between decision makers.
- Procedures, such as the regular rotation of caseloads among the agents

Healthcare system barriers
- Waiting in the system: appointments, programs, retraining

Workplace system barriers
- No job to go back to
- Stigma preventing being hired at new job
  - “You’re caught between a rock and a hard place when you’re going to these interviews and when you are in that [worker’s compensation] predicament ... because a lot of companies out there once they hear [worker’s compensation]... [it’s] like you have some kind of illness when they see that” (Mel Interview #3).
Meaning drove effort to return to work

“I never thought that I wouldn’t do something again. With everybody telling me that ‘you’ll never work again, you’ll never do this again, you’ll never do that again’, it was like, ‘no, no, no. There is something out there I can do’” (Moriah, Interview #3).

RTW effort was observed in three phases of the RTW process:
- The effort to remain in the workplace following their accident
- To find new work following the loss of their job
- To attempt new work.
Effort to remain in pre-accident jobs

Problem solving how to work within their physical limitations and obtain job accommodations
  ◦ Mel experience of sitting on a crate to do work

Attempting to juggle medical interventions with work demands

Using their limited number of sick days to remain in the workplace

When unable to remain in the workplace:
  ◦ Exerting effort to maintain contact with employers
  ◦ Trying to speed up the medical assessment and treatment process
Effort to return to employment following job loss

“I did a lot of work in the time that I had off to try to get back to work” (Jennifer Interview#2).

Preparatory work
- Rehabilitation and pain management programs
- Preparing for working life – getting up early, buying new clothes

Skill improvement
- Seeking out support programs and retaining the assistance of employment specialists
- Skill improvement courses: CV writing, Interviewing skills

Job searching
- “I have never applied this much in my life, ever!” (Jennifer Interview#3)
- Tried “every trick in the book” (Mel Interview#1) to find work. She was even willing to work for free to get her foot in the door
- Employer reluctance

Attempting work
- Attempted to return to pre-accident jobs
- Attempted job placements
- Attempted volunteering
Effort in new work

New part-time work (2 participants)
- Working for a manufacturing company that hires people with disabilities
- Working for company receiving subsidies to support injured workers

Other participants remain out of the work force.
When meaning was not optimized

The RTW process slowed

Jaime – hard work is meaningful
- caused her to overdo it and experience repeated flare-ups that slowed her progress.
- tried to pace herself with lighter work – but found it not feel like ‘work’ and she feared being perceived as lazy.

Mel - retrain as a gardener
- based on her past history in agricultural field and interests in working outdoors
- she viewed this job as beneath her
- left her feeling deeply offended and misunderstood, and impacted her trust in the rehabilitation staff, slowing RTW progress

Mob loved his work as a salesperson and educator at a hardware store
- RTW attempt - hardware store cashier was tried – matched physical abilities
- failed in less than 48 hours due to unmanageable pain
- Mob was motivated to work through this pain to return to his previous, more meaningful, selling job
- opportunity missed by a compensation system not focused on meaning
Benefits of pursuing meaning

When meaning was recognized and tapped into, it was motivating and moved them forward in their RTW pursuits.

- Moriah felt validated by rehabilitation professionals recognition of hard working attitude
  - “they noticed, with my drive, that I was stubborn and that I wasn’t giving up. They extended my time there” (Moriah Interview#3).

- Jaime - many aspects of her life improved when hard-working values were matched by her endeavors
  - high school equivalency - going to school every day, studying at home made her feel more positive generally, had a positive effect on her relationship with her husband, and gave her energy to do more in her home and leisure life.

- Jennifer when able to go back to work
  - “I was happy. I was finding myself. Again, work really kind of defined me. I think that’s what I realized back then... it is part of my identity. So when that was taken away from me, I got depressed. So when I was back, I felt like I was getting myself back into play” (Jennifer, Interview#1).
Implications
Ways to focus on meaning

Early stages of work disability
◦ when waiting in the system - tests, treatment, etc.

Action:
◦ Help people engage in meaningful accommodations or modified work
◦ Connect people to meaningful volunteering

Benefits:
◦ Maintain worker identity
◦ Prevent feelings of loss of work meanings
◦ Prevent associated psychosocial problems
◦ Prevent work disability – early return to work practices
Focus on meaning

Later stages of work disability

Action:
- Explore meaning of work in assessment process
- Use meaning to improve work simulation
- Provide better tailored interventions to keep people engaged in pain management and physical conditioning work

Benefits:
- Help people push past pain and system barriers to RTW
- Help people better understand feelings of loss or grief
- Prevent work disability
Focus on meaning

New career

Action
- Finding new meaningful directions for work
- Help clients to connect previous meanings with new job that matches physical demands

Benefits
- Return to work
- Sustainable employment

Work sustainability at all stages
- New-found understandings of meaning may help them to remain in the workplace despite challenges associated with fluctuations in pain or work duties
Occupational therapists and meaning

Initial client interview

- The focus could shift from delving deeply into the accident, medical implications and treatments, to a discussion of the meaning throughout the client’s work history, and the impact the injury has had on these meanings

Assessment tools

- Worker Role Interview: addresses the worker’s values, interests and important roles in addition to work habits and routines, opening up a dialogue on the meaning of work

Throughout intervention

- Informal discussions about meaning

Access

- Referral, funding

(Saunders, MacEachen, & Nedelec, 2017)  (Ekbladha, Thorellb, & Haglund, 2010)
Take away messages

Work continues to be meaningful
◦ in ways specific to the person
◦ regardless of the amount of time away from work

Return to work continues to be desired regardless of the amount of time out of the workforce

Meaning drove effort to RTW – even years following an injury

When the meaning of work is not understood:
◦ Effort can be wasted in return to work pursuits that are either:
  ◦ not meaningful and perhaps less sustainable
  ◦ are meaningful but do not reflect a person’s current abilities

When effort is wasted, the person can end up feeling trapped in a system that does not understand or appreciate their effort

“I’m fed up. I’m like in prison for the past eight years” (Jaime)
References


References

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