THE THEORY OF PURPOSEFUL WORK BEHAVIOR: THE ROLE OF

PERSONALITY, JOB CHARACTERISTICS,

AND EXPERIENCED MEANINGFULNESS

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ABSTRACT

The Theory of Purposeful Work Behavior integrates higher-order, implicit goals with principles derived from the Five-factor Model (FFM) of personality and the expanded job characteristics model to explain how traits and job characteristics jointly and interactively influence work outcomes. The core principle of the theory is that personality traits initiate purposeful goal strivings and when the motivational forces associated with job characteristics act in concert with these purposeful motivational strivings, individuals experience the psychological state of experienced meaningfulness. In turn, experienced meaningfulness triggers task-specific motivation processes that influence the attainment of work outcomes. Testable propositions derived from the theory are described and directions for future research are discussed.

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Explaining why people do what they do at work has been the goal of behavioral scientists for nearly 100 years. Although there are many different ways to address this complex question, ultimately, any answer includes a discussion of individual characteristics such as personality and ability and situational factors such as job characteristics and the social context. In this paper, we focus on the motivational processes resulting from the joint effects of personality traits and task or social job characteristics in explaining work behavior. We refer the reader to excellent articles that examine the effects of general mental ability on work performance (e.g., Gottfredson, 1997; Lubinski, 2004; Schmidt & Hunter, 2004), which focus on processes associated with the acquisition of knowledge and the ability to learn; these are important determinants of job performance but are outside the scope of this paper.

Behavioral science researchers have focused on two major sets of distal determinants when seeking to explain an individual’s motivation and subsequent work behavior: the effects of the person’s dispositions and environmental circumstances. For example, there is substantial empirical research showing that individual differences in personality traits play important roles in predicting and explaining employee motivation and behavior (see Barrick & Mount, 1991; Hogan & Holland, 2003; Judge & Ilies, 2002; Salgado, 1997). Similarly, numerous studies have shown that differences in characteristics of the work situation, such as the redesign of work through job enrichment (e.g., Hackman & Oldham, 1975; Humphrey, Nahrang, & Morgeson, 2007; Turner & Lawrence, 1965), play an important role in impacting employee motivation and behavior at work. In fact, it is difficult to think of an instance of employee behavior that is not better understood by considering the joint influence of these two sets of factors (Barrick, Mount, & Judge, 2001; Gustafson & Mumford, 1995). Nonetheless, it is surprising that most research in the field has examined the effects of dispositions and task or social characteristics on employee motivation and behavior separately or has given the other only cursory treatment. Consequently, very little research has systematically examined the joint and interactive effects of these two sets of motivational influences.

To explain the complex relationship between these two distal determinants of motivated behavior, we incorporate the role of higher-order, implicit goals or agendas the individual strives to
attain (Barrick, Stewart, & Piotrowski, 2002; Kanfer & Kanfer, 1991; Locke & Latham, 2004). In our model, these implicit, higher level goals depict an individual’s purposeful motivational strivings (DeShon & Gillespie, 2005), which span relatively long time frames and are represented as general desired end states that may be accessible to consciousness. We propose two self-regulatory processes associated with these broad motivational goal strivings - purposefulness and experienced meaningfulness – as key mechanisms through which personality, task attributes, and social demands affect volitional choice and action at work. Purposefulness refers to having a sense of desired end states or directedness to one’s behavior; whereas experienced meaningfulness refers to the perceived significance or meaning an individual draws from engaging in work activities (DeShon & Gillespie, 2005; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). Through purposefulness and meaningfulness, the broad, implicit goals or personal agendas in our theory channel the joint effects from specific personality traits and job characteristics to determine the individual’s motivated behavior at work.

Although there is relatively little empirical work accounting for the simultaneous influence of both personality and the work context on work behavior, there are a number of theories that attempt to explain both sets of influences including the cognitive-affective personality system (Mischel & Schoda, 1995), job crafting (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001), sensemaking (Weick, 1993), person-job fit (Edwards, 1991), situational strength (Meyer, Dalal, & Hermida, 2010) or trait activation theory (Tett & Burnett, 2003). While these theories embrace the central idea that motivation is the product of individual attributes and the environment, our theory differs from these approaches because it proposes the broad, higher-order goal(s) the person is striving to attain is the integrating mechanism that comprehensively explains how, why, even when an individual will be intrinsically motivated at work. In this paper, we posit the key to explaining an individual’s level of intrinsic motivation is to recognize that an individual’s broad implicit goals (to get along with others) arise from specific personality traits (e.g., an agreeable employee) and interact with relevant job or social characteristics (e.g., greater social support, teamwork) to determine behavior (e.g., engaging in caring and cooperative behavior towards others). By accounting for the regulatory influence of these goals, our theory demonstrates that the individual is purposeful and also
recognizes the impact of the significance or meaningfulness experienced by the person while attaining these goals. Thus, what makes our theory distinctive from all other theories integrating personality and job enrichment is it clearly identifies which specific personality traits and job or social characteristics matter to explain why we do what we do.

The integrative theory we propose differs in several ways from traditional models of motivation. First, rather than focus on specific, difficult performance goals that predict particular individual behaviors or actions (DeShon & Gillespie, 2005; Locke & Latham, 2004), our approach draws upon superordinate implicit goals or personal agendas to guide the joint effects from personality and the situation. Our approach also differs from the traditional approach taken by job design researchers. The traditional approach posits that differences among employees’ motivation and satisfaction in enriched jobs can be attributed to one relatively narrow dispositional variable, growth need strength. We believe a conceptual integration of the two paradigms requires broad comprehensive measures, which may account for the finding that the empirical research has failed to consistently support the moderating effects of growth need strength (Johns, Xie, & Fang, 1992; Tiegs, Tetrick, & Fried, 1992). Recent applications of meta-analysis have resulted in significant advancements in understanding how motivated behavior and performance are associated with the Five-Factor Model personality traits (Barrick et al., 2001; Judge & Ilies, 2002) and comprehensive job design models that recognize both task and social attributes (Humphrey et al., 2007). Now that the field has achieved a better understanding of both personality traits and characteristics of enriched jobs, we believe the time is ripe to incorporate these developments to enhance our theoretical understanding of the joint influence of individual differences and redesigned jobs on motivation.

OVERVIEW OF THE THEORY OF PURPOSEFUL WORK BEHAVIOR

The full model of the Theory of Purposeful Work Behavior (TPWB) is shown in Figure 1. In the following pages, we describe the major components of the model in detail. Given that the major contributions of the theory pertain to the processes associated with the left side of the model shown in Figure 1 (striving for purposefulness and meaningfulness), we focus our discussion on those processes and provide only a general discussion of subsequent (striving for satisfaction and
performance) performance motivation processes shown in the right half of the model. We first describe the role of personality traits and then describe their relationship to four fundamental, universal implicit goals that define individuals’ personal agendas. We then describe the roles of task and social characteristics of work in providing the context in which purposeful work behavior is interpreted as being personally meaningful. Finally, we propose specific testable hypotheses that spell out how the higher-order goals, which emerge from the individual’s standing on various personality traits, interact with the social and task characteristics of jobs to influence task specific motivation processes and work performance.

----- Insert Figure 1 about here -----

Major Components of the Model

**FFM personality traits.** Funder (2001) defined personality as “an individual’s characteristic patterns of thought, emotion, and behavior, and together with the psychological mechanisms – hidden or not – behind those patterns”. Thus, these traits reflect an individual’s volition or motivational control (i.e., choices, preferences, wishes and desires), and influence behaviors that are generally consistent over situations and time and that distinguish individuals from each other. Contemporary research in both personality and industrial/organizational psychology has converged on the five-factor model (FFM) as a widely accepted taxonomy that comprehensively captures the critical stable individual differences in personality (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Costa & McCrae, 1992). The five traits are Extraversion (sociable, dominant, ambitious), Agreeableness (cooperative, considerate, trusting), Conscientiousness (dependable, hardworking, persistent), Emotional Stability (calm, confident, secure), and Openness to Experience (imaginative, adaptable, intellectual). Through application of the FFM, considerable progress has been made over the past twenty years in understanding how personality traits are associated with employee behavior (Barrick et al., 2001; Judge, Heller, & Mount, 2001; Judge & Ilies, 2002) and the role traits play in influencing the particular types of job settings individuals actively seek out and prefer (Mount, Barrick, Scullen, & Rounds, 2005; Stewart, Fulmer, & Barrick, 2005), as shown in Figure 1. What remains unanswered is a better understanding of how and when these traits affect motivation.
Our theory argues the fundamental higher-order implicit goals associated with these five personality traits can be thought of as the “psychological mechanisms” that Funder (2001) suggests will guide and direct the unique patterns of thought, emotion, and behavior. These psychological mechanisms or higher-order goals serve to organize the dispositional tendencies to think, feel, and act associated with each personality trait in ways that differentiate them from those associated with the other traits. Thus, striving to naturally express personality traits leads us to invest more personal resources – mental attention, emotional connections, and energetic activity - to fulfill particular types of higher-order goals. For example, highly extraverted employees who are ambitious, dominant, and excitement-seeking are predisposed to choose a goal to fulfill their innate desire to obtain power and influence over others and to create competitive relationships. Such employees will experience greater motivation when they are able to pursue in unfettered ways those goals that guide behaviors linked to obtaining greater status and getting ahead of others. As we discuss next, these implicit, higher-level goals are the key mechanisms by which the distal dispositional determinants of motivated behavior lead to purposeful work striving.

**Higher-order, implicit goals.** A basic assumption in the Theory of Purposeful Work Behavior is that employee behavior is purposeful or directed toward the attainment of goals (e.g., Barrick et al., 2002; Locke, 1976). Goals are hierarchically organized, based on their abstraction (Austin & Vancouver, 1996; Cropanzano, James, Citera, 1993), with higher levels specifying the “why” or purpose of behavior and lower-level goals detailing the “how” or specific action plans to attain the overarching goals. The higher-order goals are crucial in our theory, because they represent fundamental, distal desired motivational objectives that people strive to attain. People often focus attention on these broad, higher-order goals implicitly, and may not even be consciously aware of them. This builds on recent research which clearly reveals people are generally unaware of the higher-level goals that guide their behavior, and further, that the key is attention more than explicit awareness (DeShon & Gillespie, 2005; Dijksterhuis & Aarts, 2010). This counterintuitive distinction is basic to our theory, as activation of attention but not necessarily conscious awareness is all that is required to act on these higher-order goals.
In our model, these implicit, higher-order goals represent essential, enduring personal agendas that reside at the top of the individual’s goal hierarchy. Although the goals at higher levels tend to be common across individuals, the importance or value attached to each goal differs depending on the individual’s personality (DeShon & Gillespies, 2005). If not, a person would be overwhelmed by conflicts between goals and would be unable to act. This also explains the fundamental role personality plays in predicting which purposeful implicit goal the individual actually seeks to attain or considers beneficial.

Building on previous dominant typologies that are common across different motivational theories (Adler, 1939; Allport, 1955; Barrick, Mitchell, & Stewart, 2003; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Brunstein, Schultheiss, & Gräsmann, 1998; DeShon & Gillespie, 2005; Emmons & McAdams, 1991; Hogan, 1983; Kehr, 2004; Maslow, 1943; McClelland, Koestner, & Weinberger, 1998; Murray, 1938; Steers & Braunstein, 1976), we identified four fundamental goals. As shown in Table 1, these higher-order implicit goals have different names in different theories.

For example, Deci and Ryans’ (2000) self-determination theory suggests that individuals are motivated to achieve three fundamental goals: striving for competence, autonomy, and relatedness. In addition to these three basic goals, or perhaps, by splitting relatedness into two separate goals, other theoretical frameworks have found that individuals are also inspired to engage in status striving behavior such as seeking power (Barrick et al., 2002; McClelland, 1971; Trapnell & Wiggins, 1990) in addition to communion or relatedness. Building on these theories, we posit that the four proposed implicit goals comprehensively capture individual differences in intrinsic motivation that determines purposefulness and meaningfulness at work.

Barrick et al. (2002) have shown the five factor model personality traits are positively related to three of these four higher-order goals, reporting that Conscientiousness was associated with achievement striving, Extraversion was related to status striving, and Agreeableness was linked to communion striving. These results have been replicated and extended in later studies (Halbesleben & Bowler, 2007; Hirschfeld, Lawson, & Mossholder, 2004; Parks & Guay, 2009).
Although the fourth higher-order goal, autonomy striving has not previously been examined, autonomy and self-determination have been shown to be related to Openness to Experience (Mount et al., 2005). In sum, an individual’s habitual patterns of thinking, feeling, and doing (i.e., personality) have been shown to lead to purposeful strivings in the pursuit of these four broad implicit goals.

The significance of the four higher-level goals to our theory is that each leads to quite different sets of work-related behaviors. First, individuals are highly motivated to achieve meaningful contact and to get along with others. Following Bakan (1966) and Wiggins and Trapnell (1996), we call this communion striving. Second, individuals have a desire to exert power and influence over others within the organizational hierarchy. Following Adler (1939) and Hogan (1996), we refer to this as status striving. Communion striving and status striving have been identified as broad goals associated with social interactions (Bakan, 1966). These goal strivings are so fundamental that they have been linked with evolutionary forces contributing to survival; successful groups have well-defined leader(s) and require that people cooperate and live together harmoniously (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Hogan, 1983; Kenrick, Griskevicius, Neuberg, & Schaller, 2010). Third, individuals are motivated to gain control and understanding of important aspects of the work environment and to pursue personal growth opportunities. Following de Charms (1968), Murray (1938), and Steers and Braunstein (1976), we refer to this as autonomy striving, although it also includes striving for personal growth. Finally, individuals have a powerful need to demonstrate personal competence and a sense of accomplishment. Following Allport (1955), McClelland (1951), and White (1959), we refer to this as achievement striving. These latter two goals function as inner states unique to each individual, which mediate his or her outward behavior. To be sure, researchers have discussed and conceptualized other motivational strivings, but considering the literature as a whole, we believe these four broad higher-order goals are both parsimonious and universal in application.

**Task and social characteristics.** Theoretical and empirical research has long recognized that any job consists of task and social characteristics that vary in the degree to which they are
intrinsically motivating and so influence job performance (Hackman & Oldham, 1975). To gain a more thorough understanding of how the work situation affects the employee’s motivation, it is essential to have a well-defined taxonomy of situations (Herzberg, 1954; Hackman & Lawler, 1971). Endler (1993) first suggested that scholars should develop strategies for systematically investigating situations, and subsequently other scholars have attempted to define the dimensions of work situations based on motivational features of work (Campion & Thayer, 1985; Edwards, Scully, & Brtek, 2000; Hackman & Oldham, 1975; Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006). Recently, a consensus has emerged, building on the seminal work of Hackman and colleagues (Hackman & Lawler, 1971; Hackman & Oldham, 1976), that the vital motivational attributes of the work environment can be described through two major components – task characteristics and social context (Grant, 2007; Humphrey et al., 2007; Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006).

Jobs that provide greater task identity (completing from start to finish a whole piece of work), skill variety (opportunity to use different skills on a variety of tasks), task significance (work outcomes having a substantial impact on others), autonomy (discretion in decision-making, work methods, and scheduling work), and feedback (information regarding performance) are more motivating. Similarly, jobs with enriched social roles that provide opportunities to interact with other employees or people outside the organization, to develop strong interpersonal relationships, and to exchange support with others (Grant, 2007; Grant & Parker, 2009; Humphrey et al., 2007) were identified in the original job characteristics paper (Hackman & Lawler, 1971) and have been found to significantly relate to job attitudes, work motivation, and job performance (Humphrey et al., 2007). To more comprehensively account for the motivating characteristics of work, we would add the dynamics associated with power, including leading and influencing others to get desired responses from them while striving for status (Barrick et al., 2002; Hogan, 1983; Judge et al., 2002). Research consistently demonstrates that leadership and social power over others has an important influence on individual motivation (Bono & Judge, 2003; Chen & Kanfer, 2006; Zaccaro, 2001).

As shown in Figure 1, these work characteristics interact with the personal agendas that emerge from the individual’s personality traits to determine experienced meaningfulness. Thus,
these characteristics facilitate or constrain the extent to which personality traits can be naturally enacted in the pursuit of higher-order goals and thereby influence whether individuals’ purposeful work striving is perceived as meaningful. For instance, work situations that are characterized by social support and interdependence among co-workers provide a setting in which agreeable and emotionally stable individuals can successfully fulfill their communion goals. Thus, the task or social characteristics play a key role in the theory because they provide the context in which an individual’s purposeful work striving is interpreted as being personally meaningful. Without the interpretive context provided by task and social characteristics of jobs, it would not be possible for individuals to derive meaning from their purposeful strivings.

**Striving for purposefulness and experienced meaningfulness.** The centrality of purposefulness and meaningfulness in our theory arises from the Aristotelian notion of achieving eudaimonic aspects of well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryff, 1989), which refer to psychological well being, not mere hedonism (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski, 2010; Warr, 1990). Although purposefulness and meaningfulness are clearly related, there are also important differences between them. Below, we discuss both the importance of and elaborate on the distinctions between the two concepts.

A major tenet of the Theory of Purposeful Work Behavior is that individuals are motivated to pursue the four fundamental higher-order goals to greater or lesser degrees. Although there are many reasons the individual adopts and pursues one of these broad goals over the other, the individual’s personality traits (and to a lesser extent values and interests) are seen as important determinants of which specific goal emerges to guide and direct the individual. Because personality is relatively stable throughout adulthood (Roberts, 2006), the goals individuals focus on are generally consistent over time, have meaningful connections across different work situations, and can be distinguished from other individuals. Thus, purposefulness is the dynamic motivational process by which personality traits are enacted through the pursuit of these implicit goals.

In contrast, meaningfulness refers to individuals’ perception that their actions are valuable, useful and worthwhile (Kahn, 1990, 1992). According to Pratt and Ashforth (2003: 310-311)
meaningfulness arises when work is “perceived by its practitioners to be, at minimum, purposeful and significant”. A central tenet of our theory is that personality traits, through the pursuit of higher-order implicit goals, and job characteristics jointly influence experienced meaningfulness at work. Hackman and Oldham (1975) suggested that motivational work characteristics impact behavioral and attitudinal outcomes through their influence on three “critical psychological states”: experienced meaningfulness of the work, experienced responsibility for the outcomes of the work, and knowledge of the results of the work activities. They defined experienced meaningfulness of the work as “the degree to which the employee experiences the job as one which is generally meaningful, valuable, and worthwhile” (1975: 162). Although they originally proposed that each of the critical psychological states would independently act as mediators, research by Johns et al. (1992) and Oldham (1996) suggested that experienced meaningfulness may serve as the strongest mediator between work characteristics and work outcomes. More than 20 years later, Humphrey et al. (2007: 1341) confirmed this supposition in their regression analyses based on meta-analytically derived correlations among social and task characteristics and work outcomes: “Thus, the results suggested that experienced meaning was the “most critical” critical psychological state, consistent with Johns et al.” Further, they state, “The results suggest a modified mediation model for the motivational characteristics in which the primary mediator of the motivational characteristics–work outcome relationships is experienced meaning. Its inclusion in the mediation model led to the greatest level of mediation.” (2007: 1346). Drawing on these findings, experienced meaningfulness plays a key role in our theory as it is the critical mediator of the dynamic interplay of traits and job characteristics affecting subsequent motivation and work outcomes.

Application of this theory reveals that the social and task characteristics of the job interact dynamically with the purposeful work strivings (that emanate from one’s personality traits) by providing the context in which the individual interprets the significance or worthiness of work (e.g, Grant, 2008; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). This is a core principle in our theory as we posit when the behaviors, emotions, and thoughts linked to these goals are enacted in a context that reinforces the perception that one’s actions are purposeful, this in turn evokes the psychological state of experienced meaningfulness, i.e., feelings of significance, worthiness, and usefulness at work. For
example, when individuals who are highly extraverted and who strive to attain status and power are placed in leadership situations, they are in a concordant work situation. Accordingly, when they are charged with creating change, managing multiple functions, or setting performance expectations for others, they are likely to feel a sense of significance and to feel their actions are useful, and consequently experience the psychological state of meaningfulness. Such eudaimonic reactions then lead to a greater sense of energy, dedication, and absorption in an individual’s role as a leader, which triggers task-specific motivational processes such as self-efficacy, expectancy beliefs and self-set goals. However, it should be noted that in our model goal fulfillment does not refer to how well individuals accomplish goals (e.g., how well they cooperate and create harmonious relationships with others), as this performance-oriented component occurs later in the process. Rather, it refers to the extent to which an individual is able to naturally enact personality traits in the pursuit of higher order goals. Thus, in our theory, once the individual experiences meaningfulness, it triggers task specific motivational processes (e.g., self-efficacy, expectancy beliefs) that lead to performance outcomes.

Discordant work situations refer to circumstances where there is inconsistency or lack of compatibility between one’s higher-order goals, given their personality and the job characteristics inherent in the situation. Consequently, these situations are not perceived as meaningful because the individual perceives that his or her actions lack personal importance, usefulness or significance. This perspective is consistent with predictions from conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989), which delineates self-regulatory processes relating to the allocation of effort (Halbesleben, 2006; Halbesleben & Buckley, 2004; Shirom, 2003). Paraphrasing the theory, discordant work situations create hindrances or obstacles that individuals must overcome to be successful. In these situations individuals are unable to pursue their implicit goals in unfettered ways. Because they cannot fulfill their goal striving the situations are not perceived as personally meaningful to the individual (except in a negative way); in fact, the situations are especially taxing to an individual psychologically and physically because they cause individuals to “swim upstream”. Individuals are forced to engage in tasks they do not prefer or have much interest in, to use skills they do not use
frequently or are not necessarily good at, and/or to interact with people whom they have little in common with or who have different interpersonal styles (e.g., Holland, 1959, 1971). In low meaningfulness situations such as these, there is a constant need to consciously direct energy and attention to overcome these hindrance demands or obstacles, which depletes individuals’ energy and leaves them feeling emotionally drained, frustrated and worn out.

**Fundamental assumptions of the model.** Before describing specific hypotheses, we discuss five fundamental assumptions of the theory. First, we assume the fundamental implicit goals can be satisfied on a continuing basis without a decrease in the strength of striving for additional satisfaction, because theoretically these goals can never be completely fulfilled or satiated. In fact, rather than resulting in complacency, we expect that early fulfillment of one of these goals could actually increase the strength of the desire for future satisfaction of that goal. At any rate, since personality is the primary determinant of which goal to pursue, these traits serve as a way to replenish the employee’s energy and desire to strive for these goals since traits cannot be “drained”. Consequently, fulfillment of a fundamental goal on one occasion does not mean it will stop serving as a source of purposeful striving in subsequent occasions.

Second, the theory focuses on volitional behavior. This is noteworthy because it is possible that the effects of situational demands can over-ride the motivational effects of personality traits, such as the threat of termination or the lack of availability of resources, including time, money, supervisor support or even inadequate skill and ability to do the work. When this occurs, the job characteristics approximate a “strong” situation, affording workers less freedom and choice in deciding whether to perform or not perform the behavior (e.g., Barrick & Mount, 1993; Mischel, 1968). In strong or constrained situations, extrinsic rewards or threats can overpower individual differences and the intrinsic rewards associated with pursuing meaningful or socially satisfying work. When this occurs, the individual feels less free to act as they want or as they “really are” (Barrick & Mount, 1993; Meyer et al., 2010). For the motivational effects from either the employee’s personality or characteristics of the job to predict behavior, the person has to have both perceived and actual control over one’s goals and behavior.
Third, although the pursuit of purposefulness arises from intrinsic sources associated with personality traits, experienced meaningfulness arises from the joint influence of intrinsic sources and extrinsic situations. An interaction-based perspective clarifies that the pursuit of meaning cannot be determined solely within the person (intrinsic), but must include the context in which the traits are enacted, such as the availability of social rewards or natural incentives associated with performing tasks (extrinsic). Thus, although purposefulness arises primarily from one’s personality traits, experienced meaningfulness is the result of the cumulative effects of internal forces (i.e., personal agendas and personality) and external forces (the job attributes and social roles).

Fourth, a key assumption is that the individuals’ perceptions are critical - a person can only respond to the situation (job characteristics) he or she perceives, and the strength of the motivational striving is determined by the individual him or herself (Endler & Magnusson, 1976). Thus we focus on subjective perceptions of characteristics of the situation, rather than objective characteristics, because the same objective setting may be perceived very differently depending on the motivational goals being pursued by each individual (Endler & Magnusson, 1976). Even though situational attributes such as the task itself and the social aspects of the job are “external” to the person, the source of motivation due to the situation still springs from within due to the individual’s perception of the situation (e.g., high perceived autonomy in the job may be seen as undesirable to some employees). In fact, previous research has shown that subjective perceptions of job characteristics are two to three times as strong as objective characteristics when predicting employee reactions (Fried & Ferris, 1987). Since individuals are likely to be more sensitive to those social and task characteristics that reinforce their goals and personality traits. Furthermore, people may choose which situation to be in, and our personality, values, and interests play a major role when selecting jobs (Mount et al., 2005; Schneider, 1987). Thus, to understand why individuals do what they do, we need to understand how they perceive the situation they chose to be in (or are placed in by the organization) and how this determines what motivational goals direct their effort at work.

Finally, in this paper we link broad dispositional and situational antecedents to predict broad, aggregated attitudes and behaviors, averaged over time (e.g., annual performance ratings, job
satisfaction). The compatibility principle (Ajzen & Fisbbein, 1974) recognizes that these broad predictors and behaviors must be matched at compatible levels of generality or aggregation to provide the most explanatory power (Ajzen & Fisbbein, 1974; Barrick et al., 2002; Epstein, 1979; Harrison, Newman, & Roth, 2006). Thus, we match these traits and job or social characteristics to an equally broad aggregated personal goal, which in turn, predicts broad criteria of employee effectiveness consisting of job satisfaction and job performance. Though there may be merit in predicting behavior that changes moment-to-moment across specific settings (Ajzen, 1991), our intent is instead to explain archetypical performance over long periods of time.

Testable Propositions

Our formulation and presentation of the hypotheses unfolds in the following way. We organize each set of hypotheses around one of the four higher-order, implicit goals. For each goal we discuss the way relevant personality traits lead to purposeful striving and how relevant task and social job characteristics translate purposeful strivings into experienced meaningfulness. We acknowledge that it is possible that a trait or job characteristic is relevant to multiple implicit goals. For example, in our model extraversion is relevant to both communion and status striving goals. However, to keep our model parsimonious, we link personality traits and job characteristics to their most relevant goal. Thus, we focus on only one or a very few traits or characteristics when considering each implicit goal. Table 2 illustrates the relationship between FFM personality traits and relevant task and social characteristics for each of the four higher-order, implicit goals. This table summarizes one of the primary contributions of this theory: it clearly specifies which traits and job characteristics are linked to each higher order goal. Recognizing that the individual’s higher order goals or personal agenda(s) determine the relevance of specific personality traits and particular task or social characteristics is an important contribution over previous theories, including Trait Activation theory and general theories of person-job fit. We conclude by discussing how meaningfulness triggers task-specific motivation processes that lead to better performance. However, because this process is similar for each of the higher-order goals, to avoid repetition we
only formulate specific hypotheses regarding the way experienced meaningfulness triggers task-specific motivation processes (self-efficacy, expectancy and goal setting) for communion striving.

**Communion striving motivation.** Striving for communion is a fundamental goal that evolved for survival purposes and represents an individual’s motivation to obtain acceptance in personal relationships and to get along with others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Hogan, 1996). As shown in Figure 2, the two dimensions of the FFM that are most strongly related to striving for communion are *Agreeableness* and *Emotional Stability* (Barrick et al., 2002; Mount et al., 2005; Traupman, Smith, Uchino, Berg, Trobst, & Costa, 2009). Agreeable individuals are altruistic, sympathetic, and eager to help others (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Costa & McCrae, 1992; Digman, 1990). Goldberg (1992) found Agreeableness to be associated with tendencies toward kindness, unselfishness, generosity, and fairness. Based on these clear linkages between Agreeableness and affiliation and friendliness, we expect Agreeableness will be linked to motivational strivings to interact in harmonious ways with others at work, which encourages communion striving (Barrick et al., 2002; Traupman et al., 2009). In addition, as previously stated, emotionally stable individuals are calm, relaxed, less depressed, less stress prone, and more confident (Barrick & Mount, 1991). They are pleasant to be around, interact well with others, and thereby maintain positive relations with others (e.g., getting along with people). Thus individuals who are high on agreeableness and emotional stability engage in purposeful work striving in pursuit of communion goals.

Three characteristics of the work situation provide social cues that facilitate individuals’ motivational communion striving: *social support, interdependence among employees, and interpersonal interaction outside the organization*. A job with higher levels of social support provides more opportunities for advice and assistance from others (Karasek, 1979; Karasek, Brisson, Kawakami, Houtman, Bongers, & Amick, 1998; Sims, Szilagyi, & Keller, 1976). Interdependence reflects the degree to which doing or completing the task depends on others and that others rely on the individual to also complete his or her work (Kiggundu, 1981). Jobs with extensive interaction outside the organization require employees to interact and communicate with
individuals external to the organization (Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006; Sims et al., 1976). These three situational attributes provide individuals with opportunities to interact with others at work in cooperative and harmonious ways, and provide the context in which agreeable and emotionally stable individuals interpret whether their purposeful strivings are personally meaningful. When the social characteristics of jobs are salient (social support, interdependence among employees, and interpersonal interaction outside the organization) the perceived meaningfulness is enhanced. In fact, there is a dynamic process whereby individuals high in agreeableness and emotional stability actively seek jobs with these social characteristics in order to fulfill communion striving.

When an individual’s personality traits are concordant with the attributes of the job situation, it enables individuals to freely and fully draw on self-regulatory processes associated with the allocation of attention and effort to attain their communion goals. As shown in Figure 1, this results in the psychological state of experienced meaningfulness, which leads to task-specific motivational processes (self-efficacy, expectancy, and goal setting). For example, highly agreeable and emotionally stable individuals’ task-specific, self-efficacy about affiliative behaviors is enhanced because their communion goals are concordant with the situation, which leads to greater feelings of competence in the ability to form cooperative relationships (Graziano, Bruce, Sheese, & Tobin, 2007). Their expectancy beliefs are stronger because the situation (which includes other people who also are likely to be highly affiliative) facilitates the likelihood that engaging in considerate and cooperative behavior will lead to greater harmony in the group (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003). Further, individuals will be more likely to self-set task-specific goals in order to achieve affiliative success, e.g., “Whenever I interact with others, I will do so in a friendly, compassionate, trusting and nurturing manner.” The outcome of these task-specific motivational processes is expected to be greater satisfaction and better performance.

Conversely, when highly agreeable and emotionally stable individuals encounter discordant job situations, such as where there is no social support, when interdependence among employees is low, and/or when the nature of the relationships is competitive, the person experiences low meaningfulness and, consequently, motivational striving is hindered (Hogan & Holland, 2003).
These circumstances inhibit the individual’s ability to marshal the cognitive resources needed to fulfill communion goals. This may lead to feelings of incompetence in the situation, weaker perceptions that cooperative behaviors will make a difference to outcomes that matter to the person, and fewer self-set goals to achieve affiliative success. In turn this leads to a reduction in the motivational force associated with communion striving, which in turn leads to less effective performance due to delayed and inefficient behavioral responding.

Proposition 1a: Agreeableness and Emotional Stability will be positively related to purposeful work striving in the pursuit of communion goals.

Proposition 1b: Highly agreeable and emotionally stable employees will have a preference for and self-select into jobs with higher levels on three job characteristics: social support, interdependence, and interaction outside the organization.

Proposition 1c: The relationship between communion striving (arising from Agreeableness and Emotional Stability) and experienced meaningfulness will be moderated by three critical job or social characteristics: social support, interdependence, and interaction outside the organization.

Proposition 1d: Experienced meaningfulness will mediate the effects of the interaction between the purposeful striving for communion and these three job characteristics with task-specific motivation (self-efficacy, action goals, and expectancy). In turn, greater task specific motivation will lead to greater satisfaction and performance.

Status striving motivation. Striving for status is linked to an individual’s motivation to obtain power, influence and prestige within a status hierarchy (Barrick et al., 2002; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Hogan, 1983). Prior research has demonstrated that one personality trait, Extraversion, is directly related to a strong desire for power and dominance within a status hierarchy (Barrick et al., 2002; Mount et al., 2005; Traupman et al., 2009). Extraverts are described as energetic, ascendant, and ambitious. The primary essence of extraversion is said to be a sensitivity to obtain rewards and dominate others rather than sociability (Gray, 1987; Lucas, Diener, Grob, Suh, & Shao, 2000). Because rewards (e.g., promotions or salary increases) are usually obtained by excelling relative to
others, extraverts are motivated by a desire to get ahead of others (Barrick et al., 2002; Stewart, 1996). Research also shows that extraverts tend to feel more pleasant affect even when they are working alone, which implies that they are not driven by striving for communion (Lucas et al., 2000). Therefore, extraverted employees engage in purposeful work striving when they are striving for status.

Three job characteristics, task significance, feedback from others, and power and status, are particularly likely to influence the extent to which individuals strive to attain status goals. Task significance reflects the degree to which a job influences the lives or work of others, whether inside or outside the organization (Hackman & Oldham, 1975). This is consistent with the essential idea of status striving – to achieve higher status and the esteem of others by doing work that has a significant impact on others. Simply stated, influencing the lives of others enhances one’s own reputation (Hogan, 1983). Feedback from others reflects the extent to which others in the organization provide information about performance (Hackman & Lawler, 1971). To get ahead of others implies a social comparison process that conveys information about the satisfactoriness of an individual’s performance compared to others (Hogan & Holland, 2003). Feedback from others thus can inform individuals about his or her position within a status hierarchy, and hence fulfill or frustrate the intention to get ahead of others. Finally, power and status directly measure the degree to which a job provides opportunities to lead others and to achieve dominance or influence over others (Steers & Braunstein, 1976). Individuals who achieve power and status within the organizational hierarchy are able to strive to fulfill a desire to get ahead of others and have others defer to them (Hogan & Holland, 2003).

Situations that provide high task significance, power and status, or feedback that enhance competition in the work unit provide the context in which highly extraverted employees who are striving for status can interpret whether their behaviors are personally meaningful. This should lead them to strive to attain implicit goals that lead to status, reputation, and glory. For example, Extraversion has been shown to be the single best personality predictor of leadership emergence (Judge, Bono, Ilies, & Gerhardt, 2002). Due to extraverts’ ambitious nature, they prefer to engage in
activities which have high impact and are important because such activities are more likely to garner attention from others. This also illustrates how personality traits can influence the way a situation is interpreted, as extraverted workers are more likely to perceive feedback from others as providing competitive “comparisons” which they like. Thus, extraverted employees are more likely to use feedback to judge how well they are competing with others. Opportunities for leadership (i.e., power) and competition also enable the person to be the center of attention, which are attributes extraverts are motivated to achieve. Jobs with high task significance, that endow more power and prestige, or feedback that encourages competition, are meaningful to extraverts because they provide greater opportunities to influence others, which helps them fulfill their desire for status (Hogan & Holland, 2003).

However, when an extraverted employee is in a job where the task is not significant, where there is little chance to acquire power, or there is no head-to-head competition with others, then the person-situation interaction is discordant and it has low meaningfulness for the individual, which means the strength of the person’s status striving will be weak. Similarly, an introverted employee, who is shy, quiet, and doesn’t like attention, will not be motivated to strive for status, even if the task has significance to others and provides the chance to engage in leadership or to compete with others. In both cases, the individual's personality is discordant with the demands or opportunity inherent in the work setting. As described earlier, this discordant interaction is not meaningful to the individual and this inhibits the individual’s ability to allocate attentional resources needed to fulfill status striving goals, resulting in lower satisfaction and less effective performance. Thus, we propose that:

Proposition 2a: Extraversion will be positively related to purposeful work striving in the pursuit of status goals.

Proposition 2b: Extraverted employees will have a preference for jobs with higher levels on three job characteristics: task significance, power and status, and feedback from others.
Proposition 2c: The relationship between status striving (arising from Extraversion) and experienced meaning will be moderated by three job characteristics: task significance, power and status, and feedback from others.

**Autonomy striving motivation.** Striving for autonomy is linked to a desire to have control over what to do, when to do it, and how to do it (Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006; Mount et al., 2005). de Charms (1968: 215) maintains that gaining control and understanding over our environment is one of the most fundamental goals people strive to attain. This is illustrated in his statement that “man’s primary motivational propensity is to be effective in producing changes in his environment.” Striving for autonomy also incorporates growth goals, as a person who grows and learns is more likely to develop the capacity to affect (i.e., control) the environment.

Two dimensions of the FFM, *Openness to Experience and Extraversion*, have been found to be related to striving for autonomy goals. Individuals high on openness to experience have an intense desire for autonomy (Mount et al., 2005), as they are imaginative, cultured, curious, original, broad-minded, intelligent, and artistically sensitive (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Costa & McCrae, 1992). Thus, they have strong preferences for working with ideas, engaging in divergent thinking, and doing things that are not clear or well-defined. In addition, to a lesser extent, Extraversion (e.g., individuals are energetic, ascendant, and ambitious) has been linked to autonomy (Mount et al., 2005). However, these attributes have only modest relationships with striving for autonomy and do not reflect this goal-orientation as well as does Openness to Experience. Because Openness to Experience captures the heart of striving for autonomy, and Extraversion has a more direct impact on other fundamental goals, we will focus exclusively on Openness to Experience. Thus, individuals high on openness engage in purposeful work behaviors when they are striving to attain autonomy.

Two work design characteristics, *autonomy* and *task variety*, are relevant to goals associated with autonomy striving. Autonomy in the job refers to the extent to which a job allows freedom, independence, and discretion to schedule work, make decisions, and choose the methods used to perform tasks (Breaugh, 1985; Wall, Jackson, & Davids, 1992; Wall, Jackson, &
Mullarkey, 1995). Thus, a job with high autonomy allows individuals to engage in divergent and creative mental activities which are the essence of striving for autonomy. Task variety refers to the degree to which a job requires employees to perform a wide range of tasks on the job (Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006), which indicates whether the tasks are well defined. Thus, task variety is also relevant to fulfillment of an individual’s tendency to strive for autonomy. Individuals who are high on openness in jobs that are high on autonomy and task variety will experience enhanced meaning.

Individuals who are high on openness to experience, actively seek opportunities to gain autonomy and personal growth through imaginative, curious and creative behaviors. Moreover, these individuals will proactively seek opportunities at work that allow them to fulfill their motivational striving for autonomy (Hogan & Holland, 2003; Mount et al., 2005). When the work situation has high autonomy, open individuals who are striving for autonomy find the situation highly meaningful and will be less constrained when engaging in creative activities. They have greater freedom to explore and experiment with alternative methods at work and to satisfy their curious nature. Similarly, when the work situation is characterized by task variety, it offers open individuals opportunities to engage in divergent thinking activities. As a result, in concordant situations such as when the work situation is characterized by freedom, independence and discretion and the employee is high in openness to experience, individuals are highly motivated to pursue autonomy goals and will perceive high meaningfulness in the work they accomplish.

When the person desires autonomy, but works in an environment they cannot control, the individual will experience frustration or blocked goal achievement (Langer, 1975). A creative and intellectually curious (high openness) individual who is in a job that requires a great deal of repetition and a narrow range of tasks that are well defined, will feel highly constrained and stunted in personal growth (de Charms, 1968). This discordant situation weakens the individual’s motivation to achieve their autonomy goals. The person feels less competent in this situation because they cannot engage in activities that they are best suited for; they exert less effort because they do not believe that working harder will make a difference in attaining autonomy; and they are
less likely to set goals related to attaining autonomy which leads to less job satisfaction and less effective performance.

Proposition 3a: Openness to Experience will be positively related to purposeful work striving in the pursuit of autonomy goals.

Proposition 3b: Employees higher on Openness to Experience have a preference for jobs with higher levels on two work design characteristics: autonomy and task variety.

Proposition 3c: The relationship between autonomy striving (arising from Openness to Experience) and experienced meaning will be moderated by level on two job characteristics: autonomy and task variety.

**Achievement striving motivation.** Striving for achievement refers to the employee’s desire to complete things in a timely, careful, efficient way, and is characterized by a strong focus on getting things done (Barrick et al., 2002). This goal relates to the desire to increase competency and to enhance self-worth that is essential to nearly all people (Deci & Ryan, 1985; White, 1959); at work this translates into a strong desire to execute the task at hand to the standards prescribed and to do work that has value. From the personality perspective, prior research shows that Conscientiousness and Emotional Stability are associated with the tendencies to strive for achievement (Barrick et al., 2002; Mount et al., 2005).

Conscientious people are organized, reliable, hardworking, determined, self-disciplined, rules-abiding, and achievement oriented (Barrick et al., 2002; Barrick et al., 2003; Costa & McCrae, 1992; Goldberg, 1992; Mount et al., 2005). Emotionally unstable (neurotic) people do not see themselves as worthy, are less confident, are frequently distracted by worrying and become obsessed with details, and consequently, are more dissatisfied with themselves, their jobs and lives. Thus, they are more motivated to avoid failures than they are to accomplish tasks (Barrick et al., 2002). In contrast, individuals high in emotional stability tend to exhibit higher desire for achievement (Mount et al., 2005). They are motivated to achieve, primarily because they experience less anxiety and depression and have a greater ability to focus on the task (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Costa & McCrae, 1992). In sum, highly conscientious and emotionally stable
employees engage in purposeful work behavior through their pursuit of achievement at work. This is a major reason why both traits have been shown to be generalizable predictors of job performance across jobs (Barrick, et al. 2001). Thus, it should be possible to optimize these employees’ motivation at work by providing opportunities in the work situation to fulfill goals related to achievement striving.

From the situational perspective, there are three work design factors, task identity and feedback, whether from the job or another, that provide relevant situational cues that enable the individual to strive for achievement. Task identity reflects the degree to which a job involves a whole piece of work, and thereby enhances the “identity” or value of the work (Sims et al., 1976), while feedback from the job or coworker refers to the degree to which the job or coworker, even supervisor, provides direct and clear information about the effectiveness of task performance (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). These three task characteristics let the employee know how they are doing relative to organizational expectations and provide the context in which purposeful work behavior leads to experienced meaningfulness for conscientious and emotionally stable people.

When the job provides feedback, whether from the job or others, it affects the relationship between Conscientiousness and to a lesser extent, Emotional Stability, on the extent of motivation towards achievement goals. Empirically, Frink and Ferris (1999) found job accountability (a construct similar to task identity) moderated the Conscientiousness – performance relationship; specifically Conscientiousness was significantly related to performance under high accountability situations but not low accountability situations. A highly conscientious employee wants to get things done and feedback will help them strive for achievement (Barrick et al., 2002). Thus it makes sense that these employees will be more engaged to achieve when they know how they are doing. Furthermore, a lazy, irresponsible employee will not be motivated to strive for achievement (Barrick et al., 2002; Steers & Braunstein, 1976). Extensive feedback will not increase their motivation to get things done either. In fact, it is possible that this could result in a strong disengagement effect.
Thus in concordant situations such as when the work situation is characterized by task significance and feedback from the job and others, and the employee is high in conscientiousness and emotional stability, individuals are even more highly motivated to pursue achievement goals. Conversely, when highly conscientious and emotionally stable people are in situations whereby it is difficult to identify one’s contributions to the completed product (low task identity) and/or very little clear feedback is provided either from the work itself or from others (boss, co-workers, customers) about how well the work has been performed, the situation is discordant. In discordant situations individuals feel less competent in their ability to perform effectively, they exert less effort because they are less interested in the task and do not believe that working harder will enable them to execute the task, and they are less likely to set goals related to getting things done (Dijksterhuis & Aarts, 2010). This leads to less job satisfaction and less effective performance. Thus, based on our reasoning, we propose that:

Proposition 4a: Conscientiousness and Emotional Stability will be positively related to purposeful work striving in the pursuit of achievement.

Proposition 4b: Employees higher on Conscientiousness and Emotional Stability will have a preference for and self-select into jobs with higher levels on two characteristics of the job, the degree of task identity and feedback from the job.

Proposition 4c: The relationship between achievement striving (arising from Conscientiousness and Emotional Stability) and experienced meaning will be moderated by three job characteristics: task identity and feedback from the job or others.

THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Comparison of the Theory of Purposeful Work Behavior to Other Theories

Explaining why people do what they do at work is a fundamental question that requires a complex answer. Generally speaking, any answer to this question must consider the effects of individuals’ long-term dispositions and environmental circumstances. The existing theories that have attempted to explain the joint effects arising from personality and work characteristics fall into two major categories: theories that focus on the meaning of work (e.g., job characteristic theory
Theories of the meaning of work. Meaningfulness has long been recognized as an important source of motivation to an employee at work. Rosso et al. (2010) identified various sources of the meaning of work and broadly classified them as focused on either external sources, such as the work context or the social aspects of work (Grant & Parker, 2009; Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Tyler & Blader, 2003), or internal sources, including self motives and cognitive maps developed through cues received from others (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001; Wrzesniewski, Dutton, & Debebe, 2003; Weick, 1993). However, researchers have tended to focus exclusively on either internal or external sources to explain meaning at work, even when they acknowledge the affect of the other source. For example, the expanded job characteristics theory posits experienced meaningfulness at work is primarily determined by the universal effects of task and social characteristics (discussed previously). Growth need strength is the only individual based moderator that has the potential to accentuate the effects of these external sources of employee motivation. Yet even here, the theory does not consider how and why individual differences may contribute to the individual’s purposefulness, or how the joint interaction may affect the development of experienced meaningfulness. Similarly, the group engagement model (Blader & Tyler, 2009; Tyler & Blader, 2003) only emphasizes the role of social influences (relationship with leaders, social support, and organizational justice) as fundamental to shaping employee work identity and engagement.

Theories of sensemaking (Weick, 1993) and job crafting (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001) are seen as internally-focused theories, as they recognize, to varying extents, the role of the self when trying to understand the meaning of work. Weick explicitly argued that employees actively engage in an interpretive process to make meaning of their own jobs, roles, and selves at work, by...
comprehending, understanding, and extrapolating cues received from others. Similarly, the self is seen as critical to interpreting the motivational gains derived from re-designing work. Thus, internally-focused theories do recognize that sensemaking or job-crafting requires a self-aware sensemaker to derive meaning.

Of these, the recent theory of job crafting may do the best job of recognizing the joint influence that may emerge from internal and external sources of meaning. For example, hospital cleaners may enhance the meaning they derive at work by changing the core characteristics of the job, such as by increasing task significance. However, this does not recognize that individuals may interpret the meaning of work differently, based on their unique personality. Second, the theory does not explicitly consider the joint interactive effects from both internal (personal goals) and external (expanded job characteristics) forces simultaneously determining the meaning of work. In contrast, our theory emphasizes that employees will strive for different types of work meaning (e.g., communion or status), based on particular personality traits. Furthermore, in contrast to other theories, our theory explains which specific characteristics from the expanded job characteristics model are critical for determining meaningfulness at work. The characteristic(s) that matter depend on the goals or personal agendas that emerge from the individual’s unique tendencies (i.e., personality traits).

Theories of personality-situation interactions. A number of different theories relying on person-situation interactions have been proposed in the literature. One well known theory is research on situational strength (Endler & Magnusson, 1976; Meyer et al., 2010). A central tenant of this theory is that the relationships between personality traits and behaviors are a function of situational strength, where the strong situation attenuates the personality-behavior relationship, while the weak situation accentuates the relationship. A situation can be conceptualized as either strong or weak, depending on the clarity and consistency of the constraints or consequences inherent in the situation. Thus, research on situation strength helps to answer an important question of when personality traits lead to actions (i.e., in weak situations). Yet, it is incapable of addressing other critical questions of how and why individuals express their tendencies to engage in motivated
behaviors at work. Furthermore, this theory does not clarify what specific actions are likely to occur, even if an employee is free to express his or her behavioral tendencies. In contrast, as shown in Table 2 our theory offers precise predictions of how specific personality interacts with the situation in predicting employee behavior based on the implicit goal that directs the person’s behavior.

Extending situational strength research, trait activation theory posits that personality traits are expressed as responses to trait-relevant situational cues (Tett & Burnett, 2003). A key feature of trait activation theory is the idea of situation-trait relevance. A situation is relevant to a trait if it is thematically connected by the provision of cues. The theory argues individuals tend to express their traits when presented with trait-relevant situational cues. Although this theory has proven to be a significant advance, trait activation theory is silent about the psychological mechanism that drives employee motivated work behaviors. This omission is critical because employee motivational forces are the key explaining the effects of personality traits on work behaviors (Judge & Ilies, 2002). To convert the behavioral tendencies of traits into meaningful work behavior, we argue one must consider the role of higher-order, implicit goals to truly understand the complex interactions between the person and situation. Thus, we believe the cues from enriched jobs provide the opportunity to fulfill these goals, but that the goals are central to understanding the interplay between personality and situations in work motivation.

Research on person-job fit (P-J fit) is also known for explaining the joint effects of the person and the situation on employee attitudes and behaviors (Edwards, 1991, 2008; Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005). In general, P-J fit research refers to the match between the person and environment (Dawis, 1992; Edwards, Caplan, & Harrison, 1998). Although there has been considerable empirical support for the positive influence of P-J fit on a variety of employee outcomes (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005), the concept suffers notable limitations. First, the research does not provide clear conceptualizations of the person and environment as it includes many divergent individual characteristics including abilities, values, and interests (Dawis & Lofquist, 1984; Chatman, 1989; Edwards, 2008; Holland, 1997; Shirom, 1982). For this reason, it is very difficult to develop an integrative framework explaining the interactive effects of the person and
environment. For example, it is hard to compare studies focused on needs–supplies fit between the person and situation with others focused on value congruence. Moreover, similar to other theories reviewed above, P-J fit researchers have tended to neglect the underlying motivational processes that drive employee work behaviors. For example, it is unclear how needs–supplies fit affects the types of goals described in this paper. Thus, our theory is different from fit research because fit doesn’t have a unifying theory of why congruence matters for motivation. Our theory encompasses fit research by giving a more integrated theoretical explanation of why congruence matters, and it matters because congruence is a type of concordance.

Mischel and Shoda’s (1995) cognitive-affective personality system provides a different lens to understand the interactions between the person and the situation. The theory highlights the dominant role of the situation in driving behavior, but recognizes the supporting role personality traits play in explaining behavior variance across different situations. There are several important features of the theory. First, rather than predicting an individual’s aggregated behavior over time, the theory focuses on explaining within-individual variance in behavior across specific situations. In other words, the theory attempts to explain intra-person variance and more importantly, it conceptualizes the situation at lower levels (e.g., a specific situation). As a result, it posits that variation in specific behaviors is caused by variations in the situation. However, in real organizational settings, work situations such as these job characteristics are relatively stable (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). Thus, in contrast, our theory strives to predict general measures of behavioral effectiveness over an extended period at work. Furthermore, as illustrated in Table 2, our theory makes specific links between which personality traits, job characteristics, and implicit goals together predict motivated behavior. As a result, we are able to add greater precision to existing motivational theories that focus on person-situation interactions by positing detailed predictions derived from specific personality traits and job or social characteristics for each goal.

**Summary and Conclusion.** Our article makes several contributions to the existing literature. First, the theory specifies the mechanisms by which two fundamental determinants of work motivation, the individual’s personality and the situation’s social roles and task attributes,
jointly influence motivation and behavior at work. Our intent is not to engage in a debate about which of these two approaches is better, but rather to take a comprehensive view that recognizes both approaches jointly and interactively influence work motivation. Second, we extend our understanding of person-situation interactions by introducing higher-order goals as the integrative mechanism that links the distal motivational forces from internal, individual sources (personality) and external, situational factors (task characteristics and social roles). Also, our approach shifts the traditional perspective that employee motivational forces are primarily imposed by external, situational factors (Hackman & Oldham, 1975) to an agentic view that individual motivation is generated by the desire to pursue high order goals that emanate from one’s personality traits. Thus, we clarify that in the person-situation interaction equation, personality serves as a driving force of individual behavior while the situation serves as a moderator. Third, we incorporate the concepts of purposefulness associated with striving for these higher-order goals and experienced meaningfulness associated with goal fulfillment, which have been frequently discussed in the literature but have been rarely integrated. Thus, the proposed theory is intended to be a comprehensive yet parsimonious explanation of what people are motivated to achieve at work, based on a limited number of basic higher-goals that regulate human behavior in the workplace.

In conclusion, our theory updates and extends the meaning of work literature as well as research on person-situation interactions by developing a new integrative theory that explicates the way specific personality traits lead to personal agendas that in turn interacts with specific job characteristics to jointly influence the experienced meaningfulness at work, which serves as the key driver of employee motivated behaviors. Consistent with the idea that different individuals may have differential interpretations of the meaning of work, we posit that the experienced meaningfulness of work derives from four higher order goals. In addition, we help to clarify the sources of the experienced meaningfulness of work by acknowledging the joint influences of internal sources (i.e., personality traits) and external sources (i.e., work design characteristics) on the meaning of work, which in turn, transmits the effects of the person-situation interactions on employee work satisfaction and performance.
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### TABLE 1

Comparison of Goal Strivings to Dominant Motivation Frameworks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theory</th>
<th>Taxonomy of fundamental goals at work</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The present theory</td>
<td>Communion striving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation(^a)</td>
<td>Communion striving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-determination(^b)</td>
<td>Relatedness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implicit motives(^c)</td>
<td>Affiliation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needs in work settings(^d)</td>
<td>Affiliation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work values(^e)</td>
<td>Altruism/ Relationships with others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need hierarchy(^f)</td>
<td>Belongingness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal circumplex(^g)</td>
<td>Communion: warmth / sociable / friendly</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:**
\(^a\) Barrick, Stewart, & Piotrowski, 2002; \(^b\) Gagné & Deci, 2005; \(^c\) Ryan & Deci, 2000; \(^d\) McClelland, 1971; \(^e\) Steers & Braunstein, 1976; \(^f\) Cable & Edwards, 2004; \(^g\) Maslow, 1943; \(^h\) Kiesler, 1996; Trapnell & Wiggins, 1990
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motivational Strivings/Fundamental goals</th>
<th>Task and Social Characteristics</th>
<th>Personality Traits</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Striving for communion</td>
<td>Social support</td>
<td>Emotional stability</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interdependence</td>
<td>Agreeableness</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Interaction outside</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>organization</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Striving for status</td>
<td>Power and influence</td>
<td>Extraversion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Task significance</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feedback from others</td>
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<tr>
<td>Striving for autonomy</td>
<td>Autonomy</td>
<td>Openness to experience</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Task variety</td>
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<tr>
<td>Striving for achievement</td>
<td>Task identity</td>
<td>Conscientiousness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feedback from job or</td>
<td>Emotional stability</td>
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<td></td>
<td>another</td>
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</table>
FIGURE 1
Striving for Purposefulness and Meaningfulness

Striving for Purposefulness (Directedness and Intentionality)

Task and Social Job Characteristics

Personality Trait Clusters

Purposeful Goal Striving

Striving for Meaningfulness Perceived significance

Experienced Meaningfulness

Motivational Processes
*Self efficacy
*Action goals
*Expectations

Work Outcomes
*Satisfaction
*Satisfactory Task Performance
*Citizenship
-CPBS

Personality Trait Clusters

Purposeful Goal Striving
FIGURE 2
Striving for Purposefulness and Meaningfulness: Communion

Striving for Purposefulness
(Directedness and Intentionality of thoughts, emotions, and behaviors)

Striving for Meaningfulness
(Significance and Importance of thoughts, emotions and behaviors)

Affiliation Job Characteristics
Social Support, Interdependence, Interaction Outside Org

Personality Trait Clusters
Agreeableness, Emotional Stability

Affiliation Goals
Desire to engage in helping, cooperating, nurturing, mentoring

Experienced Affiliation Meaningfulness
Perceived meaningfulness of helping, cooperating, nurturing, mentoring
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