


COMMENTARY

# Addressing antiwork concerns through nonwork identity: Beyond an emphasis on meaningful work

Christina Christodoulou<sup>1</sup>, Edileide Oliveira<sup>1</sup>, Maryam Baloch<sup>1,2</sup>, and Rick Laguerre<sup>1</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>Department of Psychology, Montclair State University, Montclair, NJ, USA and <sup>2</sup>University of Milano-Bicocca, Milan, Italy  
**Corresponding author:** Christina Christodoulou; Email: [christodoulc1@montclair.edu](mailto:christodoulc1@montclair.edu)

In a thought-provoking article, Alliger and McEachern (2024) proposed that industrial-organizational (I-O) psychologists should ponder the virtues of antiwork ideology and focus on making work more meaningful. Although we agree with their sentiment, we believe that this may not be the best approach for applying antiwork principles because work occupies the majority of one's waking time and often results in spillover effects into one's personal life (Elovainio et al., 2015). For this reason, it is unavoidable that work will have an adverse impact on worker well-being (Elovainio et al., 2015). Instead of focusing on fostering meaningful work, we propose that organizations encourage employees to develop nonwork identities.

This commentary aims to shed light on why meaningful work is not enough to address antiwork concerns. Further, we argue that organizations should promote the development of nonwork identities among their employees. Adopting a selfless approach, through promoting nonwork identities, should serve employees and organizations alike (Laguerre et al., 2023).

## A focus on the organization: why meaningful work alone is not enough

Alliger and McEachern assert that organizations have failed their employees to better serve themselves and that fostering meaningful work by encouraging autonomy is one way to remedy the adverse impact of work. Although increasing autonomy should enhance employee perceptions of job control and free will, it cannot effectively compensate for the routine and robotic functioning of organizations that antiwork perspectives note. Hence, even with improved job characteristics such as through autonomy and meaningful work, there would still be a societal focus on the organization rather than on its employees.

## A greater focus on the individual: the importance of a nonwork identity

Alliger and McEachern detail various recommendations for I-O practitioners to buffer the tension between antiwork perspectives and organizations. Importantly to the age of remote work, autonomy is understood as a critical job characteristic to enhance the employee experience. Workers who have at least some control over their workday, either through job crafting or other measures, tend to report higher levels of work ability and job satisfaction (Brady et al., 2020). As a result, Alliger and McEachern's suggestion to increase autonomy is fitting; however, focusing on work characteristics as a means to instill meaningful work may not be enough to break free of the anti-establishment sentiment that drives antiwork perspectives.

To foster the separation between work and life, we suggest that organizations not only forge freedom within the workplace, as recommended by Alliger and McEachern, but also freedom in off-work time. In particular, it has been established that nonwork identities play an essential role

in optimizing self-esteem, self-concept, and self-evaluations, and that suppressing such identities tends to diminish job satisfaction and increase turnover intentions (Madera et al., 2012). Further, one's emphasis on their work identity negatively impacts their long-term well-being and productivity, whereas the opposite is true of an emphasis on their nonwork identity (Ramarajan & Reid, 2013). Thus, ignoring nonwork identities poses dangers to both employees and organizations.

### **Promoting and encouraging nonwork identities**

Employees who suppressed group identities, such as ethnic identity, were more likely to perceive workplace discrimination and experience negative work outcomes (Madera et al., 2012). Thus, group and ethnic identities should be embraced in organizational settings. In addition, employees who align themselves with a creative identity, such as through art or writing, tended to report improved self-perceptions while also bringing creativity and innovation into the workplace (Jaussi et al., 2007). Therefore, organizations should encourage their employees to develop creative nonwork identities. Similarly, those who report a nonwork identity associated with a hobby, such as volunteering or fitness centered activities, experienced higher levels of self-efficacy, resilience, and career sustainability (Kelly et al., 2020). Accordingly, it would benefit organizations to promote regular employee engagement in hobbies. For example, an employee appreciation initiative that highlights employees' diverse backgrounds (e.g., ethnicity, culturally diverse foods) and talents (e.g., arts and crafts, hobbies) would allow organizations to promote nonwork identities.

Although a work–life balance is related to the development of nonwork identity, oftentimes through regular participation in activities or social circles (Kelly et al., 2020), we consider nonwork identity to be a unique contributor to occupational and personal well-being with benefits spanning beyond those of work–life balance. An individual's nonwork identity can be defined by the groups to which they belong, the activities in which they participate, or the values they hold (Madera et al., 2012; Kelly et al., 2020). Thus, nonwork identity corresponds to a person developing their self-concept outside of work (Madera et al., 2012), whereas work–life balance more strongly captures a person feeling they have time and energy to meet nonwork demands (Kelly et al., 2020). Hence, nonwork identity is particularly important regardless of work–life balance—as balancing conflicting work–life demands does not equate to a person creating a rich and fulfilling personal identity above and beyond routine nonwork tasks.

### **The business case for developing nonwork identities: buffering against burnout**

The benefits of a nonwork identity should be clear for the employee, yet they may not seem as tangible to the organization. Even with meaningful work, employees are still susceptible to the consequences of burnout. For example, the literature indicates that high workload is strongly linked to chronic fatigue and subsequent burnout, which can lead to mental and physical illness, and a weakening of performance (Bakker et al., 2007). Burnout is an antecedent to turnover intentions (Özkan, 2022) that primarily impacts work outcomes through the pathway of fatigue (Dyrbye et al., 2019). According to the job demands-resources model (JD-R), one's nonwork identity could be considered a personal resource that buffers against burnout through the pathway of resource development and recovery (Kelly et al., 2020).

Beyond being a personal resource that may combat fatigue, embracing one's nonwork identity has been shown to reduce turnover intentions by lowering perceptions of discrimination (Madera et al., 2012). This is important because when employees leave, it can cost organizations more than the annual salary of the employee being replaced (Allen et al., 2010). Thus, embracing one's nonwork identity should reduce the costs associated with turnover (and burnout) by not only reducing employee fatigue but also through increasing employees' perceptions of workplace

inclusion. Even when turnover is not an issue, employees who stay at work while experiencing symptoms of burnout tend to be less productive and take more sick leave, which also poses significant costs for organizations (Amer *et al.*, 2022; Dyrbye *et al.*, 2019). Thus, a nonwork identity remains crucial for combating occupational challenges and aligns more strongly with Alliger and McEachern's antiwork sentiment.

**Competing interests.** We have no known conflicts of interest to disclose.

## References

- Allen, D. G., Bryant, P. C., & Vardaman, J. M. (2010). Retaining talent: Replacing misconceptions with evidence-based strategies. *Academy of Management Perspectives*, *24*(2), 48–64.
- Alliger, G. M., & McEachern, P. J. (2024). Antiwork offers many opportunities for I-O psychologists. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, *17*(1), 1–30.
- Amer, S. A., Elotla, S. F., Ameen, A. E., Shah, J., & Fouad, A. M. (2022). Occupational burnout and productivity loss: a cross-sectional study among academic university staff. *Frontiers in Public Health*, *10*, 861674.
- Bakker, A. B., Hakanen, J. J., Demerouti, E., & Xanthopoulou, D. (2007). Job Resources Boost work engagement, particularly when job demands are high. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, *99*(2), 274–284.
- Brady, G. M., Truxillo, D. M., Cadiz, D. M., Rineer, J. R., Caughlin, D. E., & Bodner, T. (2020). Opening the black box: Examining the nomological network of work ability and its role in organizational research. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *105*(6), 637–670.
- Dyrbye, L. N., Shanafelt, T. D., Johnson, P. O., Johnson, L. A., Satele, D., & West, C. P. (2019). A cross-sectional study exploring the relationship between burnout, absenteeism, and job performance among American nurses. *BMC Nursing*, *18*(1), 57.
- Elovainio, M., Heponiemi, T., Jokela, M., Hakulinen, C., Presseau, J., Aalto, A.-M., & Kivimäki, M. (2015). Stressful work environment and wellbeing: What comes first? *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, *20*(3), 289–300.
- Jaussi, K. S., Randel, A. E., & Dionne, S. D. (2007). I am, I think I can, and I do: The role of personal identity, self-efficacy, and cross-application of experiences in creativity at work. *Creativity Research Journal*, *19*(2-3), 247–258.
- Kelly, C. M., Strauss, K., Arnold, J., & Stride, C. (2020). The relationship between leisure activities and psychological resources that support a sustainable career: The role of leisure seriousness and work-leisure similarity. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, *117*, 103340.
- Laguerre, R. A., Bragger, J. D., Cavalcanti, E., Christodoulou, C., Stavelly, S., & Russell, M. (2023). Serving decision makers and their employees simultaneously: Adopting a balanced approach. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, *16*, 113–116.
- Madera, J. M., King, E. B., & Hebl, M. R. (2012). Bringing social identity to work: The influence of manifestation and suppression on perceived discrimination, job satisfaction, and turnover intentions. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, *18*(2), 165–170.
- Özkan, A. H. (2022). The effect of burnout and its dimensions on turnover intention among nurses: A meta-analytic review. *Journal of Nursing Management*, *30*(3), 660–669.
- Ramarajan, L., & Reid, E. M. (2013). Changes in work, changes in self? Managing our work and non-work identities in an integrated world. *European Business Review*, 61–64.

---

**Cite this article:** Christodoulou, C., Oliveira, E., Baloch, M., & Laguerre, R. (2024). Addressing antiwork concerns through nonwork identity: Beyond an emphasis on meaningful work. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology* *17*, 58–60. <https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2023.85>