Exploring the Relationship between Corporate Social Performance and Work Meaningfulness

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Drawing on theory from job design literature, along with business and society research, I rely on interviews conducted with 52 employees to examine how they interpret the corporate social performance of their workplace, what they consider sources of meaningfulness in their work, and what relationship exists between these phenomena. I use content analysis and adopt a comparative approach to consider whether there are discernible differences, of content or meaning, in the responses among the two groups that comprise this study: those working in a firm with high commitment to corporate social performance, versus those working in firms that do not have a similarly high commitment. These findings show how work meaningfulness, which constitutes an important aspect of individual thriving and well-being, and corporate social performance, which encompasses corporate citizenship, social responsibility and sustainability, inform each other.

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Business and society research and practice has the good fortune, and distinct challenge, of addressing a diverse array of topics using a wide range of methods. One of the few points about which there seems to be broad agreement is the idea that companies should consider their varied stakeholders, rather than attending to the interests of owners/shareholders to the exclusion of other parties. It is, therefore, rather surprising that research about social issues in management has not reflected this consensus. Instead, the preponderance of work has been conducted at macro-levels of analysis (De Bakker et al. 2005), examining the behaviours of industries, sectors and organisations. As a result, the perspectives of key stakeholder groups, such as employees, have often been neglected. Freeman (2004: 27) asserts that what is needed is more of a ‘hands and eyes perspective’, where research and analysis is conducted at a more fine-grained and micro-focused level, such that the varied experiences of individuals in organisations can be taken into account.

Though we lack a strong understanding about how matters of social purpose influence individuals in the workplace, organisations nonetheless routinely emphasise the socially beneficial dimensions of work in an effort to foster commitment, motivation and a sense of work meaningfulness among employees. This is perhaps most evident in non-profit and public organisations. In these sectors, a connection to the organisation’s social purpose is routinely used to recruit and select employees and has been shown to motivate and enhance commitment among employees (Boxx et al. 1991; Preston and Brown 2004). The fields of public management and social work have extensive literature devoted to public service management and pro-social motivation.

More broadly, a sense of connection to a social purpose is thought to be an essential aspect of well-being (Csikszentmihalyi 1990; Spreitzer et al. 2005). Indeed, the burgeoning interest in positive organisational scholarship is based, in part, on the premise that helping people thrive at work affords psychological and physiological benefits to the individual (Frederickson and Losada 2005; Grant 2008; Lavine and Cameron 2012).

In an era when the private sector is increasingly called on to play a role in social issues, the language is lacking to describe how employees in companies might be influenced by social performance. It seems implausible that the desire for social betterment exists in the public and non-profit sectors yet somehow disappears in the private sector. Yet, there is far more hope than systematically gathered evidence to characterise social action in the private sector. This article presents an attempt to address these questions by considering how corporate citizenship, social responsibility and sustainability—what I frame here as corporate social performance—are understood by employees and how such commitments influence the meaning and meaningfulness that employees derive from their work.

This analysis stems from a comparative study of employees I conducted in two different organisational settings. One group is from an organisation with very high commitment to sustainability and corporate citizenship. The other setting comprises employees working for firms that do not demonstrate a strong commitment. Among employees in both settings, I conducted in-depth interviews to learn what makes work meaningful to employees and to ascertain how
employees understand the social performance of their workplace. Examining these topics in unison provides a means of exploring ‘the impact of sustainability on the workforce’ by looking at ‘how the quest for sustainable value affects the human side of enterprise’ (Cooperrider and Fry 2011).

In what follows, I describe the research design of the study in some detail before sharing key findings from the research. I briefly delineate ideas that informed the study and consider how this research can further scholarly knowledge and management practice.

The contribution of this study

Increasingly, positive psychology and the organisational correlate of this movement—positive organisational scholarship—have focused deeply on questions of employee well-being as ends unto themselves but also with a recognition that human flourishing can support organisational excellence. Though the majority of research about social responsibility has been at the macro-level, there is some empirical evidence that strong corporate social performance has the potential to enhance employee engagement, increase employee well-being and contribute to favourable employee outcomes in the form of greater organisational identification (Turban and Greening 1996; Greening and Turban 2000; Backhaus et al. 2002), enhanced commitment (Peterson 2004; Brammer et al. 2007) and a more positive self-identity (Turban and Greening 1996; Grant et al. 2008).

While such studies are promising, further study is needed as this work has several limitations. Most work has looked at narrow sub-dimensions of social performance exclusively, such as volunteerism or philanthropy, rather than social performance as a whole. Key aspects of corporate social performance have, to date, been overlooked. Previous studies have looked at prospective job seekers rather than actual employees (Turban and Greening 1996; Greening and Turban 2000; Backhaus et al. 2002) and not included qualitative analyses that might shed light on quantitative findings. Extant research has also lacked comparison between firms with greatly differing levels of social performance (Peterson 2004; Smith et al. 2004).

Not only does this study contribute to a more micro-level view, which helps us understand how employees make meaning out of their organisation’s social performance, but this research also addresses central questions for job design scholars and those who draw on job design to improve the workplace. Contemporary job design research has demonstrated that a host of workplace forces can enable or constrain positive job attitudes such as job satisfaction or well-being (Parker and Wall 1998). Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001) have shown that employees proactively ‘craft’ their jobs; that is, modifying them to enhance their experiences of meaning and meaningfulness in their work. Grant (2007) theorised that changes in the relational dimensions of work could enhance meaning and improve performance.
Much of job design harks back to the work of Hackman and Oldham. In their job characteristics model (1976) they established that ‘key psychological states’, including a sense of work meaningfulness, contribute to positive work outcomes that have beneficial effects for individuals and organisations, such as higher job satisfaction and lower rates of job turnover. Hackman and Oldham identify a series of forces that can contribute to work meaningfulness. Key among these is ‘task significance’. That term is a bit of a misnomer in that task significance is not just an assessment about the importance of the task at hand. Task significance describes efforts that are seen by the person doing them as ‘working toward the greater good’, or in some way serving or helping others. This conceptualisation is, in fact, quite analogous to corporate social performance.

While Hackman and Oldham provide conceptual support for a link between work meaningfulness and positive job attitudes, such as commitment and satisfaction, the work meaningfulness/task significance relationship is largely unexamined. Grant (2007: 394) notes that ‘surprisingly little research’ has addressed employees’ desire to feel that their work makes a difference and helps others. Grant has sought to remedy this gap by extensively addressing issues of ‘pro-social’ motivation, looking at when and how people help others. Yet, research about pro-social motivation has focused on ways that people become more helpful when they come in contact with beneficiaries of their action. What has remained unaddressed is how organisational-level actions, such as increased commitment to sustainability, or improved social performance, influence employees who may or may not be directly involved in such efforts.

In this study I examine whether CSP must be seen by employees as part of their core tasks in order to be perceived as meaningful, or whether novel or ancillary tasks, or tasks performed by others in the organisation rather than directly by the employee can provoke a state of work meaningfulness. This study also allows for consideration of how much organisational-level notions of ‘the task’, such as employee interpretation of broader organisational goals and mission, inform individual-level interpretation of task significance. Thompson and Bunderson’s work on ‘ideological currency’ suggests that employee perceptions about social impact extend beyond their direct experiences in the organisation (2003). Given that employees construe ‘the work of the organisation’ subjectively, do they interpret activity such as corporate philanthropy and community involvement as a fundamental part of the organisation’s mission or simply as an outcome of the work? This research affords an opportunity to better characterise and understand such issues.

**Study design**

**Sample population**

The study comprised two distinct groups, totalling 52 individuals. Participants in the ‘high CSP group’ were employees of one small consumer products firm...
known for high commitment to environmental sustainability and social responsibility. The firm had garnered substantial recognition for its commitment to these issues, including numerous prestigious awards for its commitments to corporate citizenship, ethical leadership and environmental sustainability. The company is widely seen as both an industry leader and a leading example of strong social performance among all businesses. The sample population from the high CSP group \((n=23)\) represented 46% of the firm’s employees. This sample population was 68% female and 32% male. Participants ranged in age from 22 to 60; 62% of participants were managers while 38% were in non-managerial roles. All employees of the consumer products firm were invited to participate, with 46% participating. Participants were initially recruited by email.

The second group comprised employees working for firms without a notably high commitment to social responsibility or sustainability. Thus the designation of ‘average’ is not intended to connote that the group represents some carefully engineered mid-point of social performance; simply that the visible social commitments of the employers in this group were average when compared with the clearly above average performance of the high CSP group. In fact, while it is possible to identify organisations with robust social performance, it is both theoretically and practically difficult to identify any organisation that represents average performance, as that would require an accurate and precise assessment of the total scope of performance in a given industry. Therefore, to address this challenge, I compare the high CSP group to a comparative sample population that includes people from multiple organisations rather than one firm. Using a comparison group assembled from employees across many firms lessens the effects of any one organisational setting and makes the sample population a better approximation of firms that lack notable commitment to corporate social performance generally.

The ‘average firm group’ comprised 30 professionals from a diverse range of 11 different industries, most heavily represented by the financial services and management consulting industries. Half of the participants worked in management roles and half did not. Participants in this group were a convenience sample based on the researcher’s access to members of an evening MBA programme and the alumni of a full-time MBA programme. A sample of approximately 120 alumni and current evening MBA students were initially contacted. This sample roughly mirrored the demographics of the two respective programmes as a whole. Among the 120 people who were invited to participate 25%, or 30 individuals, responded and agreed to participate. The average firm population was 57% male, 43% female and ranged in age from 24 to 49 years of age.

Only the broad aims of the study were discussed with study participants in an effort to limit response bias. Participants were told that the goal of the research was to understand what makes work meaningful to people, so that work meaningfulness could be better understood and fostered. No linkage was made to issues of corporate responsibility, corporate citizenship, sustainability or social performance.
The interview

The semi-structured interviews lasted 45 minutes on average. The aim of the interviews was to understand how study participants consider the meaning of, and contributing influences to, work meaningfulness and social performance. After a general description of their work and organisational role, participants were asked what makes their work meaningful to them. Questions about work meaningfulness were deliberately asked prior to any questions about social performance to limit response bias.

Approximately two-thirds of the way through the interview, after they were asked about work meaningfulness, participants were asked about their firm’s corporate social performance. Interviewees were asked whether they saw their respective employers do things that ‘help others or make some kind of positive difference’. They were asked to describe any activity or commitment that came to mind. Participants who stated that their organisation had such commitments or engaged in such activities were asked a series of follow-up questions intended to ascertain their perception of these activities and commitments.

Findings

I explore whether there are key differences between the average firm group and high CSP group regarding what they saw as constituting CSP and work meaningfulness. To make this determination, I analysed interview data from the two groups using rigorous content-analysis techniques. I first present a summary table about the meaning of CSP (Table 1), followed by an analysis of each theme that employees identified as related to, or part of, CSP. I then use the same approach to analyse employee perceptions of work meaningfulness.

The findings show that the two groups identify many similar themes although there is a consistent pattern of difference between the strength of response among the two groups. Employees in the high CSP group connected CSP to the core business function of the organisation twice as often as those in average CSP firms (80% compared with 37%). Employees in the high CSP group also noted the firms’ philanthropic and leadership commitments more often (55% compared with 29% and 30% compared with 14%, respectively).

The data also shows key interpretative differences between the two groups. Of the employees in the average firm group, 20% cited volunteer opportunities afforded by their employer as part of the organisation’s CSP commitments whereas the high CSP group made no mention of this. Yet, 65% of those in the high CSP group identified the firm’s distinctive internal culture as a marker of firm corporate social performance. Three main ideas underlie employee responses about a distinctive socially responsible internal organisational culture.

1 Readers who would like more details about the research methods used in the study are encouraged to contact the author.
The most straightforward of these is simply that the firm evidences its social commitments by progressive and generous employment practices. Employees talked about the firm ‘valuing the whole person’ and nurturing employee education and learning and specifically cited ‘flexible and great benefits’ including ‘$1,000 for personal development’. One employee noted:

I’m a big believer that it’s a contagious feeling. If we create an environment where we develop people to be at their best they’ll touch and affect others who they interact with so that will grow and grow and grow (001).

Employees in the high CSP group identified the organisation’s stated and enacted commitments to broad social justice principles. Several employees cited the firm’s ‘global imperatives’, as an example of the organisation’s commitment to social justice. These principles are a statement of the firm’s vision of how its actions can increase social justice. Several interviews from the high CSP group noted that the developmental culture of the firm encouraged and demanded that employees increase their participation, voice and effort to reach these lofty goals. One employee commented:

You can’t be a wallflower and it’s not for everybody but for those who choose it and those who we choose, we engage it, it’s a very different kind of company. We really live what we preach. Nothing is perfect and it’s always changing. Our former HR director used to say it’s not for the faint of heart because it demands something of you. People are forced to engage outside of the functional aspects of their job to think about these bigger issues which is somewhat atypical (002).

### Table 1: Content analysis for corporate social performance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interpretation of corporate social performance</th>
<th>Average firm group (%)</th>
<th>High CSP group (%)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reflected in core business functions: included ways the business itself created social good, provided pro bono services, enabled clients to create social good</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflected in philanthropy</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflected by leaders: setting the tone and serving as role models</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflected in volunteerism</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal culture: employee learning and development, employee reward, mission-driven culture</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>65</td>
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</table>
The average firm group included a theme of volunteerism though the high CSP group did not. This difference raises a question about whether employees in the high CSP firm volunteer less frequently, or are simply less apt to think of volunteerism as part of CSP amid a more robust set of activities. Employees may also construe volunteerism more as a personal act even if it is organisationally sanctioned or sponsored.

Employees in the high CSP group frequently cited internal culture as a key dimension of CSP, whereas those in the average firm group did not mention this theme. It stands to reason that the high CSP group would have more socially responsible activities and policies that employees would be reasonably likely to identify, including internal, employee-serving practices.

**CSP as core business function**

As might be expected from the high CSP firm, which markets its consumer packaged goods as environmentally and socially superior to comparable conventional products, 80% of those interviewed linked social performance to the core business of the company. One employee, after identifying discretionary activities that are ancillary to the core business, said: ‘Then with the products we sell. We’re trying to make a huge difference and we’re also thinking about the process, like how the products get to retail’ (003).

Others identified attributes of the products and noted these as evidence of firm social performance. A quote that was indicative of many of the responses was: ‘By virtue of the products we sell and ingredients in them bringing awareness to consumers of hazards of other things we all use’ (004).

Other interviewees identified distinct outcomes that they saw as part of social performance, such as enhanced health and safety. A quote that typifies this sentiment is: ‘We’re mainly providing a healthier and safer choice for consumers—giving them the opportunity to enhance their family health and health of the environment’ (005).

Finally, some employees emphasised the social change dimensions of commerce focused on more socially responsible buying choices: ‘We’re helping to offer the ability for people to vote with their dollars on a more environmentally friendly, less damaging product’ (006).

While this might be expected from a firm whose mission is to increase social responsibility through its product offerings, many employees from firms with average social commitment (the average firm group) also cited ways that the core business furthers socially responsible aims. The interview question prompted employees to consider ways that their organisation evidenced its social performance, the linkage to the organisation’s core business practices was not implied, and some interviewees made no connection to the firm’s primary goods or service offerings whereas others did. The responses from those in the average firms group differed from the high CSP group in a few ways. First, slightly less than half as many interviewees cited tie-ins between CSP and core business activities (37% compared with 80%). The nature of the social good
also differed noticeably. Some interview subjects identified wealth creation, the creation of shareholder value or commercial activity they deemed reasonable or beneficial. Another difference was that several employees discussed ‘comparative non-harm’, or the avoidance of negative behaviours, rather than the presence of positive behaviours. For example, one interviewee in the financial services industry noted: ‘People need money and we’re not loan sharks. We don’t break kneecaps. We’re not usury, we benefit society by providing capital at reasonable interest rates. We’re not taking advantage of the poor or funding strip joints’ (007).

Others noted specific benefits of their products or services, such as those in the medical device field: ‘Our products help extend and improve patient quality of life. We literally help mend broken hearts so that’s certainly beneficial’ (008).

Two additional sub-themes among the responses from this sample population were: creating social benefit through adherence to ethical standards and seeing the enabling role that firms play for clients they serve. On this first point, another financial services employee noted:

(Firm name) has taken the high road in the way lending is done. Predatory practices are certainly done in this industry, especially with low-income people. They’ve decided there are things they won’t do, regardless of competition, even if it means losing money (009).

On the second theme, many interview statements emphasised the role that the firm plays in benefiting clients. This statement typifies the sentiment: ‘An analogy I often use: we don’t do direct service, but we help that happen more effectively’ (010).

We can see, therefore, that employees in the high CSP group are more apt to think of the core work of the organisation as having inherent social benefit. This sentiment, while less common among those in the average firm group, is also expressed among employees in these other firms.

CSP as philanthropy

Many interviewees from both sample populations spoke about philanthropy but there was a consistent thematic difference among the responses. In this section, a sample of a concept card illustrates thematic differences in perceptions about philanthropy among the two groups (see Box 1). The concept card for philanthropy shows a series of statements that represent common types of comment elicited from employees in the interviews. Many of the comments from the high CSP firm made a distinction between charitable contributions and deeper relationships with non-profit groups through more substantive partnerships. Thus, while both sample populations cited philanthropy a considerable portion of the time, there was a discernible difference in strategic approach to philanthropy between the groups.
Box 1 Concept card statements for philanthropy (illustrative sample of statements)

**Average firm group**

‘Two years ago we stopped the holiday party and instead we contribute to an employee managed giving org. Last time it was for disaster-relief’ (011).

‘We have lots of charity or fundraising type events. Our HR dept is involved, canned goods, Habitat, also stuff for employees: giving away tickets, involvement in local events’ (012).

‘For example, instead of usual Christmas gifts we gave to the food bank’ (013).

‘I’m on the board of our charitable foundation I need someone to help with the bio ball and Special Olympics. Finding forty volunteers during tax season isn’t easy . . . they’ll do it, they’ll find a way but won’t go looking for it’ (014).

‘We have a pretty good community affairs commitment. One thing that’s great is that we’re owned by X and the family is big givers which makes me feel good’ (015).

**High CSP group**

‘By forming partnerships with nonprofits such as X & Y’ (016).

‘We’re doing a lot better just lately to be supportive to organisations in a different kind of a way—creating a connection not just flinging money around—not expecting a payback but an on-going relationship, such as X’ (017).

‘With A, B, C, rather than doing everything ourselves we’re more into connecting . . . that seems very clever to me’ (018).

‘We’re into enabling others, letting them make a difference and make a difference for others. For example we started a relationship with a company we educated them on how to start up a business helping poor women to start businesses’ (019).

‘So the marketing team was saying Earth Day is coming and we’ve participated for almost twenty years, the team was not generating any momentum around Earth Day. Someone says what about corporate direction and what does it say about Earth Day? Maybe we could have more significant higher level impact. Out of this came our campaign to empower the next generation coming up, people who are old enough to be independent, 18–24 year olds, and empower them to create change, provide them with education’ (020).

‘We struggled to have an event with our retail partners around Earth Day but to do something to create real change—a promotion with X training camp for activists. In the past they would just give something away. Instead we find a hundred individuals and let them speak. The question is: how do we keep that energy over time . . . track what they do over time and bring that energy back. Together how do we perpetuate that? How are we evolving what making a difference really means?’ (021)
CSP as reflected by leadership

Among those in the average firm group, despite respondents working in an array of firms across industries, the common theme in all responses related to leadership was to emphasise ways that the actions of company leaders signalled the values of the organisation. One employee noted the philanthropic efforts of the firm CEO and stated ‘it does make me proud to be involved in the organisation given his efforts’; yet another cited the pro bono work the head of the company does for non-profit clients. Multiple respondents used terms such as ‘role model’ or ‘messenger’ in their description of the leader and the leader’s involvement in socially responsible activities.

Unlike these other themes with more discernible differences between the two sample populations, the responses here were quite consistent among the two groups, many of whom described the CEO as an exemplar of commitment to social performance. ‘It does have to do with leadership, senior management, the CEO. There has always been the trickle-down effect and that’s ok. You have to exude that energy’ (022).

Considerations of work meaningfulness

While the proportions of responses in some cases vary considerably, with 85% of those in the high CSP group talking about deriving work meaningfulness from effecting organisational impact whereas only 28% of those in the average firm group report doing so, the thematic dimensions among the two populations seem quite similar. I briefly discuss and explain each in turn below (see Table 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interpretation of work meaningfulness</th>
<th>Average firm group (%)</th>
<th>High CSP group (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Making a general impact</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making a social impact</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal reward: both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helping others</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction/relationships: social interaction, building network and community</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature of task itself: enjoyment and novelty</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Making an impact
The dominant theme here among both groups, was the idea that one’s work and efforts, when done skilfully, can affect the organisation in discernible ways.
A quote that typifies this sentiment is ‘the stuff I’m doing is making the business better’. While respondents in some cases talked about evaluating this in individual terms such as ‘when I’m putting forth my best effort’, a key distinction between this and personal reward was that the individual sees and identifies a linkage between their actions and organisational goals. Statements such as ‘it’s a small organisation so any one person has a big impact on the success or failure’ distinguish this from simply taking satisfaction from performing a task well. In many cases comments indicated shades of extra-role or citizenship behaviours such as ‘when I put in extra work in this job to help make something happen that seemed like it might not have been possible’ (023).

While some employees cited the benefits to their organisation in abstract terms, others identified the benefits of their efforts for the end users, or customers of their goods or services. This seems akin to the theme of helping others. Yet, the focus here is still on how one’s own efforts have impact that in turn benefits others and the organisation. One demonstrative example of this is the statement: ‘If I had to pinpoint it: if I’m adding value to something . . . like when I see something I’ve suggested incorporated in a presentation’ (024).

A small percentage of the sentiments expressed among the average CSP group (15%) identified social impact as a source of meaningfulness whereas a substantial number of those in the high CSP group (65%) did so. These comments were made before study participants had been asked about issues of social performance or social responsibility, thus the idea of social impact was something introduced to the conversation by the study participants, not the researcher.

Among both groups, interviewees expressed sentiments about the perceived social impact or social value of the work or the alignment between the work and their own social values. Among the average firm group, an executive recruiter showed how she saw her efforts as having social impact when she stated:

> I really believe I’m making a difference but I’m not a community organizer, not making change from the outside but inside. I really believe that finding good people for organisations is making change . . . and selfishly I get to feel good about doing something good (025).

This quote shows that deriving a sense of meaningfulness by fostering social good is neither uncomplicated nor entirely independent from other sources of meaningfulness such as a sense of personal reward. Yet, the trigger for this is the chance to foster or create a social benefit. Among interviewees in the high CSP group, common sentiments included statements such as ‘at the end of the day when I’ve helped design a product that is better for the environment there is tremendous satisfaction in that’ (026). Many interviewees at the high CSP firm also talked about the meaningfulness derived from being a ‘different type of business’.

> It’s meaningful to come to work every day for a company that is striving to make a difference or make an impact. To work for a company that is trying to do things differently than a company in corporate America, that in and of itself is meaningful (027).
While comparatively fewer interviewees in the average firm group made such comments, the sentiments expressed were quite similar to those in the high CSP group. An employee of an energy utility that produces some energy from renewable sources noted: ‘I would say that I’m making a very small contribution to a very large problem, which is climate change and other air pollution issues. This is just one link in a very large chain’ (028).

While work that contributes to environmental benefit, whether in a high or average CSP firm, might provide easier grounds for work meaningfulness derived from social benefit, interviewees in a variety of industries, from banking to the building trades, talked about deriving meaning from work on the basis of work having social impact. For example, a manager who finances building development stated: ‘If a developer builds a new building that can give people a place to live, give people space to start a business, or make some money for the developer’ (029).

**Personal reward**

Among both groups, ideas of personal reward generally conveyed one of three dominant sub-themes. The most pervasive was the opportunity for learning through work. One statement captures this sentiment:

> In my current role there is a tremendous amount of learning that can happen. There is how to understand the credit risks of the business and to develop judgment over time. What I love about the job is the experience. If I develop that expertise it’s really valued in this company and in this industry (030).

Ideas about learning also seem to convey a sense that they may lead to additional future rewards.

While at times interviewees, when asked about work meaningfulness, would substitute other words that might stand in for meaningfulness, such as ideas of enjoyment or satisfaction, it is notable that, in several instances, interviewees specifically distinguished meaningfulness from related concepts, such as happiness. This quote shows such a distinction: ‘As long as I’m being challenged and learning I’m doing well. I’m not happy but I know I’m learning, up to date, quick’ (031).

Another sub-theme related to personal reward was that of economic or financial gain. These quotes are exemplified by responses such as ‘I’m much better paid here and participate in greater success’ and ‘I can do something positive and economically sustainable’. Perhaps because of social desirability, interviewees often linked financial reward to another concept—such as success and social impact in these examples. While people routinely talk about what employment does for them economically, interviewees may have downplayed financial reward in order not to seem greedy or because many people view money as a somewhat uncomfortable or taboo subject.

Finally, a third form of reward was the emotional or psychic reward from acknowledgement or appreciation of one’s efforts. Statements such as the following capture this: ‘When people around you acknowledge what you’re doing. That’s meaningful in a sense—you feel rewarded, respected, and cared about’ (032).
Helping others
Responses among the two groups were very similar on this point. Both described deriving meaning from the opportunity to help or assist customers, co-workers or business partners. One person in a customer service role described: ‘Having people come in upset, crying and helping people fix their problems’ (033).

Several people in managerial roles emphasised the meaningfulness they derived from seeing and helping to foster growth in those they managed. One such comment that captures this is: ‘I put a lot on how the employees are developing from the experience—the employees and the customers. That has a lot more meaning to me than the day to day numbers’ (034).

Interaction/social relationships
While helping people often involves interacting with them, these comments emphasised meaningfulness derived from interaction itself, as opposed to specific help that such interaction might bring about. Interviewees talked about meaningfulness based on caring about co-workers: ‘Really, what makes it valuable is relationships to co-workers’. Others noted specific ways that interaction with others in the workplace impacted them: ‘the people are wonderful and I feel inspired to know them’. Others talked about how the variety of interaction made for a source of meaningfulness:

I get to interact with the art designers . . . it’s so much fun to work with so many personalities. I have to go deep into myself to find a place to connect with so many different kinds of people. I find it fascinating and fun to connect with both the expressionistic and the analytical. It speaks to different parts of my personality (035).

Nature of the task itself
Among both groups, some employees talked about finding meaning in the specifics of their job or role, whether because of the specific tasks they performed or job design considerations that made the role meaningful to them. These comments did relate to other themes beyond the nature of the task/job/role itself. They showed that the role or job design allowed employees to act in a manner they found meaningful, with creativity or autonomy as the following quotes show:

The ability to be creative. It’s challenging and it’s what I enjoy. I have the chance to be creative and every day is different. I’d go crazy if I was analyzing the margins on mustard. Every company and transaction is different and people are different (036).

In terms of what I do—I’m in a position to really know the details about our products and to know the gap between our products on the shelves, what they say they are and to have those claims verified (037).

Discussion
Among the two groups that are compared in the study, there are intriguing similarities and differences. Many perceptions seem similar, just stronger
among the high CSP group. This suggests that one role of strong social performance may simply be to foster a robust organisational culture. Organisations with a more visible set of shared values and norms, that employees can self-select into, create a basis for increased employee identification with the organisation.

While the thematic dimensions of work meaningfulness were the same among the two groups, social impact provided a powerful additional source of work meaningfulness for the high CSP group. This group also reported work meaningfulness, on the basis of social interaction and the nature of the task, at a two-to-one margin over the average firm group. In total, the greater opportunity for social impact in the high CSP group seems to provide an enhanced resource for overall work meaningfulness and a greater ability to forge a strong culture based on more meaningful work and social relationships. Not only is this a positive end in itself, it can accrue substantial organisational benefits in the form of increased commitment, decreased turnover and the like.

While the findings about work meaningfulness highlight similarities, the two groups had more divergent perceptions as they relate to social performance. Many employees in the high CSP group see the internal culture of the organisation as evidence of, and a supporting platform for, social performance. The same is not true among employees in the average firm group although this group did cite volunteerism as a theme which was not the case in the high CSP group. While both groups identified philanthropy as an element of CSP, those in the high CSP group tended to talk about concepts of robust partnership, whereas those in the average firm group tended to talk about charitable financial or product donations.

The tendency of employees in the average firm group to identify volunteerism as an element of CSP could initially be seen as surprising, because it might represent a more varied or robust manifestation of CSP than a firm where volunteerism is not an element. This finding is perhaps best considered in light of work that identifies different life-cycle stages of an organisation’s socially responsible practices. Work such as Waddock (2004) and Googins et al. (2008) shows that early stages of social performance focus more on practices intended to enhance corporate reputation, such as volunteerism, whereas later stages revolve more around integration of social responsibility practices such that they provide business value to the firm. Stage distinctions describe the maturation of corporate social responsibility efforts and provide a useful lens to understand some of the qualitative differences between business practices that can influence social change. Responses from those in the high CSP group—who cited how their organisation’s practices might improve the natural environment or model new progressive labour practices—compared with responses from interviewees in the average firm group—who were more likely to talk about the social benefit of commerce itself, such as job creation or providing socially necessary goods or services—exemplify stage differences. Later stage conceptualisations of CSR and CSP describe a transformative juncture where business is reframed as an agent of change, or broader world benefit. This helps explain qualitative differences among the two groups when interviewees talked about the same
general concept but in more early stage terms among the average firm group and in later stage terms among the high CSP group.

Conclusion

Taken together, the content analysis comparing the two groups’ responses provides support for the idea that employees in a firm with a strong commitment to social performance have a differing pattern of response from those in average firms. It seems that more robust CSP and greater opportunity for alignment between employee values and that of the organisation can deepen meaningfulness—as demonstrated by the increased strength of response—for those in firms with high social performance. Higher CSP organisations have the potential to use their comparatively more developed socially responsible activities and commitments as a platform on which employees can connect. This is made visible by the stronger and more elaborate responses from those in the high CSP group.

Similarly, the themes employees used to describe work meaningfulness inform the job design literature by helping to fill in the ‘black box’ of task significance. While the job design literature has treated task significance as ‘whatever the given individual values’ (Hackman and Oldham 1976), we can see that there are relatively stable categories of response which could guide future research. These findings suggest that a sense of task significance can be triggered by more than one’s direct work but also by the indirect efforts of the workplace.

Certainly, there are limits to how broadly the lessons of any singular study can be generalised. Yet, to recap, this study provides some foundation that can inform future research by suggesting that work meaningfulness, social performance and the job design concept of task significance might be understood in somewhat predictable categories. Future work can examine the stability of these categories. Importantly, the findings from this study also suggest that social impact need not stem largely from the direct tasks that one performs, as job design literature has suggested, but may arise from the broader societal impacts produced by one’s workplace. This study also lends added support to stage theory conceptualisations of corporate social performance in business and society research. Initially, activity such as volunteerism and philanthropy may be more of a focus whereas a deepening commitment may be signalled by more connection to the organisation’s core activity and culture.

These findings have important managerial implications. The fact that many of the themes used to categorise responses from the two groups in the study were the same has useful consequences for managers. The relative similarity between the groups makes it far easier to argue that all organisations may do well to ratchet up CSP practices. In other words, while marked differences may make for more dramatic research findings, similarity is also comforting because it suggests that all organisations may benefit from improved social performance and deepening ties to core organisational mission. Both scholars and practitioners will benefit from the idea that a deep commitment to social
responsibility and sustainability may create an enhanced pathway to greater work meaningfulness.

References


