



**MOUNTAIN
& PLAINS ERC**
*A NIOSH Education and Research Center for
Occupational & Environmental Health & Safety*

HOW MEANING MATTERS: IMPLICATIONS FOR OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH

Presented by Adelyn B. Shimizu, Colorado State University

INTRODUCTION

- Counseling psychology PhD student
CSU
- Occupational health psychology
training concentration
- MAP ERC trainee
- Research focus on positive psychology
applications within the workplace





Definition

Intentional

Unintentional

Implications



MEANING

- Meaning in life is defined as “the sense made of, and significance felt regarding, the nature of one’s being and existence” (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006, p. 81).
- Normally used to connote *positive* cognitive and affective appraisals.



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Meaning is a basic human need¹ and is essential for psychological health.²

¹ Frankl, 1963; ² e.g. King, Hicks, Krull, & Del Gaiso, 2006; Ryff & Singer, 1998



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MEANING AS A “NOTABLE RESOURCE”¹

Increased meaning in life associated with...

- Greater wellbeing and less psychological distress²
- Better post-trauma adjustment³
- Better health⁴
- ...and decreased chance of death!⁵

¹Steger & Samman, 2012; ²e.g., Steger et al., 2006; ³Steger, Frazier, et al., 2008; ⁴Steger, Mann, Michels, & Cooper, 2009; ⁵Boyle, Barnes, Buchman, & Bennett, 2009

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WORKERS NEED MEANINGFUL WORK

- Meaning at work is an integrative aspect of worker's overall well-being and health.¹
- Finding meaning in the domain of work also helps fulfill the global need for meaning in life.²



¹ e.g. Dik, Byrne & Steger, 2013; Harpaz & Fu, 2002 ² Steger & Dik, 2010



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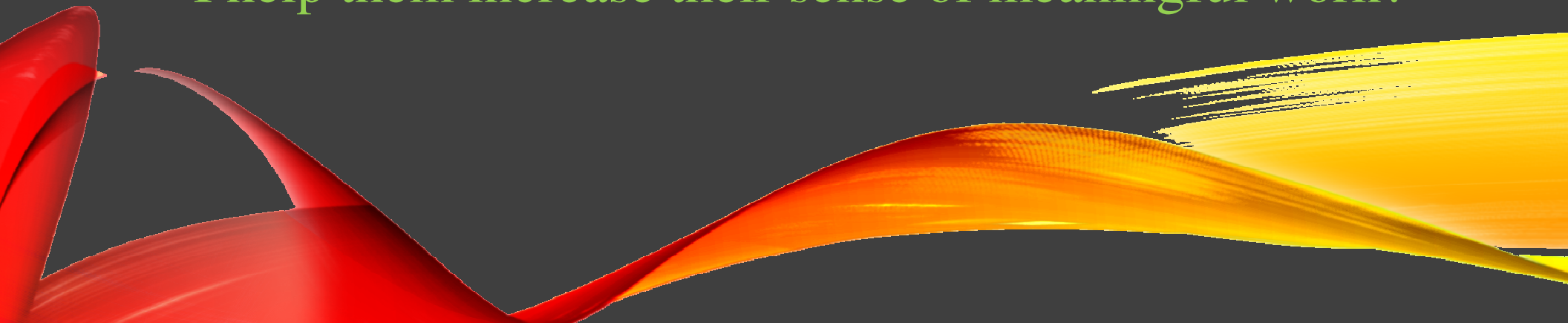
(A FEW OF THE) **WORK BENEFITS**

- Linked to greater job satisfaction.¹
- Identifying and expressing one's strengths and talents at work linked to increased productivity.²
- Decreased mental health concerns in workers (e.g., low self-esteem and anxiety).³
- Meaningful work acts as mediator between transformational leadership and psychological well-being.⁴

¹ Kamdron, 2005; Sparks & Schenk, 2001; ² Hodges & Clifton, 2004; ³ Deci et al., 2001; ⁴ Arnold et al., 2007



So increased meaning is good for workers... How do I help them increase their sense of meaningful work?





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CHANGE JOBS?

Sometimes an option for career counselors to suggest, less often one for those in occupational health to suggest...



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JOB CRAFTING¹

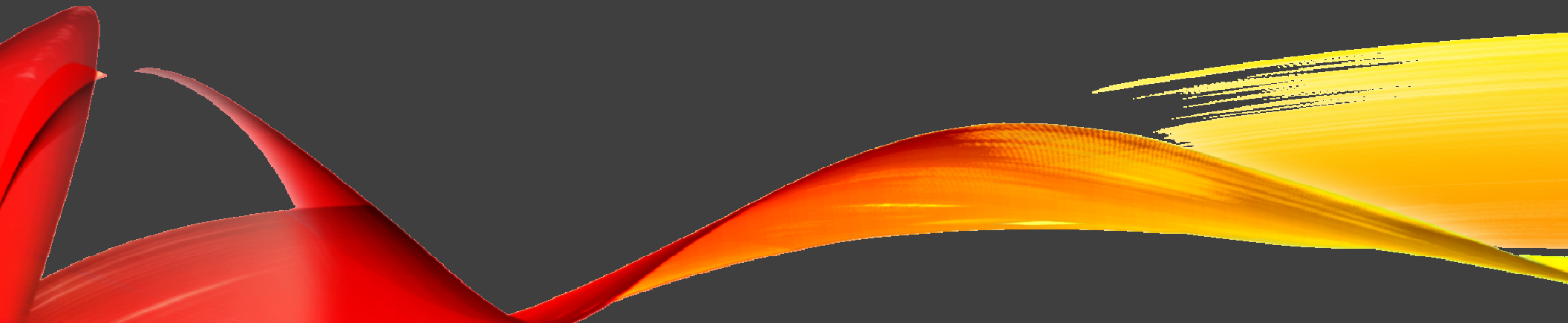
- Three identified avenues that workers can possibly take; 1) cognitive, 2) social, and 3) task
- These three also offer potential pathways occupational health and safety professionals may want to consider

¹Berg, Dutton, & Wrzesniewski, 2013



COGNITIVE

- Reframing work to focus on meaningful (often prosocial) impact
- Expanding, focusing, linking perceptions



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SOCIAL

Building, reframing, and adapting relationships at work



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TASK

- Adding tasks
- Emphasizing tasks
- Redesigning tasks





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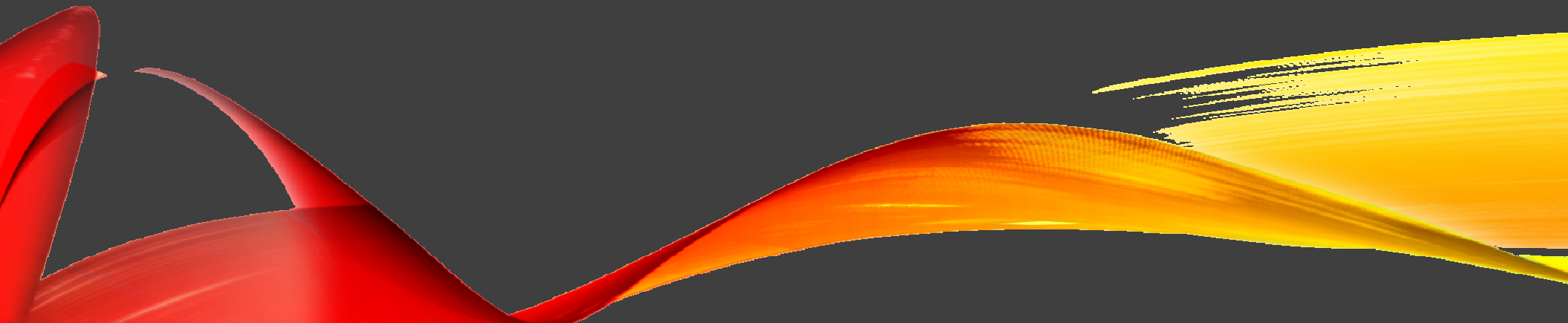
THE WORK YOU DO IMPACTS WORKERS

But in more ways than you may normally consider...



THE HAWTHORNE EFFECT

Workers (sometimes) appraised interventions as their organization caring enough about them to try and make a positive change.





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BROAD IMPLICATIONS

1. Intentionally target increasing meaningful work.
2. Make sure not to decrease the sense of meaningful work unintentionally.



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SPECIFIC IMPLICATIONS FOR OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH

Examples...

- Can act as an additional resource for some workers
- Worker's perceived importance and practice of safety procedures and equipment
- Likelihood of effective intervention implementation
- Having a conversation about the meaningfulness of work can act as a repertoire builder



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graph LR; A[Definition] --> B[Intentional]; B --> C[Unintentional]; C --> D[Implications];
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A CHALLENGE

Intentionally try to make your interactions with workers such that it will increase their perceptions of meaningfulness of their work; no matter the job, what you have been tasked with doing, or the specific worksite.



THANK YOU!

Questions? Email adelyn.shimizu@colostate.edu