



# An Empirical Study on Work Autonomy and Sense of Work Meaning of New Generation Employees Based on JD-C Model

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**Abstract.** Based on the JD-C model, this study uses Stata and Mplus structural equation models to perform multi-factor fitting analysis of the sense of meaning of work, and tests its relationship with work autonomy through Bootstrap test and Sobel test. Studies have shown that work flexibility acts on the sense of meaning at work through organizational pride, and organizational pride plays a partial mediating role between work flexibility and work meaning. To a certain extent, work stress regulates the relationship between work flexibility and organizational pride, and there are differences in the moderating effect in the context of high and low work stress.

**Keywords:** work autonomy;JD-C; organizational pride;a sense of meaning in work;Model of structural equations

## 1 Introduction

Over the past forty years of reform and opening up, the development of the Chinese market economy has shaped a unique social character of the new era youth. Compared to the previous generation of employees who experienced material scarcity, they are more concerned with achieving work-life balance, pursuing autonomy and flexibility, and also yearning to find true meaning and a sense of achievement in their work<sup>[1]</sup>. In this context, flexible work provides a work mode that meets the needs of the new generation of employees. So, what is the positive work experience that flexible work brings to employees? Does it make the new generation of employees more willing to work? If so, what are the mechanisms involved? According to social identity theory, employees can perceive organizational attention to their individual needs through flexible work, which leads to a higher sense of organizational pride. Does this mean that organizational pride plays a role in the mechanism through which flexible work affects work meaningfulness? Does the positive impact of flexible work on employee work meaningfulness vary with the work pressure they face? These are important questions that require empirical research.

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Based on this, this study aims to explore the impact of flexible work on employee work meaningfulness, the mediating role of organizational pride between flexible work and work meaningfulness, and the moderating role of different work pressure situations on organizational pride. The goal is to deepen the understanding of work meaningfulness among the new generation of employees and seek effective ways to enhance their work meaningfulness, thereby maximizing the human capital utility of organizations.

## **2 Theoretical Analysis and Research Hypothesis**

### **2.1 Work Flexibility and Sense of Meaning in Work**

The sense of meaning in work(SOW) refers to the internal connection individuals perceive between themselves and their external work, reflecting their understanding of the relationship between themselves and their work<sup>[2]</sup>. It can be seen that the sense of meaning in work includes both job characteristics and individual cognitive perceptions. From the perspective of job characteristics, Youn and Kim believe that the level of challenge at work is an important factor in the sense of meaning at work, and that when employees are faced with moderately challenging tasks, their sense of meaning increases significantly<sup>[3]</sup>. From the perspective of individual cognitive perceptions, research has found that when individuals perceive a high level of congruence between their work and personal traits and goals, their internal motivation becomes stronger, and they are more likely to experience a sense of meaning in work.

Work flexibility(WF) refers to the ability of employees to have a certain degree of flexibility and autonomy in work arrangements, including choices and adjustments in work hours, work location, and job tasks. Work flexibility by providing more choices and flexibility, creates a work environment that accommodates individual needs, thereby stimulating employees' positive attitudes and engagement towards work and promoting an increase in their sense of meaning in work. Specifically, work flexibility grants employees greater autonomy and control, making them feel respected and valued by the organization. This enables employees to better align work goals with organizational missions, thus increasing the likelihood of experiencing a sense of meaning and achievement in their work. Additionally, work flexibility also helps weaken the boundaries between work and family, alleviating work-family conflict and promoting work-family enrichment. It aligns with employees' expectations for balancing family responsibilities and work, thereby enhancing their job satisfaction. Based on this, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: The flexibility of work has a positive effect on the sense of meaningfulness in work.

### **2.2 The Mediating Role of Organizational Pride**

Organizational pride(OHP) refers to the emotional experience in which employees feel proud and satisfied with their affiliation and achievements within the organization<sup>[4]</sup>. In the work context, when employees perceive their organization as flexible and adapta-

ble, they may consider these characteristics as part of the organization, leading to the development of social identification with the organization<sup>[5]</sup>. This social identification may trigger employees' sense of organizational pride, as they perceive their organization as flexible, innovative, and capable of adapting to change.

Furthermore, when employees perceive that the organization respects and supports individual differences, allowing them to utilize their personal strengths and interests in their work, they may associate their personal identity with the organization's flexible characteristics, considering themselves as part of this flexible culture<sup>[6]</sup>. This social identification can prompt employees to demonstrate higher levels of self-investment and pride in their work. Based on this, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2a: The flexibility of work has a positive effect on organizational pride.

As mentioned earlier, work flexibility leads to higher levels of organizational identification and pride among employees. According to self-determination theory, organizational pride can stimulate employees' intrinsic motivation and personal development by fulfilling their basic psychological needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence<sup>[7]</sup>. When employees feel proud, they are more likely to perceive trust and respect from the organization, granting them a certain degree of autonomy and decision-making authority in their work. At this point, they are more inclined to establish positive interpersonal relationships with the organization and their team, and to share the organization's achievements and values with others. When employees feel proud, they are more likely to believe in their own skills and knowledge, and that they can make significant contributions within the organization. This perception of competence satisfies employees' needs for growth and development, enabling them to experience the challenge and sense of achievement in their work, thereby enhancing their sense of meaning in work. Based on this, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H2b: Organizational pride has a positive effect on the sense of meaningfulness in work.

H2c: Organizational pride acts as a mediator between work flexibility and the sense of meaningfulness in work.

### **2.3 The Moderating Role of Work Stress**

According to the Job Demands-Control (JD-C) model of work stress, work stressors originate from two key characteristics of work: job demands and job control<sup>[8]</sup>. Changes in work flexibility impose new job demands and control mechanisms on employees, thereby generating new sources of work stress. In the process of developing organizational pride, employees' reactions to external pressures can stimulate self-regulatory behaviors, involving the continuous adjustment of their cognitive structures and coping strategies. When employees perceive low levels of work stress, it can alleviate their psychological burden and tension, provide more autonomy and flexibility, and make it easier for them to cope with job demands and challenges. Under such circumstances, employees are more likely to experience a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction in their work, enhancing their well-being and further strengthening the emotional connection between employees and the organization. Therefore, work stress plays a mod-

erating role in the positive relationship between work flexibility and organizational pride. Based on this, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: Work pressure mediates the relationship between organizational pride and the impact of work flexibility on the sense of meaningfulness in work.

In summary, work stress can influence the relationship between work flexibility, organizational pride, and the sense of meaning in work. Higher levels of work flexibility can enhance employees' organizational pride, which, in turn, promotes a greater sense of meaning in their work. However, the extent to which work stress moderates this relationship needs further empirical investigation. The above analysis model is shown in Figure 1.

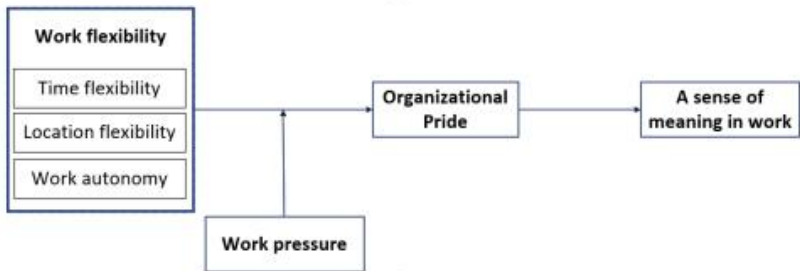


Fig. 1. Conceptual model

### 3 Research design

#### 3.1 Data Source

In this study, CGSS (2015), which covers the working module of the International Survey Cooperation Program, was used as the data source, and 4238 valid data were retained after data cleaning.

#### 3.2 Variable Measurement

Referring to Zheng Yajun's<sup>[9]</sup> analysis framework of the triangular structure of sources of work meaningfulness(SOW) among the new generation employees.

The dimensions of "job enjoyment," "job satisfaction," and "job identification" are subjected to a confirmatory factor analysis. The results pass the Bartlett's sphericity test and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin test ( $KMO = 0.765 > 0.7$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), yielding the proxy variables for work meaningfulness.

This study characterizes and measures the flexibility of work arrangements in terms of temporal flexibility, spatial flexibility, and work schedule flexibility, combining existing research<sup>[10]</sup>. Through multifactor fitting, the study obtains a representative variable for work flexibility that passes the Bartlett sphericity test and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test ( $KMO=0.788>0.7$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). This variable enables a more comprehensive and accurate evaluation of flexible work arrangements.

The mediating variable in this study is organizational pride, which refers to employees' identification with their work and the resulting sense of pride in the organization. The moderating variable is work pressure(WP), which is the subjective perception of work pressure by employees in a certain context. The control variables in this study, following previous research, include age, gender, education level, and marital status of the respondents. Regarding age, only sample data of the youth population aged 18 to 45 years old were retained.

The baseline model formula used in this study is as follows:

$$fertility\_i = \alpha + \beta attitudes\_i + \gamma control\_i + \epsilon\_i \tag{1}$$

Note: SOW: Sense of Meaning at Work, OHP: Organizational Pride, WF: Work Flexibility, Control: Control Variable, Random Perturbation Term

### 4 Analysis of empirical results

This study utilizes Stata 16.0 to conduct regression analysis on the full sample data and performs hierarchical regression analysis using multiple models. The results are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Testing main effects and mediating effects

variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
	SOW	SOW	OHP	OHP	SOW
age	-0.006	-0.001	0.006	0.006	-0.004
gender	0.127	0.127	0.082	0.058	0.103
Education Level	0.536***	0.521***	0.258***	0.290***	0.401***
Hukou	0.225*	0.226*	0.142	0.126	0.174
WF		0.154***		0.109**	0.109**
OHP					0.411***
R <sup>2</sup>	0.081	0.099	0.035	0.050	0.220
A-R <sup>2</sup>	0.073	0.087	0.024	0.037	0.207
ΔR <sup>2</sup>		0.018*		0.015	0.139***
F	9.150***	8.130***	3.350**	3.900***	17.300***

In Model 2, a significant positive correlation between perceived meaningful work and work flexibility is observed (r=0.154, p<0.01), providing further support for H1. In Model 4, a significant positive correlation is found between organizational pride and work flexibility (r=0.109, p<0.05), indicating that higher levels of work flexibility are associated with higher levels of organizational pride, thus validating H2a.

The next step involves conducting a stepwise regression analysis for organizational pride. Model 5 is built upon Model 2 by including the mediating variable (organizational pride). It can be observed that after incorporating organizational pride, the regression coefficient of work flexibility on perceived meaningful work decreases from 0.154 (p<0.01) to 0.109 (p<0.05). The ΔR<sup>2</sup> value increases from 0.018 (p<0.1) to 0.139 (p<0.01), indicating a significant improvement in the goodness of fit of the regression model. Additionally, the regression coefficient of organizational pride is positively

significant ( $r=0.411$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), suggesting that organizational pride positively promotes perceived meaningful work and partially mediates the relationship between work flexibility and perceived meaningful work. This further validates H2b and provides preliminary support for H2c.

Furthermore, a Sobel test for mediation effects, assuming a normal distribution, is conducted for organizational pride. The results, as shown in Table 2, indicate that the proportion of mediation effects in the total effect size is 29.15%, and the Z-value of 2.226 is greater than 2 ( $p<0.05$ ), further validating H2c.

**Table 2.** Sobel mediation effect test

Mediation model	error a	error b	Sobel test (standard error)	Mediation effect
WF→OHP→SOW	0.109**	0.411***	0.045**	29.150%

Finally, to address the potential bias from non-normal distribution in the sample data and to estimate the standard errors of the indirect effects in the Sobel test, a bootstrap mediation analysis was conducted on the regression model. The results are presented in Table 3. The direct effect of work flexibility on perceived meaningful work, within the 95% confidence interval, also does not include zero ([0.014, 0.215]), confirming the presence of a direct effect of work flexibility on perceived meaningful work. This further validates Hypothesis 1 and suggests that organizational pride plays a partial mediating role in this relationship.

**Table 3.** Bootstrap mediation effect test

path	Effect size	Standard error	confidence interval
WF→SOW	0.109	0.049	[0.014,0.215]
WF→OHP→SOW	0.045	0.022	[0.001,0.091]

To examine the moderating effect of work pressure, the regulating effect of the working pressure and the mediating effect with regulation are shown in Table 4. In Model 10, the regression coefficient of the interaction term between perceived meaningful work and work pressure ( $r = 0.112$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) is significantly smaller than the regression coefficient of organizational pride. This indicates that work pressure moderates the mediating effect of organizational pride on perceived meaningful work, providing initial support for Hypothesis 3.

**Table 4.** The regulating effect of working pressure and the mediating effect with regulation

variable	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8	Model 9	Model 10
	OHP	OHP	SOW	SOW	SOW
WF	0.116**	0.126***	0.152***	0.172***	0.127**
WP	-0.063	-0.067	0.013	0.006	0.019
WF×WP		-0.054		-0.100*	-0.083
OHP					0.417***
OHP×WP					0.112**
R <sup>2</sup>	0.055	0.058	0.099	0.107	0.236
A-R <sup>2</sup>	0.040	0.040	0.085	0.090	0.217
ΔR <sup>2</sup>		0.003		0.008	0.137***
F	3.57***	3.23***	6.77***	6.29***	12.50***

Further, interactive model plots were generated to illustrate the moderating effect of work pressure, as shown in Figure 2. Under different work stress situations, work flexibility and organizational pride showed a positive correlation, and compared with high work stress scenarios, employees' organizational pride in low work stress situations was more positively affected by increased work flexibility, which further verified the hypothesis 3.

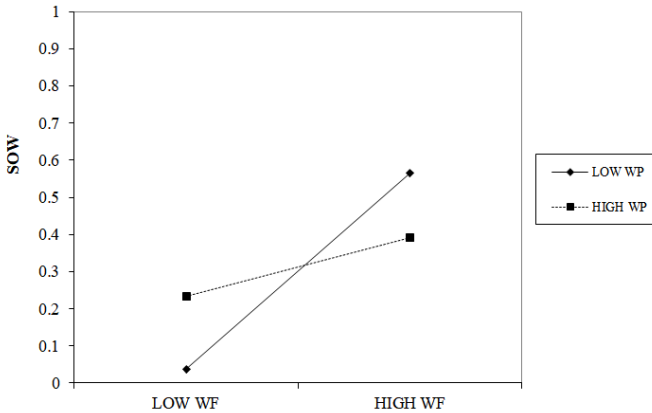


Fig. 2. Regulatory effect plot

## 5 Conclusions

This study, based on data from the China General Social Survey, explores the relationship between work meaningfulness and flexible work among the younger generation employees. It verifies the influence mechanism of flexible work on work meaningfulness and analyzes the mediating role of organizational pride as well as the moderating effect of work pressure. The empirical findings of this study lead to the following three conclusions:

1. Flexible work has a significant positive impact on both work meaningfulness and organizational pride among the younger generation employees. As the level of work flexibility increases, these employees exhibit higher levels of work meaningfulness and organizational pride.

2. Organizational pride serves as a positive mediating factor between work flexibility and work meaningfulness. The higher the level of work flexibility among employees in the new era, the higher their organizational pride, which further promotes a higher level of work meaningfulness.

3. Work pressure moderates the relationship between work flexibility and organizational pride. As work pressure increases, the positive promoting effect of work flexibility on organizational pride diminishes, and the mediating effect of organizational pride between work flexibility and work meaningfulness weakens. When the younger generation employees face a high-pressure work environment, the significant decrease in organizational pride caused by high work flexibility leads to the ineffectiveness of

organizational pride as a mediator between work flexibility and work meaningfulness.

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