Enhancing employees' mental wellbeing

The role of meaningfulness for Generation Z

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The purpose of this research is to find solutions for the decreasing mental wellbeing of Generation Z employees and to scrutinize means for organizations to provide a more humane and meaningful working environment. This research answers the question "How can organizations enhance the mental wellbeing and experienced meaningfulness of Generation Z employees?"

Work is one of the most central activities of life, yet scholars agree that work life is in turmoil and the nature of work has been affected by increasing globalization and technological development. In addition, Generation Z, individuals born between 1997 and 2010, are stepping into work life with several unique attributes and requirements for organizations. Employees' declining mental health and their significance to organizations' performance have led to a globally increased interest in implementing employee mental wellbeing initiatives. Generational differences are controversial, yet affect many aspects in life, including what generations look for in an employer and what makes their work feel meaningful. Even though Generation Z is very heterogenic, they are viewed as the first truly global generation who stereotypically want organizations to provide them with a transparent and open environment, communality, dialogue, and meaningful work.

This thesis concentrates on employees' mental wellbeing and applies a three-dimensional model that regards employees as holistic unities but also captures the complexities and variations of employees' experiences at work. Studies have shown that the experience of meaningfulness has ample influence on a person's life satisfaction and wellbeing at large. Meaningfulness of work is a subjective experience that stems from significance, broader purpose, and self-realization. According to theories specific job characteristics, such as *skill variety, task identity* and *task significance* impact employee wellbeing. In addition, organizations can support employees in dealing with the negative job characteristics by providing necessary resources like knowledge, autonomy, role clarity, opportunities for growth, feedback, and a supportive environment.

This qualitative research utilized primary data that was collected through 15 semi-structured interviews. Individuals from Gen Z and corporate professionals with experience of international business and from different fields were interviewed to gain a comprehensive view of the topic. Based on the results of the empirical research the means for organizations to increase Generation Z employees' mental wellbeing were compiled into a framework under four main themes called care, communicate, contribute, and create culture. While meaningful work and mental wellbeing ought to be available to every employee the framework considers the tendencies and preferences of Generation Z. Furthermore, the suggested means can be applied to all employees, yet the emphasis is on the means and resources that surfaced during the interviews with Generation Z individuals. For example, literature and previous studies stress the significance of autonomy in creating meaningfulness, yet Generation Z reported to find feedback and a caring environment to affect their experience of meaningfulness and mental wellbeing most. There were no previous studies concentrating on means to enhance the mental wellbeing of Generation Z, hence these conclusions present a new point of view to the existing literature. The results are likely to be affected by the current vulnerable stage of life of Generation Z, who might in the beginning stages of their career require more guidelines and nurturing than their more experienced colleagues.

Key words: employee mental wellbeing, Generation Z, meaningful work, meaningfulness, psychological wellbeing, job characteristics

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Tutkimuksen tarkoituksena on löytää keinoja, joilla organisaatiot voivat vaikuttaa Z-sukupolven alati kasvavaan henkiseen pahoinvointiin ja tarkastella kuinka ne voivat osaltaan vaikuttaa myös merkityksellisemmän ja inhimillisemmän työelämän kehittämiseen. Tutkimus vastaa kysymykseen: "Kuinka organisaatiot voivat lisätä Z-sukupolven työntekijöiden kokemaa työn merkityksellisyyttä ja edistää mielen hyvinvointia?"

Työ on yksi ihmisen elämän keskeisimmistä toiminnoista, kuitenkin tutkijat ovat samaa mieltä siitä, että tällä hetkellä työelämä on murroksessa, joka on vaikuttanut myös työn luonteeseen. Esimerkiksi teknologinen kehitys ja globalisaatio sekä uuden sukupolven, Zetojen astuminen työelämään ovat vaikuttaneet organisaatiolle asetettuihin vaatimuksiin. Sukupolvien väliset erot ovat kiisteltyjä, mutta niiden on kuitenkin todettu vaikuttavan esimerkiksi siihen mitä valtaosa sukupolven edustajista kaipaa työnantajaltaan, sekä mikä tekee heidän työstään merkityksellistä. Z-sukupolvea ovat muokanneet useat heidän varhaiset kokemuksensa ja he haluavat yritysten tarjoavan heille avoimen ja yhteisöllisen ympäristön, vastavuoroisen tavan kommunikoida ja merkityksellistä työtä.

Tämä tutkimus keskittyy työntekijöiden mielen hyvinvointiin ja tarkastelee sitä kolmiulotteisen mallin lävitse, jossa työntekijät nähdään kokonaisuuksina, mutta myös työympäristön erityispiirteet ja niiden vaikutukset mielen hyvinvointiin huomioidaan. Työ on yksi tärkeimmistä merkityksellisyyden lähteistä ja merkityksellisyyden kokemuksella on laajat vaikutukset ihmisten hyvinvointiin ja tyytyväisyyteen elämässä. Työn merkityksellisyys on subjektiivinen kokemus, joka kumpuaa työn arvokkuudesta, hyvää tuottavasta päämäärästä ja itsensä toteuttamisesta. JCT-malli selittää työn merkityksellisyyden syntyvän tietyistä työn ominaispiirteistä: työtehtävien vaatimien taitojen moninaisuudesta ja sisällön mielekkyydestä sekä työtehtävien tärkeydestä ja vaikutuksesta kokonaisuuteen. Yritykset voivat lisäksi tukea työntekijöidensä hyvinvointia tarjoamalla tärkeitä voimavaroja, kuten palautetta, mahdollisuuksia kehittyä, kannustavan ympäristön, selkeän työnkuvan ja autonomiaa.

Tutkimus toteutettiin laadullisena tutkimuksena, jossa haastateltiin sekä Z-sukupolven edustajia että kansainvälistä yritysmaailmaa tuntevia asiantuntijoita. Haastatteluiden perusteella esiin nousseet organisaatioiden keinot lisätä Zetojen mielen hyvinvointia koottiin neljäksi pääteemaksi: välitä, kommunikoi, panosta ja luo yrityskulttuuria. Nämä toimivat kattokäsitteinä yksityiskohtaisemmille haastatteluista poimituille tavoille, joilla Zetat kokevat organisaatioiden voivan edistää heidän merkityksellisyytensä kokemusta sekä hyvinvointia. Vaikka mielen hyvinvoinnin ja merkityksellinen työn tulisi olla kaikkien saatavilla, tähän tutkimukseen kootut keinot on valikoitu Z-sukupolven erityispiirteet ja taipumukset huomioiden. Näin ollen mainittuja neljää pääkeinoa voidaan soveltaa kaikkiin työntekijöihin, mutta niiden kokoamisessa on painotettu Z-sukupolven haastatteluissa esille nousseita tarpeita. Esimerkiksi aiemmissa tutkimuksissa autonomian rooli on korostunut merkityksellisyyttä lisäävänä tekijänä, kun taas Zetat painottivat vastauksissaan palautteen saamisen ja välittävän ilmapiirin merkitystä. Koska aiempia tutkimuksia juuri Z- sukupolven mielen hyvinvointia lisäävistä tekijöistä ei ole, tämän tutkimuksen johtopäätökset tarjoavat kirjallisuuteen uuden näkökulman.

Avainsanat: työntekijöiden hyvinvointi, mielen hyvinvointi, työn merkityksellisyys, Z-sukupolvi, merkityksellisyys, työn ominaispiirteet

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1 Introduction

This first chapter introduces the background, aim and structure of the study. It aims to motivate the importance of the subject to the reader and give an overview of the discussed topics. This introductory chapter also presents the focus of the study, introduces the research questions, and provides an insight to what is expected to come up later in the study.

1.1 Background of the study

Employees are usually considered the biggest expense for almost all companies worldwide. Nevertheless, employees are also the most important source for company growth, innovations, and competitive advantage (Harriott & Isson 2016, 256; Zhong et al. 2020; Cvenkel 2020; Kowalski & Loretto 2017). They are the fundament for all company operations and make up the most valuable and unique resource for organizations (Wright et al. 1994, 303–304, 308; Zhong et al. 2020; Cvenkel 2020). Employees with a high level of wellbeing are generally more creative, engaged and of superior performance than those with lower levels of wellbeing, and can influence organizational outcomes like profitability accordingly (Zhong et al. 2020). Consequently, implementing mental wellbeing initiatives is not important only for employees with diagnosed mental health issues but will benefit all employees and the whole organization. Therefore, it is no wonder that the interest in employees' wellbeing has globally increased throughout the last decades (Cvenkel 2020; Kowalski & Loretto 2017).

For most people worldwide, work is the most time consuming and one of the most central activities of life (Mitchell 2018, 10; Albrecht et al. 2021; Weeks & Schaffert 2017, 1045; Dagenais-Desmarais & Savoie 2012) and for many, it stands the source of meaning and satisfaction (Albrecht et al. 2021, 240). On the other hand, work can also be a source of dissatisfaction or stress and currently many are dealing with mental wellbeing problems at the workplace. For example, workplace stress, which has major effects on mental wellbeing, currently accounts for more than 50% of long-term absence. (Mitchell 2018, 11.) In addition, according to WHO (2022) depression, is one of the leading causes of disability. The aggravated situation has led to *good health and wellbeing* to be listed as third on the list of United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations,

sdgs.un.org/goals). In a society that heavily leans on knowledge and innovations, the role of mental wellbeing is emphasized in employees' ability to work and be productive.

Since people spend so much of their time at work, the work often comes to define a part of an individual's sense of self, or one may associate a portion of one's identity with their work (Weeks & Schaffert 2017, 1046). Consequently, the experience of meaningful work has ample influence on a person's life satisfaction and wellbeing at large (Steger & Dik 2009). Moreover, there is ongoing ethical discussion about whether "experiencing meaningful work is a fundamental human need" (Yeoman 2014, 236). Ethicists have proposed that because so much of a person's experienced meaningfulness in life derives from work, there is a moral obligation for organizations to provide meaningful work (Bowie 1998; Yeoman 2014, 236). What is more, if organizations are ethically responsible to provide meaningful work, they must become aware of the varied needs and wants across different generations, to be able to provide and enable meaningful work (Weeks & Schaffert 2017, 1047).

Scholars agree that the work life is in turmoil, as technological development and increasing globalization have both directly and indirectly affected the nature of work and simultaneously the wellbeing and experienced meaningfulness of employees (Mohd Salleh et al. 2020, 124). The uncertainty about work life has increased, expectations have changed, and simultaneously the meaningfulness of work has become ever more valued (Alasoini 2010; Scwabel 2014). In addition, a new generation, namely Generation Z (hereafter Gen Z), is stepping into work life with unique attributes, setting it apart from previous ones (Plochocki 2019; Pataki-Bittó & Kapusy 2021, 151) and placing new requirements for organizations, management, and work life in general (Schwabel 2014; Fratrièová & Kirchmayer 2018; Benítez-Márquez et al. 2022, 2). For example, employers need to consider generational differences in how they define and experience meaningfulness in order to be able to design jobs, recruitments and development possibilities in a suitable way (Weeks & Schaffert, 2017, 1059).

Gen Z individuals, sometimes also referred to as "Gen Zers" or "post-Millennials" (Benítez-Márquez et al. 2022, 2; Magano et al. 2020) have been born during mid-nineties to early-tens, with a lot of variation regarding the exact birth years, some stating the birth rate to be 1995–2009 (mcCrindle 2014, 66), some reporting years 1995–2010 (Bencsik et al. 2016; Seemiller & Grace, 2016; Koulopoulos & Keldsen 2016) and still others

recounting simply "after 1997" (Bresman & Rao 2017). This thesis defines Gen Zers as individuals who have been born into "digitime", between years 1997–2010 (Deloitte, 2019; Loria & Lee, 2018), and who are in no way a homogenous group, yet differ from previous generations in many ways. (Tienari & Piekkari 2011, 100; Fratrièová & Kirchmayer 2018; 29). They are said to have more ethical consumption habits and "greater freedom of expression and greater openness to understanding different kinds of people" (Francis & Hoefel 2018, 2). In addition, Gen Z has only ever lived in a highly globalized world, which has shaped their personality and vision of the world (Magano et al. 2020). The earliest studies on Gen Z have to a large extent been conducted only in the United States, which has led to a biased perception of the generation (Scholz 2019). Several studies on intragenerational differences have been conducted, revealing differences in preferences, visions and features of Gen Zers varying by regions. What can be agreed on, however, is that their introduction to the workforce has had similar challenges worldwide. And even though, not many studies have managed to grasp the issue yet, Covid-19 and its by-products have disturbed the Gen Zers' adaptation to the labour market. (Benítez-Márquez et al. 2022, 2–3.)

According to a recent study by Twenge et al. (2019) using data from the National Survey on Drug Use and Health, the mental health tendencies of Gen Z, displays increase in depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, and psychological distress. In fact, the data suggests that the problems are getting worse (Plochocki 2019, Twenge et al. 2019). Even though, Gen Zers are described as highly ambitious and self-confident (Pataki-Bittó & Kapusy 2021, 153), a key defining characteristic of the generation is their declining mental wellbeing (Twenge et al. 2019). In Finland, where this research is conducted, the mental wellbeing of young adults has been decreasing for over 15 years and simultaneously the effectiveness and know-how requirements have grown (Mauno et al. 2019, 273; Minkkinen et al. 2019, 257). What is more, studies have shown that the younger the generation, the weaker their recovery from work and the more common their mental strain (TTL 2019). Lately, partly due to Covid-19, increasingly many knowledge workers have changed to remote working, which may add additional strain to mental health. These statistics further highlight the need to better understand and care for the mental wellbeing of Gen Z employees (TTL 2021).

Employees' experience of meaningfulness at work and mental wellbeing go hand in hand and for many one does not exist without the other. Even though the concepts are separate,

they endorse each other and in some instances are difficult to separate from one another. What is more, the concepts of employee motivation, engagement, wellbeing, and meaningful work frequently appear together in research. To a large extent, they are affected by the same factors and each other, and therefore it is often difficult to discuss one without considering the others. This study acknowledges the ample positive affects meaningful work has on employee motivation and engagement but chooses to focus on and address employee mental wellbeing. Many of the studies used in the literature review have focused on work engagement (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004; Steger et al. 2012; Albrecht 2013; Demirtas et al. 2017; Gauche et al. 2017 Mohd Salleh et al. 2020) but have used the same methods or theories that are often utilized in the studying of meaningful work and employee wellbeing. In addition, a study by Albrecht et al. (2021, 5) indicates that job resources: supervisor support, job variety, autonomy, development opportunities and feedback simultaneously affect meaningful work and employee engagement and although the study does not emphasize it, they have a direct effect on wellbeing, too.

1.2   Aim and structure of the study

Although a lot of research has been conducted around wellbeing, very little research has focused on ways to reliably enhance wellbeing. Still fewer studies have been conducted on employee wellbeing in the workplace or about Gen Z in the workplace, which further emphasizes the need for this study. (Benítez-Márquez et al. 2022, 2– 3; Page & Vella-Brodrick 2009, 453.) The aim is to find means for organizations to enhance the mental wellbeing and experienced meaningfulness of Gen Z employees. Figure 1 presents the focus of this research, at the intersection of the three ellipses. The right side accentuates the focus on specifically Gen Z mental wellbeing and the left one visualizes that this study is looking for means for organizations to enhance it. The oval in the middle links these two, for meaningfulness of work supports employees' mental wellbeing and organizations can utilize it to increase wellbeing.
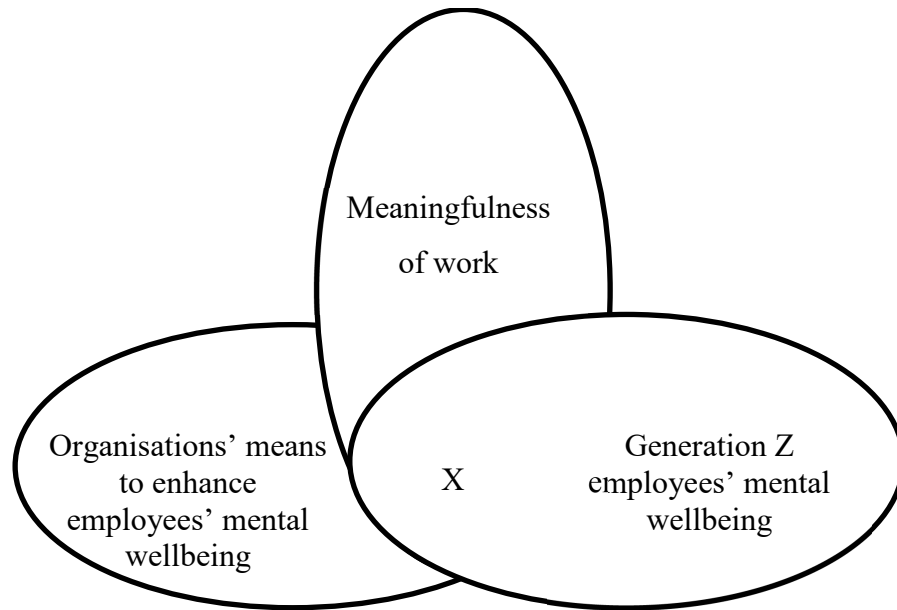
Figure 1   Research focus

Through examining this topic, this thesis further aspires to expand awareness about the currently very unsustainable situation of employee mental wellbeing and find means for organizations to make a change for better and provide a more humane and meaningful working environment. Enhancing employees' mental wellbeing is not only the responsibility of the individual employees but organizations' too and this thesis intends to render the matter more concrete and easily accessible. To thoroughly examine this topic, this thesis will use qualitative research methods to further investigate the nature of meaningful work in and its effects on employees' mental wellbeing, with the focus on Gen Z employees.

This study answers the following questions:

- How can organizations enhance the mental wellbeing and experienced meaningfulness of work among Gen Z employees?

It can further be divided into three sub-questions:

- What is the connection between meaningful work and employees' mental wellbeing?

- What are the conditions of current work life?

- What makes work meaningful for Gen Z employees?

This thesis is structured as follows. Chapters two and three compose a literature review, presenting an overview of the topic, most relevant models and defining the key concepts: *employee mental wellbeing, generation Z* and *meaningful work*. At the end of the literature review there will be a framework based on the theories and what literature names as means for organizations to enhance mental wellbeing and experienced meaningfulness. Chapter four will introduce the methods used in this study and discuss the data collection and analysis as well as the trustworthiness and ethical considerations of this study. Next, the findings are presented in chapter five with the help of the sub-research questions. After going over the empirical study, the conclusions are presented in chapter six before the last chapter that consists of the summary.

2 Mental wellbeing of Generation Z employees

This chapter introduces Gen Z, their special characteristics, and the concept of employee mental wellbeing. The first subchapter is focused on defining Gen Z and the significance of understanding the generational stereotypes and reasons behind them. The remainder of this chapter discusses employee mental wellbeing through different viewpoints and presents the three-dimensional model that is utilized here to thoroughly understand mental wellbeing of employees.

2.1 Defining Generation Z

Individuals who belong to a same generation often have much more in common than their birth years. However, the study of generational differences has received plenty of critique, especially due to disagreements on the boundaries of the generational cohorts and the accurate measurements. (Weeks & Schaffert 2017, 1058, see: Constanza & Finklestein 2015; Twenge 2010.) What is more, studies have shown that at least 25 % of people do not identify with any generational cohort (Lyons & Schweitzer 2017) and therefore it seems more important to scrutinize how the stereotypes impact behaviour in the workplace and how perceptions are formed across generations (Weeks & Schaffert 2017, 1058).

Currently five different generations are simultaneously working side by side, challenging organizations and increasing the complexity of work life (Fratrièová & Kirchmayer 2018; see Knight 2014). There is a need to find cohesion and cooperation between generations to ensure an efficient workflow and steer clear of intergenerational biases, stereotypes and possible conflicts derived from misperceptions (Benítez-Márquez et al. 2022, 3). Regarding generations, substantially more important than the birth years are the moulding factors and generational attributes that stem from major life events during critical developmental stages, influencing the formation of values and beliefs, expectations and even personality. (Fratrièová & Kirchmayer 2018, 31; see Macky et al. 2008; Twenge & Campbell, 2008; Scholz 2019, 4–6.) In retrospect, Gen Z has not only been shaped by, for example, social media and the overflow of knowledge, but also recession, rocketing house prices, terrorism, and an almost irreversible climate crisis (Fratrièová & Kirchmayer 2018; Benítez-Márquez et al. 2022, 3). What is more, like all generations, Gen Z too, is a very heterogenic group of people. While each individual is unique, it can

be stated that most of Gen Z have a few integrative factors and attributes. For example, because of their age they are currently newish to work life, and most are fluent with technology because of the constant presence of internet in their lives.

2.1.1 Characteristics of Generation Z

Several studies examining the characteristics of Gen Z, their values (Maloni et al. 2019; Cresnar and Nedelko 2020), their stance toward organizations (Barhate & Dirani 2021) and the way they adapt to a workplace (Chillakuri 2020) have emerged recently. Researchers have also investigated how Gen Z stereotypically differs from other generations (Hernaus & Poloski Vokic 2014; Klopotan et al. 2020; Mahmoud et al. 2021). As Gen Zers have grown amidst of technology they are often referred to as the "internet generation" or "digital natives", which clearly emphasizes the fact that technology has been present in their lives early on (Fratrièová, & Kirchmayer 2018, 29; Tienari & Piekkari 2011, 100). They are the first truly global generation, benefitting from for example, the free mobility and the same currency within the EU and being more informed than ever, yet they also share a greater complexity and more pressures than young people ever have before (Scholz & Rennig 2019).

It is claimed that Gen Z are eager for things to happen fast and Mark Bauerlein, a professor of English language, refers to them as a hyper networked youngsters who are unknowing of culture, politics and economy (Tienari & Piekkari 2011, 98). According to him they have lost the sense of history and context and even calls them ignorant and indifferent. On the contrary, Don Tapascott views Gen Zers as innovators who appreciate openness and who look for new ways to work, learn and function together. Moreover, Gen Zers are said to be entrepreneurial and not satisfied with mouldy old ways just because "it used to be that way". (Tienari & Piekkari 2011, 100; Magano et al. 2020.) Therefore, an organization's stiffness and strictness are a huge risk and Gen Zers are likely to vote with their feet, both as employees as well as consumers. It can be said that for Gen Z, time and place have lost their traditional meaning, and they are usually advocates for transparency, staying curious and expanding their skills. (Benítez-Márquez et al. 2022, 2–3.)

According to Harris (2016) "Gen Z are likely to be worse off than their parents — and they know it." Generational differences affect many aspects in life, including what the generation looks for in an employer, how they want to be managed and what makes their work feel meaningful (Harris, 2016). If people from different generations assume the

other generations are "only working for money" they are prone to treating each other differently compared to assuming that everyone is pursuing meaningfulness in their jobs (Weeks & Schaffert 2017, 1057).

2.1.2 Generation Z in the workplace

Gen Z will soon make up over 20% of the workforce and by the retirement of older generations, a huge shift in work life, especially in the culture and environment, is expected (Deloitte 2017). Gen Z with their expectations affect the way organizations need to adjust, and they are said to have high expectations about their work and future careers (Snieska et al. 2020; Barhate & Dirani 2021) even though they have the presumption that organizations do not really care about their employees (Scholz 2019, 6). According to some studies, Gen Z are most motivated by opportunities for advancement, money, a good team, and meaningful work (Schwabel 2014; Benítez-Márquez et al. 2022, 3, see: PR Newswire 2014; Csiszárik-Kocsír & Garia-Fodor 2018).

Stereotypically speaking Gen Z do not put up with hierarchies but instead route for equal and transparent organizations. They require a sense of communality as well as the possibility to be inspired and creative. It is common for them to want organizations to look for ways of getting rid of unnecessary and futile "stalking" kind of management and instead provide autonomy and feedback as well as support diversity and the manifold of different thoughts. (Schmidt & Uecker 2020; Tienari & Piekkari 2011, 77–78, 100.) Hence, managing of Gen Z requires renewal of the old, strict, and hierarchical "Taylorism ways". In addition, managing too much is likely to get a countereffect from Gen Z as their interests are likely to change elsewhere because over managing kills their passion and curiosity. (Tienari & Piekkari 2011, 104.) Many Gen Z employees desire managers that are proactive in making a change in society (Schmidt & Uecker 2020, 171).

Having a high motivation to expand their skills and a low tolerance for something they do not like, Gen Zers are not likely to commit to an employer more than for a while as they know that the employer won't be committed to them either (Benítez-Márquez et al. 2022, 3). However, to get them engaged and committed, instead of occasionally patting them on the head or being hard on the discipline, organizations need to enable Gen Zers creativity, communality, good dialogue, and meaningful work (Tienari & Piekkari 2011, 77–78,104; Weeks & Schaffert 2017, 1047).

In an international survey executed during an international human resource management course in year 2010, the students were asked to answer a question "How do you want to be managed?". The students answered "frames", "independence", "feedback", and "confidentiality" most frequently (Tienari & Piekkari 2011, 29). As can be seen from the overview of Gen Z attributes listed in figure 2, the answers are aligned with other existing literature and especially feedback and independence/ autonomy are repeated by many scholars.

Gen Z are as employees
- Moulded by social media & global crises
- Digital natives
- Networked
- Entrepreneurial
- New to work life

Gen Z appreciate in an employer
- Openness
- Transparency
- Equality
- Communality
- New ways to work

Gen Z want from work
- Opportunities to learn and advance
- A good team & dialogue
- Meaningfulness
- Money
- Autonomy
- Feedback
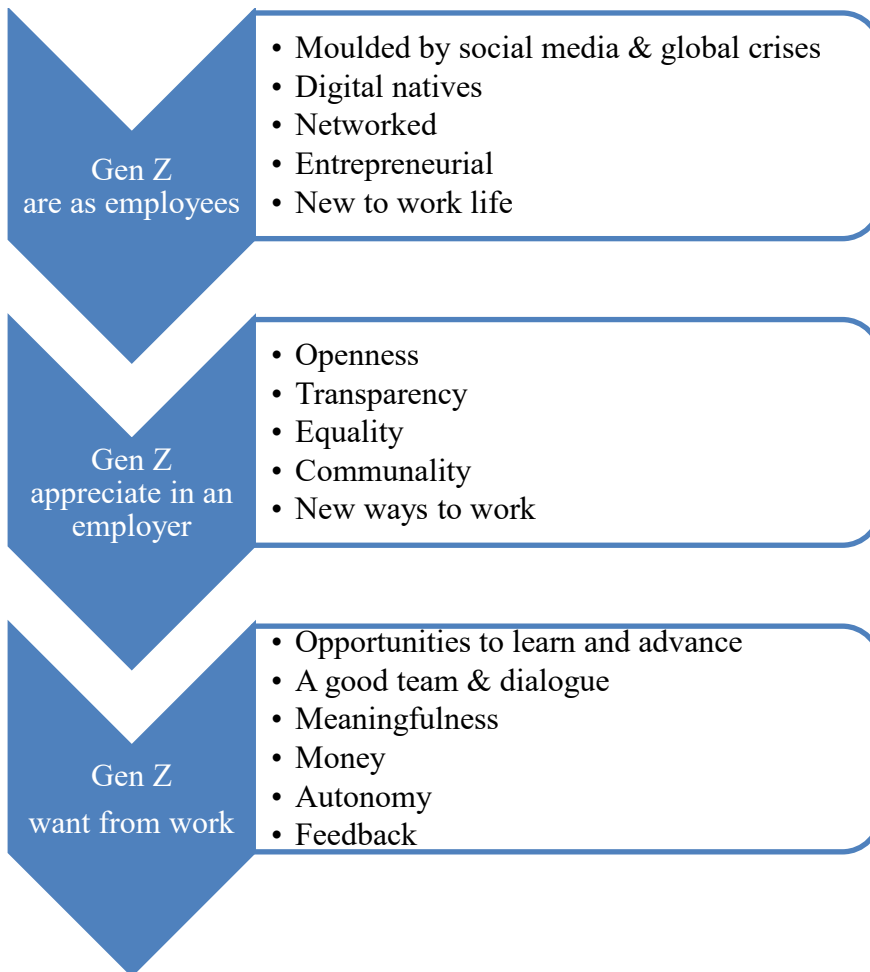
Figure 2   An overview of Generation Z

It is of importance to consider the heterogeneity of Gen Z and that the attributes presented in figure 2 provide only an overview of the most typical characteristics. In the figure are assembled descriptions of how Gen Z are stereotypically as employees, what Gen Z are likely to appreciate in an employer and what they want from their work. Having viewed Gen Zers as a generation and as employees, the next chapter will address how organizations can take care of them. For organizations to manage the mental wellbeing

of their employees it is crucial to define what it is and what are the available means for organizations to enhance it.

2.2   Defining employee mental wellbeing

The concept of employee wellbeing is broad and has been defined by researchers in many ways (Arnold 2017). It is widely agreed that employee wellbeing is a mixture of three dimensions: physical, social, and mental. Some authors even include further aspects of wellbeing, such as financial, economic, or emotional. (TTL työhyvinvointi 2019; Orsila et al. 2011, 342; Loon et al. 2019.) However, this thesis concentrates solely on one of the dimensions: employee *mental* wellbeing, which scholars agree to be a complex construct (Rose et al. 2017), and which, unlike mental health, is something that can be assessed at the population level (de Cates et al. 2015). A commonly used definition, by WHO, describes mental wellbeing as individual's ability to work productively, build relationships, contribute to their community, and develop their potential. This thesis goes deeper into the construct of employee mental wellbeing and applies a model (figure 3) with three core components: *subjective wellbeing, psychological wellbeing,* and *work wellbeing*. Hence, employee mental wellbeing is considered to be a subjective evaluation of an individual's psychological wellbeing that is affected by work specific aspects, like the organization and the work itself.

Figure 3   Employee mental wellbeing, modified from Page & Vella-Brodrick (2009, 451)

By utilizing this model, visible in figure 3, it is possible to scrutinize the nature and affecting factors more profoundly. The employee mental wellbeing model regards

employees as holistic unities but also captures the complexities and variations of employees' affective and cognitive experiences at work 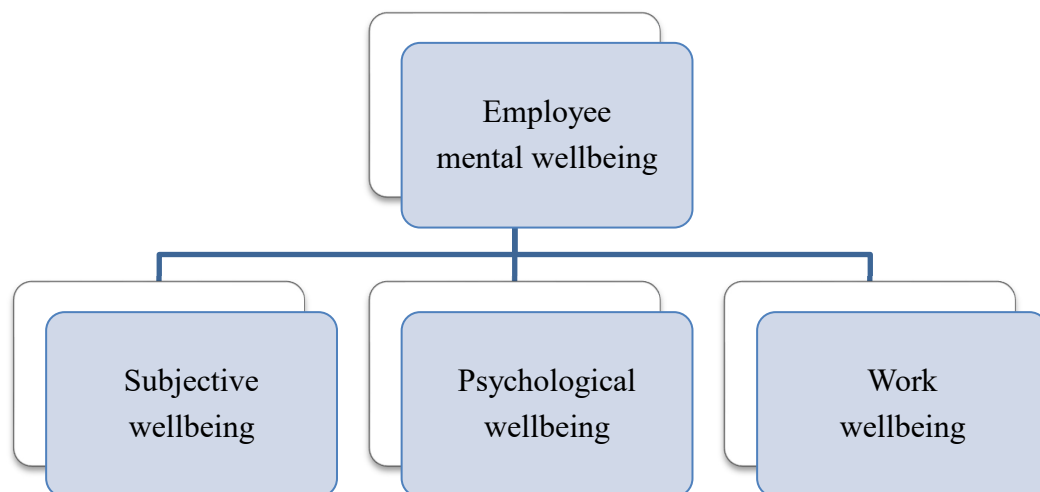(Zheng et al. 2015, 624). The model encompasses both work and non-work-related psychological experiences and mental health status (Page & Vella-Brodrick 2009, 452). Figure 3 visualizes the three core components of employee mental wellbeing: subjective wellbeing, psychological wellbeing, and work wellbeing. The two first of the model's main components, belong to a division suggested by Ryan and Deci (2001). Through their integrative review, they distinguish between only two conceptualizations of wellbeing: Firstly, subjective wellbeing, also considered the hedonic perspective, is an evaluation of wellbeing in terms of life satisfaction and happiness. Secondly, psychological wellbeing, also considered the eudaimonic perspective, takes into consideration a person's self-acceptance, personal growth, and purpose in life. (Mohd Salleh et al. 2020; Inceoglu et al. 2018; Zheng et al. 2015; Kelloway & Cooper 2021; Arnold et al. 2007.)

Despite their verified distinctiveness, psychological wellbeing and subjective wellbeing are somewhat overlapping. They share a psychological approach as their fundamental mechanism and scholars agree that they should both be considered to capture the multidimensional character of mental wellbeing. (Mohd Salleh et al. 2020, 125.) The third aspect, work wellbeing, also called as workplace wellbeing, is a necessary addition when regarding the wellbeing of employees. Notably at least Page and Vella-Brodrick (2009, 454) advocate for work context specific measures to capture the subtleties of employees' experiences at work. To be able to dig deeper into the means to enhance Gen Z employee mental wellbeing, the three core components are further discussed in this chapter.

2.2.1 Psychological wellbeing

Psychological wellbeing, like employee wellbeing, has been defined in multiple ways and is considered a multi-dimensional construct (Loon et al 2019; Grant et al. 2007). The stream of research considering psychological wellbeing started its first empirical aspirations in the 1980s stemming from earlier theories in developmental psychology focused on meaningful life and self-realization (Keyes et al. 2002). Some have conceptualized psychological wellbeing to be characterized by the presence of positive affect and absence of negative affect (Loon et al. 2019; see Panaccio & Vandenberghe) and others describe it as "a general feeling of happiness" (Loon et al. 2019; see Schmutte & Ryff). Psychological wellbeing, however, seems to be more complicated than that.

According to Ryff (1995, 103) psychological wellbeing means more than being free of mental problems and distress. For a person to be well psychologically, they need to "possess positive self-regard, mastery, autonomy, positive relationships with other people, a sense of purposefulness and meaning in life, and feelings of continued growth and development". The broadly accepted model of psychological wellbeing by Ryff (1995) includes six core dimensions that are relevant for the presence of psychological wellbeing. The dimensions are visible in figure 4 and they are labelled as: *autonomy, purpose in life, personal growth, positive relations, environmental mastery* and *self-acceptance.*

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                    │  Psychological  │
                    │    wellbeing    │
                    └─────────────────┘
```

| Self Acceptance | Environmental Mastery | Positive Relations | Personal Growth | Purpose in Life | Autonomy |
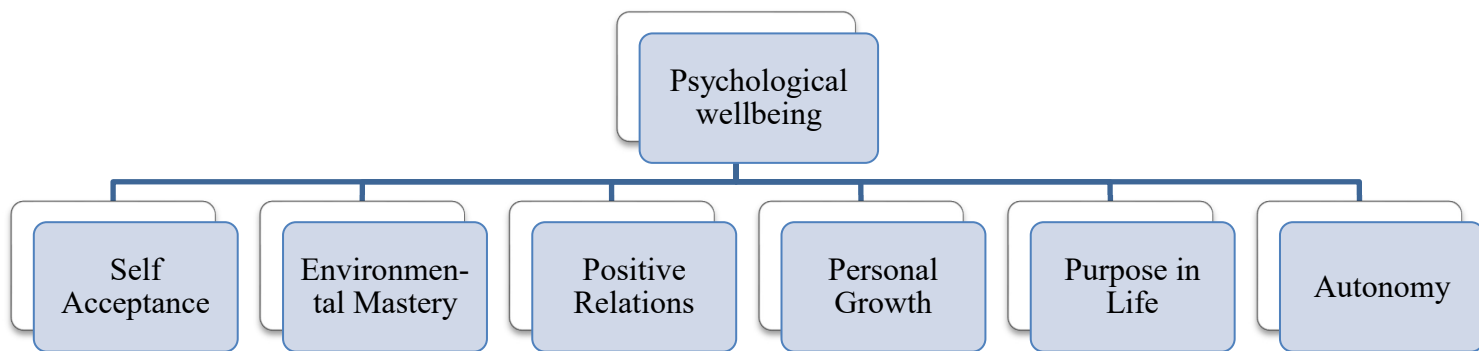
Figure 4   Psychological Wellbeing, after a model by Ryff & Keyes (1995)

Each of the dimensions of the psychological wellbeing model (figure 4) adduces a different challenge an individual encounters in one's endeavours to function positively (Keyes et al. 2002; Ryff & Keyes, 1995, 720) *Self-acceptance* is the most recurrent criterion of wellbeing and a central feature of optimal functioning, maturity, and mental health (Ryff & Keyes 1995, 721). It refers to individuals' efforts to "feel good about themselves even while aware of their own limitations" (Keyes et al. 2002). *Environmental mastery*, on the other hand, describes how people also seek to adjust their environment in attempts to meet their personal desires and needs, as well as their ability to create environments that are suitable for their conditions. *Positive relations with others*, is used to refer to the need of maintaining trusting interpersonal relationships. Many theories underline the importance of warm relations. The ability to love is deemed a central component of mental health. Literature emphasizes self-determination to be a

necessary quality of a fully functioning person. *Autonomy* portrays the sense of personal authority and self-determination that are important for an individual to sustain their individuality. (Ryff & Keyes 1995, 722–725.) Zheng et al. (2015) state that especially Western cultures underline the significance of autonomy and environmental mastery in wellbeing, whereas eastern cultures place more emphasis on social values and harmony. Another dimension, *personal growth* is said to be a central matter to an individual's wellbeing, and it enables them to seize their capacity and develop one's potential. Lastly, *purpose in life* refers to the vital aspiration to find meaning in life as well as a sense of directness and intentionality. (Keyes et al. 2002; Ryff & Keyes 1995, 722–725.)

Psychological wellbeing approach considers wellbeing to be the by-product of personal fulfilment, self-actualization (Maslow 1968) and self-determination (Ryan & Deci 2001). According to Allan et al. (2016) Self-Determination Theory explains the obtaining of psychological wellbeing. The Self-Determination Theory is a macro theory of human motivation which explains people to be driven by three basic needs: autonomy, relatedness, and competence. The theory explains that, for example, an employee's satisfaction of the needs for competence, relatedness and autonomy will result in employee's increased intrinsic motivation and the experience of work as meaningful. (Allan et al. 2016.)

2.2.2 Subjective wellbeing

Literature suggests that the research of subjective wellbeing started in the 1950s as part of the scientific movement looking to quantify life quality (Keyes et al 2002). Subjective wellbeing refers to an individual's overall assessment of their quality of life on the grounds of their own standards (Zhen et al. 2015). It consists of affective (emotional experience) and cognitive (life satisfaction) components of wellbeing. The affective component can further be divided into positive affect (happiness, serenity) and negative affect (stress, anxiety) (Page and Vella-Brodrick 2009; Loon et al. 2019). According to the book "Metrics of Subjective Wellbeing" by Brulé & Maggino (2017, 4) the affective component refers to the positive or negative emotions experienced by an individual and is related to their present situation.

The cognitive component on the other hand, refers to an individual's life satisfaction, or in the case of context-specific wellbeing: job satisfaction (Arnold et al. 2007; see: Grebner et al. 2005; Warr 1999) and can be evaluated through five aspects (Page and Vella-

Brodrick 2009; Loon et al. 2019; Brulé & Maggino 2017, 4). Brulé and Maggino (2017, 4) report that *"individuals evaluate their lives through the satisfaction of five main aspects and the self-perceived discrepancies between what one has and what one wants: (1) basic needs and wants, (2) what one was accustomed to having earlier in life, (3) what one expects to have later in life, (4) what others in society have, and (5) what one deserves."* Figure 5, below, visualizes the affective and cognitive component as a part of subjective wellbeing concurrently with psychological wellbeing, its components as well as the indicators, Keyes et al. (2002) suggest they have in common: self-acceptance and environmental mastery.
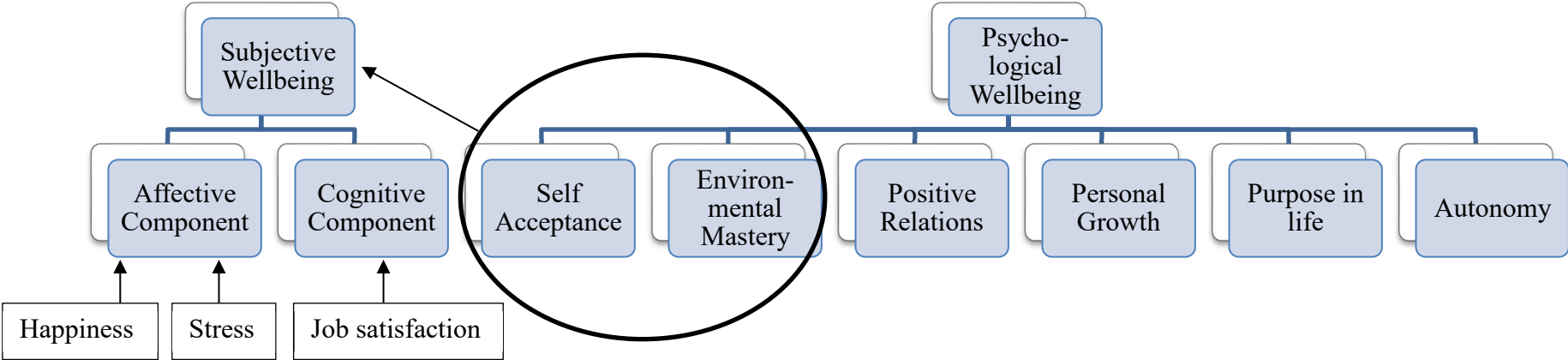
Figure 5   Overlapping qualities of the mental wellbeing model

According to Page & Vella-Brodrcik (2009, 443) psychological and subjective wellbeing ought to be considered the core components of employee mental wellbeing and even tough they are separate concepts they seem to have at least these two overlapping qualities. They are connected by self-acceptance, which is central to functioning and self-actualization and environmental mastery which indicates to a person's ability to advance in the world. Both are denned as characteristics of mental health and relating to a person's level of maturity. (Ryff & Keyes 1995, 721.) According to Keyes et al. (2002, 1008) "these research streams (of subjective and psychological wellbeing) are conceptually related but empirically distinct and that combinations of them relate differentially to sociodemographics and personality." They affirm that the threefold structure of subjective wellbeing including satisfaction, positive affect and negative affect has been confirmed by multiple studies.

2.2.3 Work wellbeing

As was mentioned in the beginning, most people spend at least half of their time at work, which highly accentuates the significance of work as a life domain distinct from for example, leisure time and family (Page & Vella-Brodrick 2009, 443). Changes in working conditions, such as jobs being more online and the influx of information technology, have affected both time and place as well as employees experienced wellbeing and meaningfulness (Mills 2007). This continuous change and dynamic business landscape, not to mention, global workplaces, with volatile and complex working environments where employees are required to have diverse skills and capabilities, highlight the importance of sustaining and enhancing employee wellbeing (Cvenkel 2020; Kowalski & Loretto 2017; Mohd Salleh et al. 2020, 124). Furthermore, for companies to increase their performance, they need to first focus on the wellbeing of their employees. Studies suggest that the annual costs of insufficient employee wellbeing far surpass the costs that arise from properly addressing risks and enhancing employees' wellbeing at work (Cooper et al. 1996; EU-OSHA 2004; Bond et al. 2006). By neglecting the wellbeing of employees, the organization weakens in solidarity and the increasing pressures of work life and society expose employees to work-related illnesses, exhaustion and even burn out (Guest 2017; Pyöriä 2012).

Mental wellbeing at work is one of organizations' most troubling issues, as the statistics show the alarming scope of the problem. For example, in the United States the annual

costs associated with depression lie between $30 and $44 billion. What is more, approximately 200 million workdays are lost each year. With these circumstances in mind, many authors have tried to define and conceptualize employees' mental wellbeing at work, yet no consensus around a conceptual framework specifically to well-being at work is achieved. Many of the previous studies have been focused on identifying organizational characteristics that lead to employee overall mental wellbeing. (Dagenais-Desmarais & Savoie 2012.) However, this chapter considers the specific variables and characteristic of the workplace and utilizes the five dimensions (table 1) discovered by Dagenais-Desmarais and Savoie (2012, 670).

Table 1   Wellbeing at work, by Dagenais-Desmarais & Savoie (2012)

Dimension	Definition
Interpersonal fit at work	Perception of experiencing positive relationships within the context of work.
Thriving at work	Perception of accomplishing an interesting and significant job that feels fulfilling.
Feeling of competency at work	Perception of possessing the necessary aptitudes to be efficient and master one's job.
Perceived recognition at work	Perception of being appreciated for both one's work and personal identity.
Desire for involvement at work	Will to involve oneself and be involved in the organization and contribute to its success.

The dimensions (table 1) are called: Interpersonal fit at work, thriving at work, feeling of competency at work, desire for involvement at work, and perceived recognition at work. They can further be divided into categories of individual and social. The first three dimensions reflex the individual side, as they are about a person's sense of happiness at work that is obtained through individual's own activities or achievements. Whereas the last two dimensions require a degree of interaction to obtain the sense of happiness and thus, fall under the social category. (Dagenais-Desmarais & Savoie 2012, 671.) There is no consensus on the concept of work wellbeing and for example, Lomas (2019) argues work-related wellbeing to consist of only two key elements: job satisfaction and

engagement, prompting that an employee who is satisfied and engaged with their work can be reckoned to experience work-related wellbeing.

Most experts highlight mental health's importance and name it a key focus area to be addressed by organizations to improve employees' work wellbeing (Mohd Salleh et al. 2020, 124; see Lee, 2019; O'Donovan & Hayne, 2018; Pfeffer, 2018). With respect to that, employees' mental health has visibly declined as last year accounted for the first time, mental health issues were the number one reason in Finland to receive disability pension. 44% of Finnish workers fear they are over exhausting themselves at work, and the uncertainty of, for example, an academic degree no longer warranting a career, has made life ever more straining. (Kauppalehti 2022.) Consequently, employees' mental wellbeing at work and individuals' ability to cope with work have become objects of increasing interest and development in organizations (Mills 2007).

Organizations' have the most impact on their employees' wellbeing particularly at work and they can enhance it by for example considering the five dimensions and by other means that are later discussed in this thesis. In addition, studies suggest meaningful work to be a fundamental component of wellbeing and to influence some of the most important organizational outcomes like performance, absenteeism, and turnover as well as personal outcomes such as internal work motivation, occupational identification and job satisfaction (Albrecht et al. 2021; Rosso et al. 2010; Hackman & Oldham 1975). Studies have detected that, especially for a Western person, work is the most pivotal source for meaningfulness and therefore the experience of meaningful work has ample influence on a person's life satisfaction and wellbeing at large (Steger & Dik 2009; Martela & Pessi 2018). Hence, the role of meaningful work and the means to enhance it are examined in the next chapter.

3   The role of meaningful work

This chapter provides a deeper look into the nature of meaningful work and how it emerges. The first subchapters focus on defining meaningfulness and why experiencing it is important to wellbeing. The latter subchapters introduce models that are beneficial in addressing the job characteristics and resources that are necessary for enhancing employees' experienced meaningfulness. The aim of the last subchapter is to form a framework to aid organizations in finding means to enhance Gen Z employees' mental wellbeing.

3.1   Defining meaningful work

Experienced meaningfulness is of great importance to a person's wellbeing both at global (life) and domain (career) level (Steger & Dik 2009). Studies have shown that employees are willing to get paid 32% less, to be able to do work that feels meaningful (Hun & Hirsch 2017). Moreover, Martela and Pessi (2018) state that people are "hardwired to seek meaning" and lack of it causes psychological deprivation that can manifest as, for example, depression. Given its importance to employees' mental wellbeing and organizational outcomes, what is meaningfulness of work and how can it be enhanced?

According to a pioneer theory from Hackman and Oldham (1975, 161), experienced meaningfulness of work is defined as *"The degree to which the employee experiences the job as one which is generally meaningful, valuable, and worthwhile"*. To contradict this relatively simple definition, a fresh article by Martela and Pessi (2018) presents an accurate description of the nature and complexity of meaningful work, as it introduces 36 different views and definitions of meaningful work, all of which have their differences, yet also overlapping qualities and similarities (appendix 1). Based on these different definitions, Martela and Pessi (2018) summarise meaningful work to be an individual's experience of the worth, importance, meaning, sense and effectiveness of one's work. It is a subjective experience where an individual feels like their work contributes to greater good, is significant in itself and leads to personal growth (Steger et al 2012).

Defining meaningful work is important as the lack of consensus in regards of its nature, makes it difficult to distinguish from the neighbouring concepts, such as calling, workplace spirituality and self-transcendence, and may lead to accidents like merging or mixing meaningful work with its outcomes or antecedents (Martela and Pessi 2018; Rosso

et al. 2010). On top of that, caution must be used with applying the words meaning, meaningful and meaningfulness correctly: while making money can be a common *meaning* for people to work, in order for the work to be *meaningful*, a deeper "more important" aspect than money must be present (Sparks & Schenk, 2001, 858).

3.1.1 The concepts of meaning, meaningfulness and meaningful work

Pratt and Ashforth (2003) define *meaning* to be the outcome of an individual having made sense of the role their work plays or having interpreted what their work means in the context of their life. For example, an employee might see the meaning of their work as a paycheck, a higher calling or maybe just as something to occupy themselves with. In addition, in the context of meaningfulness of work, the word "meaning" usually implies to a positive meaning, because the research is more focused on what employees find meaningful or how they find positive meaning in their work. (Rosso et al. 2010.) In this thesis, too, the term "meaning" refers to a positive meaning.

Martela and Pessi (2018) report meaning to be descriptive and to talk about the specific meaning an individual has attached to work, whereas *meaningfulness* is evaluative and hence "*an evaluation of one's work based on how well it fulfils certain values or characteristics*". They underline that meaningfulness of work is a subjective experience or an evaluation and not some sort of objective characteristic of work itself. According to Rosso et al. (2010) meaningfulness, indicates the extent of significance the work holds for an employee. They agree with Martela and Pessi that it is very individual and a subjective experience, meaning that the same work may be experienced completely differently depending on the individual. Like the term meaning, the construct of meaningfulness, too, has a positive valence and hence "meaningful work" stands for work that an employee experiences as particularly significant. (Rosso et al. 2010.)

According to the Oxford handbook of meaningful work (Bailey et al. 2019, 101) psychological wellbeing and meaningful work share three components that are "sense of self", "the work itself" and "the workplace". These components, visible below in figure 6, are aligned with the concept of eudaimonic (psychological) wellbeing, which was explained in detail in chapter 2.3.1. The first component of the construct of meaningful work, *sense of self,* refers to identity, agency, and purpose. It represents an individual's sense of "who am I", what is their purpose in life, how much autonomy and personal control they have, how they handle adversity and how they strive to achieve their purpose.

This idea of bringing one's "whole authentic self" to the workplace requires critical reflection on believes, values and preferences. The same authentic self is also central to meaningful work. (Bailey et al. 2019, 103.)

Sense of Self

The Work Itself   The Workplace
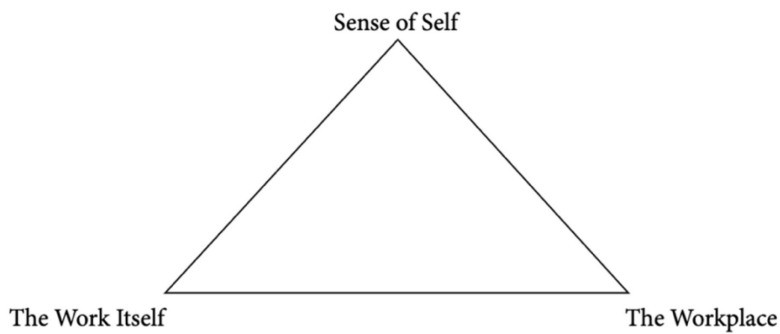
Figure 6   Construct of meaningful work, by Bailey et al. (2019, 101)

The work itself refers to "how we fulfil our life purpose" because the way we work, and what we bring of ourselves to the work, ultimately gives meaning to the work. Chalofsky (2010, 74) argues that "there is nothing like the feeling of good work, especially if the work is meaningful". The work itself is a component of meaningful work and addresses a developmental aspect of wellbeing: how the tasks fit with the self and the individual's competencies, and the continual learning leading to mastery. (Bailey et al. 2019, 104; Chalofsky & Cavallaro 2013, 335.) Chalofsky and Cavallaro (2013, 337) state that "*the workplace* is essential to the experience of meaningful work and attainment of eudaimonic (psychological) wellbeing". They address that the two key aspects of meaningfulness that can be generated in a workplace and that also create the experience of eudaimonia are values and development. An employee may contribute to greater good when they do work aligned with their values and societal needs. The more a workplace allows for employees' agency, the more they can be in touch with and live according to their values. Furthermore, a workplace's culture of development increases the employees' experience of meaningfulness (Bailey et al. 2019, 109.) and consequently the next chapter examines the nature of meaningful work in more detail.

3.1.2 The nature of meaningful work

A deeper understanding of meaningful work, its dimensions and features may assist organizations in recognizing and utilizing ways to enhance meaningfulness better. Hence,

it is beneficial to look at it from different perspectives. In their research about how and why people find their work meaningful, Bailey and Madden (2016) name five features of meaningful work that help uncover the intangible nature of meaningfulness. Simultaneously Martela and Pessi (2018) name three dimensions which should be present in order to capture the construct of meaningful work (figure 7). Bailey and Madden with their five features as well as Martela and Pessi with the dimensions are some of the leading authors in the subject of meaningfulness and are hence referred to frequently. Moreover, even though they look at meaningful work from slightly different perspectives they have a common goal to shed light on the nature of meaningful work and make it more tangible.

The five features, according to Bailey and Madden (2016) are *self- transcendence, poignant, episodic, reflective,* and *personal.* The first of the five attributes to define meaningful work is *self-transcendence*. It is a personal resource with a strong link to mental wellbeing, and to the three dimensions: *significance, broader purpose,* and *self-realization.* Individuals with self-transcendence tend to find work meaningful when it also matters to others, or the wider environment not just themselves. This is aligned with the dimension *broader purpose* which refers to an idea of one's work contributing to a "greater good" (Martela & Pessi 2018). Martela and Pessi accentuate the connection of broader purpose to self-transcendence and going beyond one's own benefits and serving something bigger or a so-called higher purpose. Regarding meaningful work and broader purpose, other authors have described that the purpose in question of work must be something "greater than extrinsic outcomes of the work" (Arnold et al. 2007, 195), "making valuable contributions" (Berg et al. 2009, 974) and "more important than simply making money" (Sparks & Schenk, 2001, 858).

According to Reed's (1991) theory of self-transcendence it is "a process of maturing and developing the ability to expand one's relationship with others" (Hwang & Chan 2019, 1475). Worth and Smith (2021, 1–2) on the other hand propose self-transcendence to be a personality trait and a way for individuals to cope or find support and relief in times of uncertainty, for example, in the context of Covid-19. Wong et al. (2020, 1) note self-transcendence to involve a fundamental shift from an egoistic to a caring attitude, that entails the interest to care for others or something greater than oneself. Self-transcendence can even be found at the very top of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which goes to show its importance to a person's wellbeing, too. (Bailey & Madden 2016, 54.) Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs is a motivation theory that comprises of a human's most

basic needs at the bottom and self-transcendence at the top, explaining that people are motivated by several physiological needs (Arnold et al. 2007).

The second of the five attributes to define meaningful work is poignant. According to Bailey and Madden (2016, 54), the experience of meaningful work is usually not purely euphoric, but rather *poignant.* They reveal that often the moments when a person would find their work meaningful, were also ones, associated with mixed and uncomfortable or even painful feelings. Hence, meaningfulness might not always be a plainly positive experience as such, on the contrary, meaningfulness at work was often experienced during more challenging times. The moments, described by nurses, about using their skills and knowledge to ease the passing of patients are vivid examples of such profound meaningfulness that is beyond the feelings of simply motivated or happy. The third feature they name is *episodic,* by which they mean that a sense of meaningfulness is likely to arise in an episodic way, at peaks, and that no one is likely to find their work consistently meaningful. Meaningfulness cannot be forced, and only on rare occasions have people become aware of their work becoming more meaningful through the actions of organizational managers.

These attributes by Bailey and Madden are aligned with the experience of meaningfulness arising from "how much intrinsic value people assign to or are able to find from their work" and what Martela and Pessi (2018) call *significance.* They recount that it is linked to the overall sense of worthwhileness and intrinsic value of work. This feature of meaningful work arose in many studies, for example Hackman and Oldham (1980) in their theory of job design use a definition of meaningfulness of work that describes the employee's experience of job to be "meaningful, valuable and worthwhile". Berg et al. (2013) establish it to be "the amount of significance employees believe their work possesses". Martela and Pessi name self-realization as the third dimension of meaningful work. They explain it to consider individual's authenticity, sense of autonomy and the ability or scope, to which one is able to express themselves through work. Some authors further associate between personal meaningfulness and alignment in one's identity and work (Kira & Balkin 2014) and other see meaningful work to be about "the realization of one's potential and purpose" (Lieff 2009) or that it "has to do with the extent to how much work reflects who we are" (Chalofsky & Cavallaro 2013, 332).

Self-
realization

Broader
purpose

Significance
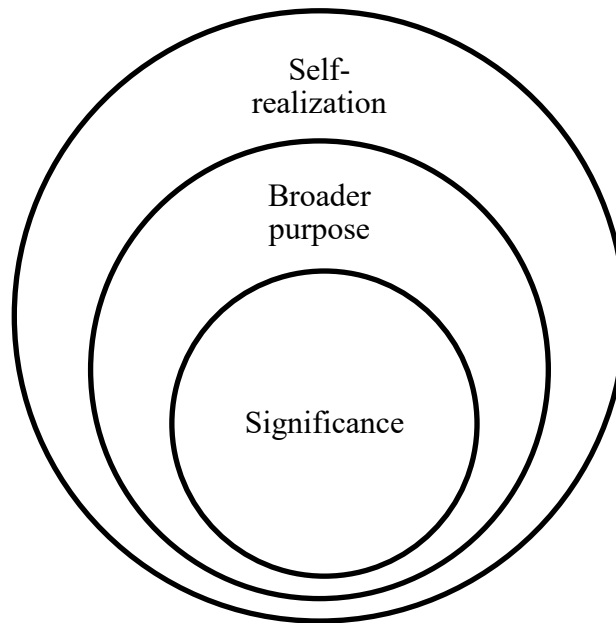
Figure 7　　　　　　Dimensions of meaningful work, by Martela and Pessi (2018)

Bailey and Madden (2016, 55–56) describe meaningful work to be of *reflective* nature, that is only when asked about it, do people usually develop a conscious awareness of the meaningfulness of their experiences. Meaningfulness is often experienced in retrospect, on reflection and after receiving a wider sense of their achievements rather than in the moment. Lastly, they report the experience of meaningful work to be *personal*. Meaningful work often has a wider context also considering one's personal life experiences and not just in the context of work. Many have recounted work situations that have become meaningful for personal reasons, for example a musician getting to perform in front of their family or a lawyer getting recommended by family and friends. In these situations, the individuals had a sense of a job well done and felt valued and recognized by others, in both spheres of life. These features of meaningful work make it a very complex task for organizations to help their employees find meaning in their work. The task goes far beyond superficial attempts and is rarely manageable by the employer or manager. (Bailey & Madden 2016, 54–56.) Understanding the dimensions and their unique angles can assist organizations to better answer the existential needs of their employees. This becomes even more important as the prompt changes in working life and technological development present further challenges for organizations to ensure meaningful work for their employees also in the future. (Martela and Pessi 2018.)

3.2 Models on meaningful work

Having made sense of the nature of meaningful work, through looking at descriptive features of how it emerges, and why people find their work meaningful, as well as scrutinizing the dimensions that make work feel meaningful, this chapter addresses theories regarding meaningful work. The following models aim to bring insight to where meaningfulness of work derives from and how job demands, and resources affect wellbeing. The models view meaningful work from different aspects and regard it a psychological state, resource or bridge connecting job characteristics, resources, and the employees experience of work with organizational outcomes, like employee engagement.

3.2.1 Job characteristics (JC) model

Decades of research has shown job characteristics to have a significant impact on employee wellbeing (Bakker & Demerouti 2007) and the research around meaningful work can be seen to have begun during the 1970's as a part of the Job Characteristics model (Hackman & Oldham 1975). Hackman and Oldham's survey of job characteristics was the first time meaningful work was brought up in academic literature as one of the factors generating positive work-related outcomes, such as job satisfaction, work motivation and work engagement. This pioneer model regards work meaningfulness as a psychological state experienced by an individual that is generated by certain job characteristics.

The JC model has later been updated (see for example, Rubenstein, et al. 2017) but based on some earlier research (Turner & Lawrence 1965) individuals become motivated by (1) meaningful work, (2) feeling responsibility over the outcomes (3) receiving trustworthy and regular knowledge about their work. According to the theory, five objective key characteristics of job are needed to create these conditions: *autonomy, feedback* and three job characteristics (so-called core dimensions): *skill variety, task identity* and *task significance*. (Hackman & Oldham 1975, 160; Hackman 1980, 447.)

Skill variety refers to the employee's possibility to utilize their talent and skills and the degree to which their work requires the use of different activities. In an ideal situation, the work provides the employee enough challenge and the possibility to utilise a wide variety of skills and their talent pervasively in order to experience the work as meaningful and think of the job as a suitable fit for themselves. (Hackman & Oldham 1975, 160.)

Task variety can foster meaningfulness through competence as it provides the possibility for skill development and intellectual stimulation (Zika & Chamberlain 1992).

Task identity on the other hand, is a dimension that is used to describe the degree to which employees come aware of the meaning and effectiveness of their job. To be able to recognise and identify the contribution of their own work to the completion of the outcome as a "whole" and link it to the bigger picture increases the employee's experience of meaningful work. In addition, assigning employees tasks and assignments where they are able to see their effort by doing job from beginning to the end with a visible outcome can enforce the degree of task identity and the experience of meaningfulness. (Hackman & Oldham 1975, 161.)

The third dimension, *task significance*, has to do with the employee's feeling of their impact on others. According to the JC model, being able to contribute to the life or work of others and have a substantial impact on either colleagues, the organization or in the external world, enhances the experience of doing meaningful work. (Hackman & Oldham 1975, 161) The experience can be augmented by performing tasks that feel important and worthwhile. The more employees become aware of the benefits generated through their work, the more meaningful it feels to carry it out.

3.2.2 Job demands and resources (JDR) model

According to an den Tooren and de Jong (2014) there are plenty of studies that have used Job Demands and Resources (JDR) model as the main theoretical framework in explaining employee wellbeing through two types of job characteristics: job demands and job resources. Job demands are different kinds of psychological, social, physical or organizational aspects that require effort and are associated with detrimental effects on wellbeing as they require physiological and or psychological costs. On the other hand, job resources are likely to have beneficial effects, they reduce job demands and costs and may stimulate personal development, learning and growth. (an den Tooren & de Jong 2014; Gauche, et al. 2017; Schaufeli et al. 2009; Orsila et al 2011.)

The model suggests employee wellbeing to result from a balance between job demands (negative job characteristics) and job resources (positive job characteristics) and proposes two underlying psychological processes: health impairment process that depletes the employee of energy and resources and may cause exhaustion or burnout, and motivational

process that suggests job resources to be rewarding and have a beneficial effect on employee wellbeing (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Gauche, De Beer, Brink 2017). Organizations can support employees in dealing with the negative job characteristics by providing necessary resources like *knowledge, social support, autonomy, role clarity, opportunities for growth, feedback,* and a *supportive environment*. The availability of resources increases employees' organizational commitment and work engagement and serves as a buffering effect on job demands. (Nahrgang, et al. 2011; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Gauche et al. 2017.)

JDR model has also been invoked as a theoretical framework in understanding how meaningful work emerges and how it influences organizational outcomes. (Albrecht et al. 2021) Similarly to JC model, that considers meaningful work as a *psychological state* mediating the relationship between job characteristics and positive organizational outcomes, according to the JDR model, meaningful work can be identified to be a *psychological resource* explaining the relationship between job resources and organizational outcomes (Nahrgang et al. 2011; Albrecht et al. 2021).

Albrecht et al. (2021) argue that meaningful work provides a *psychological bridge* connecting employee's experience of their work and level of engagement. They state that understanding the purpose and value of their work makes employees more likely to be engaged and motivated. Figure 8 visualizes a study by Albrecht et al. (2021) which utilized data from 1415 employees across several industries and concentrated on job resources' association with meaningful work and also their indirect effect on employee engagement via meaningful work. And although the study, after which figure 8 is formulated, concentrated on job resources impact on employee engagement, the availability of job resources, has also been noted to increase other organizational outcomes and employee wellbeing. The job resources allow employees to for example, better cope with demands at work. (Nahrgang et al. 2011; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Gauche et al. 2017.)
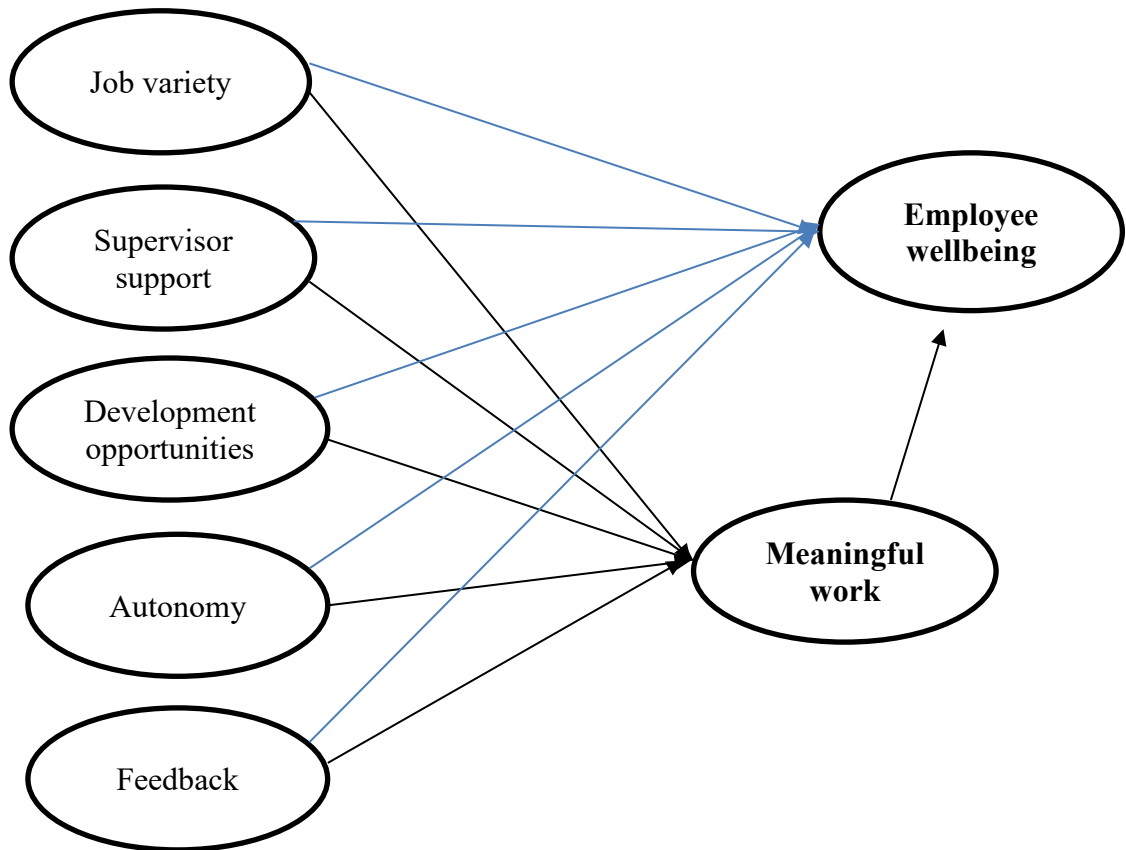
Figure 8   Job resources effect on employee wellbeing via meaningful work, adapted from Albrecht et al. (2021)

The study by Albrecht et al. (2021) scrutinized five job resources that are called job variety, supervisor support, development opportunities, autonomy, and feedback (figure 8). Job resources refer to the psychological, social, physical, or organisational aspects of the job that (1) aid in accomplishing work goals, (2) reduce job demands or (3) advance employee's growth and learning (Schaufeli & Bakker 2004; Bakker & Demerouti 2007). For example, receiving feedback supports learning, thereby augmenting employee's competence, whereas supportive environment satisfies the need for belonging, respectively. This is in line with the Conservation of resources model (chapter 3.3.3) as well as job characteristics model (chapter 3.3.1), both of which emphasize the importance of resources to employee wellbeing. (Bakker & Demerouti 2007.)

3.2.3 Conservation of resources (COR) model

Hobfoll's (1989) Conservation of resources (COR) model is, especially in organizational contexts widely applied to explain the processes which lead to wellbeing (Mohd Salleh et al. 2020, 125 see; Mulki & Locander 2006; Barling & Frone 2017). According to the

COR model, individuals aspire to obtain, retain, protect, and foster things that hold value to them. In other words, "the prime human motivation is directed towards the maintenance and accumulation of resources." (Hobfoll, 2001.) The model has become one of the most extensively cited theories in both organizational psychology and organizational behaviour studies and to a large extent forms the basis for the job demands-resources model as well (Hobfoll et al. 2018).

Based on the COR model, resources like ethical leadership, aid employees to acquire more resources, which initiates a positive spiral of resources that further enhances employee wellbeing (Kalshoven & Boon 2012). The COR model explains the drive for employees to obtain and conserve resources "based on the evolutionary need" (Mohd Salleh et al.2020). Mohd Salleh et al. (2020) state that leaders have an impact on several job characteristics, and their leadership approach could even determine the wellbeing of employees.

There have been several empirical studies on leadership style's influence on employee wellbeing (Mohd Salleh et al. 2020, 125, see: Rahimnia & Sharifirad 2015; Kara et al. 2013; Choi et al. 2016) and in their multilevel analysis on employee wellbeing, Mohd Salleh et al. (2020) examined the role of authentic leadership style, rewards, and meaningful work on employee wellbeing. They state that based on COR theory leadership style plays a significant role in influencing employee wellbeing as leaders can promote positive psychological capacities by investing in for example providing resources and improving working environment. When it comes to specific leadership styles, there is a consensus that authentic leadership styles are most likely to predict employee's engagement, commitment, and job satisfaction. Furthermore, as open, responsive, sincere, and good listeners, authentic leaders can enhance employee wellbeing by getting employees to feel appreciated and important as well as foster the growth of authenticity in employees. (Mohd Salleh et al. 2020, 129.)

In addition to leadership style, other resources, such as perceived organizational support can impact wellbeing of employees. Moreover, a study by Hayat and Afshari (2021), utilized the COR model and revealed that perceived organizational support enhances wellbeing by for example dampening the negative effects of workplace bullying. They found perceived organizational support to also have a mitigating role to burnout. Based on the model, wellbeing is a widely valued resource amidst employees across cultures.

Mohd Salleh et al. (2020, 140) suggest that meaningful work can be seen as a sustainable source of wellbeing. They propose that by providing resources and fulfilling a significant relational psychological contract with their employees, they are likely to feel valued and that their work is recognized. This enhances the experience of meaningfulness and "the sense of meaningful work as a form of a sustainable source of wellbeing."

3.3 Synthesis of the means to enhance mental wellbeing

Only a few studies have explored means to enhance employee mental wellbeing. Yet, it is widely acknowledged that job resources, that is to say, organizational aspects of the job, that contribute to learning and achieving goals as well as reducing job demands, have an impact on employees' experienced meaningfulness and mental wellbeing. This chapter presents a synthesis that was formulated based on the literature review and models used in this thesis.

Table 2, below, presents the three main models capitalizing meaningful work and the means that scholars have found to be effective in enhancing employee mental wellbeing directly or indirectly. Most of these means affect employees' wellbeing through meaningful work or fulfil some other psychological need that is necessary for mental wellbeing. The table also shows means that scholars have named to enhance work meaningfulness and how each of the models approaches meaningful work. As this thesis aims to find means for organizations to enhance Gen Z mental wellbeing, it does not consider other affecting factors, such as personal resources, or factors that might have negative effects, like passive leadership.

Table 2 Summary of the models on meaningful work

Model	Meaningful work is seen as	Means to enhance work meaningfulness	Means to enhance employee mental wellbeing
JDR model: Balance between job demands and resources results in wellbeing. Available resources enhance wellbeing.	Psychological resource explaining the connection between job resources and organizational outcomes/ Psychological bridge connecting employee experience of their work and level of engagement	Providing resources: Autonomy Feedback Job variety Supportive environment Opportunities for growth	Availability of job resources: Knowledge, Autonomy, Supportive environment, Performance feedback, Social Support, Role clarity, Opportunities for growth, Coaching, Communication
COR model: Resources, help employees to acquire more resources, leading to a positive spiral of resources that enhances wellbeing. Theory explains the drive for employees to obtain and conserve resources.	Sustainable source of wellbeing	Leadership approach /style (Such as ethical or authentic) Providing resources and fulfilling a significant relational psychological contract with employees.	Leadership style influences employee wellbeing: leaders can promote positive psychological capacities by providing resources, like organizational support. Leaders who are open, responsive, sincere, and good listeners can enhance employee wellbeing by getting employees to feel appreciated and important
JC model: Meaningfulness originates from the availability of job resources.	Psychological state generated by certain job characteristics that mediates the relationship between job characteristics and positive organizational outcomes	Providing resources: Task significance Task identity Skill variety Role clarity	Availability of job resources: Autonomy Feedback

As can be seen from the table 2, JDR model has addressed the subject most extensively and named most job resources that affect employee mental wellbeing. JC model, on the other hand, is the only one that has specifically addressed job characteristics that increase meaningfulness and calls task significance and identity as well as skill variety as core dimensions. Both JC and JDR models approach mental wellbeing by looking at increasing the number of available resources, whereas, COR model, uses a viewpoint of conserving resources. Nevertheless, all the theories consider resources to be the key to enhanced wellbeing. The resources discussed here are mainly intangible, personal assets like autonomy and self-realization or job characteristics like skill variety. All of these assets impact either employee mental wellbeing, experienced meaningfulness, or both. The synthesis in figure 9 compiles these components and places them in the circle of meaningfulness or mental wellbeing according to which best equates the literature and theories.

Meaningfulness

Task significance
Task identity
Skill variety
Role clarity
Significance
Self-realization

Autonomy
Purpose
Feedback
Job variety
Supportive environment
Opportunities for
growth & development
Leadership approach

Mental Wellbeing

Interpersonal fit
Thriving at work
Feeling of competency
Perceived recognition
Involvement at work
Job satisfaction
Self-acceptance
Environmental mastery
Positive relations

Figure 9   Synthesis of means to enhance employee mental wellbeing and experienced meaningfulness

Based on the literature review, meaningfulness can be impacted with task significance and identity, skill variety, role clarity, enabling the feeling of significance and self-realization. Mental wellbeing on the other hand, can be affected through job satisfaction, enabling self-acceptance, environmental mastery and positive relations, interpersonal fit,

generating feelings of competency and of thriving at work, getting recognition and being involved. Both, meaningfulness, and mental wellbeing can be enhanced by enabling resources such as job variety, autonomy, and development opportunities, having a suitable leadership approach, presenting feedback, a supportive environment and purpose.

Literature names qualities endorsed by Gen Z, yet no comprehensive study on the matter has been conducted. Hence, no specific factors regarding Gen Z can be included with certainty to the synthesis. However, an inquiry about Gen Z leading preferences, carried out years ago (Tienari & Piekkari, 2011), resulted in them asking for frames, independence, feedback and confidentiality. Other studies name transparency and openness, equality, and communality as preferred qualities in organizations. It is stated that Gen Z want to be creative and inspired and a part of making a change. They want to do meaningful work, with good dialogue instead of monitoring.

4   Methodology

In this chapter the chosen method for this research is presented alongside with descriptions of data collection, analysis, and evaluation. In addition, this chapter introduces the interviewed people, on what merits they were chosen and discusses the limitations.

4.1   Research design

There are various types of research strategies and perhaps the most fundamental decision to make regarding the execution of this research was whether to use qualitative or quantitative methods. The difference between the two resides in the research procedure, as the focus of a quantitative research is to produce objective and quantifiable results via hypothesis testing or statistical analysis, whereas qualitative research aims to provide a more holistic understanding and views reality as socially constructed. (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 5; Hirsjärvi et al. 1996, 161; Marschan-Piekkari & Welch 2004, 8; Silverman 2000, 8.) The two methods, qualitative and quantitative, may in some cases be difficult to distinguish from another and they can be seen as complimentary and are sometimes used simultaneously.

For this research, the qualitative method was found to be the most suitable approach for several reasons. Firstly, the research problem and questions are abstract and descriptive by nature, which makes it necessary to utilize qualitative approach that links the research to a real life setting and enables a deeper understanding of the issues in question. Secondly, the research focuses on individual's experiences of meaningfulness and mental wellbeing and qualitative approach can help discover even the underlying reasons. The three purposes of qualitative research are to explore, describe and explain different phenomena and to go beyond the "what" to further understand the "why" and "how" which makes it a suitable approach for this research. (Hesse-Biber & Leavy 2011, 10-14; Lewis et al. 2007, 133-134).

Qualitative research is seen to be composed of three different components that are data, analytical procedure, and the final report. Puusa (2011, 115) highlights that in qualitative research, the analysis and formation of the synthesis are interwoven and that is necessary to be familiar with the topic before data collection. To help familiarize the topic, a literature review was composed to provide the background information on the pivotal

topics: Gen Z, employee mental wellbeing and meaningfulness. To be able to reach relevant conclusions the researcher benefits from utilizing research questions that are designed for the topic to help determine what kind of data will be collected and analyzed. The research objective and questions are primary factors that affect the methodological decisions. (Arbnor & Bjerke 1997, 8; Ghauri & Grønhaug 2005, 87.)

4.2   Data collection

This thesis utilizes primary data, meaning that the data collected through interviews was produced specifically for the purpose of this research. There are several available methods for collecting qualitative data, such as surveys, focus groups, observation and interviews. (Hirsjärvi et al. 1996; Ghauri & Gronhaug 2002; Smith 1991, 155.) This study utilizes interviews, which are often considered to be amongst the best data collection methods (Ghauri et al 2020, 96, 107). According to Puusa and Juuti (2011, 74) through interviews it is possible to gain access to a person's subjective experiences. What is more, interviews allow for a flexible way of collecting data: the researcher is able to modify the questions based on, for example, the characteristics and knowledge of the informant or situational factors. An interview enables researcher to observe the situation and the informant, and the gathered information usually goes deeper in subject, because the informants can express themselves more freely and provide with a wider context if necessary. (Hirsjärvi et al. 1996, 194–196, 201; Metsämuuronen 2006, 113.)

In the case of collecting primary data through interviews, there are several interview types for a researcher to choose from. Standardized and structured interviews make use of a clear order and predetermined structure of questions, whereas guided, theme and semi-structured interviews only have guiding themes and predetermined set of topics to ease the flow of discussion. Then again, open, unstructured interviews have close to no directing guidelines and are most similar to a regular discussion. (Puusa & Juuti 2011, 81–82; Eriksson & Kovalainen 2003; Hirsjärvi et al. 1996, 204–205). This research utilized semi-structured interviews as the means to collect data. The advantage of a semi-structured interview is being able to collect data that is structured and systematic, yet also having the interview remain flexible and conversational. (Puusa & Juuti 2011, 81–82; Daniels & Cannice 2004, 192; Kovalainen & Eriksson 2003; Metsämuuronen 2006, 115.)

The research questions can be found from Appendix 2 and they were formulated carefully with the help of the operationalization table, visible in table 3. The aim of the

operationalization table was to ensure the application of the most relevant theories and to craft the interviews in a way that would support the research questions and obtain information relating to employee mental wellbeing and employees' experience of meaningful work. Consequently, the interviews were composed using predetermined themes and open-ended questions to encourage more dialogue between the interviewer and the informant (Silverman 2013).

Table 3   Operationalization table

Main research question	Sub-questions	Theoretical background	Themes
How can organizations increase the mental wellbeing and experienced meaningfulness of Gen Z employees?	What makes work meaningful for Gen Z employees?	2.2; 2.3; 3.1; 3.2; 3.3; n/a	Gen Z mental wellbeing
			Importance of wellbeing and meaningfulness
			Nature of meaningful work
			Emerging meaningfulness
	What is the view of corporate wellbeing professionals with experience in international business about the current work life?	2.1; 2.3; 3.1	Current work life practices
			Differences between MNCs and other organizations' practices
			Employee mental wellbeing
	What can organizations do to increase the mental wellbeing of Gen Z employees?	2.2; 2.3; 3.2.3; 3.3; 3.4	Experience of meaningfulness
			Enhancing employee mental wellbeing
			Meaningfulness as part of wellbeing

The operationalization table (table 3), themes and interviews were formulated in a way that the first sub-question and themes respectively were aimed at Gen Z informants, the second sub-question (on the grey background) at corporate experts and the third question at academic experts. Each of the interviews looked quite different, depending on the interviewed person or persons, their background and tendency to talk. (Berg & Lune 2012, 109–114.) The informants' answers often resulted in follow-up questions outside

of the predetermined questions to elaborate an interesting point of view or to gain deeper knowledge on a matter brought up by the informant.

According to Hirsjärvi et al. (1996, 199) an interview can be executed either as a one-on-one interview, as a couple interview or in a group setting. Because the aim is to attain data from the most appropriate person or persons available (Ghauri et al. 2020, 107), for this study, two different settings of semi-structured interviews were utilized in collecting the empirical data: one-on-one expert interviews and group interviews with individuals from Generation Z. Group interviewing is a separate technique that involves systematic questioning of more than two individuals simultaneously. This can happen in a formal or an informal setting and used in combination with other strategies to collect multiple views of the same phenomenon, as was done in this research. (Fontana & Frey, 1994.) According to Lewis-Beck et al. (2011) "the phenomenological assessment of emergent meanings that go beyond individual interpretation is another dimension of group interviews." Like mentioned, the held group interviews had limited structure, although the interviewer steered the interviews to make sure everyone got heard and asked follow up questions to stimulate the discussions to a desirable direction.

The informants for this study were selected based on their knowledge about the issues at hand. This kind of key informant technique is a form of purposive sampling and is often referred to as "in-depth interview" (Faifua 2014; Jankowich 1995, 167). The researcher decides on relevant people with enough knowledge on the issues in question. This technique is considered especially useful when the study aims to identify central characteristics of the issue, based on the informants' experiences, which is the case in this research. (Jankowicz 1995, 157, 212.) Based on the key informant technique the informants for group interviews were selected to represent individuals from Gen Z who were likely to be able to answer the crafted question and who were also available to take part in the study. This resulted in the seven interviewed Gen Z representatives having fairly similar backgrounds, which of course affects the generalizability of the results and does not provide an ample view into the minds of Gen Z. All the people interviewed from Gen Z were in higher degree education, had a high school diploma, were born in years 1998–1997 and most importantly, had some experience of work life, between 2 to 5 years.

Table 4 presents the interviews by interview type, date and the interviewees current or most recent title. The interviews starring Gen Zers are highlighted with a light grey

background. The key informant technique was utilized in the selection of the experts, too. The chosen interviewees represented people who were currently or had been working in Multinational Corporations (MNC), had knowledge of mental wellbeing issues, employee wellbeing and talent management. The suitable people were found via LinkedIn and contacted by email. Many of the interviewed people worked in HR and therefore had experience of different mental wellbeing issues, as well as good and bad HR practices and organizational policies from different fields and organizations. On top of that, to provide with a different, a more academic or perhaps a more instructional view, Frank Martela and Petteri Kilpinen, who both have experience on consulting organizations on employee mental wellbeing, were interviewed.

Table 4   An overview of the interviews

Interview type	Interviewed person	Date	Current or most recent Title
One-on-one interview	Corporate professional	24.3.2022	Head of HR (MNC)
Group interview	Gen Z, 1998	25.3.2022	Psychology student, (Fin)
Group interview	Gen Z, 1998	25.3.2022	International Business student, (Fin)
Group interview	Gen Z, 1997	25.3.2022	International Business student, (Fin)
Group interview	Gen Z, 1998	29.3.2022	Supply Chain Management student (Fin)
Group interview	Gen Z, 1998	29.3.2022	International Business student (Fin)
Group interview	Gen Z, 1997	29.3.2022	Marketing student (Fin)
One-on-one interview	Corporate professional	31.3.2022	Principal consultant Talent Solutions and Services (MNC)
One-on-one interview	Corporate professional	31.3.2022	Country Lead for Health and Public Services (MNC)
One-on-one interview	Gen Z, 1997	1.4.2022	Business and Finance student, (Ger)
One-on-one interview	Frank Martela	6.4.2022	Philosopher, PhD, and postdoctoral researcher of psychology specialized in the question of meaning in life.
One-on-one interview	Corporate professional	11.4.2022	Head of People Experience and Operations (MNC)
One-on-one interview	Petteri Kilpinen	12.4.2022	Director, coach and author with a mission to help individuals and companies maximize energy and improve wellbeing.

All the interviews were held via Zoom between 24[th] of March and 12[th] of April. All except for one interview were held in Finnish. There were two group interviews with three people from Gen Z present in each and, on top of that, one of the Gen Z representatives was interviewed in a one-on-one situation due to difficulties in schedules. This was the interview that was exceptionally held in English, as the interviewed person was German. All the expert interviews were held in Finnish. There were some technical issues with the group interviews, as Zoom allowed for only 40-minute sessions when there were more than two attendees. This was only a minor inconvenience as we were able to continue right where we left off, with a new link. The sessions were recorded with a phone's voice recording program and transcribed using Microsoft Word's dictation feature. Before starting the interviews, the participants were informed of the objective of the study and their role in it. They were also asked for permission to record the interviews and in the beginning of each interview a brief summary was given to clarify the agenda and the used terms.

4.3   Data analysis

Even though, Patti Lather (1991) calls data analysis "the black hole" of qualitative research, Lu and Shulman (2008, 105) highlight the importance of an effective data analysis and stress the critical role it plays in qualitative research. They assure that similarities, differences, and relationships between passages can be identified, coded, and effectively retrieved during data analysis. One of the most popular forms of analysis in qualitative research, and especially with interviews, is thematic analysis, which is also the analysis tool chosen for this study (Bogdan &Biklen 1997). Thematic analysis is beneficial for identifying, analysing and reviewing themes. It is a great tool for discovering linkages between existing studies and the collected empirical data (Braun & Clarke 2006, 79).

The use of a thematic analysis increases transparency as it allows for the reader to follow the process step by step, from understanding and coding the data to defining the themes and reporting conclusions. Pierre and Jackson (2014, 174) find that coding can make the analysing process more tangible and recommend using theory to determine what counts as data and even what counts as good or appropriate data. Hence, to conduct a data analysis, I followed the recommendations from Pierre and Jackson (2014) and Ghauri et

al. (2020, 131), who name three major components that make up qualitative data analysis: *data reduction, data display and drawing up conclusions*.

In the first stage, data reduction, literature recommends author to transcribe the interviews quickly after conducting them to improve the management of the data and to further familiarize oneself with it (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 85; Koskinen et al. 2005, 230–231). Doing so gives data structure and a possibility to add notes as well as aids with beginning of the interpretation (Koskinen et al. 2005, 230–231).

Following this advice, the data from interviews was transformed from audio to text using the dictation tool in Word. After the transcription, it was reduced to a simplified and a more focused form, by underlining the text and colour-coding the underlined parts according to the topic in question. In the beginning stages three colours were used: *blue* to represent data concerning meaningful work, *green* to represent mental wellbeing and *yellow* to represent organizations, their practices and means to impact the first two. After that, comments were added to note what the underlined bit was about, for example "broader purpose", "common goal", "atmosphere", "feedback", "dichotomy" "meaningfulness", "culture" and "trust". These small notes ended up becoming one- or two-word codes, which later were sorted under themes. In data reduction, the researcher's ability to find and give meaning from the various contexts plays a vital role (Ghauri et al. 2020, 138).

In the second phase, data display, the reduced information was organized under different themes. The four main themes: care, communicate, contribute and create culture were identified from the empirical data with the help of existing literature and theories. They act as headings under which the organizational means are assembled. The listed means are codes which were repeatedly brought up in interviews. According to Ghauri et al. (2020, 133) this can also be done by compressing information into lists or figures, which was done alongside with the conclusions. This phase was executed differently with the expert interviews than with the Gen Z group interviews, because the aim and questions were also different. For example, in the case of the group interviews, the color-coded texts and their codes fell under four main categories that report how Gen Z can experience meaningfulness and what is required from the organizations for that to happen. Whereas the corporate wellbeing expert interviews were analysed with the second research question in mind.

In the last phase of drawing up conclusions the codes under the themes were compared to the theoretical framework. The gathered information was analysed to provide a proper description of the phenomenon and to be able to reach detailed information of the contextual relationships. Which, according to Eriksson and Kovalainen (2015, 120) are the two main purposes for making a qualitative data analysis. It is essential to be familiar with the theory to be able to understand and explain the phenomenon and to draw accurate conclusions. The findings from the interviews are explained in chapter five whereas the conclusions from the analysis are presented in chapter six.

4.4 Ethical principles

According to Orb et al. (2001, 94) all kinds of research has ethical issues and qualitative research is no exception. Hence, ethical considerations regarding privacy, anonymity and confidentiality of the participants are essential. The ethical dilemmas of qualitative research have to do with (1) the relationship between the researcher and the participants or interviewees as in the case of this study, (2) the subjectivity of the researcher's interpretations of collected data and (3) the research design (Ramos 1989). In addition, the process of qualitative research, especially in the case of interviews, balances between participants rights to privacy and the researcher's aims to benefit the readers through generalizing. Hence, this research has been carried out in a way that respects privacy and applies the relevant ethical principles: autonomy, beneficence, and justice. (Orb et al. 2001, 93–94.)

In the context of qualitative study, autonomy is used to refer to the participants self-determination right to participate or refuse. In this research everyone participated voluntarily and they were asked in a manner that made it possible for them to refuse. An important aspect to making research is considering justice, which means avoiding the exploitation and abuse of the participants. The data in this research was collected in a fair manner and respect towards the participants' time and contribution was shown. Lastly, researchers are morally obliged to do good and prevent harm, in other words, beneficence. This can be taken into consideration by minimizing the possible implications for the participants. To ensure this, the data in this study was collected with anonymity (except for two professionals) and not even the names of the employers were mentioned. (Orb et al. 2001, 94–96.)

This research was conducted after the ethical integrity principles set by the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity (TENK 2021). This means that the research data, which refers to "all the material with which the analysis and results of the research can be verified and reproduced" (Research data management, Utuguides.) was collected and handled according to the Finnish Data Protection act and the EU's General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR). A data research management plan was conducted and the documentation and storing of the data were handled carefully. All empirical data was gathered personally by the researcher and the interviewees were asked for consent and notified of their anonymity or alternatively of the personal data that was collected. The researcher had a separate document for recounting the main changes and all used references. In addition, altogether twelve learning diaries that described the research process were composed. The voice recordings were deleted after the transcriptions and their backup files were saved on the computer and iCloud. These files did not include any personal data, and the researcher was able to identify the interviews based on the dates that were the only used tag. The files containing transcribed interviews and the research process will be stored for the recommended five years. (Research data management, Utuguides.)

4.5   Data evaluation and trustworthiness of the study

In this chapter, the trustworthiness of the research will be evaluated, by looking at the whole research process through different criteria. Evaluation of a qualitative study is important for various reasons, especially as it is often seen to be prone to become affected by the researcher's own perception and bias. (Haavisto 2014.) The aim is to decipher, whether the study is worth taking into consideration and that the results are trustworthy (Lincoln & Guba 1985, 291). This requires for transparency and trustworthiness of both the process and results. This research aspires to make theoretical and practical contributions in an ethical manner by generating reliable and valid knowledge, which are key elements of a trustworthy research (Puusa & Juuti 2011, 155). Validity refers to how accurately the conducted research succeeds in delivering its initial objectives. Reliability on the other hand refers to the degree to which the findings of the study are replicable. (Puusa & Juuti 2011, 155–156; Merriam & Tisdell 2015, 237, 250.) In a qualitative study the researcher enjoys a certain level of flexibility and has several options on how to present the findings. This study applies the commonly used criteria for trustworthiness by

Lincoln and Guba (1985, 301–327) that has four attributes that are called: *credibility, transferability, dependability,* and *confirmability.*

Credibility refers to the truthfulness of the conducted information and can be used to evaluate how accurately the results correspond with reality. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985, 301) it can be established through persistent observation, prolonged engagement, and triangulation. Literature mentions several different methods of triangulation. Data triangulation refers to the use of various sources of information, methods triangulation to the use of different research methods and theoretical triangulation to having several theoretical perspectives applied to scrutinize and interpret the data. (Tynjälä 1991, 392–393; Lincoln & Guba 1985, see: Denzin 1978; Pandey & Patinak 2014, 5747–5748.) To enhance credibility, this study applied triangulation in the form of different information sources and theoretical perspectives. The empirical data was collected from fourteen people who fall under three categories with different views and experiences around the same topic. To examine and draw conclusions from the interviews, an iterative process took place, and the results were compared to a theoretical framework and previous studies. (Lincoln & Guba 1985, see: Denzin 1978; Pandey & Patinak 2014, 5747–5748). The credibility of the process was further enhanced by the researcher's reflectiveness over the made observations and decisions in different stages of the study (Puusa & Juuti 2011, 165). The data was reviewed repeatedly and the transcribed interviews enabled an iterative and comprehensive analysis simultaneously increasing the internal validity.

The second criterion*, transferability* or applicability refers to how well the findings can be applied to other contexts (Lincoln & Guba 1985, 291, 316). It is argued that evaluating the transferability of the findings is not the researcher's responsibility. However, the researcher should provide the necessary information to aid the reader in evaluating the transferability of the findings. This is done by providing necessary information, like a careful description of the study including how it was conducted, who were interviewed and what was the criteria for data collection. The detailed description of data collection and analysis in the methodology chapter alleviates the process of evaluating transferability. (Lincoln & Guba 1985; Mäkelä 1990.) According to Puusa and Juuti (2011, 161) it is important to get enough data to gain a basic understanding of the phenomenon, even if it is difficult to estimate the amount of data needed to reach saturation. The limited size and scope of this research affects the transferability of this

study, yet in the data collection a decent level of saturation was achieved as 16 people were interviewed about meaningfulness and mental wellbeing.

The third criterion, *dependability* refers to the consistency of the findings. Dependability can also be viewed as the reliability dimension of trustworthiness (Pandey & Paitnak 2014, 5750). It is used to indicate how much the context, or the researcher have impacted the findings and whether the results could be repeated in the same context (Lincoln & Guba 1985, 300, 316–317). As a data collection method, interviews are commonly viewed to be subjective by nature. Besides, the situation or the context of an interview may influence the given answers, as the informant may want to please the interviewer or provide more socially acceptable answers, or ones that show them in a good light. (Hirsjärvi et al. 2004, 194; Puusa & Juuti 2011) In this study, to increase dependability the researcher aimed at objectivity by pursuing to conduct the research and interviews in an unbiased and factual manner (Lincoln & Guba 1985, 300, 316–317). However, as this was the first study conducted by the researcher, the inexperience and personal interest in the topic are likely to have influenced the course of the study. For example, a notable learning curve was visible in the interviews, especially in the form of the on-the-spot specifying questions.

Conformability can be viewed as the degree of neutrality, and it implicates how well the findings can be confirmed by a third party and if the interpretations have an understandable connection to the data. (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008; Lincoln & Guba 1985, 319; Mäkelä 1990, 54.) There are some means to increase confirmability, for example, providing an audit trail including any information about the utilized methods, the used definitions and themes as well as the connections that were identified during the analysing process. The detailed description of the research process and the utilized methods including the operationalization table reinforce the confirmability. Furthermore, chapters 4.1, 4.2 and 4.3 present a comprehensive overview of the research design, data collection and analysis, comprising the color-codes, themes and step by step description of the research. This allows for others to mimic the research path and procession of this study at least to a certain level.

5   Findings

The initial aim of this research was to examine how organizations can increase the mental wellbeing and experienced meaningfulness of Gen Z employees. This chapter presents the findings from the analysis of the primary empirical data. The data was collected from different sources to reach a comprehensive view of the matter. The interviews with corporate and academic experts as well as group interviews with Gen Z approach the topic from different perspectives. To better comprehend the empirical findings, it is useful to look back on the three sub-questions:

- What is the connection between meaningful work and employees' mental wellbeing?

- What are the conditions of current work life?

- What makes work meaningful for Gen Z employees?

The following sub-chapters address the sub-questions one by one and introduce the relevant empirical findings.

5.1   Connection between meaningful work and mental wellbeing

This chapter provides an answer to the first sub-question: "What is the connection between meaningful work and employees' mental wellbeing?" This question can to a large extent be answered based on the literature review. Chapters 2 and 3 examine mental wellbeing and meaningful work in detail and refer to studies that have been able to show a connection between them. A few authors have mentioned meaningfulness and the feelings of purpose to be essential to an individuals' mental wellbeing. Some studies report meaningfulness of work to be a part of the *concept of employee wellbeing* and to also affect *organizational outcomes*. In addition, many models on meaningful work also address employee wellbeing to some extent.

As can be seen from the synthesis in figure 9, there are several overlapping means, such as job variety, supportive environment and feedback that can be used to enhance both meaningfulness and mental wellbeing. The interviews show equivalent results and Gen Zers frequently gave similar answers to questions about what affects their wellbeing and their experienced meaningfulness at work. To gain a better understanding of the connection between wellbeing and meaningfulness, the Gen Zers were asked about how

their wellbeing could be affected *through* meaningful work. However, this process of impacting wellbeing through meaningful work (figure 8), is not linear but rather overlapping and the concepts, too are in many ways interwoven. Hence Gen Zers reported not always being able to tell the concepts apart and often not being able to feel mentally well at work if they did not experience the work as meaningful. However, some Gen Zers recounted that they were able to find meaningfulness from their studies and other aspects of life and therefore were unable to say whether meaningfulness of work was necessary for them in order to feel mentally well. On the other hand, some individuals had the experience of always finding their work meaningful in one way or another, and hence could not fully recognise its effects on their wellbeing. Whereas others recounted worse experiences and could easily notice the toll that meaningless work had on their mental wellbeing.

Mental wellbeing and meaningful work are both multidimensional, intangible concepts that are familiar to all yet difficult to explain. They are *subjective experiences* and hence difficult to measure. According to literature, *self-actualization* and *self-determination* are essential to mental wellbeing and the experience of meaningfulness. In fact, psychological wellbeing is viewed to be the by-product of personal fulfilment, self-actualization and self-determination and according to the Self-Determination theory the satisfaction of the needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness lead to meaningfulness of work.

Employees experience of meaningfulness and mental wellbeing both affect several organizational outcomes, like employee engagement and turnover. Professor Frank Martela views that mental wellbeing is a broader concept and meaningfulness is a part of it. According to him, an individual needs to experience meaningfulness and purpose in life to be able to feel well. He mentions that experiencing meaningfulness of work can assist an employee to get past the harder moments and hence help maintain one's mental wellbeing. Additionally, also Gen Zers recounted that pointless work is often likely to feel exhausting and irrelevant, whereas the experience of meaningfulness can help endure longer days and decrease heavy or laborious work's effects on mental wellbeing. To better understand the need for organizations to enhance their employees' mental wellbeing and meaningfulness, the next subchapter looks at the challenges and current conditions of work life.

5.2   Current work life conditions

This chapter answers the second sub-question: "What are the conditions of current work life?" This question was directed at corporate professionals who have been in the corporate world already for some time and have gained experience from international business and organizations of different sizes and fields. To a large extent there was agreement that the working conditions have changed drastically along with the influx of information technology and many jobs shifting online. What is more, in MNCs the business landscape was experienced to be even more *dynamic* and *volatile*. Consequently, the answers regarding current work life conditions had the most variance as according to the professionals it looks very different depending on the organization and the industry in question.

> "Upon asking team managers (in Finnish companies), how often they have one on one discussions with their subordinates, the frequency is almost always much more infrequent, compared to the MNCs and organizations that really make an effort to make employees their priority."

Professionals brought up differences between MNCs and smaller organizations, saying that in most instances, the MNCs are ahead in many aspects. They also reported that there is a lot of variance amidst companies on how they approach employee wellbeing and a lot of managers do not understand their role and responsibility in employees' wellbeing. Petteri Kilpinen who has worked with several executive board members and managers recounted that, far too many managers are unaware of the severity of the situation regarding their employees' mental wellbeing. According to him, many do not even recognize their responsibility in the matter and might claim employees' wellbeing to be something the individuals should look after personally outside of work.

> "The problem is that so many people proceed to become managers without ever learning the necessary skills about how to care for others and their wellbeing, then the responsibility of employees' wellbeing always gets transferred to HR or outsourced to occupational health services. When there are visible symptoms and it gets outsourced, it is already too late at that point."

Kilpinen is not alone in recognizing the tendency of organizations to transfer the responsibility solely to individuals or occupational health services. During the interviews, when the professionals were asked about their organizations' wellbeing practices, some would start with addressing the existing occupational health services and in some cases

supportive mental health services available to employees, because those are the means most visible to employees. What is more, only few reported about organizations having structures in place and wellbeing being part of the organization's strategy. Many experts felt that this often came down to the management team, their values and understanding of the matter. MNCs and organizations working in the technology field were said to be doing better in the wellbeing and caring sector.

> "Caring for people should be a leadership skill. There are indicators in place that can tell us that it is much cheaper to have precautionary care, than it is to try and treat an existing health problem. So, yes, it is also a question of productiveness. I would say that the organizations that care for their employees, not only do they have employees with better wellbeing, but they will also have employees who are more productive. In addition, they will win the competition for the best talents out there."

The corporate professionals recognized that the amount of work has increased simultaneously with mounting knowledge and skill requirements. The workload is seen to have inflated mainly due to technological developments and the introduction of emails, slack and other communication channels that require immoderately attention. In addition, international companies that operate in multiple time zones and smart phones that enable employees to always be reachable have blurred the boundaries between work and free time. Professionals are aware that employees' wellbeing has taken the greatest toll on these changes. The latest transition to remote work due to the Pandemic has changed the situation both for the better and worse. Some of the corporate professionals report that other employees are able to concentrate better at home whereas others suffer from loneliness and the lack of social interaction. For some the days have become shorter and more easily manageable without back-and-forth commuting. However, others suffer from pressures of needing to "prove they are working" which has led to longer working hours, wanting to be accessible around the clock, having less breaks and worse recovery.

The corporate professionals agree on the importance of a company's values, organizational culture, structure, and policies. For example, a professional talked about an MNC that had raised "being a great employer" as their main strategic goal and hence, they looked at employees as the core of their business. This has led the organization to measure their success as a good employer and therefore also implement, for example, family friendly practices and easily accessible mental health support. The organizations that are great places to work and where employees feel well, have created *structures for*

giving feedback and maintaining a psychologically safe space. The corporate professionals stated that employees need to be allowed to come as they are, to bring their *whole authentic self* to the workplace. Organizations should be able to view individuals with specific needs and wants and to be *flexible* and consider the unique situation and background of each employee. Professionals recognize the diversity of employees and different generations in the work life. Many of them find that differences in personalities have a bigger affect rather than generational differences. However, they admit that some generational stereotypes are visible and need to be taken into consideration by employees. Hence, Generation Z and what they find meaningful is examined in the next subchapter.

5.3 Meaningful work for Generation Z employees

This chapter answers the last sub-question: "What makes work meaningful for Gen Z employees?" This was a question directed at Gen Z individuals, who highlighted the feeling of their work having a *broader purpose*, of doing something that serves a greater good. In addition, they report wanting to do work that feels *significant* and *worthwhile* and has intrinsic *value* in itself.

> "It is important to me, that the work I do has tangible value to the work community – – and also that it feels meaningful to me also on a personal level."

According to Gen Zers the experience of doing meaningful work comes partly from working in an organization that is responsible and operates in a field that is deemed ethical. Gen Zers recognized it more difficult to experience meaningfulness of work, if the company and their work were not advancing any good in the society or serving a higher purpose. Hence, in addition to *the work itself*, also *the workplace* was seen to have a significant role, as is suggested also by the three-dimensional construct of meaningful work (figure 6).

> "One may ponder whether the organization you are working for, is doing something that feels meaningful, for example, advancing circular economy – that would enhance the experience of doing meaningful work."

Working in an organization that was perceived as sustainable and as doing business to further a meaningful matter, was recounted to enhance meaningfulness in a tangible way. For example, one of the Gen Zers recited that they would never work for a company that produced weapons or tobacco and that the company must do something they can *identify*

with. Aligning values with the company's values and practices, enables *self-realization*: an alignment between one's identity and work.

Gen Zers reported that their experience meaningfulness is increased by the feelings of being recognized for their input, of being competent in their work and appreciated by either managers or colleagues. They stated that even simple things like hearing the words "Thank you" enhance the sensation of meaningfulness. It is a concrete way of showing appreciation and enhancing the sense that what you have done is significant and worthwhile. These kind of small gestures of appreciation were said to be especially important when it comes down to people higher up the hierarchy, as it shows that they too, find you a valuable part of the company and do not overlook you or your contribution. These observations relate to the employee's perceptions of *competency, recognition* and *interpersonal fit at work* as well as the *desire for involvement* and *thriving*. According to studies, they are also important characteristics for wellbeing at work (table 1).

> "I want to feel important, not just a wheel in a machine. That if I did not go to work, no one would even notice or care. It feels good to receive feedback and recognition. Receiving a simple thankyou or being recognized for your effort, especially if you have managed to do your job well, makes what you do feel more significant."

Gen Zers brought forth several *job characteristics* that enhance their experience of meaningfulness. *Skill variety*, being able to utilize one's talents and skills, was seen to enable meaningfulness, as enough responsibility and challenges are required to not experience a "bore out". One of the Gen Zers reported to have experienced a change of attitude and approach to work as well as a surge of meaningfulness after receiving specific areas of responsibility and being able to take some pride and credit in their work. Also, *task identity*, being aware of the meaning and value of one's work and its connection to the bigger picture was reported to enhance the sensation of doing meaningful work. Gen Zers stated there to be a clear distinction between having one's "own projects", or only having "random" tasks to perform. The latter would deprive a person of any connection to the bigger picture as they would feel like there was nothing to show for one's effort. These are also connected to *task significance*, ergo Gen Zers wanting to sense they are impacting others and performing worthwhile tasks.

Gen Zers want organizations to show interest in their training and development and prefer to have some sort of career development plan and regular discussions about the direction

of their career. They are eager to develop themselves and hence *job resources* such as having *opportunities for growth* and possibilities to advance within the organization were recognized to further the experience of meaningfulness. Moreover, to be able to develop, see the bigger picture and feel appreciated, Gen Zers need feedback. Receiving feedback supports learning and contributes to employees' competence. In fact, *feedback* was named as one of the most important job resources to make work feel more meaningful. Gen Zers recounted that "the way and when" feedback was presented made all the difference and could be a make-or-break factor.

Feedback was often associated with the sensation of one's work being connected to a broader purpose and being worthwhile. Consequently, Gen Zers preferred the feedback to be distributed frequently and on time. One Gen Zer reported to having received feedback only at the end of a six-month long internship, which left them with no possibilities to improve those qualities. Whereas, during another internship they received feedback more frequently, on a weekly basis. This felt more meaningful and sensible as this made it possible for them to develop and learn during the internship.

> "In a way, I would like to be reminded about why it is that I am doing what I am doing – that there is a bigger target there that my work is helping to achieve – that the daily tasks, *my daily tasks*, actually matter and contribute to the target"

Gen Zers felt that especially in bigger organizations, it is easy to lose touch with the purpose of your work and they look at supervisors to make the connection to a bigger picture tangible. Hence, especially one on one discussions gained popularity amongst Gen Z, because they allow for individual and private way of receiving feedback and the possibility of reciprocity. Receiving thoughtful feedback does not only connect the individual to the purpose of their work but contributes to a safe atmosphere and a feeling of support. Gen Zers reported one-on-one discussions with their supervisor to be the most preferable way to receive feedback, however, they also noted that it would be beneficial to receive it from colleagues, too. Working in a proximity to one's supervisor avails feedback to feel more meaningful and relevant as the supervisor has seen you work and is able to give you timely and accurate feedback. Gen Zers recounted that otherwise the feedback may feel less relevant and disconnected. Not working with your supervisor may also create confusion and a conflict in one's sense of belonging.

Consequently, the *sense of belonging* was named one of the key factors in making the organization and its culture feel safe and identifiable. Furthermore, even though the experience of meaningfulness is *episodic* and *personal,* it is difficult to experience without the sense of belonging. Gen Zers find establishing an organizational culture of *openness*, *communality* and *support* important. A good organizational culture is viewed to unite individuals and create team spirit as well as the idea of "we" instead of just "me". The sense of belonging was said to also stem from doing things together and getting a feeling of being part of something greater than oneself. In addition, having things in common with your co-workers increases communality, but this is hard to achieve if you belong to a minority, for example, if you are the only woman in an organization, or the only person of colour or young age. Corporate professionals recount that this can be achieved best by placing these values in the heart of the organization. By acquiring talent that is a match with the organization's values, through a transparent and open recruiting process enhances the chances of diverse and communal personnel. Which again, comes down to structures, to the heart of doing things with the employees and their wellbeing in mind.

Being able to cooperate with others, work together towards common goals and have a *supporting environment* were recounted to enhance meaningfulness. Gen Zers report that collegial feedback, or just the acknowledgement that you have helped someone, are important to building and maintaining a supportive atmosphere. In addition, *flexibility* was reported by Gen Z to contribute to their wellbeing.

> "I feel like, work flexibility is very important to my wellbeing, just being able to work from home and go to the office when you feel like it – it kind of feels like the flexibility came rumbling with Covid-19"

Flexibility was seen enhance meaningfulness indirectly by increasing wellbeing and helping with tiredness, as one can sleep longer if they do not need to travel to work. It also enables doing sports or getting some fresh air during the day. Gen Zers would like organizations to encourage their employees to take meetings on a walk and communicate clearly when it is possible and which meetings need to be taken at a desk. The ways to enhance the experience of meaningfulness are manifold and can not be generalized to include everyone. This chapter mentioned examples from the lives of a few Gen Z individuals who, even though in this context are presenting their generation, ultimately only speak for themselves.

6   Conclusions

This chapter presents the conclusions that have been derived from empirical data and existing literature. Firstly, the aim is to provide answers to how organizations can enhance the mental wellbeing and experienced meaningfulness of Gen Z employees. Moreover, based on the interviews with Gen Zers, some guidelines regarding the consideration of Gen Z in the workplace and the enabling conditions for meaningfulness are provided. The conclusions are presented according to themes that emerged during the analysis which was conducted abductively as a dialogue with the empirical data and literature. Later in this chapter also the practical contributions are explained and lastly, the limitations and implications for future research are discussed.

6.1   Theoretical contributions

The interviews support the three-dimensional approach to meaningful work by Martela and Pessi (2018) who have suggested that meaningful work constitutes of *significance, broader purpose,* and *self-realization*. The findings introduce many instances where Gen Zers mention that they want to have the connection and impact to a bigger picture (broader purpose), want to do something that is meaningful to them and others (significance) and be able express themselves authentically and to have control over their work (self-realization). Phrases like; "what I do is significant", "I can truly impact something bigger than me" and "there is trust in me, that I can handle the tasks assigned to me and that I have the freedom to decide how and where I execute them" further emphasize the connection to theory. While Gen Z appears to experience meaningfulness of work similarly to studies, there seems to be some divergences between literature and empirics in how to best enable it for Gen Z.

Existing literature recognises means to enhance work meaningfulness and employee wellbeing, yet no previous studies were conducted on those subjects focusing on Gen Z. There are some differences between the means to enhance work meaningfulness and mental wellbeing that are assembled in the synthesis in figure 9 and the means allocated towards Gen Z that are presented in figure 10, below. For example, Gen Zers gave emphasis on sense of belonging and communality and the professionals emphasized the need for proper structures to uphold wellbeing. Literature on the other hand accentuated more on components like autonomy and job variety. Figure 10 can be viewed as an

updated version of figure 9 that considers the characteristics and needs of Gen Z. Hence, the guidelines, for organizations to better care for and foster the mental wellbeing and experienced meaningfulness of Gen Z employees, are scrutinized under four main directives: *care, communicate, contribute* and *create culture* (four Cs), visible in figure 10. These directives are derived from empirical data, yet strongly supported by existing studies.

CARE
- Supportive environment
- Communality
- Sense of belonging
- Emotional intelligence

COMMUNICATE
- Feedback
- Reciprocity
- Bigger picture
- Availability

CONTRIBUTE
- Structures and practices
- Opportunities for development
- Challenging tasks
- Flexibility

CREATE CULTURE
- Values as base
- Trust and openness
- Transparent, equal and diverse
- People in the core
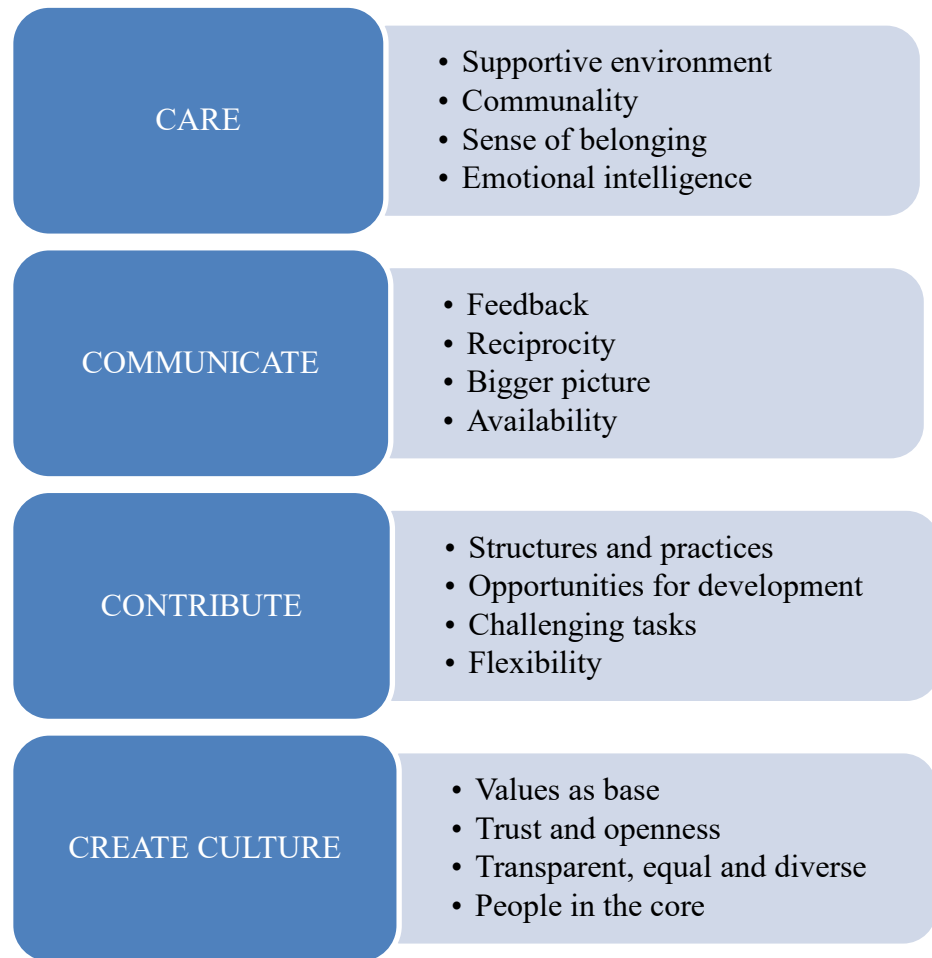
Figure 10   The four Cs: Care, communicate, contribute, and create culture

The figure 10 and its four main means to enhance mental wellbeing and meaningfulness of Gen Z employees are inspired by a framework created by Sahimaa (2020) in his master's thesis "Leading with meaning – Care, Empower, Lead the way, Equip and Communicate – The role of foremen and managers to foster the sense of meaning at work." While Sahimaa's five pillars (CELEC) advice managers how to "lead with meaning", the four Cs are not limited to managers and have been assembled with specifically Gen Z and their attributes in mind. Even tough, the four Cs were formulated

during this research, the listed means are nowhere near seminal. Similar conclusions can be found also in positive psychology's motivation theories. For example, the Maslow's hierarchy of needs discloses belongingness and competence to be needs that originate from an individual's requirement for warm interpersonal relationships and environmental mastery and argues them to be necessary for wellbeing. Herzberg's motivation–hygiene theory suggests motivating factors to influence job satisfaction and to rest on an individual's need for advancement and personal growth, achievement, recognition, responsibility and work itself. Whereas Elton Mayo suggests that providing feedback makes employees more productive. (Positive psychology 2021) Ergo, many of the means that enhance employees' wellbeing have been discovered in motivation theories to also impact motivation and productiveness.

6.1.1 Care

The first guideline for organizations: *care*, was formulated based on several elements in empirics that expressed the desire for a safe and caring environment. During the interviews, all Gen Zers mentioned some form of care as a factor they require from organizations in order to feel mentally well. The literature too, mentions a supportive environment and positive relations as factors that increase mental wellbeing. For example, according to JDR theory, supervisor support was deemed to effect employee wellbeing directly, and indirectly via meaningful work. The empirics really emphasized the important role played by team managers, and the time they spend leading people instead of managing things. Employees become most engaged with their immediate work community and concurrently they have the biggest impact on an individual's mental wellbeing at work.

According to literature and supported by the interviews, organizational care is often most visible in the behaviour and actions of immediate managers, and they are usually the ones who have the biggest impact on their employees' wellbeing. Their emotional intelligence, ability to share information and give feedback can be huge factors in making or breaking the employees' sensation of a supportive environment. This is supported by literature and numerous studies have been made on managers' role in employees' engagement, job satisfaction and wellbeing as well as which leadership style best supports employee wellbeing. Also, COR theory names leadership style to play a significant role in enabling employees to experience meaningfulness and leaders to be able to promote wellbeing by

providing recourses and by being responsive, sincere and open. Additionally, a lot of research has been conducted on organizational culture and how it is linked to wellbeing.

While literature names several relevant means, like supportive environment, for organizations to care for their employees, it seems that some Gen Zers require more than that. Communality stands out from the interviews with Gen Z and according to them, in addition to managers and team leaders, the work community and colleagues have a huge impact on the perceived meaningfulness and mental wellbeing at work. They want to be recognized, appreciated, and cared for by their colleagues and to belong in their community. Several Gen Zers expressed their desire for an open and family like work community where even personal things can be discussed freely without judgement. However, this was not the preference of every Gen Zer and just like with every generation there are differences between individuals.

According to Frank Martela, recognizing that employees are people with feelings and becoming aware of the possibility that an employee may burn out, can be helpful and lead to better consideration of employees and their recourses. "If the workload is too large – even if everything else is well, no one can work sustainably with too long hours and too much work – getting tired is inevitable." Regarding employees that are new to the work life, there needs to be policies and structures in place. According to a head of HR, people sometimes just drift into doing tasks unrelated to their job description or might try to over exceed as they are not sure what they are being evaluated for. "Employees need to be aware what they are in charge of and how they are being measured." Unclear roles and goals increase stress and uncertainty which have a negative impact on wellbeing. For new employees, it is even more important that they are guided to the right direction, which sometimes means teaching and communicating them what is enough.

6.1.2 Communicate

The second guideline: *communicate* refers to organizations' possibility to enhance their employees' experienced meaningfulness and mental wellbeing by communicating the bigger picture, giving feedback and being available and reciprocal. Feedback needs to be given frequently enough, and professionals agree that there is an urgent need for more organizations to create a culture of feedback. The findings are in line with literature that communicating the bigger picture or the broader purpose of one's work to environment enhance the experienced meaningfulness of one's work. The means "communicate"

appears in CELEC and is strongly supported also by other leadership literature. Considering the meaningful work literature JDR model and JC model name feedback as a resource to enhance wellbeing. However, there seems to be a deviance in the noteworthiness of autonomy compared to feedback in the empirical findings from interviews with Gen Z and previous studies. According to Frank Martela (interview 4.2022), the two most central factors in enabling the experience of meaningfulness are sensation of autonomy and of broader purpose. However, autonomy was not emphasized in the discussions with Gen Zers, who seemed to put much more weight on the importance of feedback.

In the interview with the researcher Frank Martela, it was concluded that it is possible that as Gen Z are in a vulnerable and new stage of life where they might not yet feel comfortable in work life, they have a heightened need for feedback, support and guidelines. Whereas it might be that employees who are accustomed to the norms of working life require more autonomy and the importance of feedback decreases simultaneously as their self-confidence and knowledge of their own skills and abilities increases. Consequently, this would mean that employees, no matter the generation, who are new to the labour market require more feedback and less autonomy, and the ratio might shift with time and accumulated experience.

6.1.3 Contribute

While the meaningful work literature names providing resources like opportunities for development and skill variety, it does not discuss specific organizational structures that are needed according to experts to enable the values and care to be seen and felt by employees. The JCT and JDR theories bring up job variety, task significance and other job characteristics that enhance work meaningfulness, but according to interviewed professionals also organizational level structures such as, career path plans, mentoring programs and practices that ensure equal treatment, fair pay and advancing possibilities despite the employees' personal tendencies to speak up for themselves, are needed. Gen Z are quick to move on from organizations' that do not contribute equally to the relationship. For Gen Zers to be happy in a work place they want to see effort from the company's side too to become committed to the organization.

Regarding the means how organizations can contribute to their employees' wellbeing, flexibility was brought up as an important matter by Gen Zers who felt it has an impact

on both experienced wellbeing and meaningfulness. Existing theories emphasize the role of autonomy, the definition of which includes self-determination over one's work and flexibility can be seen as such. Flexibility, as it is seen by Gen Z: "flexible working hours and possibility to choose to work remotely", does not surface in meaningfulness literature, yet it is possible that the importance of flexibility as a factor to increase wellbeing and meaningfulness has strengthened as late as over the space of past three years due to Covid-19. The Pandemic has affected work flexibility arrangements, such as remote work and increased autonomy in many fields. As the Pandemic is not fully over yet, all its consequences have not been thoroughly studied and the older theories have not yet been adjusted to these changes.

In addition to flexibility, organizations need to set boundaries, too. As the internet generation is accustomed to being online and because of around the clock possibilities to stay in touch, time and place have lost their meaning. People have new and different possibilities compared to what they used only 15 years ago, and it is also the responsibility of organizations to draw boundaries between work and free time and express clearly when and what is expected of employees. The experts note that some, especially younger employees, are far too diligent in their work for it to be durable in the long run and that the expectations and role descriptions need to made clear by the organizations.

6.1.4 Create Culture

Organizations should really invest in creating an organizational culture where employees are able to thrive and feel well. Desirable culture elements are trust and openness and these values should be at the heart of operations to truly be seen by employees. Literature and the interviewed professionals agree that organizational cultures that have people in the core have the employees with highest wellbeing. For Gen Z the qualities of transparency, equality and diversity were also highlighted. The interviewed Gen Zers reported to desire a culture that does not glamorize or idealize overtime work but rather that the culture has more soft values embedded. Gen Zers and professionals alike agreed that caring needs to woven deep into the organizational culture to be experienced by employees. It needs to be more than words or occasional wellbeing workshops and seminars.

Literature on organizational culture reports that a supportive and caring organizational culture provides employees with conditions that optimize their wellbeing. The Gen Zers

reported that they as employees want to be seen and heard as individuals with their specific skillset, needs and aspirations. Similar outcomes are visible in motivation theories and positive psychology. Like mentioned previously, Gen Z want to have individual treatment in terms of deciding where and how they work and having flexibility in their work. Allowing flexibility requires an atmosphere of trust and support, instead of strict boundaries, limitations, and supervision. This is in line with literature, and decades worth of leadership and management research has changed from strict Taylorism to preferring softer approaches like authentic or ethical leadership. Several studies have been made on different leadership models and their effects on wellbeing, it seems however, that more important than the exact applied management trend, is the organizational atmosphere and the managers' emotional intelligence and ability to be empathetic.

6.2   Practical contributions

This research, along with the theoretical contributions, provides organizations with practical implications and recommendations. The empirical findings bring forth many shortcomings and collisions between Gen Z wants and needs and organizations' current practices. This is not surprising, as not many have yet realized the disparity of the truly global and outspoken Generation Z in comparison with the older generations. Nevertheless, this indicates how necessary it is for organizations to recognize the need to enhance the mental wellbeing of Gen Z employees and address the role played by meaningful work, in order for them to attract the most talented employees and ensure a sustainable working life.

The first recommendation for managers is to *invest in education and increase knowledge* about Gen Zers mental wellbeing and means to enhance it. The findings and especially the discussions with Petteri Kilpinen, accentuated the need for more education on mental wellbeing matters on every level in organizations, yet especially managers. Kilpinen highlighted the role of managers as *people leaders,* their responsibility in the wellbeing of their employees and the importance of emotional intelligence. According to Kilpinen "Emotional intelligence is a skill that ought to be practiced by managers on all levels, not just human resources." Managers need to make time for people leading as, especially immediate managers are in a great position to form a productive reciprocal relationship if

they take the time to really explain and listen. By showing interest they can make employees feel seen and heard, which is one of the most basic desires every person has.

The second recommendation is to *implement values on a strategic level and invest in preventive wellbeing practices* and to not outsource employee wellbeing. Studies have shown it to be more profitable – for employees, organizations and society – to be proactive rather than try to fix an occurring problem. Mental wellbeing issues are most common cause for early retirement, and it is not only the responsibility of an individual to take care of their health. Organizations need to help change the societal structures and make a difference towards a more sustainable and humane way of treating employees and securing their mental health. Once employees' wellbeing becomes a part of strategy, it will be measured and a truly a priority.

The third recommendation is to *communicate the bigger picture and create a culture of feedback*. Employees' experienced meaningfulness and wellbeing can be enhanced by increasing the amount and quality of given feedback. Organizations would also benefit from asking their employees how they want to receive feedback. Especially one-on-one discussions gained popularity amongst Gen Z, because they allow for an individual and private way of receiving feedback and the possibility of reciprocity. Having frequent one-on-one development discussions was strongly suggested by professionals also. Additionally, getting knowledge of one's performance is said to enhance the experience of meaningfulness and unclear roles or goals increase stress and uncertainty which have a negative impact on wellbeing. For new employees, it is even more important that they are guided to the right direction, which sometimes means teaching them what is enough.

The last recommendation is to *consider the generational differences*, stereotypes and how they affect for example, the selection, training and employees' possibilities to find their work meaningful. The generational differences affect the cohesion and cooperation at the workplace and if not managed correctly might bring about conflicts. Gen Z are also different with what they expect from organizations, and they have high expectations for their careers. To be able to attract the best talents, and increase engagement and motivation, organizations should consider Gen Zers expectations and adjust accordingly. Gen Z want to be seen and heard as individuals with their specific skillset, needs and aspirations. They want to have individual treatment in terms of deciding where and how they work and have flexibility in their work.

6.3   Limitations and future research

As was mentioned in the chapter (4.4) evaluating the trustworthiness of this study, one of the main limitations of this research was the limited size and scope. The resources to conduct this study were limited time and skill vice, as this was a first timer's one person effort. Only seven Gen Zers with relatively similar backgrounds were interviewed. Hence, this study represents only a small part of Gen Z and as it is, this study addresses meaningfulness of work in a limited area of work, focusing on knowledge workers. To gain more knowledge about what makes Gen Z work meaningful, a more ample, preferably a global multi-industry study is needed. For example, it might be useful to conduct research with several case companies in different fields and sizes to examine whether the line of business, internationality or the structure of the company has an impact.

This study focused on mental wellbeing, yet people are psycho-physio-social unities, and it is important to also take care of and study further the other dimensions of employee wellbeing. Especially on less knowledge intensive fields, there are more physical strains which need attention. Remote work is another factor that is not paid much attention to in this study, yet it greatly affects employee wellbeing. A significant part of expert organizations have at least partly, changed to remote working. While the means to enhance employee mental wellbeing presented in this study, are undoubtedly beneficial, they are not explicitly designed for remote work and for future research it would be useful to examine how these means can best be modified to fit remote work.

7 Summary

The aim of this study was to find out how organizations can increase the mental wellbeing and experienced meaningfulness of Gen Z employees. The sub-objectives were to gain insight about what makes work meaningful for Gen Z employees and about how corporate wellbeing professionals with experience in international business view the current work life. In addition, one of the subobjectives was to find out how organizations can utilize the employees' experience of meaningfulness to enhance their mental wellbeing.

This study commenced with a literature review and proceeded to form a theoretical framework based on existing research. Not much research has been conducted on Gen Z as employees, how their mental wellbeing can be impacted or what makes work meaningful specifically for them. However, Gen Z special characteristics were considered and a summary of their attributes was conducted. This study identified the complex and subjective nature of meaningful work, as well as the three dimensions; self-realization, broader purpose and significance, the presence of which, makes work feel meaningful. The concept of mental wellbeing was defined in a way that enables the consideration of one's personal assessment of their quality of life, the six-dimensional model of psychological wellbeing and the context-specific measures regarding employees' experiences at work. The developed framework illustrates the means that enhance employee mental wellbeing, the resources that can be used to impact the experience of meaningfulness and factors that affect them both.

Qualitative research was conducted in an ethical manner, using empirical primary data. The data was collected through semi-structured one-on-one interviews and group interviews and the questions were formulated based on the organizational table's themes. The expert interviewees were selected based on their current and previous job experience including international business experience, knowledge on employee wellbeing and willingness to participate. Representatives of Gen Z got selected based on their age, education, minimum work experience of two years and interest in the subject of meaningfulness and wellbeing. All of the interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed with the help of the themes in the operationalization table and the theoretical framework.

The findings from the empirical research supported the existing literature to a large extent, yet also some new findings, particularly concerning the experienced meaningfulness of Gen Z emerged. This research concluded that organizations can best enhance the mental wellbeing and meaningfulness of Gen Z employees by caring, communicating, contributing resources and creating a suitable organizational culture. This study also dispensed managerial implications in the form of four recommendations and discussed limitations and future research.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 Definitions of meaningful work, by Martela and Pessi (2018, 4–5)

TABLE 1 | The definitions of meaningful work in various sources and our interpretation of which of the three dimensions are referred to in the given definition. "Other' means that the definition refers to a dimension other than the three we concentrate on.

	Construct	Definition	Context	Purpose	Significance	Self-realization	Other
Hackman and Oldham, 1975, p. 162	Experienced meaningfulness of the work	"The degree to which the employee experiences the job as one which is generally meaningful, valuable, and worthwhile"	Job design theory		X		
Schwartz, 1982, p. 640	Meaningfully structured work	"Arranged to allow all persons to act as autonomous agents while performing their jobs"	Philosophical ethics			X	
Arneson, 1987, p. 517	Meaningful work	"Work for which pay is received is interesting, calling for intelligence and initiative, and in which the worker has considerable freedom to determine how the work is to be done and a genuinely democratic say over the character of the work process and the policies pursued by the employing enterprise"	Philosophical ethics			X	X
Kahn, 1990: pp. 703–704	Psychological meaningfulness	"A feeling that one is receiving a return on investments of one's self in a currency of physical, cognitive, or emotional energy"	Employee engagement			X	
Walsh, 1994, pp. 243–244	Meaningful work	"Work which offers opportunities for eudaimonian activity" that involves "the development of skills and capacities"	Philosophical ethics				X
Renn and Vandenberg, 1995, p. 282	Experienced meaningfulness of the work	"The extent to which an individual believes his or her job is important vis à vis the individual's own value system"			X		
Bowie, 1998, p. 1087	Meaningful work	"Meaningful work is work that is freely entered into, that allows the worker to exercise her autonomy and independence, that enables the worker to develop her rational capacities, that provides a wage sufficient for physical welfare, that supports the moral development of employees and that is not paternalistic in the sense of interfering with the worker's conception of how she wishes to obtain happiness"	Kantian ethics			X	X
Ciulla, 2000: 225	Meaningful work	"Morally worthy work undertaken in a morally worthy organization"	Nature of modern work	X			
Britt et al., 2001, p. 55	Meaningful work	"(a) Being engaged in important and relevant work [–] and (b) experiencing events [at work] that put [the work] in a broader contextual framework"	Stressful events and work trauma	X	X		
Sparks and Schenk, 2001, p. 858	Belief in a higher work purpose	"Purposes 'more important' than simply making money"	Transformational leadership	X			
Sarros et al., 2002, p. 287	Meaninglessness	"Inability to comprehend the relationship of one's contributions to a larger purpose"	Work alienation	X			
Chalofsky, 2003, p. 74	Meaningful work	"That which gives essence to what we do and what brings a sense of fulfillment to our lives"	Meaningful work as such		X		X
Pratt and Ashforth, 2003, p. 311	Meaningful	"Work and/or its context are perceived by its practitioners to be, at minimum, purposeful and significant"	Meaningful work as such	X	X		
May et al., 2004, p. 14	Experienced meaningfulness	"The value of a work goal or purpose, judged in relation to an individual's own ideals or standards"	Employee engagement	X	X		
Arnold et al., 2007, p. 195	Meaningful work	"Finding a purpose in work that is greater than the extrinsic outcomes of the work"	Transformational leadership	X			
Cheney et al., 2008, p. 144	Meaningful work	"Work that contributes to a personally significant purpose"	Organizational communication	X	X		

(Continued)

TABLE 1 | Continued

	Construct	Definition	Context	Purpose	Significance	Self-realization	Other
Grant, 2008, p. 119	Experience of meaningfulness	"A judgment of the general value and purpose of the job"	Task significance	X	X		
Berg et al., 2009, p. 974	Personal and social meaning	[perceiving work] "as intrinsically enjoyable and as making valuable contributions to society"	Callings	X		X	
Bunderson and Thompson, 2009, p. 40	Sense of work meaning	"My work is significant"	Neoclassical callings		X		
Lieff, 2009, p. 1384	Meaningful work	"The realization of one's potential and purpose purpose—the point at which a person's passions, strengths, and core values interact synergistically in his or her work"	Career development in medicine	X		X	
Rosso et al., 2010, p. 95	Meaningful work	"Work experienced as particularly significant and holding more positive meaning for individuals"	Meaningful work as such		X		
Fairlie, 2011, p. 510	Meaningful work	"Job and other workplace characteristics that facilitate the attainment or maintenance of one or more dimensions of meaning"	Human resource development				
Beadle and Knight, 2012, p. 433	Meaningful work	Work "ordered toward goods of excellence pursued within social practices"	Virtue ethics		X		
Steger et al., 2012a, p. 323	Meaningful work	"Work that is both significant and positive in valence"	Meaningful work as such		X		X
Lips-Wiersma and Wright, 2012, p. 657	Meaningful work	"An individual subjective experience of the existential significance or purpose of work"	Meaningful work as such	X	X		
Roessler, 2012, p. 88	Meaningful work	"Being able to realize his talents and abilities, his "individuality," in the work and the producing activity in a self-determined way"	Philosophical ethics			X	
Hirschi, 2012, p. 480	Work meaningfulness	"The amount of significance people perceive in their work"	Callings		X		
Tummers and Knies, 2013, p. 861	Work meaningfulness	"An employee's perception that he or she is able to understand the complex system of goals in the organization and its relationship to his or her own work"	Leadership in public sector				X
Berg et al., 2013	Meaningfulness	"The amount or degree of significance employees believe their work possesses"	Job crafting		X		
Schnell et al., 2013, p. 543	Meaning one finds in work	"A sense of coherence, direction, significance, and belonging"	Meaningful work as such	X	X		X
Chalofsky and Cavallaro, 2013, p. 332	Meaning one finds in work	"The extent to how much the work reflects who we are"	Meaningful work as such			X	
Allan et al., 2014, p. 545	Meaningful work	"The subjective experience that one's work has significance, facilitates personal growth, and contributes to the greater good"	Meaningful work as such	X	X	X	
Raub and Blunschi, 2014, p. 11	Meaningful work	"Requires that employees understand the significance of what they do"	Corporate Social Responsibility		X		
Yeoman, 2014, p. 249	Meaningful work	Work "constituted by the goods of autonomy, freedom, and dignity"	Business ethics		X	X	
Lepisto and Pratt, 2017	Meaningful work	"(a) Realizing one's self through work, and (b) being able to account for worth of one's work"	Meaningful work as such	X	X	X	
Bailey et al., 2017	Meaningful work	"Work that is personally enriching and that makes a positive contribution"	Meaningful work as such		X	X	

Appendix 2 Interview questions

Questions directed at	The main interview questions
Gen Z	What does meaningful work mean to you?
	What makes your work meaningful?
	How does experienced meaningfulness affect your mental wellbeing?
	What is required from an organization for you to feel mentally well?
Corporate professionals working in MNCs	Are there big differences between the organizations you have worked with?
	What are the current wellbeing policies?
	How do organizations take care of employees' mental wellbeing?
Professionals with experience from consulting organizations about wellbeing and or meaningfulness	What are the means to enhance employees' experienced meaningfulness?
	What should organizations do to enhance employee mental wellbeing?
	How are meaningfulness and mental wellbeing connected?