Is “Mine” Meaningful in Creative Work?

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Recently scholars have acknowledged and focused their research on the social processes that enable creativity (e.g., Bruns, 2012; Elsbach & Flynn, 2013; Hargadon & Bechky, 2006; Harrison & Rouse, 2014; Harvey & Kou, 2013; Skilton & Dooley, 2010). What has largely escaped scholars’ attention is how these social processes influence creative workers' experiences as they create and, more specifically, how the social nature of creative work relates to people's ability to derive a sense meaningfulness from the process of creating. Meaningfulness, a sense of purpose or significance, is an important outcome because it relates to one’s motivation, satisfaction, and production at work (Hackman & Oldham, 1975; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski, 2010).

Based on the determinants of meaningfulness, one might assume that creative work is likely to provide an opportunity for employees to experience meaningfulness. For example, work on psychological ownership suggests that people can develop a sense of meaningfulness through claiming that an idea or job is “mine” (Pierce, Jussila, & Cummings, 2009). Creative workers are likely to develop ownership over their ideas, since they invest their time energy and selves into their development (Pierce, Kostova, & Dirks, 2001). Moreover, in considering the properties of creative jobs, creative work has the potential to be both challenging and complex (i.e. enriching) and therefore provides an opportunity to experience meaningfulness (Oldham & Cummings, 1996; Oldham & Hackman, 2010).

But, today’s creative work is highly collaborative and iterative. In highly collaborative, interdependent work people may not be able to clearly identify their contributions to the final product and individual creative workers may not be responsible for any one complete piece. Moreover, in a highly iterative process based on prototyping, ideas and work are continually discarded. Therefore many ideas and pieces of work may not directly lead to visible outcomes and it may be difficult to see how one’s discarded work impacts others. These aspects call into question whether today’s creative work provides an opportunity for task identity and task significance—two key characteristics of jobs believed to foster meaningfulness (Hackman & Oldham, 1975). In considering an ownership path to meaningfulness, it might be difficult to claim any idea as “mine” and the ideas one does claim as “mine” may be discarded routinely. The driving question for this research project, then, is can and how do people find meaningfulness in collaborative, iterative creative work?

Through a qualitative, inductive field study at a video game studio, I explored this question. Based on 92 interviews, 829 diary entries, and 38 hours of observation I developed several key insights: 1) People seek and find meaningfulness in collaborative creative work in different ways. In the context of constant iteration, people who seek meaningfulness through a sense of idea coalescence are able to find meaning in a sense of belongingness (i.e. meaningfulness at work), whereas people, who seek meaningfulness through working on ideas alone (i.e. meaningfulness in work), often cannot find the meaning they desire because a sense of individuality cannot be satisfied. 2) Shared ownership is important not only because it creates space for multiple people...
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to invest in a single idea, but because it reinforces and supports a sense of belongingness that buffers the experience of idea rejection by people outside of the group. 3) Without considering both individual-idea relationships and interpersonal relationships simultaneously, we cannot understand why some people develop resilience to idea iteration and why others chose to exit collaborative creative work.

REFERENCES


