ARTICLE

Meaningful work in startup organizations: reflections on emerging paradoxes

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Abstract

The research aims to understand meaningful work in startups. Theoretically, the literature on startups and meaningful work are reviewed, and the five paradoxes of meaningful work proposed by Bailey et al. (2019) constitute the theoretical reference for conclusive propositions on the results after their analysis. This qualitative, exploratory-descriptive study is based on in-depth interviews with eight entrepreneurs and professionals working in startups. The data were analyzed using the technique of meaning core analysis and interpretation, and the following factors emerged: learning; growth and autonomy; importance of interpersonal relationships; social contribution; and organizational utility. The five paradoxes of Bailey et al. (2019) led to unique reflective conclusions about meaningful work in startups, pointing to directions for future studies.

Keywords: Meaningful Work. Startups. Paradoxes.

Os sentidos do trabalho no contexto laboral de startups: reflexões sobre paradoxos emergentes

Resumo

A pesquisa objetiva compreender os sentidos do trabalho emergentes no contexto laboral de startups. Teoricamente, as literaturas sobre startups e sentidos do trabalho são revisadas e os cinco paradoxos sobre sentidos do trabalho, propostos por Bailey et al. grama de Pós (2019), constituem a referência teórica para proposições conclusivas sobre os resultados, após sua análise. Metodologicamente, trata-se de uma pesquisa qualitativa, de caráter exploratório-descritivo, baseada na escuta em profundidade a oito empreendedores e profissionais que trabalham em startups. Os dados foram analisados mediante a técnica de análise e interpretação dos núcleos de sentido, tendo emergido os seguintes sentidos: aprendizagem; crescimento e autonomia; valorização das relações; contribuição social; utilidade organizacional. Os cinco paradoxos de Bailey et al. (2019) ensejaram conclusões reflexivas peculiares sobre os sentidos do trabalho em startups, apontando caminhos para estudos futuros.

Palavras-chave: Sentidos do trabalho. Startups. Paradoxos.

Significado del trabajo en el contexto laboral de las startups: reflexiones sobre las paradojas emergentes

Resumen

La investigación tiene como objetivo comprender el significado del trabajo en el contexto laboral de las startups. Teóricamente, se revisa la literatura sobre startups y los significados del trabajo, y las cinco paradojas del significado del trabajo propuestas por Bailey et al. (2019) constituyen la referencia teórica para las proposiciones conclusivas sobre los resultados después de su análisis. Metodológicamente, se trata de un estudio cualitativo, exploratorio-descriptivo, basado en entrevistas en profundidad con ocho emprendedores y profesionales que trabajan en startups. Los datos se analizaron utilizando la técnica de análisis e interpretación de núcleos de significado, y surgieron los siguientes significados: aprendizaje; crecimiento y autonomía; valorización de las relaciones; contribución social; utilidad organizacional. Las cinco paradojas de Bailey et al. (2019) condujeron a conclusiones reflexivas únicas sobre el significado del trabajo en las startups, señalando direcciones para estudios futuros.

Palabras clave: Significados del trabajo. Startups. Paradojas.

INTRODUCTION

Startups emerged in Silicon Valley, a region hosting the largest startup ecosystem (Oliveira & Ribeiro, 2018), and are at the epicenter of contemporary capitalism (Barbosa & Mansano, 2023). In an increasingly digital world, they symbolize technological advancement and are considered a priority for economic growth (Kozusznik, Aaldering, & Euwema, 2020).

Startups distinguish themselves from traditional companies by seeking a repeatable, scalable business model rather than implementing a pre-defined one (Blank, 2013). Given these characteristics, startups function in uncertain conditions regarding the conception of products and services, necessitating rapid consumer interaction to achieve favorable outcomes (Ries, 2011). They are characterized by their disruptive innovative potential in products, services, and work organization, influencing workers' subjectivity, and operating in a flexible environment subject to restructuring (Barbosa & Mansano, 2023; Rocha, 2022).

Research involving startups has focused on areas such as sustainability analysis, the entrepreneurial ecosystem, and value generation (Reis, Galvão, Fleury, & Carvalho, 2017; Oliveira & Zotes, 2018; Karambakuwa & Bayat, 2023; Wei, Lee, Jia, & Roh, 2023), while studies on startups and workers are still in their early stages (Faria, 2019; Henry, 2020; Melenchion, 2023). This highlights the need for research specifically addressing this gap within hybrid studies, such as organizational studies and people management.

According to Colomby and Costa (2018), work meaningfulness arises from the apprehension and intrapsychic analysis of work meanings, configuring itself within a personal dimension. Given its unique nature, work meaningfulness involves subjective aspects of the work context (Bianchi, 2018), which implies the challenge of elucidating such meanings, as their definitions are intertwined with individual perceptions and influenced by collective and cultural factors (Costa, Marques, & Ferreira, 2020).

Facing the identified gap and acknowledging the significance of comprehending the work meaningfulness in innovative settings, the research began with the following inquiry: What are the meanings of work in the labor context of startup organizations? The goal was to comprehend work meaningfulness in this specific context.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

Startups and organizational contexts innovation

Startups spread worldwide between 1990 and 2000, during the internet "bubble" in the United States, marked by the emergence of Dotcom companies (Gonzaga, Figueiredo, Souza, & Passos, 2020). Although startups occupy increasing space in the contemporary market and are recognized for their innovative potential, there is still no consensus regarding their definition, format, and characteristics (Melo, Tavares, Felix, & Batista-dos-Santos, 2019). Different individuals immersed in this context may provide divergent definitions (Rocha, 2022). This diversity of interpretations may indicate the complexity of startups, mainly because they represent new possibilities for entrepreneurship and managing resources (Rocha, 2022).

Despite this multiplicity of definitions, certain aspects throughout the literature help characterize them. Startups are considered technology-based companies at an early stage, distinguishing themselves through innovation and a business model based on recurrence, scalability, and profitability (Ries, 2011; Blank & Dorf, 2012; Blank, 2013), operating with high risks, uncertainty and team changes (Brattstrom, 2019), which complicates management and increases failure probability (Munir & Beh, 2019).

Recurrence, profitability, and scalability unfold into inherent dynamics in startups, as proposed by Blank (2013), by differentiating lean startups from traditional companies in strategy, organization, and error handling. Regarding strategy, the dynamic is the quest for a unique business model, unlike traditional companies that establish and execute business plans.

Concerning organization, while traditional companies are structured into functional departments and individuals are hired based on their experience and capabilities, in startups, the organizational logic revolves around agile teams, with hiring focusing on learning capability, agility, and speed, with involvement being essential (Ries, 2011).

Another distinctive feature of startups is their approach to managing errors. Unlike conventional companies where mistakes are seen as exceptions warranting termination, startups embrace failures as an anticipated part of the process. Correcting these errors involves iterating on ideas and discarding ineffective ones (Blank, 2013).

At a macro level, startups epitomize the present era of flexible capitalism (Oliveira & Ribeiro, 2018). They focus on development and productivity to underpin accelerated expansion (Oliva, Couto, Santos, & Bresciani, 2019), distinguished by their attribute of flexibility. This aligns with digital transformation shifts on labor (Rodriguez-Lluesma, García-Ruiz, & Pinto-Garay, 2021).

Oliveira and Ribeiro (2018) posit that the labor context of startups harbors contradictions and challenges inherent to the flexible phase of capitalism, as it provides flexible working conditions linked to novel forms of influence on workers' subjectivities. Consequently, these individuals face professional profiles hitherto unknown and sometimes imbued with superhuman demands.

In an increasingly mutable work context, Faria (2019) points out that many individuals see startups as an opportunity to build their self-image and establish their place in the world.

Work meaningfulness and its paradoxes

In this research, it is suggested that the state of meaningful work is intrinsically linked to the quality of the bonds that workers establish with what they produce, with whom they produce, how they produce, the quantity of production, and the location of production, thereby shaping the subjective formation of these bonds. It is understood that, through this process, workers are able to convey their identity, both to themselves and to others. Thus, meaningful work serves as both a means to fulfill material necessities and a crucial factor for identity development and social integration (Irigaray et al., 2019; Dejours, 1998).

In the contemporary setting, flexible capitalism has contributed to the fluidity of professional identity, which adapts to varying career advancement perspectives (Rohm & Lopes, 2015). The profound transformations in the nature of work, associated with the restructuring of productive logics and organizational frameworks, generate objective, subjective, and relational impacts (Rodriguez-Lluesma, García-Ruiz & Pinto-Garay, 2021). These changes thereby alter work meaningfulness forged through labor experiences (Neves, Nascimento, Felix, Silva, & Andrade, 2018).

The conceptualization of work meaningfulness is characterized by a lack of theoretical consensus, encompassing various conceptions and epistemological viewpoints including cognitivist, existentialist, socio-historical, constructionist, and the Psychodynamics of Work (Pereira & Tolfo, 2017; Rocha, 2022). Concerning variables associated with the meanings of work, a plethora of studies emphasize factors such as needs, autonomy, social legitimation, professional expectations, realization, and social impact, among other dimensions (Costa et al., 2023; Drencheva et al., 2023; Ferraz & Fernandes, 2019; Morin et at., 2007).

In light of this intricate theme, scholars like Bailey et al. (2019), critique static scientific narratives surrounding work meaningfulness, arguing that conceptual tensions demand a broader openness to intertemporal and interspatial discourse.

Bailey et al. (2019), also propose a series of unanswered questions manifested as paradoxes concerning work meanings. The initial paradox reveals the inherent drive of individuals to seek meaningful work to meet internal needs, yet this pursuit can also lead to detrimental excesses. The subsequent paradox links the significance of work to self-realization and self-actualization, while highlighting its reliance on others for actualization.

A third paradox underscores the dual nature of meaningful work, derived both subjectively and within an external and objective context that shapes individuals' interpretations of what is meaningful. The fourth paradox posits that although meaning is subjectively "found" and not susceptible to managerial control, it is simultaneously normatively regulated through structures like job roles (Bailey at al., 2019).

Lastly, the fifth paradox articulated by Bailey et al. (2019), references the connection between the intrinsic value of one's labor and various spatial, temporal, and material contexts, ranging from transient to partial or episodic. These paradoxes are vital for a holistic comprehension of work meanings, particularly in contemporary settings such as startup environments.

METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES

A qualitative exploratory-descriptive research was conducted to access the dynamism of a specific social reality such as startups, based on the experiences of individuals immersed in this specificity (Kloep, Roese, & Peifer, 2023). Guided topic interviews were conducted following the validation of the interview script in a pilot study, enabling access to narratives that unfolded into texts open to interpretation, revealing values, norms, symbols, and representations of groups in specific contexts (Minayo, 2009).

The interviews were audio-recorded after participants signed the Free and Informed Consent Form, following the protocols of the Research Ethics Committee of the researchers' affiliated institution, in line with Resolution 510/2016 of the National Health Council of the Ministry of Health of Brazil (Ministério da Saúde), which provides applicable norms to research in Human and Social Sciences fields.

To select interviewees, diversity criteria regarding the sizes and sectors of startups were utilized (Box 1). The field research was concluded upon empirical data saturation, reached by the eighth interview (Pires, 2008).

Box 1
Profile of interviewees

Names (fictitious)	Sex	Age	Education	Office	Job level	Time at startup	Time in position	Startup sector	Startup size
Daniel	M	23	Incomplete Higher Education	Trainee	Operational	1 year and 9 months	1 year and 9 months	Health	Big
Emily	F	22	Incomplete Higher Education	Scrum Master	Tactical/ Operational	1 year and 10 months	Four months	Health	Average
Helena	F	23	Complete Higher Education	Project Analyst	Tactical/ Operational	1 year and 1 month	1 month	Retail and Wholesale	Small
Alan	M	23	Incomplete Higher Education	Trainee	Operational	2 years and 5 months	2 years and 5 months	Professional Services	Big
Tone	M	25	Complete Higher Education	Head of Marketing and Sales	Tactical	2 years and 8 months	1 year and 6 months	Retail and Wholesale	Small
Ivan	F	30	Complete Higher Education	Relationship manager	Tactical	9 months	9 months	Education	Average
Julie	F	21	Incomplete Higher Education	Product manager	Tactical	6 years	1 year	Professional Services	Small
Rafael	M	24	Complete Higher Education	Relationship manager	Tactical	3 years and 4 months	6 months	Education	Big

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

After multiple readings of the 81 pages of transcriptions, data was analyzed using the technique of meaning core analysis and interpretation, adapted by Mendes (2007) from Bardin's content analysis technique (2011). The analytical process, assisted by AtlasTI software, was tailored through the following stages: i) full material reading; ii) selective reading of context units; iii) identification of meaning cores; iv) coding; v) categorization. Themes were categorized by similarity of semantic, logical, and psychological meaning (Mendes, 2007).

The categorization results were submitted for validation by peers (Eastwood, Davies, & Rees, 2023) through three rounds involving qualitative researchers in the fields of people management, labor relations, and organizational studies, as well as an audit of the informational processes conducted by a licensed consultant by AtlasTI owner company.

RESULTS

Theory and empiricism dialogues

Five predominant factors were delineated during the analytical process, namely: learning; growth and autonomy; importance of interpersonal relationships; social contribution; and organizational utility.

Learning is highlighted as a substantial motivator for the survey participants. Helena, when conveying the importance of her work in startup settings, prioritizes learning, emphasizing its expansive nature (intersectoral learning) over the specific skills usually associated with the compartmentalized structures of conventional companies. Conversely, Alan draws attention to the rapid pace of learning transformations in startups, portraying these businesses within a distinctive market-driven spatial context.

> Working at a startup for me is mainly about learning a lot and having flexibility. So, I can now engage with all departments and learn a bit from each of them." (Helena).

> Another objective (of working at a startup) is learning. As it is a market that is very attentive to current events and changes, it is a daily learning experience (Alan).

The accounts of Tom and Ivana confirm the theoretical prescriptions that in the startups learning process, there is greater allowance for error, when compared to traditional companies, as long as the same error is not constantly repeated by the worker:

> They always told me "You can make mistakes". [...] until you understand the error as part of a process and that you will not be punished for it, and you have the ability to be bold, in fact, to take risks, to put your cards on the table and try to make something [...] you will have to break several things down in your head. [...] your mistake won't be the problem, the problem will be that you don't make different things wrong (Tom).

> Even though the allowance for error seems to be greater in speech than in reality, there is still more allowance for error than in a more traditional business (Ivana).

Thus, even though, according to Ivana, the permission for error is greater in discourse than in practice, the interviewees identify that it exists, a fact that can contribute for the person to feel free to carry out their activities and learn through them, assuming certain risks and possibilities for innovation. Indeed, learning associated with error is assumed in the reference literature on startups (Blank & Dorf, 2012). According to notes by Ferraz and Fernandes (2019), learning favors the attribution of meanings to work, as, through the acquisition of different skills and knowledge, the subject tends to aspire to new opportunities to evolve their professional career.

Another aspect mentioned by the interviewees, which directly cooperates with learning in the work context, is the ease with which workers can participate in construction processes in startups, structuring certain processes, or even sectors, an unusual scenario in traditional corporations:

> For example, my friend works at a startup and they were developing a selection process, thinking about the selection process and such. You won't see this as easy in a traditional company, because you don't have so much of this "ah, there are no structured processes, let's go here together and build it". So, it doesn't happen so simply (Ivana).

> In fact, it was another huge challenge, it was a sector within the company that didn't exist, so we created it from scratch, me and two other people (Emily).

> Here at the company, a lot of things were created from scratch, right? So it's a classic thing, when I was as a pre-sales leader, there wasn't a very well-defined sales process, right? There was a map there, but the specification of what that procedure would be like did not exist. So from the reading I did, studies, chatting with other people, we created the sales model itself and we managed to capture more than was possible before, right? In other words, we managed to impact the final result there (Rafael).

By giving workers the chance to apply their knowledge and skills in structuring new processes and sectors, the scope of startups contributes to the subjects' conception of meanings of work. This situation also aligns with that pointed out by Henry (2020), reinforcing that it is essential that workers can test their capabilities in varied tasks, enhancing their learning through new discoveries and the creation of innovative solutions.

In the second factor – Growth and Autonomy – emerge strongly associated, where autonomy is evoked due to various flexibilities in startups, but also as a result of the rapid growth experienced by the workers.

In relation to what the interviewees narrate as professional growth, there are emerging peculiarities: a) the relationship of growth with various learning experiences (Helena); b) the quantity and speed of changes between positions (Helena, Julie, Rafael); c) horizontal changes (Helena, Julie); d) radical vertical changes (Julie, Rafael); as well as e) a lack of standardization in the nature of job titles (Helena, Julie). This latter characteristic suggests an indiscriminate equivalence between managing things and people (Julie), as well as an ambiguity in the type of job content: leader and specialist (Helena).

> During this... a little more than a year, technically I changed my position three times, my portfolio changed three times, and this is a change that, despite one of them being in the same area, from leader to specialist, I had different focuses and had to learn different things (Helena).

> I started there as an intern, spent less than a year, I think about eight months as an intern and then I became a project manager, manager of the engineering team [...] I must have spent about six months with that and moved to product management. This jump (from junior to management) doesn't quite line up when I step out of the startup bubble (Julie).

> Following my trajectory, I joined as an intern and within three years I managed to become a manager. Taking another example, there is our CEO, who joined as an intern about five years ago, and today he is CEO, president, so it is very fast growth (Rafael).

It is common that, over time, startups make changes to their teams, changing the roles of some members or specializing them (Brattstrom, 2019). In this situation, there may be several opportunities arising from the growth of startups and their staff, benefiting, mainly old employees, through job promotions, considering that such subjects already know the company's conduct and practices, in addition to the established trust relationships.

Autonomy stands out both in the monetary reward resulting from growth, and in the flexibility in managing work hours.

According to Tom, he keeps working at startups because he earns a good salary for doing something he enjoys, which wouldn't necessarily happen in the same way if he changed jobs. Julie presents a similar conception, regarding the interest in the financial gain provided by the work, but it is clear that such gain is related to the interviewee's level of seniority in the context of startups, a fact that, according to her, is very different in large corporations, in which her age and experience would place her at the junior level:

> And today it's also really about my career, because for me to get another position, another salary... you know? [...] my salary is good and I do something cool. That's it (Tom).

> The point... is also to pay the bills [...] Because I'm still in college, this leap (from internship to management) isn't as suitable when I leave the startup bubble. So, on the one hand it helped a lot with my career in startup companies, on the other hand it really hurt my career because, for a more open company,

> I don't have a reference for seniority and time, so I end up being seen as a junior or intern. Today a profile that is extremely coveted among startups, but it is unlikely that I will be able to get a position at the same level in a larger company or even in a more stabilized startup. [...] I see this repeating itself with colleagues who also made these leaps (Julie).

As Morin et al. (2007) point out, autonomy predominantly refers to the financial independence that remuneration provides to the worker. It is interesting to note that, in the case of Tom and Julie, they both hold leadership positions in the startups where they work, which gives them satisfactory financial rewards.

In addition to the monetary incentive, so that work is meaningful, some interviewees mentioned the importance of the flexibility provided by startups, allowing individuals to have autonomy to organize their work schedules and be able to experience personal moments:

> (I work in a startup) it's not even because it's dynamic, it's different and you'll learn all the time, it's a challenge. It's for the qualities of work, for well-being. I work from home, so I have a great quality of life, I can set my own schedule, it's very flexible (Emily).

> It offers me the flexibility I need to live my life. If I need to, I put it in my status here that I'm absent and then I don't need to respond to anyone at that time, understand? I'm going to do things here at home that I couldn't do at other times, which is spending time with the animals, participating a little more in my sister's education, so today I study with her, she's doing distance learning, right? So, there are many things that I wouldn't be able to do if I hadn't been working in this format (Helena).

Helena highlights that such flexibility exists, mainly, as an advantage of her position which, being a leader, grants her such autonomy, as well as for Tom, who adds the satisfaction of not feeling tied to a specific place, but rather having the freedom to alternate between performing his activities and taking breaks (Barbosa & Mansano, 2023).

> I really like having some freedoms, like making a little of my own work schedule. So I have some schedules that are fixed, where I need to be working, but there are others that I can make flexible, so I can say "no, in the morning I will need to be off, so I will work in the afternoon and at night", right? And, of course, these are all advantages of my position, because there are people in the company with different positions, who don't have the freedom that I have, because of their position, so this is, for me, what makes sense today (Helena).

> I'm in a leadership position, so this makes it easier, gives me more flexibility. [...] Here, if I want to change something, I say to myself, "Hmm, let's change here" and we change (laughs). I think, "What am I going to do tomorrow? Tomorrow I want to do something like that" so let's do it, understand? [...] Like "ah, I'm being super unproductive right now and I'm going to take a walk. And when I get back I'll keep trying to do it, because it's not urgent" or "Ah, I'm going to have a day off on Wednesday". So that's cool, this flexible schedule helps me a lot, this autonomy so you don't feel trapped, right? You are not tied to any place (Tom).

In fact, according to Henry (2020), autonomy is also related to the freedom that the worker has to plan and express themselves, as well as the possibility for the individual to be accountable for their own work, providing opportunities for individuals to conquer their place in society through of meaningful work.

Furthermore, some interviewees were convinced that work is an important part of life, but that it does not represent all of it:

> I also want to have the possibility of not making this work all I have, right? Work is a very important part of my life, I can't say that "oh, I would be happy if today I had time off and I didn't have to work anymore", I wouldn't be happy, I like working. But at the same time, the possibility of setting limits and having other focuses is also very important to me. So it should act much more as a complement than as the only thing I'm focused on, right? (Helena).

> I think learning about what work is the first step. Nowadays I know that work is part of my lifestyle and that's it, it's not my supreme source of wisdom and my being, understand? Like, it's a part of me, important, but it's a part (Ivana).

The reports from Helena and Ivana demonstrate that work is seen as a part of life, not the entirety, in the sense that it is not the primary path in the pursuit of happiness. Thus, it is observed that interviewees perceives work from a perspective that favors self-fulfillment, because, according to Rohm and Lopes (2015), if people seek the meaning of their lives only at work, they are compromising their potential of self-realization.

The third factor – Quality of relationships – sheds light on harmony between workers, where aspects such as alignment of values, relationships of trust and connection between people were mentioned by interviewees that corroborate the conception of work meaningfulness. For Rafael, practically everyone involved in the startup where he works adheres to the company's culture and shares growth as a value, facts that motivate him to stay together.

> The people are very good, they are always there... they really respect the company's values. [...] So, all people, practically all, are very suited to the values. And that's what motivates the most, right? Because the people, well, they really adhere to the culture and are very focused on growth, right? (Rafael).

Tom presents the concept of trust between people, which helps people feel free to be themselves in the work environment, metaphorically invoking the idea of security in transparency:

> You are in an environment where you feel safe and people trust you. [...] It's very positive because I can be who I am, right? No barriers, no masks and stuff, so that's really cool (Tom).

> Furthermore, the reports indicate the existence of strong connections among workers in startups, mentioning generational aspects, implying a shared worldview understanding (Helena), as well as a type of recognition of equality (Ivana).

> Interaction with people, as it is often made up of young people, people who also have similar thoughts to me, or even to complement this part of learning (Helena).

In a startup it is much easier to look at yourself and say "this person has something like me, understand? This person connects with me", so I think there is this, that for me, startups are absurd like that, they are really essential (Ivana).

According to Henry (2020), the quality of relationships in the work context is a characteristic that considerably influences the construction of the meanings of work. By establishing good professional relationships, the individual can be inspired by new ways of expressing themselves, thinking and reacting to work situations, creating interpersonal meanings and contemplating new perceptions regarding the meanings produced at work.

Regarding the fourth factor – Social Contribution – many interviewees emphasized, with satisfaction, that their work in startups generates impacts on the lives of other people, associating them with a purpose and highlighting the ethical manner and speed of the social impact as something significant.

> I feel that I directly solve a demand that society has. I effectively participate in solving a societal problem. Mainly because it's in the health sector, I have this feeling that I'm not just helping with anything, I'm helping to save lives, it's one of our values and we can see this in practice (Emily).

> Normally, we can help people who don't have food at home, people who, sometimes, need that money to survive, because there are people who need to buy morphine to live, you know? [...] What motivates me most is, in fact, contributing to this purpose that we are all trying to fulfill (Alan).

> It's like a sense of importance to society, don't you know? I feel important to be transforming something in society. So I think that's the main point, the guy looks at me and "wow, he's doing something that will impact society ethically, quickly too, right? (Rafael).

In this way, the subjects' work begins to acquire meaning as they realize how much they are capable of positively impacting society, the organization and even themselves through their profession (Irigaray et al., 2019). Following the perspective of the impact of work on the workers themselves, Ivana explains that her work in education startups, called edtechs, allows her not only to believe in a purpose, but also to have her ego fulfilled:

> I worked at two edtechs, because, even though I didn't deliver directly there, being in this market is like it somehow fulfills your ego. You believe in a purpose, you work close to it in some way, it's like I'm supplying an energy, something that I'm feeling. So I think that was very strong. It's sad for you to say, but it is true (Ivana).

It is noteworthy the evaluative uncertainty of Ivana regarding "feeding her ego" by working in education. However, the meaning of work is also associated with the dynamics of ego fulfillment (Dejours, 1998), as it is a source of identity. Work is a bonding source for the worker with their feelings and has the potential to communicate their identity to others and to themselves.

According to Alan, the company's purpose also relates to the internal audience, motivating him to be in the startup and contribute in the best way possible to the well-being of other employees:

> The purpose of the company motivates me, having these demands motivates me, especially in relation to employees, since I am HR, like making their work easier, making everything they planned happens, everything they want happens (Alan).

However, Tom emphasizes that it is important to demystify some aspects related to work, such as the search for your dream job, saying that not all people will work with purpose, some of them will work "screwing up", with the existence of both cases being fundamental to the world:

> I think we need to demystify the whole concept of a job. I think people really mystify what it means to work, what it means to have a job. I don't think it's supposed to be a cool thing. If it's cool, it's already a big plus. If it's not bad, it's already something big, you know? I think there are other things that are meant to be cool. If you get paid to do something that's super cool, maybe it's too much to ask (laughs). There is a quote from a book "a job to love", which says that not everyone will work with purpose, someone needs to make screws. And the world needs that to happen, right? (Tom).

In this sense, Ivana demonstrates that, although startups manage to enchant and convince many workers to adhere to the company's purpose as if they were their own, it is important for the subject to identify their personal purpose, considering that adherence only to the purpose of an organization is not something functional, given the possibility that, at any moment, the worker can be fired and his purpose lost:

> I ended up buying into the idea for a while that this was my purpose. [...] And, whether you like it or not, when you are orphaned by that passion, by that sparkle in your eye for something and often you can't see that you can find it in your life, regardless of work, you will look for it in a corner that seems closer to that, and a startup can bring this message in a simpler and clearer way. [...] But, I understand that your purpose has to match the company, but this proposal of you buying the company's purpose is not so functional, understand? Because when you are fired or when you have to leave, what is your purpose, right? So there is this question. I think that companies that are in this field, in general, still don't quite understand how to distinguish, they use it as a form of enchantment, as if it were Disney magic, but they can't sustain it because it's not sustainable (Ivana).

Therefore, the existence of a purpose to be followed is important for the perception of social utility and, consequently, for the conception of work meaningfulness, since, as pointed out by Henry (2020), the meanings of work are established in its usefulness and its contributions to society, giving purposes to work and explaining the reasons for the existence not only of the organization, but, sometimes, of the workers themselves.

Finally, the fitfh factor – Organizational utility – demonstrates that the interviewees perceive the usefulness of their work for the company's results, and it is important for them to see the positive impact and usefulness of each little job performed:

> I could see, I looked at the macro and I could see that all the small work that we ended up doing there affected the entire company (Daniel).

> I have this participation (in the results), I can see... it's a well labored task, right? I feel like that little bit that I do helps (Emily).

> I see that I was a small piece of work for us to achieve a greater result. So today I see it in a more subjective and objective way, because these two things are very important to me. If I'm working and not generating anything, it doesn't make sense to me either. So it's something that I try to constantly evaluate (Helena).

In fact, when the dedication of workers bears fruit and results in positive impacts for the organization and society, there is a primordial scenario for the conception of work meaningfulness (Henry, 2020). Therefore, the recognition of the usefulness of the work performed by the subject, issued by peers, superiors and clients, is of fundamental importance for the worker to see the relevance of the results he generated and to be able to attribute meanings to his work (Morin et al., 2007).

From this perspective, the interviewees reported the happiness they feel when achieving results through the performance of their duties. According to Ivana, Julie and Rafael, the best days at work are the days when goals and results are achieved:

> The good days were when we achieved results, you know? There was a week when I was very discouraged and then there was a day when we were almost closing a deal, then it closed and then I thought "this is the moment when I see that I am happy in my work". So I think that when you also achieve the result, those are happy days (Ivana).

> One of the best things is seeing your work running, right? If you are more in touch with the result, then I see this, for example, when a delivery comes out on the right day, the customer doesn't complain about the deadline, or a customer renews their contract saying that they received good attention, something like that, so I can see my results there (Julie).

One day we hit our sales target (laughs), this is the most fantastic day (Rafael).

The aforementioned reports corroborate that meaningful work promotes satisfaction for workers when they are able to appreciate their activities and the results they generate.

CONCLUSION

Emerging issues on the paradoxes of work meaningfulness in startups

What is work meaningfulness in the labor context of startups organizations? Respondents answered this question as follows: learning; growth and autonomy; the valorization of relationships; social contribution; organizational utility. In light of the objective to deeply understand these meanings, the analyses yield conclusions about the paradoxes of work meaningfulness in these contexts (review section 3), which are now shared as reflective questions to guide future studies.

Regarding the first paradox, the factor of learning allows for several reflections: could the relationship between error and learning in startups be an example of the natural drive of internal needs for meaning taken to harmful excess? What is the error limit for learning in meaningful work? Would "learning how to deal with mistakes", with increasingly diversified errors, be an example of a boundary exceeded in startups? Assuming that human fallibility is inherent and constitutes a fundamental anthropological dimension, what is the subjective impact when the act of making mistakes transitions from a condition to a prescription? What meaning is subjectively established when an ontological condition, against which humans generally struggle, is transformed into a teleological and instrumental condition? Is this a harmful excess within the startup context? Are these young workers learning to be errant in order to succeed in their careers?

The second paradox evokes reflections related to the factor of the valorization of relationships: considering that respondents value relationships in startups based on criteria such as transparency and equal recognition. Are self-fulfillment and self-actualization in these contexts increasingly dependent on an "equal-other"? Is there a risk to identity processes that depend on differentiation rather than homogenization? Are startups becoming work contexts where the logic of recognition is inverted? Is it a matter of recognizing oneself in the other rather than the other recognizing oneself in one's differentials? Are these workers at risk of succumbing to sameness?

The factors of social contribution and organizational utility help to reflect on the third paradox, especially concerning the relationship between the concepts of purpose and results. These factors illuminate how external contexts, such as startups and society in general, resonate with both objectivity, demonstrated by the increasing demand for results, and subjective representations, highlighted by the normalization of shared purposes. This leads to the inquiry: To what extent does the subjective assessment of work meaningfulness in startups derive from external discourses that associate startups with purpose and social impact? Are these workers shaping the intrinsic meaning of their work relationships based on externally stereotyped meanings?

The factor of growth and autonomy evokes reflections on the fourth and fifth paradoxes. Concerning the fourth paradox, the meanings of work are subjectively specific to a particular context; consequently, they may not be under managerial control. However, they are simultaneously influenced by external normative regulations, such as job roles. An inquiry may arise: Could the rapid growth in startups, evidenced by sudden shifts in roles and income increments, function as an external normative regulation that subjectively impacts how these workers perceive working in startups rather than their actual work?

Are these young workers beholden to this type of growth to the extent that they cannot envision themselves in other types of organizations? Does this type of growth impose rigid career limits? Is the relationship between growth and autonomy in startups contradictory, representing a constrained autonomy where individuals can progress within the confines of the startup environment, thus fostering an internal career advancement?

For the fifth and last paradox, work meaningfulness pertains to a generalized sense of the value of someone's work but is also linked to spatial, temporal, and material contexts that might be temporary, partial, or episodic. Are these workers, with growth and autonomy restricted to the startup bubble, losing the generalized sense of their work's value? Are the temporal and spatial contexts of startups making the value of these individuals' work too particularized? As Bailey et al. (2019) argue, there are always tensions that require openness to broader intertemporal and interspatial explanations of the meanings of work.

The limited literature involving the relationship between work meaningfulness and startups context was both a limitation and an opportunity for the knowledge constructed in this research. The disseminated results aim to contribute to filling this gap and to establishing an innovative research agenda by addressing the emerging paradoxes in the context of startups concerning the meanings of work. It is suggested that future research address emerging aspects of the results, such as the subjective, relational, and career challenges faced by this new generation of "startup workers".

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