

# Purpose: A New Paradigm with Implications for Policy, Business and Individual Lives

AYŞE YEMİŞCİGİL

*Ph.D. Candidate in Behavioral Science, Warwick Business School  
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GLOBAL RELATIONS FORUM YOUNG ACADEMICS PROGRAM  
ANALYSIS PAPER SERIES No.5

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## ABOUT GRF

*Global Relations Forum (GRF)*, founded in 2009 with the support of prominent Turkish leaders in business, government, and academia, is an independent, nonprofit membership association providing a platform for engaging, informing, and stimulating its members and all interested individuals in all matters related to international affairs and global issues.

GRF intends to advance a culture that rewards the fertile tension between passion for intellectual diversity and dedication to innovative and objective synthesis. It nurtures uninhibited curiosity, analytic inquiry, rational debate, and constructive demeanor as the elemental constituents in all its endeavors. It contributes to the shared understanding of and aspiration for humanity's path to peace, prosperity, and progress as an accessible, inclusive, and fair process for all.

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The program is designed to culminate in the publication of either a policy or an analysis paper authored by the young academic, which is then published as part of the Policy Paper Series or the Analysis Paper Series. The author benefits from the experience of GRF members in crafting her paper. However, the publication reflects the views of the young academic and not the institutional views of GRF or the individual positions of the commission members.

This paper, entitled “*Purpose: A New Paradigm with Implications for Policy, Business and Individual Lives,*” is authored by Ms. Ayşe Yemişçigil as part of the *GRF Young Academics Program Analysis Paper Series*. GRF thanks her for her contribution and commitment to this effort.

GRF convened the following group of distinguished members to evaluate and guide Ms. Ayşe Yemişçigil’s paper:

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GRF is grateful to all members who participated in the evaluation commission for their invaluable insights and informed guidance, as well as for the time and effort they dedicated to the program.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Ayşe Yemişçigil** is a doctoral student in behavioral science at Warwick Business School, UK and a Visiting Fellow at Harvard Kennedy School, US. Broadly, her research focuses on well-being and work. She is currently studying factors that affect people's sense of meaning and purpose in life, including work-life transitions, the social utility of jobs, and relationships in and outside of work.

Ayşe holds a bachelor's degree in economics and business administration from Koç University, Turkey, and a master's degree in behavioral and economic sciences from Warwick University. She was awarded the Vehbi Koç Scholarship towards her bachelor's degree, and Jean Monnet Scholarship towards her master's degree.

Ayşe has previously worked as a research assistant at the London School of Economics, UK. In parallel to her academic work, she has also been working as a consultant to help companies integrate the latest scientific insights into their operations. Within this capacity, she has partnered with Heart Mind Design (Turkey), Core Leadership Institute (US), and The Behavioralist (UK), among others.

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# Purpose: A New Paradigm with Implications for Policy, Business and Individual Lives

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## Abstract

People have a unique capability to understand and question the broad purpose of their lives, or the purpose of their specific activities in life (i.e., working, or learning at school). Recent scientific evidence confirms that the search for purpose is not a trivial pursuit; purpose is a fundamental human need that can lead to health and success. Hence, policy-makers and practitioners in business, education, and health are increasingly interested in understanding how to help people gain a sense of purpose to promote well-being and prosperity. In this paper, I first present a review of this interest in purpose in business and policy and discuss the broad-scale social changes that have potentially made purpose important in the Western, developed world in the 21st century. I then aim to help readers gain a deeper and clear understanding of this construct, purpose, by presenting a conceptual framework that draws upon existing theories and evidence in psychology. Next, I make the case for why purpose matters by outlining its benefits. For this, I review evidence on the positive links between perceptions of purpose and i) physical and mental health outcomes and longevity, ii) employee productivity, iii) students' academic performance, and iv) organizational performance. In the final section, I discuss potential pathways for individuals to live a purposeful life; for managers to help employees have an increased understanding of their purpose at work; and for policy-makers to promote and maintain purpose in life at scale.

*The truth is that as the struggle for survival has subsided, the question has emerged — survival for what? Ever more people have the means to live, but no meaning to live for.*

Viktor Frankl<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Introduction

For centuries, it was the philosopher's or theologian's job to ponder the meaning and purpose in people's lives. Today, such concerns seem to be of interest to broader sections of the public. Policy-makers, for instance, are exploring ways to measure citizens' happiness and satisfaction with life in an effort to develop the right policies to improve people's lives.<sup>2</sup> These policy efforts are informed by cutting-edge scientific research which suggests that happiness does not only entail feeling good, but also having a meaning and purpose in life.<sup>3</sup> Evidence emphasizes the necessity to consider purpose alongside pleasure to help people flourish. Reflecting this shift in our understanding of happiness, several OECD countries are already investigating ways to monitor people's experiences of purpose in life, with the aim of aligning their policies with this broader notion of well-being.<sup>4</sup>

Purpose has also attracted significant attention from public health scholars and practitioners. The last decade has witnessed a surge of evidence documenting the links between having a purpose in life and physical and mental health and longevity. As described in Section 3, longitudinal studies have shown that purpose could be protective of a range of widespread and costly health risk factors such as Alzheimer's disease, coronary heart disease, stress and depression. Purposeful people were also found to be more engaged in healthy behaviors that are difficult to sustain such as flossing or exercising. Hence, researchers and practitioners in public health are now exploring ways to cultivate purpose at scale, especially among older people who are at a greater risk of lacking a sense of purpose and experiencing health problems.<sup>5</sup> Social enterprises like Encore, for example, are working towards this vision by helping retired elderly individuals to find opportunities for volunteering.

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<sup>1</sup> Viktor E. Frankl. *Man's Search for Meaning*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985, 21.

<sup>2</sup> Global Happiness Council, *Global Happiness Policy Report 2018*. Accessed August 1, 2018. <https://www.worldgovernmentsummit.org/api/publications/document?id=304a8bc4-e97c-6578-b2f8-ff0000a7ddb6>.

<sup>3</sup> National Research Council. 2013. *Subjective Well-Being: Measuring Happiness, Suffering, and Other Dimensions of Experience*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/18548>.

<sup>4</sup> Global Happiness Council, *Global Happiness Policy Report 2018*.

<sup>5</sup> Lisa Rapaport. "Can Having a Purpose in Life Keep You Strong in Old Age?" Reuters. August 31, 2017. Accessed August 2, 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-purpose-strength-aging/can-having-a-purpose-in-life-keep-you-strong-in-old-age-idUSKCN1BB2BK>.

In education, purpose has become an important paradigm, partly in response to rising levels of boredom and despair among students. To tackle this problem, and to contribute to young people's healthy development, education specialists emphasize the need to help young people develop a purpose in life through school activities.<sup>6</sup> For instance, the Project on Purpose and Values in Education (PAVE) is organizing co-curricular activities at 24 colleges in the US, including Harvard and Stanford universities, where students can reflect on big questions about life, focusing especially on meaning, value and purpose. Similarly, the Institute of Positive Education in Australia has trained educators from a thousand schools across the globe on integrating positive purpose into their programs. In Mexico, too, a university with 52,000 students defines itself as Positive University and commits to "preparing people with a purpose in life."

Finally, purpose has emerged as a new buzzword in business. In the last few years, the largest professional services firms – including Ernst and Young (EY), Deloitte and Price Water House Coopers (PwC) – have all participated in initiatives to investigate and promote the role of purpose in business.<sup>7</sup> There was even a roundtable meeting on purpose at the 2016 World Economic Forum. More and more, managers are seeking ways to understand and communicate the purposes of their organizations in order to motivate their employees and appeal to their customers. Consultancies like Heart Mind Design are helping managers to discover the purpose of their organizations, and to integrate it into their business activities. Furthermore, firms like Core Leadership Institute are training managers in global corporations such as Unilever, General Electric and Siemens to gain a better understanding of their leadership purpose and become more motivated and effective leaders.

It is worth noting that this widespread cultural interest in purpose is a 21st-century phenomenon. Researchers tracked the words "purpose in life" and synonymous phrases in books published between 1800 and 2008, and in academic articles published between 1969 and 2013.<sup>8</sup> The results demonstrated that purpose-related phrases started to appear with increasing frequency since the 1980s, and the rate of increase has become exponential since the beginning of the new millennium (see Figures 1 and 2). However, a similar trend did not emerge when researchers searched resources in Spanish, French and Chinese or even in British English. This suggests that the US might be driving this cultural emergence of purpose. Yet, as described above, it seems that purpose has been spreading through the global networks of knowledge and business since 2008 and has now become an important paradigm across the world.

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<sup>6</sup> William Damon. *The Path to Purpose: How Young People Find Their Calling in Life*. New York: Free Press, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Deloitte. *Culture of Purpose – Building Business Confidence; Driving Growth, 2014 Core Beliefs and Culture Survey*, Deloitte, 2014. Accessed July 31, 2018. <https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/us/Documents/about-deloitte/us-leadership-2014-core-beliefs-culture-survey-040414.pdf>; Price Waterhouse Coopers. *Putting Purpose to Work: A Study of Purpose in the Workplace*. Price Waterhouse Coopers (PwC), 2016. Accessed July 31, 2018, <https://www.pwc.com/us/en/purpose-workplace-study.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Gabriel B. Grant "Exploring the Possibility of Peak Individualism, Humanity's Existential Crisis, and an Emerging Age of Purpose." *Frontiers in Psychology* 8, (September 5, 2017). doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2017.01478.

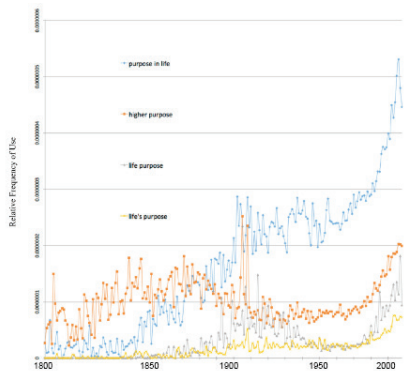


Figure 1: Frequency of “purpose in life” and synonymous phrases in the Google Corpus of English books from 1900 to 2008 (Grant, 2017).



Figure 2: Frequency of academic publications containing the phrase “purpose in life”; published between the years 1960 and 2013 (Grant, 2017).

Although it is not within the scope of this article to discuss why the interest in purpose is emerging now, it is worth highlighting some ideas that can shed light on this question. Sociologist Corey Keyes points to several societal shifts in the 21st century which might have brought purpose to the forefront of the public psyche.<sup>9</sup> First, people live longer lives and experience a great deal of uncertainty about their future. This might be causing people to seek new ways to spend the years added to their lives in a meaningful way and to find stable goals and ideals that can reduce feelings of uncertainty. Second, Keyes suggests that the “gradual un-scripting of social life” has brought more flexible and diverse social norms about marriage and childbirth, which might be leaving people with more personal responsibility about how to live and question their purpose in life.<sup>10</sup> The third reason Keyes highlights is concerned with modern institutions like government, work and schools. Within the last decades, these institutions have excessively prioritized short-term and materially oriented aspirations, and they have given rise to scandals of governance and adverse societal outcomes (i.e., inequality). All the while, an increasingly greater share of people’s lives is spent at work or at school. These factors may be leaving people’s need for purpose unfulfilled, alerting both people and institutions to reclaim their purpose.

In sum, purpose seems to be penetrating the daily lives of people and transforming societal institutions across the world. Some people even claim that

<sup>9</sup> Corey L. M. Keyes “Authentic Purpose: The Spiritual Infrastructure of Life.” *Journal of Management, Spirituality & Religion* 8, No. 4 (2011): 281-297. doi:10.1080/14766086.2011.630133

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 283.

the world is “entering an age of purpose.”<sup>11</sup> Given this tremendous interest in purpose and its appeal to individuals and institutions from all layers of society, it is important to have a clear understanding of what purpose is, and why it matters. This article aims to answer these questions by drawing upon the disciplines of Psychology, Economics and Management. It concludes by offering ideas to individuals, managers and policy-makers on how to cultivate purpose.

## 2. What is Purpose?

Purpose matters to the extent that it is perceived and experienced by humans. Hence, it is worth turning to psychology to gain a clear understanding of what purpose is. In this section, I summarize the most prominent psychological theories of purpose and the empirical evidence that supports these theories. In doing so, I follow a chronological order, starting with psychiatrist Victor Frankl's account of purpose from 1946. In his influential book *Man's Search for Meaning*, Frankl (1985) describes the immense torture that was inflicted upon him and other inmates during the three years he spent in a Nazi concentration camp. He argues that those who could survive the harsh indignities of their circumstances were people who had a personally meaningful purpose. Whether it was a hope to reunite with loved ones, projects to complete or spiritual faith, purpose helped people endure adversities and survive. Frankl suggested meaning and purpose are foundational motivations for human beings – much more important than the widely accepted drives for pleasure and power. He also emphasized that in the absence of a purpose, a wide range of psychopathologies arise, like boredom, addictions and obsessions. As a psychiatrist, he developed logotherapy, a method of psychotherapy that is aimed at helping individuals find meaning and purpose in life. As recognized by Frankl as well, his conceptualization of purpose – with its emphasis on survival and adversity – can best be summarized by Nietzsche's words: “He who has a ‘why’ for which to live, can bear with almost any ‘how.’”<sup>12</sup>

As the positive psychology movement shifted the emphasis of psychology from the study of pathologies to the examination of a good life, purpose also started to be thought of in a more positive light – as a component of psychological well-being.<sup>13</sup> In 1989, Carol Ryff made an extensive review of the existing theories of psychological functioning and proposed that purpose in life was one of the key components of psychological well-being, along with self-acceptance, autonomy, environmental mastery, positive relations and personal growth.<sup>14</sup> She

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<sup>11</sup> Grant, “Exploring the Possibility of Peak Individualism,” 1478.

<sup>12</sup> Frankl, 1985: 97, 126.

<sup>13</sup> Martin E. Seligman “Positive Psychology, Positive Prevention, and Positive Therapy.” In *Handbook of Positive Psychology*, 3-9. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2002.

<sup>14</sup> Carol D. Ryff “Happiness is Everything, or Is It? Explorations on the Meaning of Psychological Well-Being.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 57, No. 6 (1989): 1069-1081, 1069. doi:10.1037//0022-3514.57.6.1069.

developed a scale of purpose in life that asks people the extent to which they have goals and aims that give their lives meaning. This measure was integrated into large-scale surveys and used to discover the relationships between purpose in life and various health outcomes described in Section 3. Scheier et al.<sup>15</sup> have also approached purpose as an aspect of well-being and proposed a measure of purpose in life that involves statements like: “To me, the things I do are all worthwhile,” “I value my activities a lot,” and “I have lots of reasons for living.”<sup>16</sup> It is worth highlighting that purpose is generally considered an aspect of eudemonic well-being – an approach to happiness that is frequently contrasted with the traditional view of happiness as the experience of pleasure and avoidance of pain (hedonia).<sup>17</sup> Eudemonia was first described by Aristotle as the highest good achievable in life, and his conceptualization has mostly been translated from Greek as “happiness.” This translation, however, remains controversial, because Aristotle made a strict distinction between the pursuit of pleasure and the pursuit of virtues, suggesting that eudemonia can be reached through the pursuit of excellence, the best within us, based on our unique potential (skills and dispositions).<sup>18</sup> This meant that people could experience eudemonia by engaging in activities that are in line with who they are (their values, skills and interests), but which also contribute to the fulfilment of some higher goal or goals (purpose). These activities, however, need not necessarily bring positive feelings.<sup>19</sup>

Prominent researchers in the field accept purpose and meaning as hallmark measures of eudemonic well-being and contrast these with traditional measures of happiness such as pleasure and satisfaction with life.<sup>20</sup> For instance, one study has demonstrated that people rate certain activities such as work, volunteering and spending time with children as actions that are low in pleasure but high

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<sup>15</sup> Michael F. Scheier et al. “The Life Engagement Test: Assessing Purpose in Life.” *Journal of Behavioral Medicine* 29, No. 3 (2006): 291-98, 291.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Daniel Kahneman, Ed Diener, and Norbert Schwarz. *Well-Being: Foundations of Hedonic Psychology*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation, 1999.

<sup>18</sup> Carol D. Ryff and Burton H. Singer. “Know Thyself and Become What You Are: A Eudaimonic Approach to Psychological Well-Being.” *Journal of Happiness Studies* 9, No. 1 (January 2008): 13-39. doi:10.1007/978-94-007-5702-8\_6.

<sup>19</sup> Alan S. Waterman. “Reconsidering Happiness: A Eudaimonist’s Perspective.” *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 3, No. 4 (2008): 234-252; Ryff and Singer, “Know Thyself and Become What You Are.”

<sup>20</sup> Although meaning and purpose have often been used interchangeably in the literature, there is now a consensus within the scientific community that meaning and purpose are distinct. The agreement is that purpose is one of the ingredients of a meaningful life together with other constructs such as significance and coherence (King et al., 2016). Damon et al. (2003) also emphasize that unlike meaning, purpose is externally oriented towards goals, achievements and making an impact on the world.

in purpose.<sup>21</sup> Research by Baumeister et al. has shown that people correlate a happy (vs. meaningful) life with being in the present (vs. integrating past, present and future) and being a taker (vs. being a giver).<sup>22</sup> Compared to happiness, meaningfulness was also more strongly related to thinking about one's self and identity. The same study has also shown that people associate a meaningful life more strongly with stress, worry and anxiety, even though research has not provided evidence on whether pursuing purposeful activities is indeed stressful. Although there are differences between pleasure and purpose, behavioral economists have also shown that people are driven to maximize both of these states of well-being in choosing how to spend their time.<sup>23</sup>

More recent theories approach purpose as a motivational aspect of identity rather than as an aspect of well-being. Erikson pointed to adolescence as the time when people first start to form belief systems and dedicate themselves to purposes.<sup>24</sup> Building upon this work, Damon and colleagues proposed a definition of purpose as “a generalized intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and leads to productive engagement with some aspect of the world beyond the self.”<sup>25</sup> The authors emphasized the importance of purpose for the development of identity and character while highlighting the motivational underpinnings of purpose as a determinant of life choices and commitments. Similarly, McKnight and Kashdan have likened purpose to a compass that guides lower level goals and behaviors, defining purpose as “a central self-organizing life aim.”<sup>26</sup> They also suggest that a key characteristic of purpose is its centrality, because it is at the core of a person's identity. These motivational theories emphasize that purpose is more enduring and far-reaching than low-level goals like going to the movies, and that it doesn't need to be concrete or directly achievable. Furthermore, these theories posit that purpose may initiate a psychological mechanism (i.e., behaviors, cognitions) that would generate well-being, but cannot be considered an aspect of well-being.

In sum, there have been several approaches to purpose in psychological science, and the concept has found itself a place in theories of motivation, well-being and identity. Initially, purpose was described as a fundamental human drive that is

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<sup>21</sup> Matthew P. White and Paul Dolan. “Accounting for the Richness of Daily Activities.” *Psychological Science* 20, No. 8 (2009): 1000-1008.

<sup>22</sup> Roy F. Baumeister, Kathleen Vohs, Jennifer Aaker, and Emily Garbinsky. “Some Key Differences between a Happy Life and a Meaningful Life.” *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 8, No. 6 (October 2012): 505-516.

<sup>23</sup> Daniel J. Benjamin, Ori Heffetz, Miles S. Kimball, and Alex Rees-Jones. “What Do You Think Would Make You Happier? What Do You Think You Would Choose?” *The American Economic Review* 102, No. 5 (2012): 2083-2110.

<sup>24</sup> Erik H. Erikson. *Identity: Youth and Crisis*. New York: WW Norton & Company, 1968.

<sup>25</sup> Damon et al., “The Development of Purpose.”

<sup>26</sup> Todd B. Kashdan, and Patrick E. McKnight. “Origins of Purpose in Life: Refining Our Understanding of a Life Well Lived.” *Psibologijске Teme* 18, No. 2 (2009): 303-313.

essential for survival and enduring adversity. Second, purpose was considered an essential component of psychological well-being. Third, purpose was conceptualized as a motivational construct that determines people's actions and defines who they are. At first sight, these existing conceptualizations may seem distinct, and the task of finding a common definition of purpose may seem overwhelming. However, this paper argues that there is an overarching theme that is present in all of the above-mentioned definitions: purpose represents stable, far-reaching, high-order goals that people are striving towards as they live. Furthermore, purpose has three characteristics that hold across its different descriptions:

1. Identity: Purpose connects what people do with who they are. It ties people's actions and activities to their values, skills and interests.
2. Meaning: Purpose imbues people's lives and activities with meaning. It serves as the reason for being engaged in a certain action or activity, whether it be living, working, or studying.
3. Motivation: Purpose promotes engagement and motivation in activities and guides people's behaviors and choices.

### **Is Purpose Pro-Social?**

It is important to note that some psychologists, including Damon and colleagues, highlight that purpose is directed towards making a difference in the world and for others.<sup>27</sup> The authors point to "noble" purposes that are about helping others and making the world a better place, although they also admit that some purposes may be anti-social and destructive. Keyes also suggests that "as the 'why' for living, purpose in life is recognition that one has – in both the past and future tense – important and socially useful work to perform."<sup>28</sup> Indeed, a close reading of the philosophical discourse about purpose reveals that purpose signifies the end goal of an entity (*telos*) which generally captures its usefulness for a larger whole or for the parts of a larger whole.<sup>29</sup> However, other scientists like Frankl (1985), Ryff (1989), Scheier (2006), McKnight and Kashdan (2009), have refrained from placing such an emphasis on the pro-sociality of purpose, emphasizing that scientists should not make value judgments about which purposes are good or bad because these will depend strongly on cultural and social context.<sup>30</sup> Given the current state of theoretical and empirical evidence, as of yet there is no consensus on this issue. As the scientific discourse develops, our knowledge of the pro-sociality of purpose will also grow and become more refined.

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<sup>27</sup> Damon et al., "The Development of Purpose."

<sup>28</sup> Keyes, 2011: 284.

<sup>29</sup> For a detailed discussion, see: Michael Ruse. *On Purpose*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2017.

<sup>30</sup> Kashdan and McKnight, 2009.



### 3. Why Purpose Matters

For psychologists, purpose is an end such that it is pursued for its own sake. But purpose can also be a means to ends that people value such as health, well-being and success. Below is a review of the literature on the benefits of purpose from the disciplines of Psychology, Behavioral Economics and Management.

#### 3.1. Purpose in Life and Health and Well-being Outcomes

“Purpose in Life” questions exist in large-scale, publicly available and longitudinal surveys where a wide range of information about people’s lives is collected. Within the last decade, researchers made great use of this data, demonstrating longitudinal associations between purpose and multiple indices of physical and mental health, even longevity. In these studies, researchers tested whether baseline measures of purpose in life predict health outcomes that are assessed years later. In this way, these studies provide evidence that can make stronger claims about causality, compared to correlational studies where both the predictor and the outcome are measured concurrently. At times, these studies also control for baseline measures of health outcomes, further improving our confidence that purpose might be causally affecting these outcomes.

The aforementioned longitudinal studies have shown that people who report a higher sense of purpose in life have reduced risk of Alzheimer’s disease, heart disease and disability in late life.<sup>31</sup> Purpose was also linked to mental well-being, as purposeful people showed less biological signs of long-term stress.<sup>32</sup> In a longitudinal study over 18 years, researchers found purpose to be predictive of levels and changes in multiple indices of aging well. These include lower rates of depressive symptoms and functional disability, better cognition (speed and episodic memory), better self-rated health and delayed mortality.<sup>33</sup> In fact, multiple studies have shown that purpose in life is linked to longer life expectancy.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> For Alzheimer’s disease, see: Patricia A. Boyle, Aron S. Buchman, Lisa L. Barnes, and David A. Bennett. “Effect of a Purpose in Life on Risk of Incident Alzheimer Disease and Mild Cognitive Impairment in Community-Dwelling Older Persons.” *Archives of General Psychiatry* 67, No. 3 (2010): 304-310. For heart disease, see Eric S. Kim, Jennifer K. Sun, Nansook Park, and Christopher Peterson. “Purpose in Life and Reduced Incidence of Stroke in Older Adults: The Health and Retirement Study.” *Journal of Psychosomatic Research* 74, No. 5 (2013): 427-432. For disabilities, see Patricia A. Boyle, Aron S. Buchman, and David A. Bennett. “Purpose in Life is Associated with a Reduced Risk of Incident Disability among Community-Dwelling Older Persons.” *The American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry* 18, No. 12 (2010): 1093-1102.

<sup>32</sup> Samuel Zilioli, Richard B. Slatcher, Anthony D. Ong, and Tara L. Gruenewald. “Purpose in Life Predicts Allostatic Load Ten Years Later.” *Journal of Psychosomatic Research* 79, No. 5 (2015): 451-457.

<sup>33</sup> Tim D. Windsor, Rachel G. Curtis, and Mary A. Luszcz. “Sense of Purpose as a Psychological Resource for Aging Well.” *Developmental Psychology* 51, No. 7 (2015): 975-986, 975.

<sup>34</sup> Boyle, Patricia A., Lisa L. Barnes, Aron S. Buchman, and David A. Bennett. “Purpose in Life Is Associated With Mortality Among Community-Dwelling Older Persons.” *Psychosomatic Medicine* 71, No. 5 (2009): 574-79. doi:10.1097/psy.0b013e3181a5a7c0. Patrick L. Hill, and Nicholas A. Turiano. “Purpose in Life as a Predictor of Mortality across Adulthood.” *Psychological Science* 25, No. 7 (2014):1482-1486.

In trying to explain how purpose may be leading to so many important and beneficial health outcomes, researchers admit there could be a behavioral pathway: purposeful people might be significantly better at taking better care of their health to experience such health benefits. What is more, persistent and long-term engagement in healthy behaviors would be crucial for purpose's potential effects on long-term health outcomes and longevity to materialize. There is empirical evidence that supports this proposition. In longitudinal studies, people who reported a higher purpose in life used preventive health care like pap-smears and colonoscopy more frequently over six years.<sup>35</sup> Purposeful people showed less symptoms of sleep disturbances over four years.<sup>36</sup> Finally, purposeful people are also more likely to engage in moderate and vigorous physical activity, remaining active up to 10 years longer as they shift from adulthood to old age.<sup>37</sup> There is also some correlational evidence that purpose is positively linked with additional behaviors like eating vegetables and flossing.<sup>38</sup>

There is also some evidence that purpose shapes people's response to negativity. Researchers found that people with a higher sense of purpose had better regulation of the amygdala (a center of the brain involved with stress and anxiety) after exposure to negativity.<sup>39</sup> In the lab and in real-life settings, purposeful people respond less strongly to stress.<sup>40</sup> Hence, the physical health and longevity-related benefits of purpose might also be driven by purposeful people's ability to respond to unfavorable circumstances in life.

### 3.2. Purpose at Work and Labor Productivity

Purpose can also be thought of and studied at the level of work tasks, and evidence for the benefits of this type of purpose comes from the literature on Behavioral Economics. Ariely et al. conducted two controlled laboratory experiments where participants were asked to engage in mundane, repetitive

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<sup>35</sup> Eric S. Kim, Victor J. Strecher, and Carol D. Ryff. "Purpose in Life and Use of Preventive Health Care Services." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 111, No. 46 (2014): 16331-16336.

<sup>36</sup> Eric S. Kim, Shelly D. Hershner, and Victor J. Strecher. "Purpose in Life and Incidence of Sleep Disturbances." *Journal of Behavioral Medicine* 38, No. 3 (2015): 590-597.

<sup>37</sup> Ayse Yemiscigil and Ivo Vlaev. "Purpose in Action: Purpose in Life Predicts Higher Physical Activity for up to 10 Years." *Social Science and Medicine* (forthcoming in 2019).

<sup>38</sup> Patrick L. Hill, Grant W. Edmonds, and Sarah E. Hampson. "A Purposeful Lifestyle is a Healthful Lifestyle: Linking Sense of Purpose to Self-Rated Health through Multiple Health Behaviors." *Journal of Health Psychology*, May (2017).

<sup>39</sup> Carien M. Van Reekum et al. "Individual Differences in Amygdala and Ventromedial Prefrontal Cortex Activity Are Associated With Evaluation Speed and Psychological Well-Being." *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience* 19, No. 2 (2007): 237-248. For the real-life setting, see: Schaefer et al. "Purpose in Life Predicts Better Emotional Recovery from Negative Stimuli." *PLoS ONE* 8, No. 11 (2013).

<sup>40</sup> Schaefer et al., "Purpose in Life Predicts." For the real-life setting, see: Anthony L. Burrow, Maclen Stanley, Rachel Sumner, and Patrick L. Hill. "Purpose in Life as a Resource for Increasing Comfort with Ethnic Diversity." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 40, No. 11 (2014): 1507-1516.

tasks.<sup>41</sup> In the first experiment, a piece of text was distributed to each participant. The first group of participants was instructed to find two consecutive “s” letters in the text, to write their names on their sheets and return them to the examiner. The second group, in the “ignored condition,” was instructed to complete their tasks without putting their names on their sheets and then to place their sheets on top of a stack of paper. Finally, the last group, in the “shredded condition,” was informed that their sheets would be put into a paper shredder. In the second experiment, the authors asked participants to build a construction with Legos. Participants were randomly allocated to a group where their constructions would either be displayed or destroyed. Hence, the tasks were made purposeful to a randomly selected group of participants but purposeless to others. In each task, people were paid a fixed amount per each unit completed. People’s reservation wages (the wage at which they chose to stop) were significantly lower (up to 40%), and the quantity of outputs produced were significantly higher, for the purposeful tasks in both experiments. In these experiments, purpose manifests itself in the acknowledgment of the completion of the work and the relation of the task to a general objective.

Chandler and Kapelner (2012) also tested the effects of purpose on productivity in a natural field experiment.<sup>42</sup> The authors recruited 2,500 workers via Amazon MTurk and manipulated purpose by telling half the participants that they were labelling tumor cells in medical images in order to help cancer researchers, and also, by thanking them (recognition). The quantity and quality of the output produced in the purpose condition was compared with that of participants who were given no context for an identical task, and with that of others who were told that their output would be destroyed. Neither of the latter two groups received recognition. The researchers found that the output was higher in quantity in the purposeful task (in terms of the number of images labelled), while the quality was lower in the shredded condition (in terms of accuracy of labelling). Authors also used a post-manipulation check and found that their method indeed increased the perceived meaning of tasks significantly.

To explore how purpose might impact performance, Fehrler and Kosfeld (2014) tested the interactions between the impact of purpose, financial incentives and symbolic recognition.<sup>43</sup> Among the 413 students hired for a data-entry job, authors used a 2X3 design where the purpose was induced by notifying participants either that their task serves an important purpose or that the data has in fact already been entered. Additionally, participants were either paid a fixed wage or fixed plus piece rate, and recognition was given either to all or to the highest performing individual.

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<sup>41</sup>Dan Ariely, Emir Kamenica, and Dražen Prelec. “Man’s Search for Meaning: The Case of Legos.” *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization* 67, (2008): 671-677.

<sup>42</sup> Dana Chandler and Adam Kapelner. “Breaking Monotony with Meaning: Motivation in Crowdsourcing Markets.” *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization* 90, (2012): 123-133.

<sup>43</sup> Fehrler and Kosfeld, “Pro-Social Missions and Worker Motivation.”

Purpose had a 14% effect, and the 8% effect of monetary incentives was independent of the purposefulness of the task. Recognition, however, had a significant effect of 19% when the task was purposeless, but had no significant effect when the task was purposeful. The authors argue that recognition affects behavior as far as people are motivated by how they are seen by others (image-seeking). Since recognition did not have an impact when the task was purposeful, the authors suggest purpose might also affect behaviors through this channel. This interpretation, however, is not conclusive, and other psychological mechanisms can explain why recognition does not impact performance when the task is purposeful. For example, there could be a ceiling effect, whereby purposefulness raises performance to its maximum, so no other factor can increase performance beyond this point. Future studies can shed further light on this question.

### 3.3. Purpose at School and Academic Success

Researchers have operationalized purpose in the context of schoolwork as “a goal that is motivated both by an opportunity to benefit the self and by the potential to have some effect on or connection to the world beyond the self.”<sup>44</sup> They specifically studied whether self-transcendent purposes for learning (i.e., helping people) would improve performance at school, relative to self-oriented motives for learning (i.e., earning money). In a survey of 1,364 students, research demonstrated positive correlations among self-transcendent purposes for studying, persistence in academic tasks and college enrolment amongst high school students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. In a follow-up study, researchers conducted an intervention where 338 high school students were asked to establish a connection between self-oriented motives for studying and self-transcendent purposes in a 20-minute survey. Compared to a control group that solely focused on self-oriented motives, the intervention increased the GPAs for math and science courses especially for those with lower baseline GPAs.

Yeager et al. (2014) continued to test the mechanisms for the causal effect of purpose on GPAs and found that self-transcendent purpose improved students' performance in tedious academic tasks.<sup>45</sup> In a naturalistic field experiment, the authors sent undergraduate students (N=89) some difficult review material for an upcoming exam and randomly assigned them to the previously mentioned purpose intervention or a control task. Results showed that the purpose-induced group spent almost twice as much time as the control group on each question. In a final follow-up study, the researchers used the same purpose intervention before a diligence task where students (N=429) resisted the urge to consume internet media in the face of an increasingly boring academic task. Results showed that the treatment group's performance stalled much less compared

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<sup>44</sup> Yeager et al. “Boring but Important: A Self-Transcendent Purpose for Learning Fosters Academic Self-Regulation.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 107, No. 4 (2014): 559-580,560.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

to the control group. The purpose intervention proved effective at improving academic performance in a follow-up study that was conducted with 1,594 students in 13 geographically diverse high schools in the US.<sup>46</sup>

### 3.4. Organizational Purpose and Performance

Purpose was initially mentioned by strategy scholars in management science who called for a shift in the understanding of management strategy from the “old doctrine of strategy, structure, and systems” to a “softer, more organic model built on the development of purpose, process, and people.”<sup>47</sup> This shift required that the top management instill a sense of purpose, rather than set up strategy in a traditional sense. Bartlett and Ghoshal defined purpose as “the statement of a company’s moral response to its broadly defined responsibilities, not an amoral plan for exploiting commercial opportunity.” Later, an empirical model was proposed to explain why firms may invest in costly purpose-promoting programs where purpose is described as a “concrete goal or objective for the firm that reaches beyond profit maximization.”<sup>48</sup> Gartenberg et al. (2016) also proposed a similar definition of purpose as “the meaning of a firm’s work beyond quantitative measures of financial performance.”<sup>49</sup>

Many consultancies have shown interest in the idea of company purpose and have conducted research for documenting the potential effects of purpose on business outcomes. Below is an overview of what was discovered in this survey-based research, compiled in cooperation with the Istanbul-based consultancy firm Heart Mind Design.

#### **A Compass in Times of Change**

In 2003, renowned futurist Ray Kurzweil stated that “the 21st century will be equivalent to 20,000 years of progress.”<sup>50</sup> Fifteen years later, numerous communities, markets and sectors are going through what could be deemed an unprecedented era of change, while the exponential development of technology and ever more complex social movements challenge organizations with constant disruption.

According to the 2016 Corporate Longevity report prepared by the innovation consulting firm Innosight, close to 50% of the companies listed in the S&P 500

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<sup>46</sup> David Paunesku et al. “Mind-Set Interventions are a Scalable Treatment for Academic Underachievement.” *Psychological Science* 26, No. 6 (2015): 784-793.

<sup>47</sup> Christopher A. Bartlett and Sumantra Ghoshal. “Changing the Role of Top Management: Beyond Strategy to Purpose.” *Harvard Business Review* 72 (1994): 79-88.

<sup>48</sup> Rebecca Henderson and Eric Van den Steen. “Why Do Firms Have ‘Purpose’? The Firm’s Role as a Carrier of Identity and Reputation.” *The American Economic Review* 105, No. 5 (2015): 326-330.

<sup>49</sup> Claudine Madras Gartenberg, Andrea Prat, and George Serafeim. “Corporate Purpose and Financial Performance.” *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2016. doi:10.2139/ssrn.284005.

<sup>50</sup> Ray Kurzweil and Chris Meyer. “Understanding the Accelerating Rate of Change.” Kurzweil Accelerating Intelligence. May 2, 2003. <http://www.kurzweilai.net/understanding-the-accelerating-rate-of-change>.

will be replaced over the next 10 years.<sup>51</sup> Another finding is that, since the 1920s, the average lifespan of a company listed in the S&P 500 has decreased more than 50 years, dropping from 67 to 15.<sup>52</sup> Both data indicate that the rules of survival have changed and organizations that fail to adapt cannot be a part of tomorrow.

Executives seem well aware of the perils of this era, as 84% of 1,470 business leaders from 12 countries and 10 industries said that “their business operates in an environment that is volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous.”<sup>53</sup> Meanwhile, in Innosight’s survey study of 91 companies with a revenue over \$1 billion, and across 3 continents and 20 industries, 66% of executives agreed or strongly agreed that their organizations needed to transform — to change their core offerings or business model — in response to disruption.<sup>54</sup>

Looking at this, one assumes that organizations are ahead of change, confident and secure in their positions. Yet the same study shows that more than 37% of the same respondents declared their lack of confidence towards achieving transformation over the next 5 to 10 years, while a mere 15% felt “very confident” about it. Examining the reasons for this disparity, it was found that 40% of the respondents believed that the biggest obstacle to transformation was “day-to-day decisions that undermine [the] stated strategy to change” while 24% blamed the lack of a coherent vision for the future.<sup>55</sup>

The gist of the situation is that organizations know the destructive forces coming at them, but they either lack the ability or are slow to develop the strategies that will help them survive and then thrive in a rapidly changing world. As almost all organizations are made up of multiple entities such as branches, departments, teams and individuals, it is not difficult to imagine the hardship of establishing a common understanding amongst all parties. Each has its own day-to-day reality, work dynamics and possibly desires and understandings of concepts. Just at this point, as the common analogy goes, purpose serves as the “North Star,” guiding every part of the organization through change and towards the same destination.

## **Greater Ability to Innovate & Transform**

A survey study by Ernst and Young’s Beacon Institute revealed that executives

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<sup>51</sup> Scott D. Anthony, S. Patrick Viguerie, and Andrew Waldeck. *Corporate Longevity: Turbulence Ahead for Large Organizations*, Innosight Executive Briefing, Spring 2016. <https://www.innosight.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Corporate-Longevity-2016-Final.pdf>.

<sup>52</sup> Kim Gittleson. “Can a Company Live Forever?” BBC. January 19, 2012. <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-16611040>.

<sup>53</sup> *How Can Purpose Reveal a Path through Disruption? Mapping the Journey from Rhetoric to Reality*. Report. EY Beacon Institute. 2017: 10. [https://www.ey.com/Publication/vwLUAssets/ey-how-can-purpose-reveal-a-path-through-uncertainty/\\$File/ey-how-can-purpose-reveal-a-path-through-uncertainty.pdf](https://www.ey.com/Publication/vwLUAssets/ey-how-can-purpose-reveal-a-path-through-uncertainty/$File/ey-how-can-purpose-reveal-a-path-through-uncertainty.pdf).

<sup>54</sup> Anthony et al., *Corporate Longevity*, 5.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

from “purposeful companies” (as defined by EY) identify five major areas where having a purpose holds critical value to the organization.<sup>56</sup> The top two are “agility to innovate in times of disruption” and “ability to drive transformational change,” with 68% and 59% of the respondents agreeing with the statements, respectively. Moreover, the same study states that “73% of executives agree that having a well-integrated purpose helps their company navigate today’s turbulent environment.”<sup>57</sup>

Similarly, Harvard Business Review’s “Business Case for Purpose” report claims that having a purpose helps companies transform and innovate better while delivering consistent revenue growth, especially when executives “treat purpose as a core driver of strategy and decision-making.”<sup>58</sup> According to their findings, “53 percent of executives who [state] their company has a strong sense of purpose [also state] their organization is successful with innovation and transformation efforts, compared with 31 percent of those who are trying to articulate a sense of purpose and 19 percent of the companies who have not thought about it at all.”<sup>59</sup>

## **Financial Performance**

Gartenberg et al. (2016) used a survey of 456,666 workers in 429 firms to examine the performance associations of purpose.<sup>60</sup> They used employees’ answers to the following questions as a measure of purpose: “My work has special meaning; this is not just a job”; “I feel good about the ways we contribute to the community”; “When I look at what we accomplish, I feel a sense of pride”; and “I’m proud to tell others I work here.” There was no association between this measure of purpose and financial performance (return on assets and stock market performance). Authors then explored the link using a purpose-clarity measure derived from the questions “Management makes its expectations clear”; “Management has a clear view of where the organization is going and how to get there.” Companies who are rated high in the purpose-clarity measure were found to have superior accounting and stock market performance. Supporting findings were present in Harvard Business Review’s survey study. The authors asked 474 executives whether they thought their companies had a clearly articulated and understood purpose; 39% thought so. The study then examined the performances of these companies and found that 58% of the companies that prioritized purpose has experienced growth of 10% or more in

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<sup>56</sup> “Purposeful companies” are defined as those that i) articulate a purpose, and ii) have made significant progress in integrating their purpose into their corporate DNA (EY Beacon Institute, 2017).

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>58</sup> *The Business Case for Purpose*. Harvard Business Review Analytic Services. 2015: 3. <https://hbr.org/resources/pdfs/comm/ey/19392HBRReportEY.pdf>

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Gartenberg et al, “Corporate Purpose and Financial Performance.”

the last three years, compared to the 42% of companies that aren't purpose-led.<sup>61</sup>

## Employee Engagement

Gallup's State of the Global Workplace 2017 report found that only 15% of adults working full-time for an employer are engaged at work. Moreover, even though this figure differs depending on country and religion, it is stated that "in no country does the proportion of the employed residents who are engaged in their job exceed about four in 10."<sup>62</sup> While this dire situation must have damaging effects on employees' lives, another consequence is a drop in the productivity and profitability of companies with disengaged employees. According to the data, companies at the top quartile of the Gallup database are 17% more productive and 21% more profitable than those at the bottom quartile. It is shown by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) survey study that "a lack of understanding around purpose can lead to demotivation and emotional detachment, which in turn leads to a disengaged and dissatisfied workforce."<sup>63</sup> Wilson suggests that a stated purpose can inspire an organization's teams and employees, and help them focus their effort.<sup>64</sup> Perhaps Henderson and Van den Steen's proposal lies at the root of such strong effects of organizational purpose on employee engagement: that working in a company which lives by a purpose may contribute positively to an employee's own identity and reputation.<sup>65</sup>

As institutions that provide a sense of purpose for the individual – families, communities, churches, etc. – recede into the background of life, and as the workplace keeps demanding an ever-increasing share of people's resources – such as time and energy – it inevitably becomes the primary domain where people seek fulfillment and a sense of purpose that derives from it.<sup>66</sup> This view can be supported with the results of a survey study conducted with the participation of 26,151 LinkedIn members from 40 different countries. People were asked to choose amongst purpose, achievement or money as the primary reason for why they work. 37% of LinkedIn global members reported being purpose-oriented; that is, they rated purpose to be more important than achievement and money.<sup>67</sup> Another 38% reported purpose to be equally weighted with achievement and

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<sup>61</sup> *The Business Case for Purpose*, 2015.

<sup>62</sup> *State of the Global Workplace*. Gallup. 2017. <https://news.gallup.com/reports/220313/state-global-workplace-2017.aspx#formheader>

<sup>63</sup> *Shared Purpose: The Golden Thread*. Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development. 2010: 2. [http://observgo.quebec.ca/observgo/fichiers/51569\\_Shared\\_Purpose\\_Sustainable\\_Organisation\\_Performance.pdf](http://observgo.quebec.ca/observgo/fichiers/51569_Shared_Purpose_Sustainable_Organisation_Performance.pdf)

<sup>64</sup> Clive Wilson. *Designing the Purposeful Organization: How to Inspire Business Performance Beyond Boundaries*. London: Kogan Page, 2015.

<sup>65</sup> Henderson and Van den Steen, "Why do firms have purpose?"

<sup>66</sup> Bartlett and Ghoshal, "Changing the Role of Top Management."

<sup>67</sup> *2016 Workforce Purpose Index. Purpose at Work*. Report. Imperative and LinkedIn. 2016. [https://cdn.imperative.com/media/public/Global\\_Purpose\\_Index\\_2016.pdf](https://cdn.imperative.com/media/public/Global_Purpose_Index_2016.pdf)



money. There have also been claims that purpose and purposeful work seems to be especially important for the millennial generation.<sup>68</sup> Some support for these claims was provided by Deloitte's "Mind the Gap" Millennial Survey which asked 7,800 millennials from 29 countries their views about the companies they work with.<sup>69</sup> The survey specifically examined the thoughts of millennials who are actively using social networking tools and found that roughly 8 in 10 who actively use social networking tools, said a "sense of purpose" is part of the reason they chose to work for their current employers.

## Customer Loyalty

Purpose also seems to be important for customers, potentially affecting their purchasing decisions and brand loyalty. Edelman's study, with approximately 8,000 consumers in 16 markets, indicates that from 2008 to 2012 there was a 33% increase in the number of global consumers who believe that it is acceptable for brands to make money and support good causes simultaneously – overall, 76% believed so in 2012.<sup>70</sup> Similarly, 47% more people reported that they buy from brands that support a cause and 39% more people suggested that they would recommend such brands. According to the EY survey study (2017) organizations that are in pursuit of purpose experience an increase in "customer loyalty (52%), followed by preserving brand value and reputation (51%), [...] and developing innovative new products and services (40%)."<sup>71</sup>

## 4. How to Cultivate Purpose

Given the substantial benefits of purpose, it is important to understand how people can lead purposeful lives. Below, some ideas are outlined for individuals (Section 4.1), managers (Section 4.2) and policy-makers (Section 4.3) who are interested in understanding how to cultivate purpose.

### 4.1. Implications for Individuals

Researchers highlight that purpose may develop reactively.<sup>72</sup> For instance, experiencing a transformative life event may trigger a person's need to reflect on herself, or her purpose(s) in life. Alternatively, purpose may develop through social learning, when people try out the different roles they observe in their social environments and feel an affinity for other people's purposes. Indeed,

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<sup>68</sup> Peter Sheahan. *Generation Y: Thriving and Surviving With Generation Y at Work*. Victoria: Hardie Grant Books, 2005: 72-77.

<sup>69</sup> *Mind the Gaps: The 2015 Deloitte Millennial Survey Executive Summary*. Report. Deloitte. January 14, 2015. <https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/global/Documents/About-Deloitte/gx-wef-2015-millennial-survey-executivesummary.pdf>.

<sup>70</sup> *2012 Edelman Trust Barometer*: Survey. Edelman. January 23, 2012. <https://www.edelman.com/2012-edelman-trust-barometer>

<sup>71</sup> EY Beacon Institute, 2017: 14.

<sup>72</sup> Kashdan and McKnight, 2009.

a study of purpose development in adolescents confirms these reactive paths. Bronk (2012) interviewed seven adolescents between 12 and 23 years of age across five years.<sup>73</sup> The authors found that the first encounters that triggered purpose development among young people were mostly coincidental and depended on the environment in which children lived. For example, a young person developed a purpose to curb gun violence and stop arms proliferation after experiencing a gun incident in their neighborhood. Similarly, another young person developed a purpose to promote adolescent health after being influenced by an anti-smoking advertisement on TV at the age of 7.

Other evidence suggests that there are also proactive paths for cultivating purpose.<sup>74</sup> Certain behaviors can help individuals develop, understand and commit to a purpose in life. First of all, listening to the feedback from our experiences may be important to discover and pursue a purpose in life. People may be more likely to experience meaningfulness and positive emotions while engaging in certain activities, which would signal that these are a match to their values, skills or interests. With further reflection, they can also articulate the higher purpose that is guiding their engagement in these activities. The findings in Bronk's study (2012) with adolescents confirm this path too. Although initial encounters that triggered their purpose were mostly coincidental, adolescents became aware of and committed to their purpose, as they experienced pleasure or excitement from using their skills or realizing their action's prosocial impact. Kashdan and McKnight (2009) also highlight this interplay between reflection and experience when they refer to two essential pathways for purpose development: clarifying and strengthening pre-existing interests and values (depth), and the construction and broadening of interest and value categories (breadth).<sup>75</sup>

The second pathway to purpose would be to shift one's attention and resources (time and money) from the pursuit of happiness to meaning. People tend to find meaning in actions and activities that contribute to something greater than

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<sup>73</sup> Kendall C. Bronk "A Grounded Theory of the Development of Noble Youth Purpose." *Journal of Adolescent Research* 27, No. 1 (2012): 78-109. doi:10.1177/0743558411412958.

<sup>74</sup> Purpose may also stem from private beliefs about the purpose of life. Believing in God, for example, may give people purposes like worship, fellowship, discipleship, ministry and mission (Warren, 2003). Even without a God, people may adopt purposes from their spiritual beliefs. Gaianism, for instance, is a spiritual opinion that assumes the earth's biosphere (Gaia) is a living organism, and assigns a purpose to humans, which is to preserve life on the planet. In addition, certain social roles may also be a source of purpose. Being a parent, for example, would endow people with valued goals and aims such as looking after the children and preparing them for the future, and there is evidence that people consider parenting as low in pleasure yet rewarding (White & Dolan, 2009). For the purposes of this article, these channels were not mentioned among the means to increase purpose because they involve private beliefs and decisions. Similarly, a meta-analysis has shown that purpose can be increased via positive psychological behavioral or therapeutic interventions such as well-being therapy, acceptance and commitment therapy, or life review therapy (Weiss et al. 2016). However, these interventions have been conducted with patient populations, hence, they may not yield similar results when repeated with healthy adults. Furthermore, long-term therapy may not be a feasible and affordable option for many people. For these reasons, this method was also excluded from the recommendations outlined above.

<sup>75</sup> Kashdan and McKnight, 2009: 306.

themselves and connect them with the wider world.<sup>76</sup> Hence, one of the ways people can discover their purpose(s) may be to explore how actions that lay at the intersection of their talents, skills and values may be used for the benefit of others. Indeed, purpose in life seems to be correlated with prosocial activities like volunteering and caring for others.<sup>77</sup> Experimental evidence also confirms that people report higher purpose in life after helping others.<sup>78</sup> Hence, trying to discover the socially useful activities that we might want to commit to may offer a shortcut to purposeful living. It is worth remembering that while some people may have a “big” cause to which they are committed to, most people may have a purpose that is hidden in relatively small and mundane acts and activities, through which they are contributing to the lives of others. Hence, contemplating our day-to-day actions and activities and trying to identify how they are impacting others’ lives may also help us realize that our life is purposeful.

Studies also provide evidence that reflecting directly on one’s purpose may serve as a catalyst for leading a purposeful life. A study by Bundick (2011) has randomly assigned students to a group that was interviewed for 45 minutes about their purposes and goals in life, while another group was not interviewed. The author showed that 9 months after, those who reflected on their goals reported a higher purpose in life and satisfaction with life.<sup>79</sup> Similarly, Yeager et al. (2014) have shown that students who reflected on how their studies can be useful for the wider society (self-transcendent purpose) worked harder at tedious school tasks and improved their grades.<sup>80</sup> These studies reveal that being able to understand and articulate a purpose is a crucial step in committing to it. Friends, parents and partners can also help people in their reflections of purpose.

Could there be downsides to discovering and committing to a purpose? First, the search for purpose can create anxiety. McKnight and Kashdan (2009) suggest that the development of purpose will depend on individual differences like curiosity, cognitive ability and whether people are approach-oriented or avoidance-oriented – the former type will be more likely to capitalize on available opportunities for exploration and reflection and develop their

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<sup>76</sup> Roy F. Baumeister et al., “Some Key Differences,” 2012.

<sup>77</sup> For volunteering, see: Joomo Son and John Wilson. “Volunteer Work and Hedonic, Eudemonic, and Social Well-Being: Volunteer Work and Well-Being.” *Social Forum* 27, No. 3 (2012): 658–681. For caregiving, see: Matthew P. White and Paul Dolan, “Accounting for the Richness,” 2009.

<sup>78</sup> Nadav Klein. “Prosocial Behavior Increases Perceptions of Meaning in Life.” *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 12, No. 4 (2017): 354–361.

<sup>79</sup> Matthew J. Bundick. “The Benefits of Reflecting on and Discussing Purpose in Life in Emerging Adulthood.” *New Directions for Youth Development* 132, (2011): 89–103.

<sup>80</sup> Yeager, David S. et al., “Boring but Important,” 2014.

purposes proactively.<sup>81</sup> Hence, some people may not possess the skills and traits that are advantageous in the pursuit of discovering and committing to a purpose and might experience stress and anxiety in this pursuit. Second, self-reflection may create confusion. There is some research showing that reflecting on one's self reduced self-clarity among people who had high self-clarity to begin with.<sup>82</sup> It is also possible that, in the long run, self-clarity bounces back and that confusion about the self is a short-term side effect of a personal growth process. Third, researchers have also shown that excessive focus on one's goals (intrinsic motivation) may have some side effects.<sup>83</sup> These include the neglect of non-goal areas; increased imbalance in life; a rise in unethical behavior towards the pursuit of the goal; and reduced enjoyment of activities that do not directly contribute to the attainment of one's goals. Finally, people may also adopt anti-social purposes that are destructive, and commitment to these purposes may cause harm to individuals and to the larger ecosystem.

## 4.2. Implications for Managers and Leaders

Work is one of the main institutions that might give (or take) purpose to (or from) people's lives. In recent decades, the workplace has been viewed more in materialistic terms, and less as a calling. That is, people are less likely to view their job as a personally important and loved occupation, or as an outlet for making a positive difference in the world.<sup>84</sup> Despite this gloomy picture, it is possible to help employees experience a sense of purpose at work, which would help both organizations and their employees to thrive. One of the ways managers can make work purposeful is to grant employees more flexibility so that they can develop projects that allow them to express who they are.<sup>85</sup> Managers and employees can also try to develop a clear understanding of their personal purposes for work as this may help them become more effective, confident and authentic leaders.<sup>86</sup>

The second main path for making work purposeful involves having managers who understand the purpose of their organization. Managers can then pay attention to making it clear how daily tasks performed by the employees are

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<sup>81</sup> Patrick E. McKnight and Todd B. Kashdan. "Purpose in Life as a System That Creates and Sustains Health and Well-being: An Integrative, Testable Theory." *Review of General Psychology* 13, no. 3 (2009): 242-51. doi:10.1037/a0017152.

<sup>82</sup> Patricia A. Csank and Michael Conway. "Engaging in Self-Reflection Changes Self-Concept Clarity: On Differences between Women and Men, and Low-and High-Clarity Individuals." *Sex Roles* 50, No. 7-8 (2004): 469-480.

<sup>83</sup> Lisa D. Ordóñez et al. "Goals Gone Wild: The Systematic Side Effects of Overprescribing Goal Setting." *Academy of Management Perspectives* 23, No. 1 (2009), pp. 6-16. doi: 10.5465/amp.2009.37007999

<sup>84</sup> Amy Wrzesniewski et al. "Jobs, Careers, and Callings: People's Relations to Their Work." *Journal of Research in Personality* 31 (1997): 21-33.

<sup>85</sup> Bryan J. Dik, Zinta S. Byrne and Michael F. Steger. *Purpose and Meaning in the Workplace*. Massachusetts: American Psychological Association, 2013.

<sup>86</sup> Nick Craig and Scott A. Snook. "From Purpose to Impact." *Harvard Business Review* 92, No. 5 (2014): 104-111.

related to the larger purpose that is driving the organization. According to Heart Mind Design, managers can take the following steps to identify their organization's purpose and to transform their organizations.<sup>87</sup> The first step in identifying an organization's purpose is to ask why the organization does what it does and arrive at a deeper understanding of what is valued, needed and desired. Many indicators of these motivations would lie in the company's history and how people choose to narrate it. Paying attention to both the facts, and the way facts are discussed or delivered, would reveal purpose. It is also important to observe with care and honesty how people relate to and talk about the organization and/or its product. Once an organizational purpose is identified, it is then essential to communicate it to all stakeholders with clarity and to infuse operations, management and strategy with purpose.

When purpose is discussed within the context of for-profit corporations, however, people naturally question its authenticity. Sociologist Corey Keyes points to the culture of competition and profit-orientation, as well as the shift to service jobs with lower wages and higher instability, as the reasons why people might no longer consider the workplace as an outlet for experiencing their authentic purpose.<sup>88</sup> Given the general perception that organizations exist for profit maximization, purpose-washing is a serious threat to organizations' efforts towards understanding and communicating their purpose. For this reason, it is important that companies and organizational leaders are able to differentiate between an authentic and an inauthentic purpose, and to convince people of the authenticity of their organizational purpose. Managers can make use of the following characteristics of organizational purpose as a checklist, in order to make sure that the organizational purpose they identified is "right."

### **i. Social value and human-centeredness**

In the context of organizations, purpose inevitably starts with understanding the value that an entity creates for the greater whole of which it is a part. Therefore, a true organizational purpose should benefit all stakeholders (customers, employees, shareholders, suppliers, partners and the larger society). Some successful examples of purposes that fulfill this condition are the following. Nike: "To bring inspiration and innovation to every athlete in the world. If you have a body, you are an athlete"; Google: "To organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful"; and Ikea: "To create a better everyday life for many people." These examples demonstrate how a human-centered organizational purpose statement can inspire multiple stakeholders (employees, society, shareholders, etc.) and groups with different strategies within an organization (communication, new product development, talent development, etc.) due to the deeper and more accessible affinity, understanding and connection that it fosters in all parties. Only in this way can

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<sup>87</sup> "Purpose Discovery." Heart Mind Design. 2018. Accessed August 01, 2018. <https://www.hmdistanbul.com/purposediscovery/>

<sup>88</sup> Keyes, "Authentic Purpose," 2011.

the purpose of a company inspire a call to action in all parties and, thus, derive the strength to guide the ship that is the organization through the rocky waters of change.

## **ii. Reason for existence and anchor-like stability**

Having a purpose is a durable ideal, a “true identity [for] the organization,” a “golden thread” that connects every decision, action and strategy and guides them towards a single, shared direction.<sup>89</sup> It is a common mistake to confuse vision, mission and strategy – different components of an organization – with organizational purpose. The centrality of purpose for a firm’s existence can distinguish these constructs from purpose easily. Strategies are time-bound and target specific results. Purpose, in contrast, is what makes an organization durably relevant to the world.<sup>90</sup> Vision, on the other hand, is a “hard to reach” yet still “out there to be achieved” statement of what the organization aims to be like in the future.<sup>91</sup> In fact, even the vision of a better future is not what it is all about, as this ideal will morph and shift in this dynamic world as the context also changes.<sup>92</sup> Finally, mission is a description of what an organization does, and can be based on its type of work, its clients or its level of service.<sup>93</sup>

## **iii. Manifestation through action**

Organizational purpose defines not only why a company exists but also what it does.<sup>94</sup> For organizational purpose to serve as an organization’s foundational value-creating function, it must be able to produce actionable strategies and inspire ways for conducting them. It must as well inspire a code of conduct and a set of values for how “things are done” within the organization. One crucial aspect of the latter is that the ways and values that emerge from and co-exist with the purpose should be adopted and applied throughout the organization. The CIPD survey study suggests that while communication and leadership for developing a shared sense of purpose are important, “what emerges is that employees surveyed particularly believe that senior leaders, board members and trustees must clearly demonstrate that they too live the values.”<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Wilson, *Designing the Purposeful Organization*, 2015, 2.

<sup>90</sup> Laurent Chevreux, Jose Lopez and Xavier Mesnard. “The Best Companies Know How to Balance Strategy and Purpose.” *Harvard Business Review*, November 2, 2017. Accessed August 1, 2018. <https://hbr.org/2017/11/the-best-companies-know-how-to-balance-strategy-and-purpose>

<sup>91</sup> Graham Kenny. “Your Company’s Purpose Is Not Its Vision, Mission, or Values”. *Harvard Business Review*, September 3, 2014. Accessed August 1, 2018. <https://hbr.org/2014/09/your-companys-purpose-is-not-its-vision-mission-or-values>

<sup>92</sup> Wilson, *Designing the Purposeful Organization*, 2015.

<sup>93</sup> An example of a mission statement provided by Kenny (2014) is the following: “We’re in the business of providing high-standard assistance on performance assessment to middle-to-senior managers in medium-to-large firms in the finance industry.”

<sup>94</sup> Aaron Hurst. *The Purpose Economy, Expanded and Updated: How Your Desire for Impact, Personal Growth and Community Is Changing the World*. Idaho: Elevate Publishing. 2016.

<sup>95</sup> *Shared Purpose*, Chartered Institute, 2010, 5.

Purpose: A New Paradigm with Implications for Policy, Business and Individual Lives

### 4.3. Implications for Policy-makers

Given the importance of purpose for health, well-being and prosperity, it is policy-makers' responsibility to anticipate and mitigate the societal changes that will adversely affect people's ability to experience purpose. Aging and automation are two important trends to watch out for. Recent statistics show that the number of people above the age of 60 will increase from 900 million in 2015 to 2 billion by 2050, and it will be of critical importance to understand how the larger number of people and the longer number of years in retirement will affect people's sense of purpose.<sup>96</sup> Furthermore, automation may also present challenges to purpose as a significant number of people are likely to lose their jobs. According to one study, 5 million factory jobs in the US have already vanished since 2000 mostly due to automation.<sup>97</sup> A report by McKinsey suggests a third of work activities in 60% of occupations may disappear by 2030. There might be significant ripple effects on people's purpose, behavioral health and well-being due to these shifts.

Policy-makers can also cultivate purpose at scale first and foremost by providing resources for projects and programs that are aimed at the development of purpose. In the US, for example, the social enterprise Encore was established to help retired individuals find opportunities to volunteer. Other enterprises like Project WayFinder and Future Project are working with teachers and educators to develop a sense of purpose among adolescents. As described in the Global Happiness Policy Report, educational institutions worldwide are transforming to integrate purpose into their curricula.<sup>98</sup> Providing financial and logistical support to such projects could be one way through which policy-makers can contribute to promoting purpose at scale. Yet, to begin with, there is a need for evaluating the effects of these programs on behavioral outcomes and people's sense of purpose, as well as a greater need for the development of standardized tools to measure purpose for the evaluation of these programs.

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<sup>96</sup> *The Power of Purposeful Aging: Culture Change and the New Demography*. Report from the 2016 Purposeful Aging Summit. Milken Institute. 2016. Accessed August 3, 2018. <http://aging.milkeninstitute.org/assets/Uploads/PAS-16.pdf>

<sup>97</sup> Michael J. Hicks and Srikant Devaraj. *The Myth and the Reality of Manufacturing in America*. Report. Center for Business and Economic Research, Ball State University. June 2015: 6. Accessed August 2, 2018. <https://conexus.chberdata.org/files/MfgReality.pdf>

<sup>98</sup> Global Happiness Council, *Global Happiness Policy Report 2018*.

## 5. Conclusion

The consequences of having or lacking a sense of purpose have begun to weigh increasingly on the cultural psyche of the Western world. Having a purpose in life is considered an important aspect of one's health and well-being, and perceptions of purpose at work are closely linked to productivity. Consultancies aim to help transform organizations in identifying and capitalizing on their purposes. Leadership coaches aim to help business leaders discover their purpose and use it to improve their leadership. Promoting purpose is also an important goal in education and among policy-makers whose aim is to improve the well-being of their citizens. But what is purpose, why does it matter and how can purpose be cultivated? This paper reviews evidence and theory in social science to reach a refined understanding of purpose, and to shed light on means of fostering purpose in the context of life and work.



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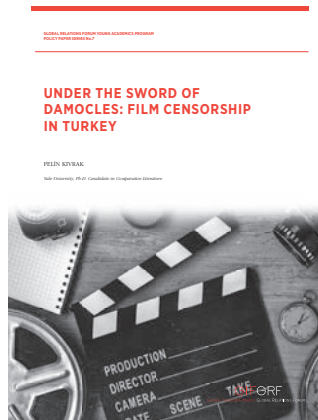
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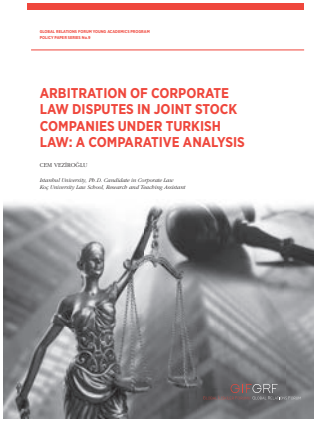
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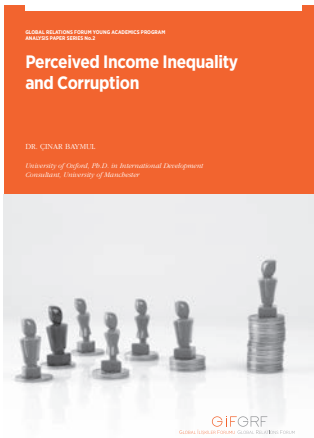


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Istanbul University, Ph.D. Candidate in Corporate Law  
Koç University Law School, Research and Teaching Assistant

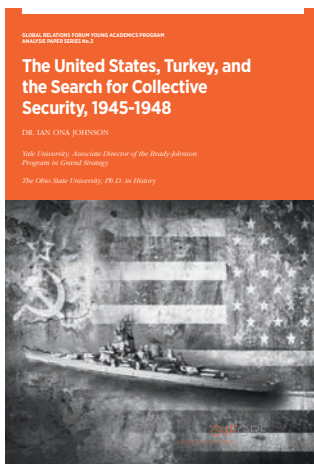
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University of Oxford, Ph.D. in International Development  
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The Ohio State University, Ph.D. in History  
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Ayşe has previously worked as a research assistant at the London School of Economics, UK. In parallel to her academic work, she has also been working as a consultant to help companies integrate the latest scientific insights into their operations. Within this capacity, she has partnered with Heart Mind Design (Turkey), Core Leadership Institute (US), and The Behavioralist (UK), among others.

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