

Existential Drift: a Literature Review on the Role of Meaning in Workplace Boredom

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Abstract: This literature review explores the phenomenon of boredom in the workplace, linking it with existential theory through the lens of positive psychology. It introduces the concept of existential drift—a gradual psychological disengagement that occurs when individuals lose a sense of meaning in their work. Using a structured literature review approach, this study synthesizes findings from 22 scholarly sources to explore how perceived meaning shapes, mitigates, or exacerbates boredom at work. The review finds that boredom is not merely caused by task monotony, but often emerges from a deeper sense of meaninglessness. Meaningful work is shown to buffer against boredom, while its absence can lead to both maladaptive and adaptive coping strategies. The review highlights the importance of meaning regulation and proposes existential drift as a key framework to understand persistent disengagement in work settings. These findings suggest that organizations should foster meaning-making processes to support employee well-being and engagement.

Keywords: Literature Review, Meaning, Existential Drift, Workplace Boredom

1 INTRODUCTION

Boredom in the workplace is increasingly recognized as a significant psychological issue related to the decline of employees well-being, motivation, and performance. Research shown that workplace boredom is associated with lower engagement, decreased job satisfaction and diminished mental well-being (Chehayeb et al., 2021; Reijseger et al., 2013; van Hooff & van Hooff, 2014). Studies by Cleary et al. (2016) confirms that employees experiencing persistent boredom are more likely to underperform, disengage or exhibit counterproductive behaviour. Traditionally boredom is associated with monotonous or under-challenging tasks, but recent research renewed this definition, where it is now understood as reflections of a deeper psychological state—particularly a lack of perceived meaning or fulfillment in one's work (Danckert & Elpidorou, 2023; Ji et al., 2022; Lucas et al., 2018).

Meaning is defined as the sense made of, and significance felt regarding, the nature of one's being and existence (Bronk & Mitchell, 2020), (Frankl et al., 2006) believed that the desire for meaning is the primary human drive. According to the discussion of positive psychology in Bronk & Mitchell (2020), meaning in life and work is considered a core pillar of human flourishing. An individual's sense of purpose is said to increase when they perceive their work as meaningful, which will indirectly also protect them against various negative emotional states such as boredom, alienation, and burnout. Scholars have increasingly argued that boredom functions as a signal of misalignment between one's task and one's core values, need for growth, or contribution (Morin, 2004; Sánchez-Cardona et al., 2020; van Tilburg & Igou, 2012). This perspective reframe boredom, not merely as a deficit stimulation, but as an existential call to reconnect with what is personally and socially meaningful in one's work life.

Although attention to meaning and boredom has been extensive in workplace studies, the relationship between these two constructs has yet to be fully synthesized, especially from the lens of existential psychology. Some studies focus on job design and strategy (Pemsel, 2022; van Hooff & van Hooff, 2014), others emphasize the psychological outcomes of boredom (van Hooff & van Hooff, 2024), but few integrate these views to explore how the subjective experience of meaning—or lack thereof—shapes boredom in the workplace. Furthermore, studies suggest that individual's perceptions and reactions to boredom varied according to personal traits, such as proactivity, assertiveness, and self-consciousness (Chehayeb et al., 2021; Striler & Jex, 2023), also supported by contextual variables such as role fit, cognitive ability, and managerial support (Martin et al., 2023; van Casteren et al., 2021; Van Wyk et al., 2016). In some cases, workplace boredom also occurs together with emotional exhaustion, especially when under high stress conditions, which complicates

the meaning-making process (Harju et al., 2023). (Dharani et al., 2021) added that symbolic influences, such as heroes in the workplace appear to be less effective in reducing boredom, suggesting that proximity and relevance shape the perceived impact.

Existing theoretical framework such as the Job Characteristics Model (Hackman & Oldham, 1975) which emphasizes meaningfulness as a key psychological state affecting core of job dimensions, and Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) that suggest when basic psychological needs are met results in work meaningfulness, can provide useful insights for this review. However, they do not fully address the existential and subjective nature of boredom. Therefore, this review introduces and builds upon the concept of existential drift—a gradual, often unconscious, psychological disengagement that occurs when individuals lose a sense of meaning in their work.

Rooted in existential psychology, existential drift reflects the condition of meaninglessness described by theorist such as (Frankl et al., 2006), wherein the absence of purpose leads to apathy, stagnation, and compensatory behaviour. This “drift” represents a subtle but chronic erosion of one’s psychological connection to their professional role, characterized by a persistent sense of dislocation, disorientation, or emotional withdrawal with uncertain trajectories (Ferrell, 2017)

This study conducted a literature review to critically examine how perceived meaning in work shapes the experience of boredom, and how the emerging concept of existential drift may contribute to its causes. By framing boredom as a symptom of existential disengagement, this review aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of employee well-being and meaningful work within organization, drawing on perspective from positive psychology, organizational behaviour, or existential theory.

2 MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study used a structured literature review approach to explore, synthesize, and critically reflect on the existing body of research. Massaro et al. (2016) argue that structured literature review is not only intended to summarize previous findings but also to identify research gaps, propose future research directions, and develop theoretical insights. This method also helps reduce selection bias by using a clear and replicable process, while producing robust and meaningful interpretations of existing research. This study aims to explore the relationship between meaning and workplace boredom, specially through the lens of positive psychology and existential theory.

Data for this review were drawn from a variety of academic sources, including peer-review journal articles, book chapters, conference proceeding, and empirical and conceptual studies that used qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-method designs. Sources in the form of mass media writings or websites were excluded, and only sources that addressed key themes—such as meaningful work, workplace boredom, meaninglessness, disengagement, or existential perspectives in organizational contexts—were included in this review.

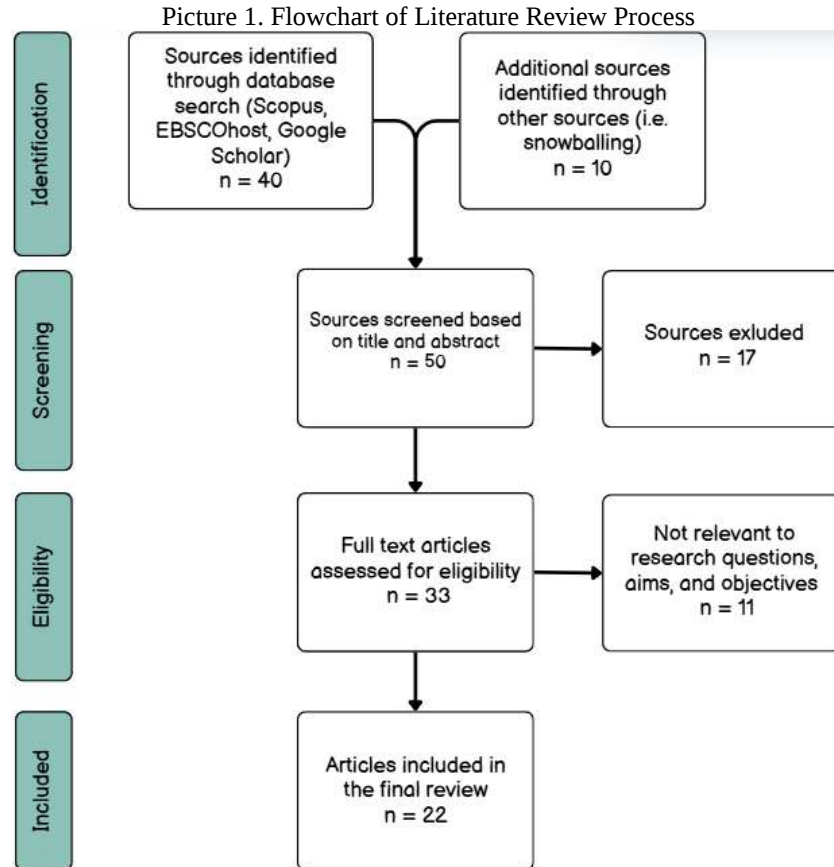
This literature research was conducted using the help of several academic databases and repositories, including Scopus, Google Scholar, EBSCOhost, and other scholarly websites. Guided by the methodological framework on structured literature review proposed by Barnard (2015) and Harry & Alrezq (2022), this review followed a series of procedures as follows:

1. Defining the Research Problem. In this stage, the researcher articulates the problem and objectives of the study clearly
2. Conceptual Framework. The researcher establishes a conceptual or theoretical framework to guide the literature review process
3. Search Strategy. A comprehensive search strategy is conducted using several databases and pre-determined criteria to be included/excluded
4. Screening and Selection. The researcher screens and selects relevant studies based on the pre-determined criteria to be reviewed
5. Data Analysis. Analyse data using qualitative and quantitative methods, including meta-analysis and meta-synthesis
6. Findings and Discussion. The research findings are presented, along with implications and future research directions
7. Implications. Highlights practical implications and potential changes in practice based on the findings of the review

Date restrictions (primarily between 2000 and 2025) and the use of boolean operators on combination keywords such as “meaning”, “boredom”, “work meaning”, “workplace boredom”, “meaningful work”, “existential boredom”, “existential theory”, “work meaninglessness”, and “boredom and meaning in the workplace” were used throughout the search process to further refine results and increase relevance.

This study used a qualitative thematic synthesis method to help researchers integrate findings from multiple studies and generate new interpretation (Cruzes & Dyba, 2011; McMahon et al., 2022). Each selected article was reviewed in full and coded for recurring themes, with the entire synthesis process guided by a thematic framework that supported the

central concept of “existential drift”, interpreted as the subjective experience of gradual loss of meaning that leads to disengagement or persistent boredom at work. Themes were inductively generated through open coding of full texts, followed by axial coding based on conceptual overlap with existential theory. Full texts coding and analysis were all conducted manually using Excel. This analytical approach aims to highlight theoretical intersections between meaning and boredom from the lens of existential theory and discover important directions for future research and practical applications in positive organizational psychology.



The initial research yielded, 50 articles; after screening titles and abstracts, 33 full texts were reviewed, yielding 22 publications closely related to the role of meaning in the workplace boredom, using keywords such as meaning, boredom, work meaning, workplace boredom, meaningful work, existential boredom, existential theory, work meaningfulness, and boredom and meaning in the workplace in the period up to 2025. Of all publication used, 18 were journal articles, 3 were book chapters, and 1 was a thesis publication. Of these publications, 15 were empirical research studies, 3 were review articles, 3 were book chapters, and 1 was a report.

3 RESULTS

The reviewed literature consistently reinforced the central role of meaning in regulating the experience of workplace boredom. The findings from this literature synthesis are outlined in four main sections. The first section examines the inverse relationship between meaning and boredom. The second section reviews the psychological and behavioral implications of meaningfulness. In the third section, the authors discuss the organizational and individual factor that shape meaning. Finally, an overview if existential drift and meaning regulation is provided.

Meaning and Boredom

Series of studies have shown that workplace boredom is negatively related to meaningful work. Research by Sánchez-Cardona et al. (2020) found that employees experienced significantly less boredom when they perceived their work as meaningful, especially those who felt overqualified for their job. This suggest that meaningful work not only relieves boredom but also contributes to well-being and fosters job skills. Zharifah & Parahyanti (2022) reported that meaningful work and challenging job demands had positive effects on reducing boredom, with the effect of meaningful work being rated more significant than challenging job demands. Interestingly, at low levels of meaning, even increasing

job demands worsened boredom—further highlighting the important role of perceived purpose. For younger workers, such as Generation Y, work that supports life goals and personal development serves as an antidote to boredom.

Parahyanti et al. (2022) found that positive work meaning mediates the relationship between perceived workload and boredom. They stated that even under low workload conditions, boredom can be reduced when employees find meaning in their work. Chan et al. (2018) asserted that boredom is directly related to the perception of meaningless task or environments, regardless of personality or dispositional traits. This perception-driven experience of boredom is consistent with the findings of van Hooff & van Hooft (2017), who emphasized the role of intrinsic motivation and need satisfaction in reducing daily boredom. They showed that when work is perceived as interesting, skill-aligned, and enjoyable, employees are less likely to report boredom. These findings confirm that meaningful work serves as a psychological buffer that reduces boredom across job contexts and demographics. Additionally, studies by Toscanelli et al. (2022) extend this relationship by showing that perceived social utility of work—a dimension of meaning—strongly predicts lower levels of boredom, especially among individuals prone to boredom.

Implication of meaninglessness

According to several studies on workplace boredom, it is not simply an emotional or cognitive state, but also triggers behavioural responses rooted in an individual's attempt to rebuild meaning. Moynihan et al. (2017) reported that perceived meaninglessness mediates the relationship between boredom and impulsivity. In the face of existential discomfort—in this context is boredom—individuals often pursue hedonic impulses as a maladaptive strategy, especially when they lack internal meaning-regulation resources. Further research by Moynihan et al. (2020) identified boredom as an existential threat, defined as a signal of meaninglessness that prompts individuals to engage in increased impulsivity, unhealthy food consumption and sensation seeking. Similarly, Coughlan et al. (2017) emphasized that boredom threatens one's meaning system, triggering a search for existential significance—often through symbolic figures such as heroes in the workplace to re-establish one's sense of meaning and purpose.

Individuals generally mobilize psychological strengths in response to meaning threats. Research by O'Dea et al. (2024a) found that gratitude helps decrease boredom by increasing a sense of meaning in life, while O'Dea et al. (2024b) showed that spontaneous self-affirmation increases perceived meaning and protects against chronic boredom. This is echoed by O'Dea et al. (2022) who found that self-compassion increases the presence of meaning and reduce the risk of experiencing boredom. Collectively, these studies affirm the concept of boredom as a signal that activates an individual's meaning-seeking process to attempt to restore threatened meaning using internal strengths or external value representations.

Dharani et al. (2021) also linking boredom to the discovery of a deeper engagement with life purposes, calling it the term existential void. These insights, grounded in existential psychology, suggest that boredom not only reflects a loss of meaning but also triggers attempt to restore it through creative, reflective, or impulsive behaviour.

Factors That Shape Meaning

Factors that contributed to the experience of meaning at work have been previously examined through several studies. Fletcher & Robinson (2016) argued that employees who lack meaningful work—especially those without external interest—are at risk for emotional and mental distress. Three dimensions of conceptualized meaning were described as task value (in the work), identity within the organization (at work), and contributing to a larger purpose (transcendence). Bailey & Madden (2017) further elaborated on this by noting that meaning is not a constant experience, but emerges in moments of transcendence—such as connection, reflection, and task completion—that enhance the significance of work.

The capacity actively shapes one's role emerged as another mechanism for constructing meaning. Van Hooff & van Hooft (2014) showed that job crafting—a proactive strategy to reshape work task to make them more meaningful—can reduce boredom. This self-directed change allows employees to regain purpose when organizational structures are dysfunctional. Sezer et al. (2024) expand the scope of meaningful engagement beyond the workplace, distinguishing between leisure and free time. Meaningful leisure, they argue, enhance resilience and serves as an important source of psychological meaning, particularly for workers. Toscanelli et al. (2022) describe the social usefulness of work as a predictor of meaningfulness, while Coughlan et al. (2017) and Kinsella (2019) suggest that symbolic figures such as heroes fulfil core psychological needs and help individuals rebuild meaning when they are threatened. These findings underscore that both structural conditions and personal strategies contribute to building meaning at work and reducing boredom.

Pemsel (2022) adds a nuanced understanding of how work task design—balancing underload and overload—influences boredom. This study suggests that moderate levels of cognitive challenge promote sustained engagement and meaning, whereas too much repetition or uncertainty undermines both.

Existential Drift and Meaning Regulation

The synthesis of the literature reveals that when individuals experience a lack of meaning in their work, they do not merely disengage momentarily; instead, it is often a gradual process of psychological withdrawal, a shift away from meaningful engagement in everyday work. We defined this condition as existential drift, which stems from Frankl's (2006) theory of existential vacuum. This theory states that when faced with a loss of purpose and a failure to connect

with broader framework of meaning, individuals tend to experience not only boredom but spiritual emptiness. The term “drift” is used to describe the process of meaning loss through the gradual erosion and disorientation of emotional connection to one’s work overtime. This concept reflects a condition in which individuals continue to fulfil their roles, but with diminished affect, initiative, or identification with broader purpose of their task.

This phenomenon can be seen in Lawn’s (2021) qualitative study, where employees in knowledge-intensive industries reported a feeling of being “trapped in motion”, where despite of meeting deadlines and completing tasks, they experienced a chronic absence of personal significance in their contributions. Furthermore, Lawn (2021) also challenges the notion that boredom is merely a negative affect and instead views it as a catalyst for meaningful change, conceptualizing boredom as a transient but meaningful emotional signal that leads to deeper questions of identity, purpose and authenticity.

This idea is further developed by Igou et al. (2024) who propose a comprehensive meaning regulation framework. Their findings suggest that when boredom threatens one’s meaning system, individuals may respond by enhancing meaning through creative or spiritual engagement, escaping the threat to meaning through distraction or impulsivity, or protecting themselves through psychologically enriching experiences.

Kinsella et al. (2019) support this dynamic by arguing that personal meaning integrates one’s sense of self, social belonging, and significance, and that threats to meaning—in this context, boredom—can be overcome by engaging with representation of values. Dharani et al. (2021) also emphasize that state boredom serves as an existential signal that spurs individuals into reflective or symbolic action to restore coherence and purpose.

In this perspective boredom is reframed not only as a negative affective state but also as a meaning-sensitive experience that triggers adaptive and maladaptive efforts to regain purpose. This understanding positions boredom as a central psychological phenomenon—central not only to individual well-being but also to how humans construct and maintain meaning in work life.

4 DISCUSSIONS

The findings of this literature review confirm that the experience of workplace boredom is deeply rooted in a perceived lack of meaning in work. Studies across contexts and populations consistently show that when individuals interpret their work as meaningful, they are less likely to experience boredom even under demanding or monotonous conditions (Sánchez-Cardona et al., 2020; Zharifah & Parahyanti, 2022; Chan et al., 2018). These findings are consistent with positive psychology’s growing recognition that meaning is a fundamental psychological need and foundation for well-being (Bronk & Mitchell, 2020; O’Dea et al., 2024a).

Most importantly, this study introduced the concept of existential drift as a contribution to the theoretical understanding of workplace boredom. This condition captures a distinctive pattern of disengagement, in which employees gradually—rather than abruptly—lose their sense of meaning in their work. While traditional framework like the Job Characteristics Model and Self-Determination Theory address the importance of intrinsic motivation and role variety, they fall short in accounting for existential dimension of disengagement—especially in context where external job design appears satisfactory but internal significance has eroded.

This conceptualization aligns closely with Viktor Frankl’s notion of existential vacuum, which he describes as a pervasive sense of meaninglessness that leads to boredom, apathy, or even despair. Frankl et al. (2006) observed that such a vacuum often arises in modern life when individuals can no longer derive purpose from routine, fragmented, or depersonalized experiences. Existential drift in the workplace mirrors this condition, employees may not be underworked or overstimulated, but nonetheless feel that their efforts are void of value over time. This suggest that this phenomenon is a meaning-regulation failure at the intersection of personal purpose and structural support. Although individual differences (such as values orientation or reflective capacity) shape susceptibility to existential drift, the literature highlights that organizations play critical role in either buffering or exacerbating this process.

This “drift” does not necessarily stem from the nature of the task itself, but from a misalignment between the worker’s values, identity, and perceived role significance (Lawn, 2021; Fletcher & Robinson, 2016). Individuals are more susceptible to passive disengagement and psychological exhaustion when they feel their connection to their work purpose is diminishing or drifting away—an experience strongly echoed in existential psychology conceptualizations of meaninglessness. These findings further confirm the concept of existential drift in the experience of workplace boredom, which is an implication of perceived meaninglessness in one’s work.

The literature synthesis suggest that individuals often cope with this meaninglessness by seeking distractions, engaging in impulsive behaviour (Moynihan et al., 2017; Moynihan et al., 2020), or, conversely, by engaging in positive psychological strategies such as gratitude, self-compassion, and spontaneous self-affirmation (O’Dea et al., 2022; O’Dea et al., 2024a; O’Dea et al., 2024b). These strategies are consistent with the principles of positive psychology, which emphasize developing personal strengths and inner resources to enhance well-being and resilience.

At the organizational level, the review suggested that boredom can be reduced not by improving task design but also by enabling employees to construct shared meaning through job structuring, feedback, and opportunities for personal and professional development (van Hooff & van Hooft, 2014; Toscanelli et al., 2022). This reinforces the need for

organization to move beyond traditional productivity-focused models and embraced meaning-centered approach to work engagement that recognizes the psychological and emotional dimensions of the work experience.

Furthermore, meaning in work is not static. Bailey & Madden (2017) note that meaning often emerges in fleeting moments of transcendence—rare instances when purpose, connection, and identity converge. The temporality of this meaning underscores the importance of creating culture and conditions that allow such moments to emerge. Similarly, heroes or symbolic figures (Coughlan et al., 2017; Kinsella et al., 2019) and perceptions of contributing to the greater good (Toscanelli et al., 2022) serve as external sources of meaning, offering inspiration and orientation in the face of workplace boredom.

Overall, this review argues that workplace boredom is best understood as a complex emotional response to the erosion or absence of meaning. The strength of this study is viewing workplace boredom through the lens of existential drift opens up new possibilities for theory and practice—inviting researchers and practitioners to reframe disengagement as a psychological signal rather than a behavioural failure.

However, this study is not without limitations. This review did not follow a formal systematic review protocol, and the semi-manual search and selection process of the articles chosen may have introduced selection bias. Most of the included studies relied on self-report data and the majority of reviewed studies were conducted within the same cultural context, which may limit generalizability. The predominance of Western studies—known for their individualistic culture—in this review focuses the meaning-boredom dynamic through individual purpose, rather than group identity. Individuals in collectivist culture setting, on the other hand, may derive meaning from role-based obligations or social harmony, potentially cushioning the effects of individuals disconnection. Furthermore, existential drift is still an emerging concept that requires further empirical exploration to clarify its mechanisms and applicability across work settings.

5 CONCLUSIONS

This literature review highlights the central role of meaning in shaping and regulating the experience of workplace boredom, introducing the concept of existential drift—a gradual disengagement that occurs when work loses its perceived significance—emerging as a key explanatory factor. The findings suggest that boredom is not merely a byproduct of repetitive or unstimulating work, but from a deeper psychological disengagement, often prompting both maladaptive and positive coping strategies in search of existential significance in one's work. Overall, the support of organization in addressing this issue is essential with interventions that foster shared meaning, personal growth and purpose. While framing workplace boredom through the lens of existential drift offers valuable theoretical and practical insights, limitations such as selection bias, cultural homogeneity, and the nascent state of existential drift concept suggest the need for further empirical research.

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