



The psychology of work fulfilment

Thriving not just surviving

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At The Cutting-Edge Event (8th October 2026)

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Director level roles
across six sectors



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First, a mini quiz (3 questions)

Question 1

Work fulfilment is available to everyone

Mostly true or mostly false

Mostly true

Question 2

Job satisfaction is the same as work fulfilment

True or false?

False

Question 3

Work fulfilment is a totally unique experience for everyone

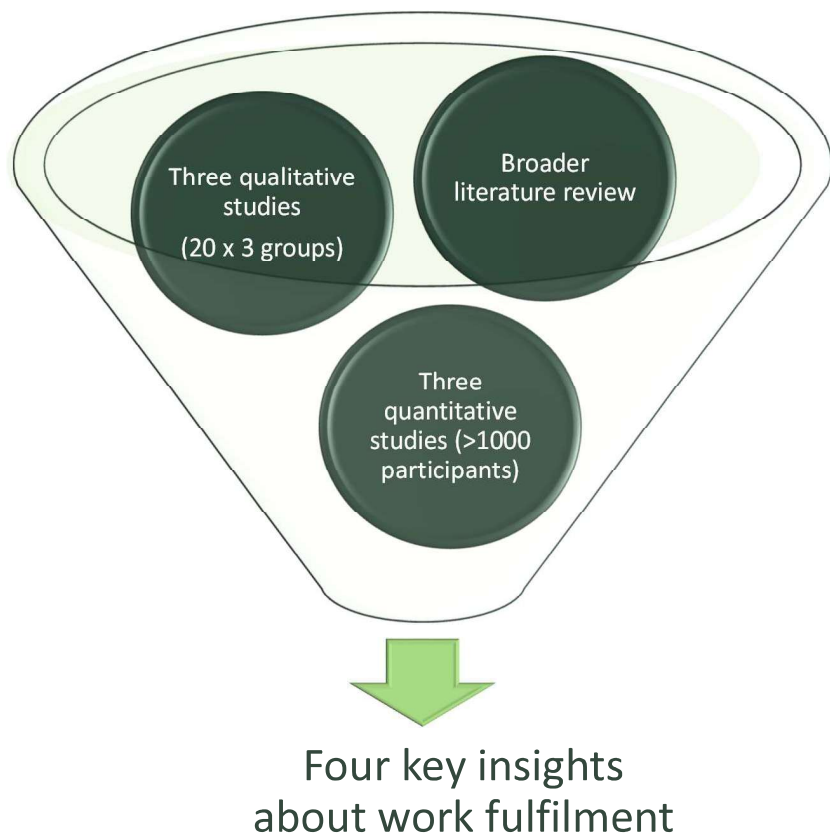
True or false?

False



What is ‘work fulfilment’?

- Not defined in career research
- A positive, subjective, holistic experience
- Encompasses aspects of growth, work engagement, and purpose (Ryan & Deci, 2001)
- *“A holistic and complete sense of wellbeing and flourishing in the work context”* (Allan et al., 2019)



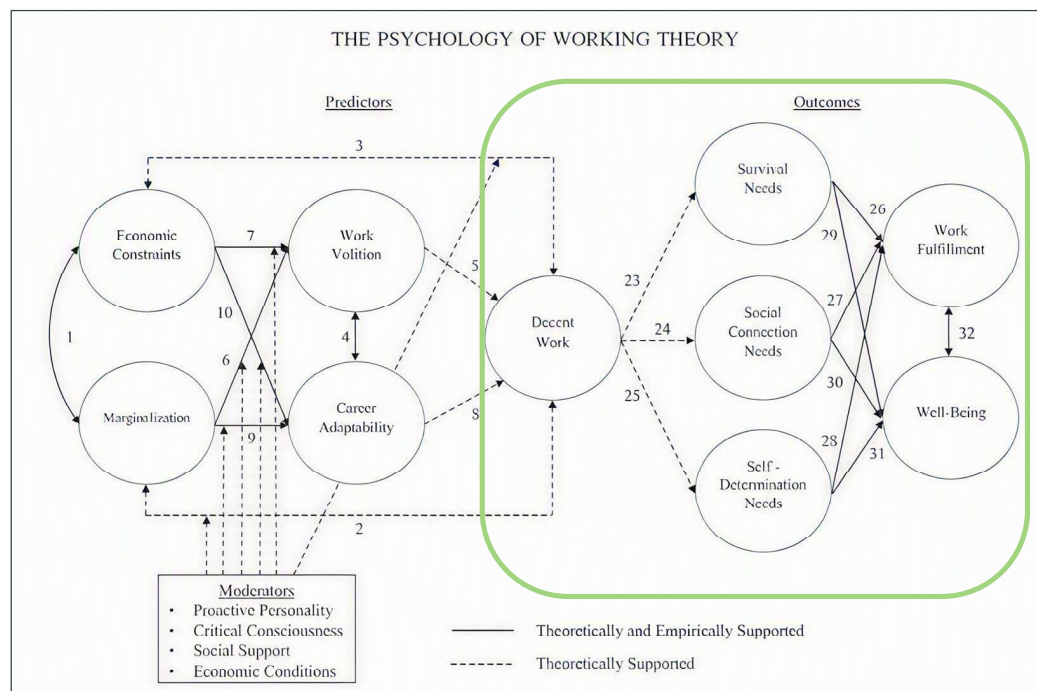
Work fulfilment is an important outcome (#1)

- A main outcome in four psychology theories / models
- In practice, people do know and value it
- The lived experience, however, has been underexamined
- So, what is the nature of this positive, subjective experience (metaphors)



Contingent on decent work and core psychological needs (#2)

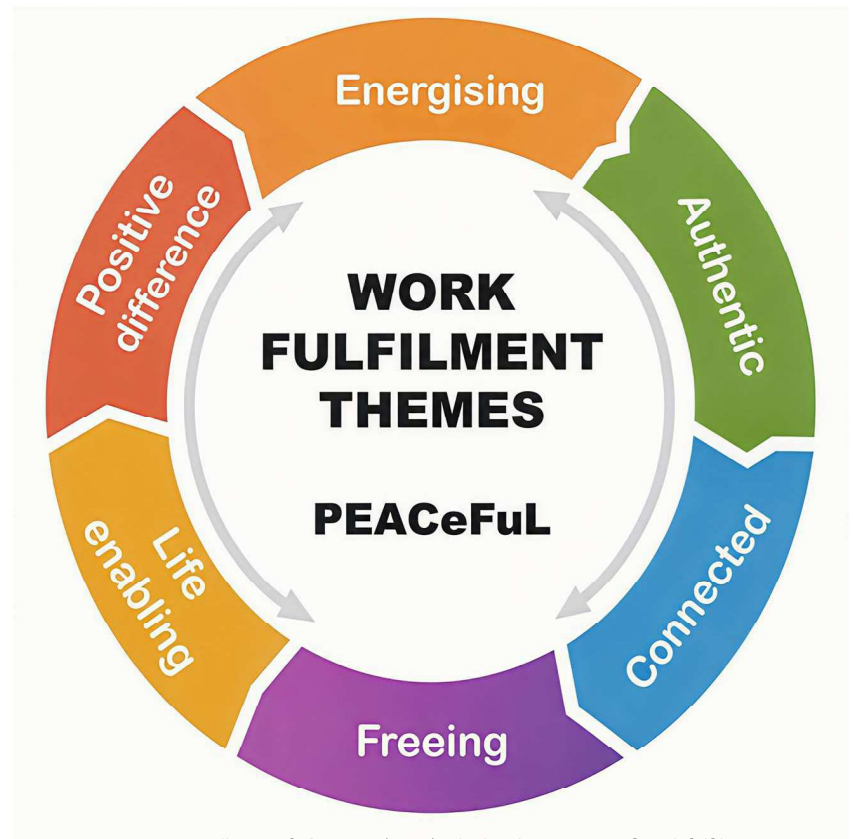
- Over 100 quantitative studies (antecedents)
- Unlikely without 'decent work' (ILO definition)
- Predicted by core needs:
 - Survival
 - Social contribution (initially connection)
 - Self determination (autonomy, relatedness, competence)
- Unequally accessible



Duffy et al., 2016
32 propositions

The experience itself is more shared than previously assumed (#3)

- Prevailing assumption of uniqueness
 - Possibility of attaining is influenced by contextual factors
 - But what work fulfilment means seems to be shared
- Six consistent themes emerged
- Also, fascinating nuances between groups



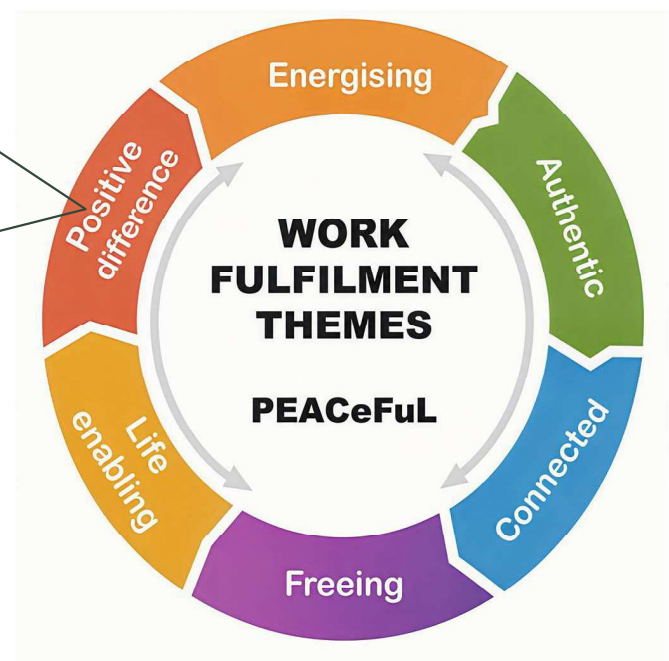
Source: Walker, Swift & Sutton (2026). *The lived experience of work fulfilment: A qualitative examination across groups*. NICEC Journal – coming soon

Making a positive difference

"The warm feeling you get in your heart when you know that was the right thing to do or it was well received. When someone comes to you with a highly sparked emotion of gratitude" (MLW)

"Noticing I had an impact on other people, that the work I'm doing was affecting them and possibly causing change in their lives" (MLM)

"When the projects I'm contributing to are meeting a goal for society that I would be happy to support" (20s)



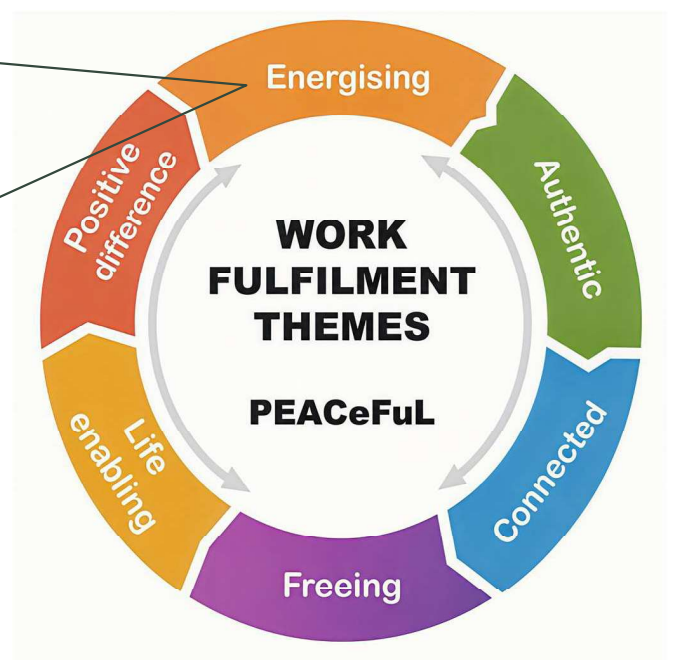
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Energising

"Unfulfilling tasks are draining and, you know, I feel quite burnt out after them"
(20s)

"Feels like every cell is sparkling and alive. Feeling flexible, strong, and sparkling" (MLW)

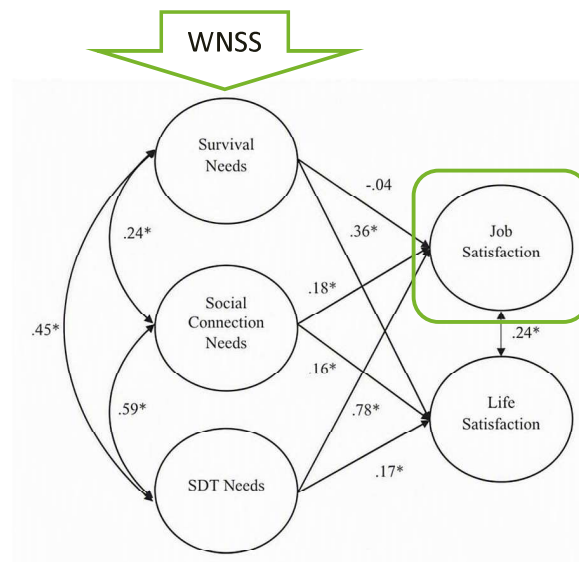
"I feel like I hear things better. You know I smell things. I see things. I appreciate things because I'm not distracted"
(MLM)



Source: Walker, Swift & Sutton (2026). *The lived experience of work fulfilment: A qualitative examination across groups*. NICEC Journal – coming soon

Related to, but distinct from, job satisfaction (#4)

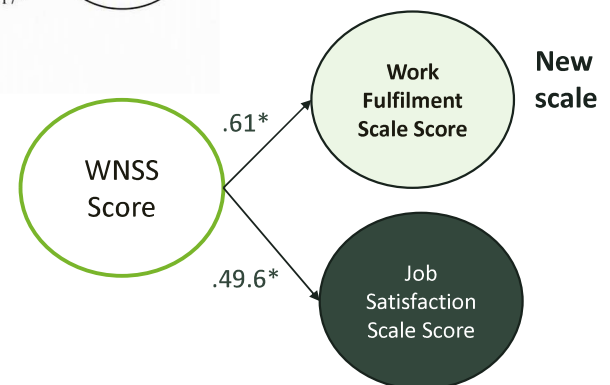
- “An overall evaluative judgment about one's job” (Weiss, 2002)
- Overall JS Scale (Judge et al., 1998) used as a proxy measure by some
- But, work fulfilment is also a coherent measurable construct
- Vital to be clear about what you are measuring / attending to



Source: Autin et al. (2019)
The Development and Initial Validation of Need Satisfaction Scales Within the Psychology of Working Theory

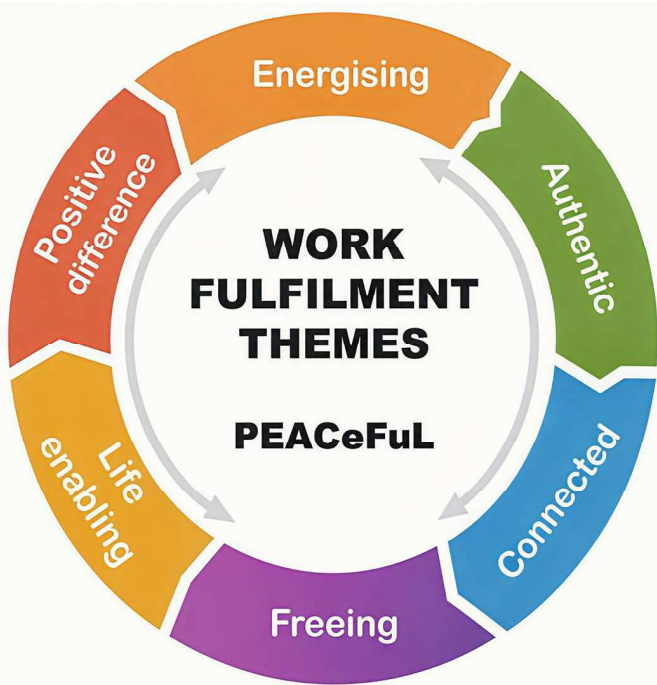
As a proxy for work fulfilment

Work needs satisfaction predicts work fulfilment significantly more than job satisfaction.



Source: Doctoral research

Work fulfilment is...



- An experience people do know
- More shared than assumed (6 themes)
- Cognitive + affective + sensory
- Natural rather than forced
- Not the same as satisfaction
- A coherent, measurable construct

Source: Walker, Swift & Sutton (2026). *The lived experience of work fulfilment: A qualitative examination across groups*. NICEC Journal – coming soon

Further reading/ references

- Allan, B. A., Owens, R. L., Sterling, H. M., England, J. W., & Duffy, R. D. (2019). Conceptualizing Well-Being in Vocational Psychology: A Model of Fulfilling Work. *The Counselling Psychologist*, 47(2), 266–290.
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- Baumann, D., & Ruch, W. (2022). Measuring what counts in life: The development and initial validation of the Fulfilled Life Scale (FLS). *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 795931. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.795931>
- Blustein, D. L., Kenna, A. C., Gill, N., & Devoy, J. E. (2008). The psychology of working: A new framework for counselling practice and public policy. *Career Development Quarterly* (Vol. 56, Issue 4, pp. 294–308). Wiley Blackwell.
- Duffy, R. D., Blustein, D. L., Diemer, M. A., & Autin, K. L. (2016). The psychology of working theory. *Journal of Counselling Psychology*, 63(2), 127–148.
- Owens, R. L., Allan, B. A., & Flores, L. Y. (2019). The Strengths-Based Inclusive Theory of Work. *Counselling Psychologist*, 47(2), 222–265. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011000019859538>
- Walker, L. (2024). How possible is fulfilling work for mid-life women: A review of the empirical psychology literature. *Journal of the National Institute for Career Education and Counselling*, 53(1), 51-67. <https://doi.org/10.20856/jnicec.5306>
- Walker, L., Swift, H.J., Sutton, R. (2026). *The lived experience of work fulfilment: A qualitative examination across groups*. National Institute for Career Education and Counselling, October (coming soon)



In small groups...

1. Have you experienced fulfilling work?
2. Do the PEACeFuL themes resonate with your experience?

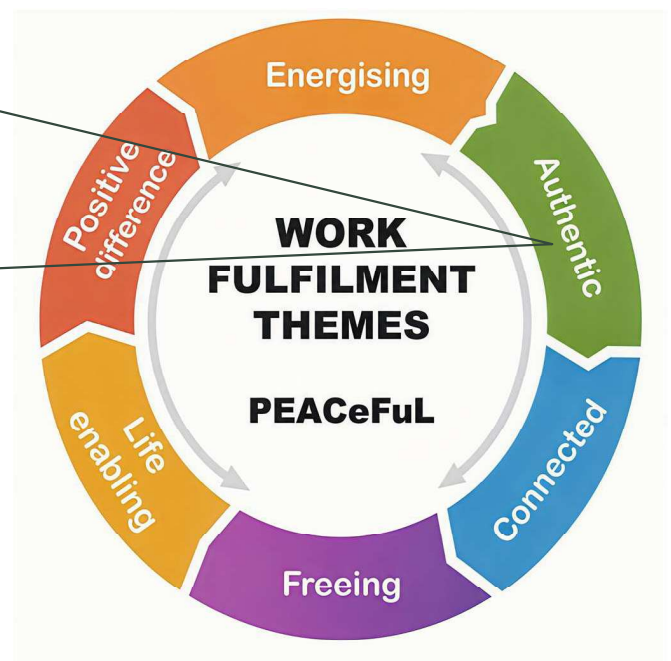
Additional slides

Authentic

"Does it align with, my core values and who I want to be as a person?" (20s)

"When you're doing fulfilling work, it just comes naturally. You're not struggling against yourself" (MLW)

"I couldn't continue with the work, defending what we were doing. I wasn't smiling anymore, and it wasn't fair to my family. It had to do a re-evaluation" (MLM)



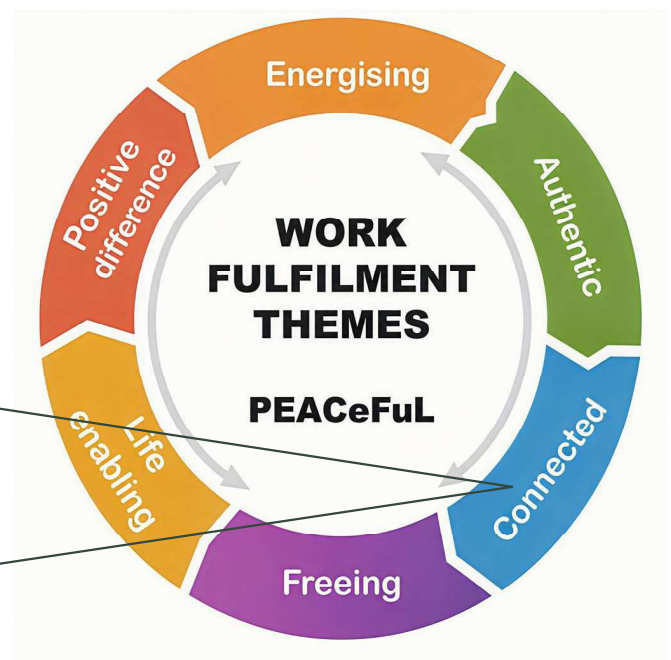
Source: Walker, Swift & Sutton (2026). *The lived experience of work fulfillment: A qualitative examination across groups*. NICEC Journal – coming soon

Connected

“Co-creating something with people in a non-toxic environment, advocating across leadership at the same level or higher is very fulfilling” (MLW)

“Post uni, my social circles evolved. For me, I have found building new connections important. I have friends I can count on, so I am not alone, and I learned by working with them” (20s)

“Working with a great team of people around me is really nice and helps make me feel good, fulfilled” (MLM)



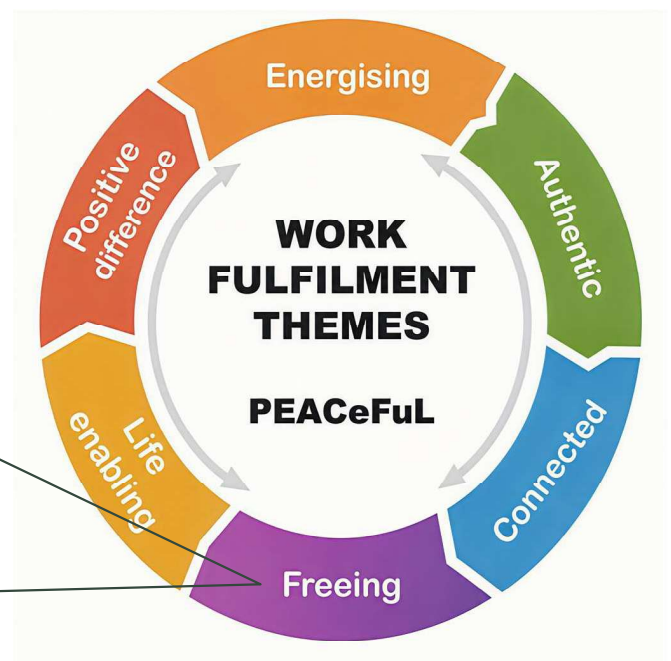
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Freeing

"I have the space to go learn things myself, the freedom to go learn and try" (20s)

"The ability to have an impact at a larger scope, actually make decisions about things and influence decisions versus roles which are more about just kind of taking orders" (MLM)

"Many women I know, including me, have been kind of bullied at work, I would say, and that's often through kind of micromanagement or kind of controlling behaviour which has made the job much less fulfilling" (MLW)



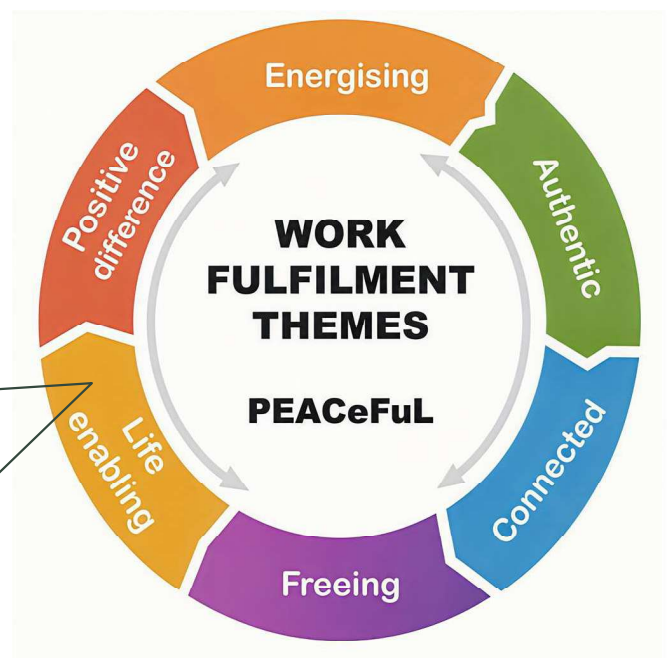
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Life enabling

"For me I get fulfilment out of the fact that my work provides the lifestyle and experience I want for my family" (MLM)

"I'd like keep them more separate (like my boyfriend), but they spillover" (20s)

"They merge for me and has done for years. I can't separate the two because I get phone calls about mum in the middle of, you know, a work meeting and all those sorts of things. It respects my interwoven life – I've a lot going on" (MLW)



Source: Walker, Swift & Sutton (2026). *The lived experience of work fulfilment: A qualitative examination across groups*. NICEC Journal – coming soon