

# Pathways to meaningful work in the digital workspace: A qualitative exploration



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## Dates:

Received: 05 Jan. 2023  
Accepted: 18 Sept. 2023  
Published: 29 Nov. 2023

## How to cite this article:

Coetzee, M., Ferreira, N., & Potgieter, I.L. (2023). Pathways to meaningful work in the digital workspace: a qualitative exploration. *SA Journal of Industrial Psychology/SA Tydskrif vir Bedryfsielkunde*, 49(0), a2080. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajip.v49i0.2080>

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**Orientation:** The way people view and experience their work and workplaces is fundamental to the extent to which employees find meaning in work. Research that examines individuals' views about the more turbulent and disruptive technology-enhanced work world seems to be scant.

**Research purpose:** The present study sheds light on the extent to which individuals' personal philosophy and Africanisation views on the work world inform pathways to meaningful work in the digital-era workspace.

**Research approach/design and method:** The study applied a qualitative, grounded-theory research approach to inductively gain deeper insight into participants' views of the digital era work world from their responses on an open-ended research questionnaire. A randomly chosen sample of ( $N = 486$ ) undergraduate students participated in the study.

**Main findings:** The findings illuminated four psychosocial pathways and their resources toward meaningful work in the digital-era workspace: Self-agency, other-agency, self-communion and other-communion.

**Practical/managerial implications:** Employers and practitioners should explore strategies for enhancing work meaningfulness in today's more turbulent technology-driven work world.

**Contribution/value-add:** The study contributed an integrative model of psychosocial pathways and resources toward meaningful work in the digital workspace. The model informs practices for fostering meaningful work in technology-enhanced workspaces.

**Keywords:** Africanisation; meaningful work; technology-enhanced workspace; digital era work world; psychosocial pathways to meaningful work; resources of meaningful work

## Introduction

Today's post-pandemic, technology-driven landscape for work is characterised by constant instability and change (Howe, Chauhan, Soderberg & Buckley, 2021; Van Vulpen & Veldsman, 2022). As the new reality of technological advancement and remote and hybrid work models sets in, organisations and individuals are grappling with their adaptation to the "new normal" of work and working in the digital-driven workspace (Howe et al., 2021; Jain & Srinivasan, 2022). Concepts such as the "digital workplace", "working digitally" and the "virtual and/or hybrid office" signal that people have started to think differently about their work and working (Kaji, Bordoloi & Bhat, 2021). Meaningful work has always been one of the top contributors to helping employees thrive, but it became even more important in the post-pandemic, digital-driven work world as people reconsider the nature of work and how the changes in work and working fit into their lives (Bravery, Cernigoi & Silva, 2022). Having to adapt to a technology-enhanced work environment necessarily raises the question on how people view the digital era work world (Coetzee, 2022).

Empirical studies on meaningful work in organisations seem to have largely assumed work contexts to be stable and devoid of external disruptions and unpredictable changes (Jiang, 2021; Steger, Littman-Ovadia, Miller, Menger & Rothmann, 2013). The meaning individuals construe from their work is shaped by their social context and changes as world views shift (Autin & Allan, 2020; Barrett & Dailey, 2018). The way people view and experience their work and workplaces is fundamental to the extent to which employees find meaning in work (Rosso et al., 2010; Wrzesniewski, Dutton & Debebe, 2003). Research further suggests that the organisational and broader sociocultural contexts shape the construction of meaningful work (Rosso et al., 2010). The evolutionary changes associated with digital-era work can challenge workers' existing views about what makes their work meaningful (Jiang, 2021). However, research that examines

**Note:** Special Collection: Navigating Talent in a Disruptive World.

individuals' views about the more turbulent and disruptive technology enhanced work world as a source of meaningful work seems to be scant (Bravery et al., 2022; Coetzee, 2022; Van Vulpen & Veldsman, 2022).

The present research addresses this gap by its objective to qualitatively uncover the personal agentic and sociocultural (communion) pathways to meaningful work in the post-pandemic digital workspace. The focus is not on workers' subjective views of the meaning of work *per se* but rather to explore their personal Africanisation views of the digital era work world as sources of meaning. The premise is that these views will uncover self-oriented and other-oriented mechanisms that may inform organisational practices that potentially facilitate meaningful work in the digital-era workspace. Research shows an interplay between self-oriented sources (e.g. personal agentic values) and other-oriented sources (e.g. working with others within a particular sociocultural context) as pathways to workers experiences of meaningful work (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002; Grant, Dutton & Rosso, 2008; Rosso et al., 2010; Steger, Dik & Duffy, 2012; Wrzesniewski et al., 2003; Zhang, Chen, Chen & Schlegel, 2019). Moreover, research that explore both personal and sociocultural views, beliefs and values in an integrative fashion would greatly expand understanding of how these serve as mechanisms of meaningful work (Jiang, 2021; Rosso et al., 2010).

## Meaningful work

Meaningful work denotes a multidimensional construct that encapsulates meaning-making of the environmental and social work context, personal growth, and positive contributions to the greater good (Autin & Allan, 2020; Steger et al., 2012). The present paper adopts a normative lens on meaningful work (Michaelson, 2021). The general premise is that the meaning of work lies within the world and its universal meaning is discovered in the work people craft or engage with in a specific work and sociocultural context (Michaelson, 2021; Rosso et al., 2010). The understanding is that work is a contributor to a meaningful life; work's meaningfulness is partly independent of whether it is individually experienced or socially perceived as meaningful and worthwhile. Individuals are active agents and arbiters of the meaningfulness of their own work as shaped through the lens of their unique views and experiences of a broader sociocultural context (Autin & Allan, 2020; Barrett & Dailey, 2018; Rosso et al., 2010). Work is viewed as meaningful if it fulfils the need for personal agency in self-expression, growth, creation and mastering, and if it fulfils the need for meaningful communion (i.e. connecting, union, relating) with others (Coetzee, 2021; Steger et al., 2012; Wrzesniewski et al., 2003).

Scholars assert that meaningful work is an outflow from the dynamic interplay between multiple sources of meaning including both personal and sociocultural pathways to meaning-making (Chalofsky, 2003; Jiang, 2021; Rosso et al., 2010). Meaningful work results from the simultaneous

interaction of the individual (self-agency) contributing something of value to and unifying with others for a collective, greater good (Rosso et al., 2010). Research shows that meaningful work is important for positive functioning and occupational and general wellbeing, work engagement, job satisfaction, job performance and retention (Allan, Batz, Sterling & Tay, 2019; Autin & Allan, 2020; Jiang, 2021). It stands to reason that gaining an understanding of individuals' personal and Africanisation (sociocultural) views of the digital era work world may help to uncover personal and sociocultural beliefs and values that serve as important sources of meaningful work.

In the contemporary South African workplace, the notion of "Africanisation" is increasingly emphasised as a sociocultural approach to relational connections at work. Africanisation alludes to a philosophy of African-cultural humanism that are emphasised in the post-apartheid democracy (Vilakati & Schurink, 2021). Africanised views on the work world may cultivate an awareness of collectivist human values that enrich the meaning of work in the multicultural digital-era workspace (Veldsman, 2020). Key values of humanism underpinning the notion of Africanisation include inter alia communal interdependence and belonging, harmony and cooperation and Ubuntu (a spirit of communion, solidarity, respect, togetherness, united culture, caring community: Molose, Thomas & Goldman, 2019; Vilakati & Schurink, 2021). Rosso et al. (2010) and Atitsogbe and Bernaud (2023) view values as important mechanisms associated with how work becomes meaningful. Research on the contemporary psychological contract (Coetzee, 2021) highlights values such as working with others (e.g. positive, collaborative teamwork), self-expression (e.g. creativity, independence, career development) and extrinsic conditions (e.g. finance and job security) as important perceived employer obligations to enhance the meaning of work.

## The contemporary digital-driven workspace

The contemporary technology-enhanced workspace has become an eco-system that includes both traditional and contingent "gig" workers who bring an entrepreneurial spirit to organisational service-delivery (Bricka & Schroeder, 2019). The organisational metaverse (i.e. a virtual-reality online workspace) unites a hybrid and digitally distributed diverse talent pool of workers through meaningful, collaborative digital interactions that are conducive to better productivity, creativity and decision-making (Van Vulpen & Veldsman, 2022).

A global talent trends survey by Bravery et al. (2022) shows that employees increasingly describe their work as being characterised by more balanced work redesigned to allow time for family, hobbies, work, health and learning; digital technology that fuses human creativity with artificial intelligence and automation; cyberteams being the digital "office" to work collaboratively regardless of where they are working; a more empathetic, human centric approach to workers and their needs; thriving in one's career regardless

of where they work; and agency and independence in working globally and digitally where one wants, when one wants and for whomever one wants. Increased flexibility and work-life balance have been cited as important sources of job satisfaction (Van Vulpen & Veldsman, 2022).

The digital era workspace is also characterised by positive-impact business sustainability practices that equally benefit people, society, the environment, the planet and business profit including enhanced equity and a clear unifying organisational purpose that goes beyond shareholder return (Bravery et al., 2022; Howe et al., 2021; Pavez, Kendall & Laszlo, 2021; Van Vulpen & Veldsman, 2022). A survey by Van Vulpen and Veldsman (2022) further shows that workers view technological change and automation as facilitating the creation of more meaningful work with the focus being shifted from repetitive and administrative tasks to higher level cognitive, creative, challenging tasks, greater purpose-driven work and autonomy.

Paradoxically, technology brings diverse talent pools across the globe together via virtual media platforms while also creating a disconnect with the human need for physical interaction, belonging and emotional connection. The work meaning theory of Rosso et al. (2010) indicates relational connections at work as an important source of employees' work meaning. In the digital-era, organisations and employees need to find ways of harnessing employee energy for the collective good which involves a new way of partnering that is more human-centric, relatable and attuned to the digital-era workspace (Bravery et al., 2022).

Research links employees' connections to work groups to the meaning of work (Grant, Dutton & Rosso, 2008; Rosso et al., 2010; Wrzensniewski et al., 2003). This may be because work generally involves employees who are members of many groups and communities, including work teams and professional networks that are engaged in a common activity or share a common goal or identity. Organisations help shape the meaning of work by providing a space for forging stronger ties to larger work communities. Psychological identification with a work community and negotiating work-family boundaries function as determinants of work meanings (Rosso et al., 2010; Way, 2020).

The normative lens adopted in the present paper highlights the importance of interrogating not only individuals' subjective, self-oriented views of work in the digital era work world, but also their views about the social (other-oriented) nature of work as impacted by the larger environmental context (Michaelson, 2021). Rosso et al. (2010) further suggest a coherent integration of self-oriented and other-oriented work views to illuminate core pathways or mechanisms that may inform the creation of meaningful work. To this end, we posed two open-ended research questions for study participants:

**Research question 1:** What is your personal philosophy about the digital era world of work?

**Research question 2:** What is your personal Africanisation views on the digital era world of work?

It was assumed that requesting a "personal philosophy" would elicit participants' understanding of, and beliefs about the digital era work world, their place within it and what they regard is important in work and working. A personal philosophy generally reflects a set of beliefs, values and principles that individuals use to evaluate information and respond to people and situations (Crespo, 2021; Dudley, 2018). In the present study, the question about "Africanisation" was seen to represent important "other-oriented" sociocultural work views relevant to the South African post-apartheid, multiculturally diverse work context. To ensure that the participants had the same understanding of the term "Africanisation", the following explanatory note was included: personal views based on African philosophy or world view.

## Research method

The study utilised a qualitative, grounded-theory research approach (Creswell, 2013) to inductively gain deeper insight into participants' personal philosophy about and Africanisation views of the digital era work world. An open-ended questionnaire (Züll, 2016) comprising of the two research questions were used. This approach allowed respondents to express their opinions freely and in their own words.

## Research setting

We invited undergraduate students pursuing further studies in the economic and management sciences field at a South African comprehensive open distance learning higher education university. We decided on the South African services industry as research setting because these students are generally in some form of employment in the services industry and exposed to the contemporary technology-driven work world. Their higher educational background further informed their knowledge of the world of work. The university also had a strong drive towards Africanisation in the curriculum.

## Entrée and establishing researcher roles

The researchers were subject matter experts who adopted an objective, neutral role in the data collection, analyses and interpretation to avoid biasness in the presentation and discussion of the findings (Khan, 2014).

## Sampling and participants

A randomly chosen sample of (N = 486) undergraduate students participated in the study. The sample comprised of predominant Black African (72%) students (male: 35%; female: 65%) who were in some form of employment. The mean age of the sample was 34 years (SD = 9.12; age range 25–55 years). The sample was further represented by

participants from a Coloured (7%), Indian (5%) and White (16%) racial origin.

### Data collection

Students received an invitation via an email from a “noreply” student system administrator with an URL link to the online open-ended questionnaire. This approach ensured anonymous participation, objectivity and unbiasedness in the data collection and analysis.

### Capturing and storing data

The data was captured on an Excell spreadsheet and stored by the primary researcher in an online, password-protected folder.

### Data analysis and interpretation

Considering the large sample, researcher triangulation was applied to ensure the rigour, validity and credibility of data analyses and interpretation (Creswell, 2013). In agreement with grounded theory, an inductive data analysis strategy was applied which involved constructing analytic codes and thematic categories that emerged from the data (Kahn, 2014). The researchers were subject matter experts and analysed the data manually. To minimise the risk of potential biasness, the three researchers followed an inductive, reiterative process to data coding through a process of recurring discussions which involved in-depth clarifications and comparisons, going back to the text to verify insights and then reconvening.

A constant comparative methodology was applied (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) whereby each researcher first independently studied the data several times to gain an overall impression of the responses. The researchers then met to discuss and compare the emerging higher order and subthemes with supporting evidence (responses) of general patterns observed. A process of open coding was used to manually establish an initial list of codes for significant responses that provided a rich understanding of the research questions (Al-Asfour et al., 2021; Creswell, 2013). The researchers had repeated discussions about the initial codes and reread the response data to search for similarities and dissimilarities across the theoretical themes. The process assisted in conceptually clustering and breaking down subthemes with supporting response data. The reiterative process was repeated as necessary until researcher consensus was reached and the core overarching higher order themes and subthemes became sufficiently refined for interpretation and theory development. The reiterative process also allowed for the researchers’ interpretations to be triangulated. The principle of meaning saturation (i.e. the point at which no further dimensions and insights were identified) was applied to establish the final list of core themes (Vasileiou, Barnett, Thorpe & Young, 2018).

### Reporting

Table 1 and Table 2 summarise the outcome of the core identified themes.

### Strategies to ensure data quality and integrity

Drawing from the guidelines of Nowell, Norris, White & Moules (2017), trustworthiness of the study was ensured by means of keeping a record of the research process, the data coding, labelling and derivation of higher order and subthemes. Trustworthiness alluded to ensuring credibility through researcher triangulation, transferability through thick descriptions, dependability through quality documentation and record keeping of the data analysis process, confirmability by providing response evidence for the established themes and explanations for interpretations (Nowell et al., 2017). Employing strategies to warrant the trustworthiness of the research methodology was deemed important for ensuring data quality, integrity and transferability.

### Ethical considerations

The research ethics review and permission committees of the university (#2020\_CEMS-IOP\_031) provided approval for the study. The participants provided informed consent for the use of the data for research purposes. Participation was anonymous and voluntary. The responses were collected as anonymous group-based data. Responses could thus not be traced back to an individual respondent and as such participants’ privacy and confidentiality were ensured.

### Results

A higher-order theme emerged for each research question: (1) technology advancement and work and (2) Africanised views of technology-enhanced workspaces. As summarised in Table 1, the subthemes of the first research question’s higher-order theme (technology advancement and work) alluded to five sources of self-oriented meaningful work in the digital-era workspace: (a) flexibility, agility, resilience and adaptation, (b) organisational employment and working, (c) individual employment and career development opportunities, (d) creativity and innovation, and (e) job and financial security and work-life balance. Generally, these subthemes seemed to reflect digital-era work as an enhanced opportunity for agentic self-expression.

As summarised in Table 2, the subthemes of the second research question’s higher-order theme (Africanisation views of technology-enhanced workspaces) alluded to five sources of other-oriented meaningful work in the digital-era workspace: (a) collaboration and teamwork, (b) sense of unity or togetherness, (c) African identity and self-transcendent growth potential, (d) trust and family values, and (e) Ubuntu, trust, fairness and respect. Generally, these subthemes seemed to elucidate digital-era work as a space for enhanced communion with others.

**TABLE 1:** Digital-era work as enhanced opportunity for agentic self-expression.

Supporting data (response examples)	Subtheme categories
<b>Higher order theme: Technological advancement and work</b>	
<p>"An intense way of adapting to change, and depending on technology more than physical work"</p> <p>"Digital-era world of work has shown us the importance of being flexible in our thinking to quickly adapt to a changing environment"</p> <p>"Due to the pandemic hitting the world all companies as well as individuals had to adapt to a new way of working and thinking outside the box in using technology to get the work done and to continue to make an income"</p> <p>"Flexibility, resilience and agility have become extremely important"</p>	Flexibility, agility, resilience and adaptation
<p>"I actually agree with the fact that the technological developments may open up new ways of employment and initiating ways to boost flexibility and retention, largely by removing many of the barriers and management styles of the past and bringing them into line with a modern multigenerational workforce"</p> <p>"A lot of people had to adjust to new ways of working, including meetings on teams and zoom. Above that, a lot of people had to find a better way of working from home and multi-task"</p> <p>The pandemic forced us to open up to new avenues of how technology can be used to improve the ways we do things, teach, learn and work"</p> <p>"Technology has opened up new ways of communicating and working"</p>	Organisational employment and working
<p>"Technology advances career development"</p> <p>"Technology has definitely opened up opportunities to gain employment"</p> <p>"... one can get employment anywhere in the world while working from home. Therefore, it is important to stay abreast and updated on technological developments"</p>	Individual employment, learning and career development
<p>"Digital era world of work forced people to find new ways to sell their skills and services online"</p> <p>"The pandemic forced people to learn new ways to do things and to become more aware of their actions, which in the workplace, allowed for a more entrepreneurial spirit"</p> <p>"Creativity and understanding have been cultivated in the working world over the last year and it encourages better communication among staff members"</p> <p>"Innovation and growth within my future career path"</p>	Creativity and innovation
<p>"The workplace is no longer limited by borders. Placements may be made abroad or one can work remotely for an internationally-based company while in South Africa"</p> <p>"Thankfully to remote work, less travelling and zoom calls have been implemented and accepted as a norm, making work-life balance, family time and individual performance drivers a priority, without compromising income, professional development and those who are career-driven can pursue more balanced opportunities"</p> <p>"A lot of people have lost their jobs and a lot of jobs in this country require you to be physically present. Companies are still not allowing staff to work from home. They aren't open to hiring staff who can or would work from home"</p> <p>I think there will be an increase in unemployment derived from improvement in technology"</p> <p>"I feel like it has become difficult for people to find jobs due to the fact that a lot of things are done online. One needs access to the internet in order to comply to requirements of getting a job. Technology is a good thing; however, I feel it hinders some people from really wonderful job opportunities"</p> <p>"Technology reduces travelling costs to get to places, instead you can do things virtually"</p> <p>"A lot of companies or jobs realised that they can save money on rent due to the fact that employees can work from home. The tech industry boomed out of its boxes and companies also realised where they were overspending on a lot of other things"</p>	Job and financial security and work-life balance

**TABLE 2:** Digital-era work as a space for enhanced communion with others.

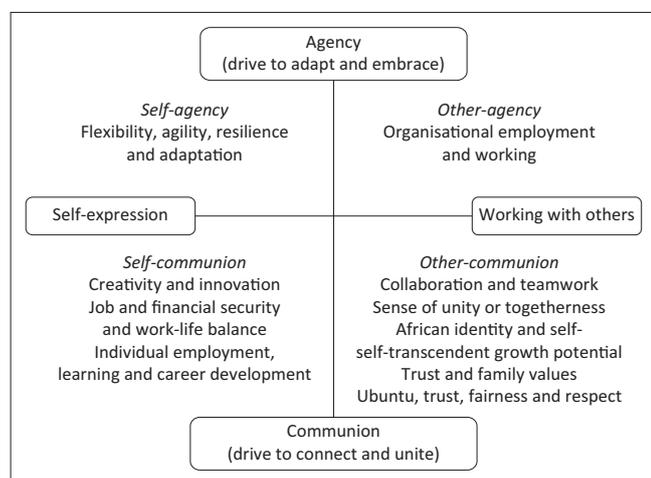
Supporting data (response examples)	Subtheme categories
<b>Higher order theme: Africanisation views of technology-enhanced workspaces</b>	
<p>"When I think of Africa, Africans and Africanisation, the spirit of teamwork comes to mind, what makes us great is our collaborative efforts, working together to achieve more than what we could as individuals. In the past this has meant meeting in boardrooms or organising small get-together functions in which a lot of brainstorming and innovative ideas would be birthed. The year 2020 saw us exploring different media platforms to allow us to engage still and to bring us together even if were miles apart"</p> <p>"Africanisation for me means that people work collaboratively to live and work in a global employment network"</p> <p>"With the technological advancements occurring the collaborative style of work is now diminishing making people work more independently"</p>	Collaboration and teamwork
<p>"From an Africanised perspective, the contemporary digital era world of work has separated us greatly and took the feeling of togetherness away. However, with that said, it has brought us together on many digital platforms which have a wider reach and are aligned with the African way of doing things- which is gathering in numbers to embrace togetherness and uniformity. This has brought Africans together on a broader scale"</p>	Sense of unity or togetherness
<p>"Africanisation means as people we combine and become one nation and pride ourselves in our African heritage through opening virtual platforms which encourage our diversity and pride in our Africanness"</p> <p>"Africans can stay true to their cultures while working together in a global employment network"</p> <p>"Africanisation to me is that is important to realise that we all have opportunities and potential to grow and to grow our continent if we just realise how amazing Africa really is as well as the resources we have in our backyard"</p>	African identity and self-transcended growth potential
<p>"It promotes a culture of trust and brings an end to presentism. Employers have to trust that we are being productive even if we are working from home. It also provides for better work-life balance because I spend more time with my family whilst working from home"</p>	Trust and family values
<p>"Practising the spirit of Ubuntu, helping each other by providing the needy with life essentials such as food and paying funeral costs where needed"</p> <p>"With the evolving of technology Africanisation means people join forces to work together in a spirit of Ubuntu"</p> <p>"Africanisation to me means that people should be able to work together harmoniously and have respect and trust for each other"</p> <p>"For me the world of work from an Africanised perspective is about fairness and respect"</p> <p>"Africanisation for me means that people respect one another and are always willing to be a helping hand"</p> <p>"Different cultures being unified and equal opportunities for all"</p>	Ubuntu, trust, fairness and respect

## Discussion

The present study sheds tentative light on the extent to which individuals' personal philosophy and Africanisation views on the contemporary digital era work world inform pathways to meaningful work in the digital-era workspace. Figure 1 presents an integrative framework of the core potential pathways to meaningful work that emerged from the empirical findings. The framework in figure 1 draws from the theoretical meaningful work scheme of Rosso et al. (2010) which explains: (1) human agency (self-regulatory drive to adapt to and embrace change) and communion (intrinsic drive to connect and unite with others) and (2) work views directed toward authentic self-expression and working with others toward a collective greater good, as two fundamental psychosocial dimensions to creating meaningful work. Work meaningfulness is experienced at the intersection of these two dimensions and may differ for individuals with respect to the degree they focus on self-expression or working with others as sources of meaningful work. Other-oriented work views generally broaden or expand the self for greater experiences of work meaningfulness (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009; Rosso et al., 2010). Building on the work of Rosso et al. (2010), our proposed framework (Figure 1) illumines four psychosocial pathways toward meaningful work in the digital-era workspace: Self-agency, other-agency, self-communion and other-communion.

*Self-agency* reflects the participants' drive toward adopting the mindsets and attributes required for adapting to and embracing the new ways of working resulting from technological advancement. In this regard, attributes such as flexibility, resilience, agility and adaptation may become integral qualities that give meaning to work in technology-driven workspaces. The findings corroborate research highlighting these self-agency mindsets and attributes as important values that provide meaning to work (Coetzee, 2022; Hall et al., 2018).

*Other-agency* reflects participants' views of work and working in digital-enhanced workspaces. Work meaningfulness



**FIGURE 1:** Framework of psychosocial pathways and resources toward meaningful work in the digital-era workspace.

seems to be tied to technology facilitating new ways of employing and retaining staff, greater flexibility in management styles and alignment with the needs of a modern multigenerational workforce. Other-agency further reflects self-regulatory (agentic) adjustment to working in a virtual office space (remote working), communicating and meeting with others through digital platforms such as MS Teams and Zoom, and using technology to improve the ways of working, learning, and multitasking as important sources of meaningful work. A global talent trends survey (Bravery et al., 2022) corroborates participants' positive views about the influence of technology advancement on the nature of work and working. The purpose of work is re-evaluated, and workers trust their company to redesign work experiences that empower and bring the best out of them. The viability of remote work options has led to enhanced flexibility in how and where work is performed and enables workers across the globe to collaborate in increasingly seamless and faster ways as technologies continue to evolve (Howe et al., 2021).

*Self-communion* reflects values of authentic self-expression that facilitate meaningful work. The participants perceived technology to bring greater job and financial security through opportunities for new boundaryless career paths, learning new skills, being creative and entrepreneurial, enhanced personal and career growth, crafting better work-life balance and saving on travelling costs through remote working without compromising income. Participants' self-communion views corroborate research on career values reflected in the contemporary psychological contract (Coetzee, 2021). Research shows employment fostering creative and authentic self-expression, career development and personal learning and growth provides psychological job security, a sense of work-life meaningfulness and higher purpose individuals strive towards (Hall et al., 2018). Individuals are motivated to derive a sense of meaningfulness from their work endeavours (Wrzesniewski et al., 2003). Organisational supportive conditions fostering work-life balance and integration in high-tech living workspaces have also emerged as an important value influencing work meaningfulness (Bravery et al., 2022; Coetzee, 2021).

*Other-communion* reflects values of African humanism that need to be cultivated to bridge the disconnect between distributed virtual working and human relatedness and connection. The findings highlight the paradox between globally enhanced virtual-digital workspace connectedness, communion and collaboration among multiculturally diverse workers and the need for more empathetic human-connectedness and -relatedness. Technology appears to be a vehicle toward greater unification and collaboration of a virtual-distributed multicultural diverse workforce that potentially enhance a sense of work meaningfulness. The findings suggest the potential for bringing together a global virtual community made possible by technological advancement. Unity in collaboration and teamwork seems to expand the potential of individuals through the collective efforts of the team. African humanism denotes a way of

thinking and living that emphasises constructive human agency in the pursuit of communion toward a greater good for all (Bell, 2002). The value of work is less about standing on one's own than an opportunity to demonstrate interconnectedness and contribution to something bigger than oneself (Way, 2020). People want meaning through their connection to others; interaction with others shape the meaning of work (Wrzesniewski et al., 2003).

Participants' personal Africanisation (other-communion) views of the contemporary digital-era work world are resonant with research on African values of humanism and Ubuntu (Molose et al., 2019; Vilakati & Schurink, 2021). Participants' Ubuntu-notion of trust took on a new nuance with virtual remote working requiring employers to respect and trust the agency of workers in being productive while being able to live out values of family care and connection. Work is meaningful as it brings family into being and is an opportunity for crafting a livelihood and enacting family (Way, 2020).

Values of other-communion such as trusting and respecting remote workers' self-managed productivity while having now the opportunity to cultivate better work-life balance seem important sources of meaningful work. The global talent trends survey of Bravery et al. (2022) highlights the quest for a more human-led approach to workers and their needs and for the company to unlock collective energy by balancing productivity, flexibility and empathy while catering for workers' lifestyle needs.

The findings suggest that personal Africanisation (other-communion) views of the digital-era work world may promote a shared belief that the work team is psychologically safe for interpersonal risk-taking in virtual collaborative spaces because of shared experiences of trust and respect. In this regard, research highlights the cultivation of trust, inclusion and belonging in virtual team collaboration to be important for a climate of psychological safety (Feitosa & Salas, 2021).

The findings assisted in generating a conceptual framework of psychosocial pathways and resources toward meaningful work in the South African-based digital-era workspace. The research findings corroborated the view of Rosso et al. (2010) that meaningful work can be derived from the interplay between multiple sources and that exploring a web of meaning has the potential to enrich meaning of work theory and practice.

### Practical implications

Practically, the findings highlight the importance of organisations in providing community for workers who draw meanings and psychosocial resources from collaborative group memberships (Rosso et al., 2010). The digital-driven workspace of the contemporary work world calls for an organisational culture and climate that workers can relate to. A social-moral organisational climate characterised by trust-

based, respectful and cooperative relations, and human-centric supportive organisational practices enables greater meaningful work (Lysova, Allan, Dik, Duffy & Steger, 2019). Employers can invest in enhanced collaboration technology that create a safe, compassionate environment to share concerns and needs. Employers should further invest in flexible work-life options and collaboration training for workers that raise sensitivity toward values of African humanism when engaging virtually with others. Digital techniques such as virtual team dialogues and focus groups, pulse surveys, employee resource groups and networks can help employers understand the values and needs that facilitate the meaning of work for employees. Employers can engage in strategies that redefine contractual agreements to manage expectations and needs that define the meaning of work. Expectations for work models, ways of working and communicating digitally to empower workers must be clear (Bravery et al., 2022).

### Limitations and recommendations for future research

The qualitative design of the study limits the relevance, and thus generalisability, of the findings to the larger population. The findings should be interpreted in the context of the research setting, sample of participants and the researchers' understanding of the subject matter and themes. Future research should consider replicating the research across various occupational, gender and racial groups in various industries and research settings. Quantitative studies could further contribute to the actual measurement of workers' sense of work meaningfulness in digitally enhanced workspaces.

### Conclusion

The study findings and integrative framework provide an important contribution to both the scholarly literature and practice by highlighting pathways comprising multiple resources toward meaningful work in the digital workspace. Participants' positive philosophy about the contemporary technology-enhanced work world including their Africanisation views on the digital workspace resonate with Victor Frankl's (1985) profound statement that life holds a potential meaning under any condition no matter how miserable or challenging the condition. The digital-era workspace opens new possibilities for meaningful work and organisations need to invest in technology and human-led practices to help workers construct new meaning. It is hoped that the study inspires new research and support for workers and employers on crafting meaningful work with the use of innovative technology that surpasses the challenges of a turbulent, more volatile work world.

### Acknowledgements

M.C., N.F. and I.L.P. would like to acknowledge the participants of the study and their consent to use their data for research purposes.

## Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationship that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

## Authors' contributions

M.C., N.F. and I.L.P. contributed equally to the writing of the article.

## Funding information

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, M.C., upon reasonable request.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency, or that of the publisher. The authors are responsible for this article's results, findings, and content.

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