Future of Work and Digital Management Journal

Liang. Chen [iD][1], Wei. Zhang [iD][2]*

1   Department of Educational Psychology, Fudan University, Shanghai, China
2   Department of Psychology, Peking University, Beijing, China

Corresponding author email address:
weizhang99@pku.edu.cn

Job Autonomy and Organizational Commitment: The Mediating Role of Work Meaningfulness

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to investigate the mediating role of work meaningfulness in the relationship between job autonomy and organizational commitment among Chinese employees. A descriptive correlational design was employed, and data were collected from 490 full-time employees in China using stratified random sampling. Standardized instruments were used to measure job autonomy, work meaningfulness, and organizational commitment. Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation coefficients were computed using SPSS-27, while Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was conducted using AMOS-21 to test the hypothesized mediation model and assess the overall fit of the structural model. The results of Pearson correlations indicated significant positive relationships among all study variables: job autonomy was significantly correlated with work meaningfulness ($r = .49$, $p < .001$) and organizational commitment ($r = .38$, $p < .001$), while work meaningfulness was strongly correlated with organizational commitment ($r = .56$, $p < .001$). SEM analysis demonstrated good model fit ($\chi^2 = 148.72$, df = 84, χ^2/df = 1.77, CFI = .96, TLI = .95, RMSEA = .039). Path analysis revealed that job autonomy significantly predicted work meaningfulness ($\beta = .49$, $p < .001$) and organizational commitment directly ($\beta = .26$, $p < .001$). Work meaningfulness significantly predicted organizational commitment ($\beta = .52$, $p < .001$), and the indirect effect of job autonomy on commitment through meaningfulness was also significant ($\beta = .26$, $p < .001$), indicating partial mediation. The findings confirm that job autonomy enhances organizational commitment both directly and indirectly through the experience of work meaningfulness. This highlights the importance of designing autonomous and meaningful work environments to foster long-term employee commitment, particularly in collectivist cultural contexts such as China.

Keywords: Job Autonomy, Work Meaningfulness, Organizational Commitment.

Introduction

In the evolving landscape of modern organizations, understanding the psychological mechanisms that enhance employee retention and performance has become a strategic imperative. Among the constructs receiving considerable scholarly attention is organizational commitment, a multifaceted concept reflecting an employee's emotional and cognitive attachment to their organization. High organizational commitment has consistently been linked to positive organizational outcomes such as reduced turnover, increased performance, and greater citizenship behavior [1, 2]. As workplaces become more dynamic and complex, the factors contributing to sustained commitment are being reexamined, with job autonomy and meaningful work emerging as critical antecedents.

Job autonomy, defined as the degree to which employees have control over their tasks and decisions, plays a central role in fostering intrinsic motivation and enhancing psychological engagement. Autonomy is not merely about flexibility in scheduling or task execution; it signifies a deeper trust in employees' judgment and professional discretion. Numerous studies underscore the positive relationship between job autonomy and commitment, indicating that when individuals perceive a

high level of autonomy, they tend to invest more emotionally and behaviorally in their organizations [3, 4]. Job autonomy satisfies the basic psychological need for self-determination, which, according to self-determination theory, is essential for sustained motivation and well-being at work [5].

Yet, job autonomy alone may not fully explain the variance in organizational commitment. Recent research suggests that the psychological mechanism through which autonomy translates into commitment may involve the experience of meaningful work. Work meaningfulness refers to the degree to which individuals perceive their work as significant, purposeful, and aligned with their personal values. Meaningful work is considered a cornerstone of employee well-being and is increasingly viewed as a mediator in organizational behavior models [6, 7]. Empirical evidence indicates that when employees find their work meaningful, they are more likely to develop a sense of belonging and commitment to their organizations [8, 9].

The concept of meaningful work has been conceptualized in multiple ways, including its sources, functions, and outcomes. It can emerge from personal growth, social contribution, and alignment with organizational values. Meaningful work also promotes adaptive work behaviors such as organizational citizenship, engagement, and job performance, while mitigating counterproductive work behaviors [10, 11]. For instance, Youn and Kim [12] demonstrated that meaningful work mediated the relationship between corporate social responsibility and organizational citizenship behavior, suggesting that employees who perceive their work as meaningful are more likely to transcend their formal role requirements.

Furthermore, the influence of meaningful work is particularly evident in the context of leadership, organizational justice, and support. Leaders who emphasize employee development and provide ethical guidance enhance perceptions of meaningful work among subordinates, thereby fostering greater commitment and prosocial behavior [13, 14]. Similarly, perceptions of organizational justice and support have been shown to indirectly influence organizational commitment through their effects on work meaningfulness [15, 16]. These findings underscore the importance of considering meaningful work not only as an outcome but also as a mediating variable in the broader organizational commitment framework.

In educational and service sectors, where emotional labor and value alignment are pronounced, meaningful work becomes especially salient. Teachers, for example, are more likely to exhibit commitment and innovative behavior when they perceive their work as meaningful and aligned with their personal calling [17, 18]. A study by Kinanti [19] found that meaningful work significantly predicted organizational citizenship behavior, further supporting its motivational potential. This emphasis on value-congruence and purposeful engagement also resonates with James's [20] work, which identified meaningfulness as a critical mediator between person-job fit and engagement.

The role of meaningful work in fostering organizational commitment is not only supported by empirical data but is also grounded in theoretical frameworks such as the Job Characteristics Model and Psychological Empowerment Theory. According to the Job Characteristics Model, core job dimensions like skill variety, task identity, and autonomy contribute to the psychological experience of meaningfulness, which in turn influences critical outcomes including commitment [21, 22]. In psychological empowerment theory, meaningful work is considered one of the four cognitions essential for empowering employees and enhancing their intrinsic motivation [23].

Despite the growing consensus on the significance of meaningful work, the pathways through which it operates remain underexplored in different cultural and organizational contexts. In collectivist cultures such as China, where hierarchical structures and social obligations shape workplace dynamics, the interplay between autonomy and meaningful work may

differ from Western contexts. While autonomy is generally associated with individualism, emerging research suggests that Chinese employees also value autonomy as a means of demonstrating competence and fulfilling social responsibilities [24]. Therefore, exploring how job autonomy leads to organizational commitment via meaningful work in the Chinese context offers both theoretical and practical contributions.

This study aims to fill this gap by investigating the mediating role of work meaningfulness in the relationship between job autonomy and organizational commitment among employees in China.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

This research employed a descriptive correlational design to examine the relationships between job autonomy, work meaningfulness, and organizational commitment among employees in China. The study sample consisted of 490 participants, determined based on the Morgan and Krejcie sample size table for a large population. Participants were selected using stratified random sampling from various sectors, including manufacturing, education, and services, to ensure diversity in occupational backgrounds. All participants provided informed consent prior to data collection and met the inclusion criteria of being employed full-time for a minimum of one year.

Data Collection

Organizational commitment was measured using the Organizational Commitment Scale developed by Meyer and Allen (1991), which conceptualizes commitment as a multidimensional construct comprising affective, continuance, and normative commitment. The scale consists of 18 items divided equally across the three subscales (6 items each), assessing emotional attachment, perceived cost of leaving, and a sense of obligation to remain with the organization. Respondents rate their agreement with each statement on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with higher scores indicating greater levels of commitment. Numerous studies have confirmed the scale's internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values typically exceeding 0.70 for each subscale, and its construct validity has been supported through confirmatory factor analyses in various organizational contexts.

Work meaningfulness was assessed using the Work and Meaning Inventory (WAMI) developed by Steger, Dik, and Duffy (2012), which evaluates the degree to which individuals perceive their work as meaningful. This instrument includes 10 items across three subscales: positive meaning in work, meaning-making through work, and greater good motivations. Each item is rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (absolutely untrue) to 5 (absolutely true), with higher scores reflecting greater perceived meaningfulness of work. The WAMI has demonstrated robust psychometric properties, including high internal reliability ($\alpha > 0.80$) and strong evidence for convergent and discriminant validity in both academic and organizational samples.

Job autonomy was measured using the autonomy subscale from the Work Design Questionnaire (WDQ), developed by Morgeson and Humphrey (2006), which captures the extent to which a job allows freedom, independence, and discretion in work processes. The autonomy subscale consists of 9 items divided into three components: work scheduling autonomy, decision-making autonomy, and work methods autonomy (3 items each). Responses are recorded on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with higher scores indicating greater job autonomy. The WDQ has

been widely validated, with the autonomy subscale consistently demonstrating high reliability (α > 0.85) and validity across diverse organizational and cultural settings.

Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 27 and AMOS version 21. Initially, descriptive statistics were calculated to summarize participant demographics and key study variables. Pearson correlation coefficients were computed to explore the bivariate relationships between organizational commitment (dependent variable), job autonomy, and work meaningfulness. Subsequently, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was used to test the proposed mediating model, examining the direct and indirect effects of job autonomy on organizational commitment through work meaningfulness. Model fit was assessed using standard indices, including Chi-square, RMSEA, CFI, and TLI.

Findings and Results

Of the 490 participants, 271 (55.3%) identified as female and 219 (44.7%) as male. In terms of age distribution, 97 participants (19.8%) were aged 20–29 years, 204 (41.6%) were 30–39 years old, 134 (27.3%) were 40–49 years old, and 55 (11.2%) were 50 years or older. Regarding educational background, 58 participants (11.8%) held a high school diploma, 167 (34.1%) had an associate degree, 201 (41.0%) had a bachelor's degree, and 64 (13.1%) had a master's degree or higher. Participants represented various job sectors: 156 (31.8%) were from manufacturing, 138 (28.2%) from education, and 196 (40.0%) from the service industry.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Main Variables

Variable	M	SD
Job Autonomy	36.42	5.89
Work Meaningfulness	41.57	6.14
Organizational Commitment	66.23	8.35

The mean and standard deviation values for the study variables are presented in Table 1. Participants reported moderate to high levels of job autonomy (M = 36.42, SD = 5.89), perceived work meaningfulness (M = 41.57, SD = 6.14), and organizational commitment (M = 66.23, SD = 8.35). These values are consistent with previous research in similar workplace contexts and suggest generally positive employee experiences across these dimensions.

Prior to conducting the main analyses, all statistical assumptions were examined and confirmed. The normality of distributions was assessed using skewness and kurtosis, with values for all key variables falling within the acceptable range of -1 to +1 (e.g., organizational commitment skewness = -0.42, kurtosis = 0.38). Linearity was confirmed through scatterplot inspection, revealing a consistent linear trend between each pair of variables. Homoscedasticity was verified via Levene's test for equality of variances, with non-significant results (p > 0.05) for all comparisons. Multicollinearity diagnostics revealed tolerance values above 0.74 and VIF values below 1.35, indicating no serious multicollinearity issues. These results confirmed the suitability of the dataset for both Pearson correlation and SEM analyses.

Table 2

Pearson Correlations Among Study Variables

Variable	1	2	3
1. Job Autonomy	—		
2. Work Meaningfulness	.49** (p < .001)	—	
3. Organizational Commitment	.38** (p < .001)	.56** (p < .001)	—

As shown in Table 2, job autonomy was significantly and positively correlated with work meaningfulness (r = .49, p < .001) and organizational commitment (r = .38, p < .001). Additionally, work meaningfulness showed a strong positive correlation with organizational commitment (r = .56, p < .001). These correlations support the hypothesis that autonomy and meaningfulness are important antecedents of commitment.

Table 3

Model Fit Indices for the Structural Equation Model

Fit Index	Value	Recommended Threshold
χ^2 (Chi-Square)	148.72	—
Df	84	—
χ^2/df	1.77	< 3.00
GFI	.94	≥ .90
AGFI	.91	≥ .90
CFI	.96	≥ .95
TLI	.95	≥ .95
RMSEA	.039	≤ .06

Table 3 shows that the proposed structural model had an acceptable to excellent fit. The Chi-square value was 148.72 with 84 degrees of freedom, resulting in a χ^2/df ratio of 1.77, which is well below the cutoff of 3. Goodness-of-fit indices such as GFI (.94), AGFI (.91), CFI (.96), and TLI (.95) all exceeded the acceptable thresholds, while the RMSEA value (.039) indicated a good approximation of fit. These values confirm that the model adequately represents the observed data.

Table 4

Path Coefficients: Total, Direct, and Indirect Effects

Path	B	S.E	β	p
Job Autonomy → Work Meaningfulness	0.61	0.08	.49	< .001
Work Meaningfulness → Org. Commitment	0.87	0.09	.52	< .001
Job Autonomy → Org. Commitment (Direct)	0.39	0.07	.26	< .001
Job Autonomy → Org. Commitment (Indirect via Meaning)	0.53	0.06	.26	< .001
Job Autonomy → Org. Commitment (Total)	0.92	—	.52	< .001

As detailed in Table 4, job autonomy significantly predicted work meaningfulness (B = 0.61, β = .49, p < .001), and work meaningfulness in turn significantly predicted organizational commitment (B = 0.87, β = .52, p < .001). The direct path from job autonomy to organizational commitment was also significant (B = 0.39, β = .26, p < .001). The indirect effect of job autonomy on organizational commitment through work meaningfulness was B = 0.53, with a total effect of B = 0.92 (β = .52, p < .001). These findings support the hypothesis that work meaningfulness partially mediates the relationship between job autonomy and organizational commitment.

Figure 1

Model with Beta Values

Structural Model of Job Autonomy, Work Meaningfulness, and Organizational Commitment
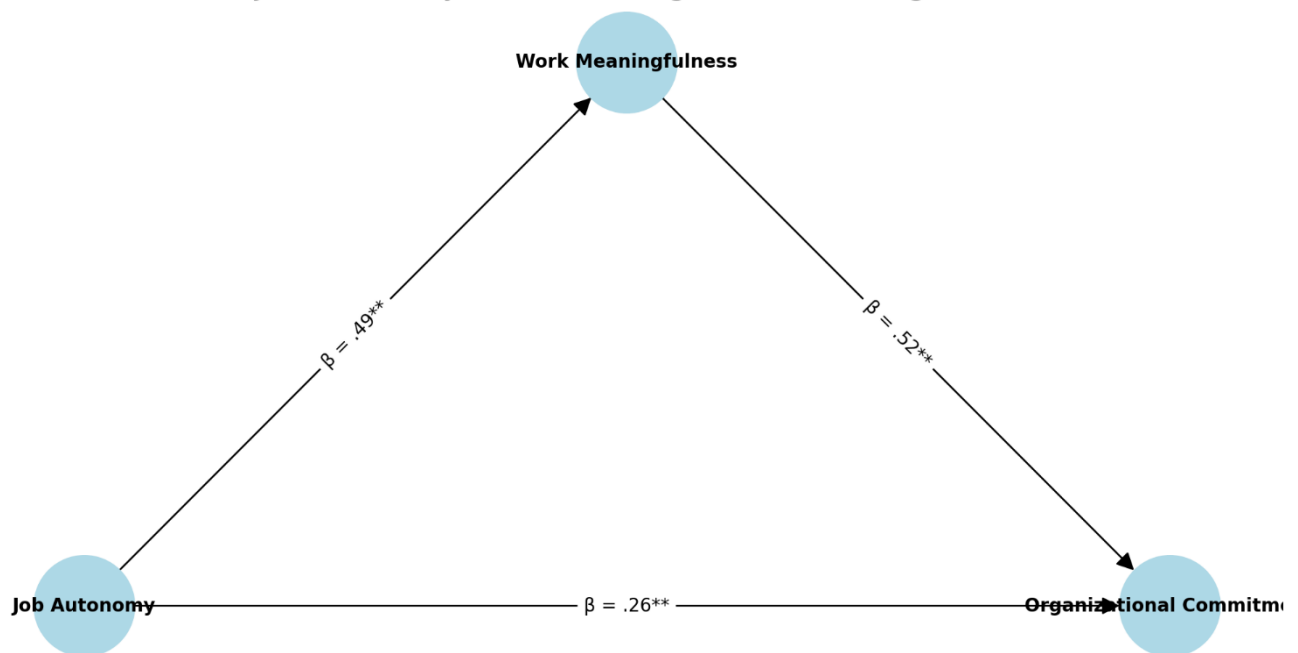
Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study provided empirical support for the hypothesized model, which posited that job autonomy positively predicts organizational commitment both directly and indirectly through the mediating role of work meaningfulness. Pearson correlation results revealed significant positive associations between job autonomy and organizational commitment, as well as between work meaningfulness and organizational commitment. Structural equation modeling (SEM) further confirmed that work meaningfulness partially mediates the relationship between job autonomy and organizational commitment among Chinese employees. These results underscore the importance of autonomy and the experience of meaning in fostering a committed workforce.

The significant direct relationship between job autonomy and organizational commitment is consistent with previous findings that highlight autonomy as a key motivational resource. Employees who are granted discretion over their tasks, decision-making, and work processes tend to exhibit stronger emotional and psychological attachment to their organizations. This supports the broader literature emphasizing the role of autonomy in enhancing internal motivation, satisfaction, and long-term retention [3, 4]. In the Chinese context, despite cultural values that emphasize hierarchy and collectivism, job autonomy still emerged as a significant driver of commitment. This aligns with studies suggesting that autonomy satisfies universal psychological needs for competence and control, which transcend cultural boundaries [5, 24].

The study also found that work meaningfulness significantly mediates the relationship between job autonomy and organizational commitment. This mediating role supports theoretical models that propose meaningful work as a psychological mechanism through which job characteristics exert their effects on employee outcomes. When employees perceive their tasks as meaningful—when their work is seen as valuable, purposeful, and aligned with personal or

organizational values—they are more likely to develop a deep connection with their organization. These findings are supported by studies that frame meaningful work as a motivational amplifier, capable of enhancing employee engagement and commitment regardless of job type or sector [6-8].

Our findings echo the work of Merdiaty et al. [25], who demonstrated that meaningful work mediates the relationship between organizational commitment and organizational citizenship behavior. They concluded that employees are more willing to go beyond their role when they find intrinsic value in what they do. Similarly, the study by Fu and Huang [17] among Chinese teachers highlighted that meaningful work enhances organizational citizenship behavior, especially when job crafting and autonomy are present. This supports our assertion that job autonomy acts as a precursor to meaningfulness, which then fuels organizational commitment.

Moreover, the current results resonate with the conceptual model proposed by James [20], which positioned work meaningfulness as a mediator between fit perception and engagement. Our findings extend this model by confirming the mediating role of meaningful work not just in engagement, but in commitment—an outcome with direct implications for retention and performance. Studies by İMali and Kaya [9] and Youn and Kim [12] similarly confirmed that when employees perceive their work as meaningful, they experience a higher level of attachment to the organization and demonstrate behaviors aligned with organizational goals.

The relationship between autonomy, meaningfulness, and commitment is further enriched when considered through the lens of leadership, organizational culture, and justice. Leadership practices that foster meaningful work—such as involving employees in decision-making, recognizing their contributions, and aligning tasks with personal values—have been shown to elevate commitment levels. Mercurio et al. [13] mapped leadership strategies intended to generate meaning in the workplace, emphasizing their impact on motivation and retention. Likewise, the model by O'Callaghan [2] showed how perceptions of justice influence turnover intention via meaningful work, indirectly validating the pathways explored in the current study.

Furthermore, the current findings align with the work of Kutaladze and Butsashvili [16], who emphasized that organizational cynicism can be reduced and commitment enhanced through perceived support and meaningful work. When organizations empower employees with autonomy and provide opportunities to find meaning in their roles, they can buffer the adverse effects of workplace cynicism. This is also echoed by Soyalin and Battal [15], who highlighted the importance of organizational justice and support in enhancing commitment via meaningful experiences.

From a broader psychological and organizational behavior perspective, the current results corroborate the Job Characteristics Model, which positions autonomy as a core job dimension leading to critical psychological states such as experienced meaningfulness. According to this model, when employees experience high autonomy, they are more likely to view their work as impactful and purposeful, which in turn motivates them to remain committed [21, 22]. Additionally, Albrecht et al. [23] emphasized the psychological conditions necessary for engagement during organizational change, noting that autonomy and meaningfulness are essential psychological enablers.

Notably, our study contributes new insights by situating these relationships in the Chinese context, a collectivist society where job control may not be culturally emphasized. Nonetheless, the findings validate that Chinese employees value autonomy as a means of demonstrating professionalism and fulfilling communal responsibilities. This expands the cross-

cultural applicability of previous Western-centric findings and aligns with the integrative review by Mulyana et al. [18], which recognized the cultural nuances shaping meaningful work experiences in education and beyond.

The importance of meaning-making was also supported by Şentürk and Altunok [11], who emphasized how meaningful work is strengthened by broader life meaning and prosocial motivations. Their findings align with the notion that work meaning is not confined to task significance but is also shaped by interpersonal relations, organizational values, and perceived societal impact. Similarly, Lukitasari and Etikariena [14] found that an ambidextrous culture—balancing innovation with stability—fosters employee innovation via enhanced meaning-making, further reinforcing the mediating power of meaningfulness across various organizational outcomes.

In addition, our findings support the results of Kinanti [19], who demonstrated that employees who find meaning in their work are more likely to exhibit discretionary behaviors that benefit the organization. These behaviors, though not part of formal job requirements, signify deep psychological investment and align closely with the construct of organizational commitment. The serial mediation model proposed by Sîrbu et al. [10], which linked meaningful work to reduced counterproductive behaviors through psychological mechanisms, also provides support for the protective and motivational functions of meaningfulness in the workplace.

Taken together, the evidence from this study and the broader literature underscores that organizations striving to foster commitment must look beyond structural and financial incentives. Psychological job resources such as autonomy and meaningful work are essential for sustaining commitment, motivation, and engagement. Leaders and HR professionals should thus focus on designing roles and environments that empower employees and allow them to derive significance from their work experiences.

Despite its valuable contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional design limits our ability to make causal inferences about the relationships among job autonomy, work meaningfulness, and organizational commitment. Future longitudinal studies are needed to confirm the directionality of these effects over time. Second, all measures were self-reported, raising the possibility of common method bias, even though validated scales were used. Third, while the study was conducted with a relatively large and diverse sample from China, the findings may not be generalizable to other cultural or organizational contexts, particularly those with different norms regarding authority, individualism, and work values. Finally, although SEM allowed for testing a complex mediating model, other potentially influential variables—such as leadership style, job crafting, and organizational culture—were not included in the model and could provide additional explanatory power.

Future research could expand on this study in several meaningful directions. Longitudinal designs would help clarify the temporal dynamics of how autonomy fosters meaningful work and commitment over time. Additionally, incorporating qualitative methods—such as interviews or narrative analysis—could provide richer insights into how employees construct meaning from their work and how autonomy shapes that process. Comparative cross-cultural studies would also be valuable to examine how cultural values moderate the autonomy-meaning-commitment link across different regions and industries. Including additional mediators and moderators such as psychological empowerment, emotional intelligence, or perceived organizational support could offer a more nuanced understanding of the underlying mechanisms. Finally, experimental or intervention-based studies aimed at increasing autonomy and meaning could test the practical effectiveness of organizational initiatives designed to enhance commitment.

Organizations seeking to enhance employee commitment should invest in work design strategies that prioritize autonomy. Allowing employees discretion in scheduling, decision-making, and problem-solving can foster a sense of control and ownership over their roles. Additionally, it is essential to create environments that support meaningful work through clear communication of organizational purpose, recognition of individual contributions, and opportunities for personal growth. Managers should be trained to connect employees' daily tasks to broader organizational goals and societal impact. Regular feedback and development opportunities can further reinforce a sense of value and significance in one's work. By integrating autonomy with meaningfulness, organizations can cultivate a more committed, motivated, and resilient workforce.

Acknowledgments

Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. Written consent was obtained from all participants in the study.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

Funding

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