

Activity 5.4

Case Study: Other Things Matter

You have just graduated college with your degree in hand. You quickly find a job that pays a salary of \$80,000 a year. It is the job you have strived for and you are looking forward to beginning your career in a productive and meaningful environment.

Fast forward a year into the job. You find yourself doing meaningless tasks lacking both purpose and recognition. You keep in mind that you have a good salary. At the same time, you consider how much longer you can place a value on that pay when little to no recognition or purpose is placed on the work you do. Do other things beyond pay really matter?

College professors Dan Ariely, Emir Kamenica, and Drazen Prelec designed an experiment to explore whether meaning matters in attitudes toward work. They distinguished two different ways individuals can derive meaning from their work: through recognition and through a sense of purpose. *Recognition* means that one's efforts do not go unnoticed. *Purpose* means that workers perceive their work as a part of a general objective that is valued.

The Experiment:

College students volunteered to participate in an experiment in which they were paid to build Bionicle figures (Bionicle is a Lego brand construction toy). Participants were paid on a declining unit wage schedule: they were compensated \$2 for the first Bionicle built, \$1.89 (11 cents less) for the second, \$1.78 for the third, and so on, with the wage declining by 11 cents for each successive Bionicle. When a Bionicle was completed, the amount earned for that Bionicle was recorded, and subjects were then asked if they would like to build another Bionicle. The only choice participants had to make was at what point they wanted to stop making Bionicles.

The experiment took place in a room in which there were only two people: the student participating in the experiment and an experimenter. The study participants were randomly assigned to one of two work conditions and they had no knowledge of the work condition to which they were not assigned.

In the "Meaningful" condition, after participants completed a Bionicle, the experimenter would take the completed Bionicle, place it on a desk in the room, and hand subjects a box

containing the parts to construct another Bionicle. Participants could see their work accumulate on the desk as they completed each additional Bionicle.

In the “Sisyphus” condition,² after participants completed a Bionicle, the experimenter would take the completed Bionicle and hand subjects a box containing the parts to construct another Bionicle. But rather than place the completed Bionicle on a desk in the room, the experimenter would take apart the just-completed Bionicle in front of the participant. No Bionicles were put on a desk to accumulate as they were completed.

Can you predict what happened?

The question: Did students in the Sisyphus condition complete more, less, or the same number of Bionicles as students in the Meaningful condition?

1. What would you predict about how many each group would produce if you viewed the situation as an Econ?
2. What do you predict actually happened in the experiment? (Think about the motivations of Humans.)

² This condition in the experiment was named after the mythical figure Sisyphus, whom “The gods had condemned...to ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain, whence the stone would fall back of its own weight. They had thought with some reason that there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labor.” (Albert Camus. “The Myth of Sisyphus.” *The Myth of Sisyphus*. N.p., n.d. Web. 17 Jan. 2016.)