International Journal of Science and Research (IJSR)
ISSN: 2319-7064
Impact Factor 2025: 7.089

Addressing Employee Existential Emptiness: Efficacy of a Structured Organizational Intervention

Poornima Srinivasan

Department of Psychology, Jain (Deemed-to-be) University, Bengaluru, Karnataka, India
Email: *poornima.srinivasann[at]gmail.com*

Abstract: ***Existential emptiness, characterized by chronic apathy, socio-emotional alienation, and a perceived absence of intrinsic purpose in professional life, is a key driver of disengagement, quiet quitting, and voluntary attrition in knowledge economies. Traditional wellness initiatives target physiological stress but rarely address this ontological distress. This mixed-methods study (QUAN-qual) evaluated a structured, 8-week organizational intervention grounded in Viktor Frankl's logotherapy, combining purpose-aligned leadership training, job crafting, and reflective peer-coaching circles. A sample of 380 mid-to-senior corporate professionals across IT, professional services, and HR leadership in India completed pre- and post-intervention assessments using the Meaning in Life Questionnaire, Purpose in Life Test-Work Adaptation, Turnover Intention Scale, and Organizational Citizenship Behavior Scale, supplemented by thematic analysis of reflective journals (n = 60). Paired-sample t-tests revealed significant increases in presence of meaning (t(379) = 14.82, p < .001, d = 0.76) and work-specific purpose (t(379) = 16.45, p < .001, d = 0.84), alongside reductions in turnover intention (t(379) = -12.30, p < .001, d = 0.63) and increases in organizational citizenship behavior (t(379) = 8.91, p < .001, d = 0.46). Qualitative synthesis revealed a shift from transactional compliance toward purpose-integrated professional identity. Findings position existential well-being as a strategic human resource imperative.***

Keywords: Existential Emptiness, Logotherapy, Meaningful Work, Job Crafting, Employee Retention

1. Introduction

In modern post-industrial knowledge economies, work occupies a uniquely central position in adult identity construction, self-actualization, and socio-economic integration. Individuals devote the majority of their waking hours to professional tasks, often projecting intrinsic aspirations, values, and identity onto their corporate roles. Despite rapid improvements in workplace ergonomics, flexible hybrid models, advanced collaborative tools, and competitive compensation, psychological disengagement remains at historic highs globally.

Organizational literature and occupational health psychology have extensively examined burnout, emotional exhaustion, role ambiguity, and job dissatisfaction. While these frameworks capture operational fatigue and stress, they frequently obscure a more profound, qualitative psychological phenomenon: existential emptiness.

First conceptualized in clinical literature by Viktor E. Frankl [1,2], the "existential vacuum" represents a pervasive sense of inner emptiness, aimlessness, and a lack of perceived meaning in life. When manifested within corporate environments, employee existential emptiness does not present merely as physical weariness or transient task frustration. Rather, it manifests as a profound disconnect between daily occupational output and personal human purpose. Employees experiencing existential emptiness perform their duties mechanically, viewing themselves as replaceable components in an impersonal corporate mechanism, achieving operational metrics while experiencing deep internal alienation — a condition termed in existential psychology as the "existential neurosis of work."

In knowledge-driven markets, such as India's rapidly evolving corporate technology and enterprise service sectors, this existential rift has given rise to systemic organizational challenges: quiet quitting, emotional detachment, psychological presenteeism, and elevated voluntary turnover. Traditional retention levers- financial bonuses, gamified perks, or surface-level team-building retreats- fail to resolve this phenomenon because they operate on a purely transactional level, missing the underlying ontological distress.

The present study examines the empirical efficacy of a structured, logotherapy-grounded organizational intervention in mitigating employee existential emptiness, elevating workplace psychological capital, and reducing turnover intentions among Indian corporate professionals.

2. Literature Survey

2.1 The Ontological Crisis in the Modern Workplace

A substantial body of research has established the psychological toll of commodified labor. Historically, work was integrated into community life and survival, providing immediate, visible utility. The rise of hyper-specialized corporate hierarchies, algorithmic management, and transactional labor contracts has decoupled work performance from perceived societal impact. Recent empirical studies in existential psychology reveal that when individuals perceive their daily efforts as disconnected from personal values, they experience existential anxiety — a constant, underlying dread regarding the utility and legacy of their lives.

2.2 Logotherapy in Organizational Behavior

Logotherapy, derived from the Greek logos ("meaning"), posits that the primary human motivational force is not the "will to pleasure" (as in psychoanalysis) or the "will to power" (as in Adlerian psychology), but the "will to meaning" [1]. When this drive is blocked or unfulfilled, an existential

vacuum develops, subsequently filled by symptoms of apathy, cynicism, boredom, and psychological distress.

Traditional job design theory [3] highlights task identity, task significance, autonomy, and feedback as key determinants of motivation, conceptualizing "significance" primarily in operational terms. Existential organizational psychology expands this scope, asserting that work attains authentic human significance when it satisfies three dimensional values defined by Frankl: creative values (what an individual contributes through problem-solving and intentional labor), experiential values (what an individual derives through authentic relationships and shared culture), and attitudinal values (the stance adopted toward unavoidable organizational constraints and setbacks).

2.3 The Failure of Individualized Wellness Interventions

Historically, organizations have attempted to address psychological distress by outsourcing responsibility to individual-focused interventions: Employee Assistance Programs, subscription-based mindfulness applications, or generic stress-management seminars. While beneficial as secondary coping tools, these interventions place the entire burden of adaptation on the individual employee while leaving systemic conditions untouched. Systemic organizational interventions, by contrast, modify the structural, relational, and managerial architecture of the workplace. By integrating job crafting frameworks [4], authentic leadership practices, and reflective peer dialogue directly into operational workflows, organizations can address the root structural causes of existential distress.

3. Problem Definition

Despite extensive corporate investment in health and wellness programs, rates of emotional detachment, burnout, and turnover intention remain high across industries. Existing research in Industrial-Organizational psychology primarily addresses burnout as a physical or cognitive fatigue phenomenon, overlooking its existential root: the loss of personal significance at work. Much of the existing evidence on gratitude-adjacent and meaning-based interventions has been derived from Western populations, and empirical evaluation of structured, logotherapy-grounded interventions among Indian corporate professionals remains limited. There is a critical empirical gap regarding how specific, structured organizational interventions directly reduce existential emptiness and mediate employee retention outcomes.

3.1 Objectives of the Study

1) To evaluate whether participation in a structured logotherapeutic organizational intervention increases employees' perceived presence of meaning in work.
2) To assess whether the intervention reduces employee existential emptiness and work-related purpose deficits.
3) To examine whether the intervention decreases turnover intentions and increases discretionary organizational citizenship behaviors.
4) To explore, through qualitative narrative analysis, how employee perception shifts from transactional labor compliance toward purpose-integrated professional identity.

3.2 Hypotheses

H_1: Participation in the 8-week structured logotherapeutic intervention will lead to a statistically significant increase in employees' perceived presence of meaning in work.
H_2: The intervention will produce a statistically significant reduction in employee existential emptiness and work-related purpose deficits.
H_3: The intervention will result in a statistically significant decrease in employee turnover intentions and a concomitant increase in discretionary organizational citizenship behaviors.
H_4: Qualitative narrative reflections will demonstrate a transformation in employee perception from transactional labor compliance to a purpose-integrated professional identity.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study employed a pragmatic, mixed-methods sequential explanatory design (QUAN→qual). The quantitative phase used a single-group pre–post intervention design without a randomized control group, evaluating change across standardized psychometric instruments at baseline (Week 0) and immediately following an 8-week structured program (Week 8). The subsequent qualitative phase involved thematic analysis of reflective weekly journal entries from a purposive subsample (n = 60), providing mechanistic context for how participants navigated and reinterpreted existential distress within their operational roles.

4.2 Participants

A sample of N = 380 full-time corporate professionals was recruited via purposive non-probability sampling from technology conglomerates, professional consulting firms, and enterprise software organizations in Bengaluru, India. Inclusion criteria required a minimum of three years of total post-qualification experience, current organizational tenure of at least 12 consecutive months, baseline Purpose in Life Test scores indicating mild-to-moderate work-related existential disengagement, and the absence of acute severe clinical psychiatric disorders requiring immediate treatment.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Participants (N = 380)

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Female	205	53.9
	Male	171	45
	Non-binary/undisclosed	4	1.1
Age	23–31 yrs	124	32.6
	32–41 yrs	188	49.5
	42+ yrs	68	17.9
Sector	IT & Software Services	220	57.9
	Strategic HR & Ops	98	25.8
	Financial Consulting	62	16.3
Level	Individual contributor	158	41.6
	Mid-level manager	152	40
	Senior management	70	18.4

Note. Percentages may not sum to exactly 100% due to rounding.

The sample was balanced across gender, with a modal age band of 32–41 years, and was weighted toward enterprise software and IT services given the concentration of large technology employers in the sampling region.

4.3 Intervention Procedure

The intervention was delivered as a structured, bi-weekly developmental program combining interactive workshops, manager-facilitated group dialogue, peer reflective circles, and guided job-crafting assignments, targeting Frankl's three dimensional values within everyday corporate workflows. Participation was embedded within paid working hours rather than treated as an optional after-hours activity.

- Module 1 (Weeks 1–2), Deconstructing the Existential Vacuum: participants audited daily tasks to identify "meaning leaks" and contrasted extrinsic motivators with core intrinsic values.
- Module 2 (Weeks 3–4), Relational and Cognitive Job Crafting: applied Wrzesniewski and Dutton's tripartite model [4] across task, relational, and cognitive dimensions.
- Module 3 (Weeks 5–6), Purpose-Oriented Leadership: managers shifted one-on-one meetings toward developmental, purpose-oriented check-ins and reduced employee instrumentalization.
- Module 4 (Weeks 7–8), Institutionalizing Attitudinal Values: participants practiced attitudinal reframing around unalterable organizational constraints and formulated personal-professional mission statements.

4.4 Measures

Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) [5]: 10-item, 7-point Likert scale assessing Presence of Meaning (MLQ-P; α = .89) and Search for Meaning (MLQ-S; α = .84).

Purpose in Life Test—Work Adaptation (PIL-W): 12-item, 7-point semantic differential scale adapted from Crumbaugh and Maholick [6] to evaluate work-specific existential fulfilment (α = .88).

Turnover Intention Scale (TIS-6) [7]: 6-item, 5-point Likert instrument measuring conscious intent to voluntarily leave the organization (α = .91).

Organizational Citizenship Behavior Scale (OCBS) [8]: 10-item adapted scale assessing discretionary workplace behaviors including altruism, sportsmanship, and conscientiousness (α = .86).

Reflective journal logs: weekly structured entries; a subsample (n = 60) provided comprehensive narrative exit logs at Week 8.

4.5 Procedure

Data were collected through the organization's HR-facilitated program enrollment. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses, and informed that participation in the research component was voluntary. Electronic informed consent was obtained before participants completed the baseline questionnaire. The survey included demographic questions followed by the standardized psychological measures, repeated at Week 8.

4.6 Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to established ethical principles for research involving human participants. Participation in the research evaluation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the evaluation at any stage without any penalty to their program participation.

4.7 Statistical Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS (Version 28) and Python statistical modules. Normal distribution assumptions were validated via Shapiro–Wilk testing ($p > .05$). Paired-sample t-tests were conducted to evaluate pre- and post-intervention differences across all standardized psychometric scales. Effect sizes were computed using Cohen's d, categorized as small (d = 0.20), medium (d = 0.50), and large (d = 0.80). Bivariate Pearson correlation examined the association between post-intervention purpose and turnover intention. Qualitative journal data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis framework [9].

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 Descriptive Statistics

Table 2 presents baseline and post-intervention descriptive statistics for all five psychometric measures across the full sample (N = 380).

Table 2: Pre- and Post-Intervention Descriptive Statistics

Measure	Baseline M (SD)	Post M (SD)
MLQ–Presence	21.15 (5.24)	28.92 (4.18)
PIL–Work	41.80 (9.92)	58.95 (7.84)
TIS-6	23.10 (4.72)	15.85 (3.95)
OCBS	28.40 (6.10)	34.80 (5.25)
MLQ–Search	26.80 (4.15)	20.45 (4.70)

Note. MLQ = Meaning in Life Questionnaire; PIL = Purpose in Life Test—Work Adaptation; TIS-6 = Turnover Intention Scale; OCBS = Organizational Citizenship Behavior Scale.

5.2 Inferential Analysis

Paired-sample t-tests provided strong support for H1, H2, and H3 (Table 3).

Table 3: Paired-Sample t-Test Results and Effect Sizes

Measure	t (379)	p	d
MLQ–Presence	14.82	<.001	0.76
PIL–Work	16.45	<.001	0.84
TIS-6	−12.30	<.001	0.63
OCBS	8.91	<.001	0.46
MLQ–Search	−8.12	<.001	0.42

Note. All tests df = 379. Negative t-values indicate a post-intervention decrease relative to baseline.

Presence of meaning (MLQ-P) increased significantly from baseline (M = 21.15, SD = 5.24) to post-intervention (M = 28.92, SD = 4.18), t(379) = 14.82, p < .001, d = 0.76, indicating that the structured intervention substantially elevated employees' perceived meaning in everyday work.

Work-specific purpose (PIL-W) improved from M = 41.80 (SD = 9.92) to M = 58.95 (SD = 7.84), t(379) = 16.45, p < .001, d = 0.84, reflecting a large reduction in work-related existential emptiness.

Turnover intention (TIS-6) decreased from M = 23.10 to M = 15.85, t(379) = −12.30, p < .001, d = 0.63. A bivariate Pearson correlation confirmed a strong inverse relationship between post-intervention purpose (PIL-W) and turnover intention, r = −.62, p < .001. Organizational citizenship behavior (OCBS) increased from M = 28.40 to M = 34.80, t(379) = 8.91, p < .001, d = 0.46, indicating that gains in intrinsic purpose were accompanied by greater discretionary support for colleagues.

Search for meaning (MLQ-S) declined significantly, t(379) = −8.12, p < .001, d = 0.42, consistent with participants resolving- rather than merely continuing to seek- existential purpose.

These findings are consistent with the broaden-and-build logic underlying meaning-centered interventions more broadly: as employees gained structural and relational resources for constructing meaning, both intrinsic purpose and prosocial workplace behavior increased in tandem, while active searching for meaning- itself a marker of unresolved purpose deficit- subsided.

5.3 Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis of exit journal logs (n = 60), conducted using Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework [9], yielded four thematic clusters supporting H4.

Theme 1- Re-connecting micro-tasks to macro human value: participants described mapping daily output to real-world human outcomes. A systems architect explained that tracing his code to an emergency healthcare logistics system reshaped his perspective, even though his daily routine had not changed.

Theme 2- De-instrumentalization and relational authenticity: peer reflective circles created psychological safety; an engineering manager of 12 years noted that it was the first time managers and engineers had sat together and openly acknowledged feeling lost and burned out.

Theme 3- Attitudinal agency amid unalterable systemic friction: a UI/UX designer reported that shifting her focus from organizational chaos to her personal values restored her sense of agency.

Theme 4- Shift from transactional survival to purpose-integrated identity: a senior talent development specialist described no longer living only for the weekend, and no longer viewing work as a place where personal identity was suspended.

These qualitative accounts converge with the quantitative results by illustrating the psychological mechanisms- task reframing, relational safety, attitudinal reframing, and identity integration- through which the intervention's structural components translated into measurable gains in meaning, purpose, and retention-relevant outcomes.

5.4 Practical Implications

This empirical inquiry bridges a critical disconnect between clinical existential psychology and strategic human resource development. While traditional HR frameworks attempt to elevate engagement through external incentive structures, gamified recognition, or wellness perks, this study demonstrates that existential emptiness requires an ontological solution rather than a transactional one. When employees experience high levels of work-specific purpose, their intrinsic psychological capital expands, buffering against burnout, fostering discretionary altruism, and reducing voluntary turnover intent.

To translate these empirical findings into scalable corporate practice, HR leaders and organizational design practitioners can embed meaning into the core talent management architecture through a 4-P framework:

Purpose Architecture: restructure task-based job descriptions and KPIs into purpose-oriented statements; incorporate quarterly "Impact Orientation Audits" into performance reviews documenting how operational output affected clients, end-users, or colleagues.

Presence-Oriented Leadership: train line managers to identify behavioral indicators of existential emptiness (cynicism, quiet quitting, mechanical compliance) and conduct "Purpose Check-Ins" during one-on-one meetings.

Psychological Safety Circles: replace passive wellness seminars with facilitator-led, bi-weekly peer reflection circles embedded within paid work hours.

Pathway Autonomy: formally adopt "Job Crafting Agreements," allowing employees to allocate a portion of their bandwidth (up to 10% in this study's framework) to cross-functional projects, mentoring, or innovation work aligned with personal values.

Collectively, these mechanisms reposition meaning as a structural job resource rather than an individual coping responsibility, offering HR practitioners a concrete, evidence-based alternative to conventional engagement levers.

6. Conclusion

Employee existential emptiness represents a modern organizational challenge that traditional, transactional retention strategies cannot resolve. When organizations treat human capital purely as functional production assets, disengagement, quiet quitting, and voluntary attrition naturally follow. By integrating logotherapeutic principles and structured organizational interventions- task and relational job crafting, purpose-oriented leadership development, and psychological safety circles- enterprises

can create workplace environments where high operational productivity and meaningful human existence coexist. Addressing existential distress is both a moral imperative for employee well-being and a strategic HR decision for long-term organizational survival.

7. Future Scope

This study has several limitations that define directions for future research. First, the single-group pre–post design lacked a randomized active control group, leaving open the possibility that some portion of the observed change reflects general attention effects or participant expectancy rather than the specific logotherapeutic content of the program. Second, post-intervention assessment occurred immediately at Week 8, so the durability of gains beyond the structured program period is unknown. Third, the sample was concentrated among corporate knowledge professionals in Bengaluru, India, within technology, professional services, and HR functions, which may limit generalizability to other sectors and cultural contexts. Fourth, reliance on self-report instruments and participant-authored journal logs introduces the possibility of social desirability bias, particularly given that participation was facilitated by each organization's own HR function.

Future research may employ randomized controlled trials with active comparison conditions (e.g., standard stress-management workshops) to isolate mechanism-specific effects, and longitudinal follow-up at 6- and 12-month intervals to determine the durability of meaning-related gains and reduced turnover intention. Replicating this intervention across manufacturing, public sector, and healthcare industries, and across more diverse socio-economic and cultural contexts, would strengthen generalizability. Independent behavioral indicators such as actual attrition records or supervisor-rated citizenship behavior would also usefully triangulate the self-report findings reported here.

Acknowledgment

This manuscript is derived from the author's Master of Science in Psychology dissertation, completed under the guidance of Dr. R. Hemanth Babu, Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, Jain (Deemed-to-be University), Bengaluru. The author declares no conflict of interest. No external funding was reported for this study. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Poornima Srinivasan, Department of Psychology, Jain (Deemed-to-be) University, Bengaluru, Karnataka, India. Email: *poornima.srinivasann[at]gmail.com.*

References

[1] Frankl VE. Man's search for meaning. Boston: Beacon Press; 1963.
[2] Frankl VE. The will to meaning: foundations and applications of logotherapy. New York: New American Library; 1984.
[3] Hackman JR, Oldham GR. Motivation through the design of work: test of a theory. Organ Behav Hum Perform. 1976;16(2):250–279.
[4] Wrzesniewski A, Dutton JE. Crafting a job: revisioning employees as active crafters of their work. Acad Manage Rev. 2001;26(2):179–201.
[5] Steger MF, Frazier P, Oishi S, Kaler M. The Meaning in Life Questionnaire: assessing the presence of and search for meaning in life. J Couns Psychol. 2006;53(1):80–93.
[6] Crumbaugh JC, Maholick LT. An experimental study in existentialism: the psychometric approach to Frankl's concept of noogenic neurosis. J Clin Psychol. 1964;20(2):200–207.
[7] Roodt G. Turnover intentions scale (TIS-6) [unpublished manuscript]. Johannesburg: University of Johannesburg; 2004.
[8] Podsakoff PM, MacKenzie SB, Moorman RH, Fetter R. Transformational leader behaviors and their affiliate effects on followers' trust in leader, satisfaction, and organizational citizenship behaviors. Leadersh Q. 1990;1(2):107–142.
[9] Braun V, Clarke V. Using thematic analysis in psychology. Qual Res Psychol. 2006;3(2):77–101.

Author Profile

Poornima Srinivasan is currently pursuing a Master of Science degree in Psychology at Jain (Deemed-to-be University), Bengaluru, India. Her research interests include existential and positive organizational psychology, meaningful work, job crafting, and evidence-based interventions for employee well-being and retention. She is particularly interested in translating logotherapeutic and meaning-centered frameworks into scalable strategic human resource management practice.