

A Snapshot of the Perception of Meaningful Work Within A Diverse Sample of Singapore Workforce

Michael F. Steger, PhD, Associate Professor
Colorado State University, USA



This report takes a quick look at how a sample of employees from diverse industries within the Singapore workforce perceives meaning in their work experiences. This is among the very first applications of the Work and Meaning Inventory (WAMI) in Singapore. The WAMI has been used in many research projects around the world since its publication in 2012. It measures three dimensions of meaningful work as well as providing an overall meaningful work score.

The first dimension is called Positive Meaning in Work, which measures how much meaning and purpose people experience through their jobs and careers. The second dimension is called Meaning-

Making through Work, which measures how one’s work is in harmony with and helps support broader meaning in life. The third dimension is called Greater Good Motivations, which measures people’s beliefs that they are able to contribute to the greater societal good through their work. Finally, the overall meaningful work score combines these dimensions into an overall appraisal of how much meaningful work people experience.

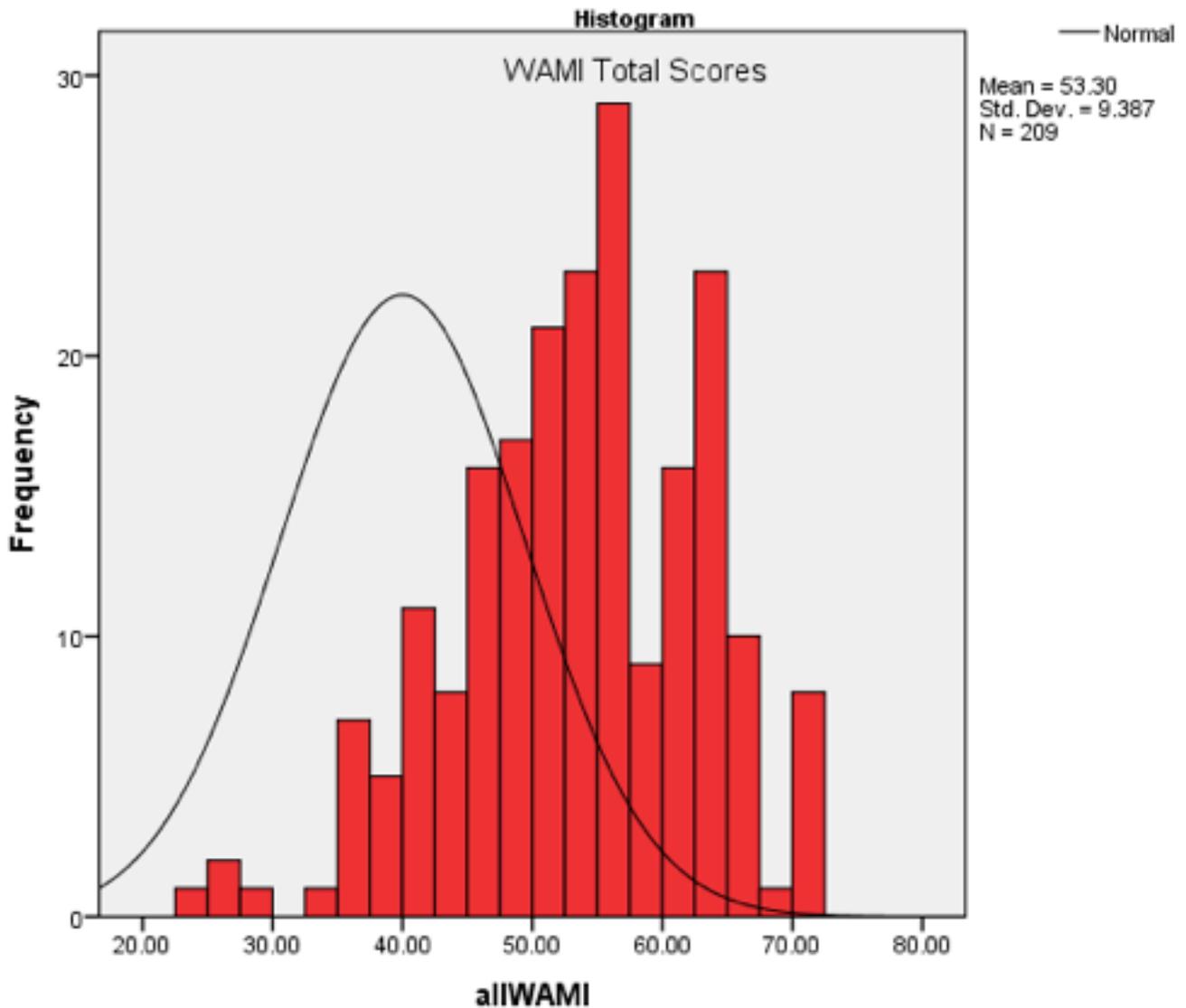
The table below shows the description of the age and gender of the general Singapore workforce who responded to the survey, as well as the average scores on the WAMI.

Age Group	18-25	26-35	36-45	46-55	56+
% of Sample	5%	20%	54%	17%	4%
Gender	67.3% Female				
Years in Workforce	0-5	6-10	11-15	16-20	21+
% of Sample	9%	14%	27%	24%	27%
Monthly Salary	Less than \$2000	\$2001-\$4000	\$4001-\$6000	\$6001-\$8000	\$8001+
% of Sample	8%	18%	20%	17%	37%
WAMI total	53.3 (out of 70)				
Positive Meaning	21.8 (out of 28)				
Meaning-Making	16.3 (out of 21)				
Greater Good	15.2 (out of 21)				

This sample of the Singapore workforce is mostly female, aged in the mid-30s to mid-40s with at least one decade of time spent in the workforce and a range of salaries with more than one-third of the sample reporting a salary level being \$8000 or more Singapore dollars per month.

In terms of meaningful work, the average total score on the WAMI was slightly higher than a rating

of “Somewhat True” that work is meaningful. Thus, the members of this sample do feel that their work has at least a little bit of meaning for them. Below is a chart showing the distribution of scores on the WAMI total score.

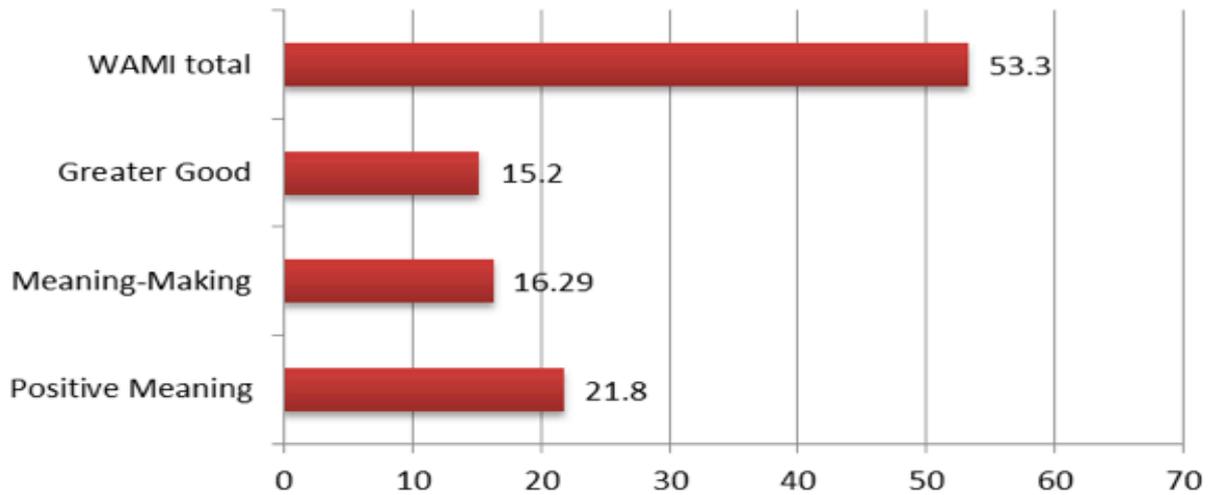


Also displayed on this graph is a curve demonstrating what scores would look like if the workforce was net neutral regarding meaningful work. That is, the curve shows the expected distribution of scores if, on average, the Singapore workforce thought that work was neither meaningful nor meaningless, but instead was simply neutral. Scores on the WAMI can range from 10 to 70. This means that scores from 10-30 would convey that work is worrisomely lacking meaning; scores of 30-50 would convey that work neither lacks nor possesses meaning; and scores from 50-70 would convey that work is at least somewhat meaningful. It can be seen that this sample of the Singapore workforce indeed does generally feel that work is meaningful, with most of the scores exceeding the neutral range of 30-50. Most workers report that work is somewhat to mostly

meaningful, with another group reporting that work is mostly completely meaningful. At the same time, there is a sizable portion of the workforce that reports work is neither meaningful nor meaningless, it is just work. Maintaining motivation, engagement, and commitment is likely to be a challenge for this group, which comprises roughly one-third of the sample. We would anticipate that this group is very open to leaving current employers for other organizations or perhaps even other careers. There are a few respondents who report that work is at least somewhat meaningless and pointless. These workers are likely to have little motivation to attend work, commit to their employers or organizations, or engage in activities that promote the welfare and brand of the organization. They are likely to be actively looking to leave the organization.

To understand why meaningful work is not more common among the Singapore workforce, we turn to an analysis of the WAMI subscales. Here, the subscale scores are presented together.

Singapore Workforce



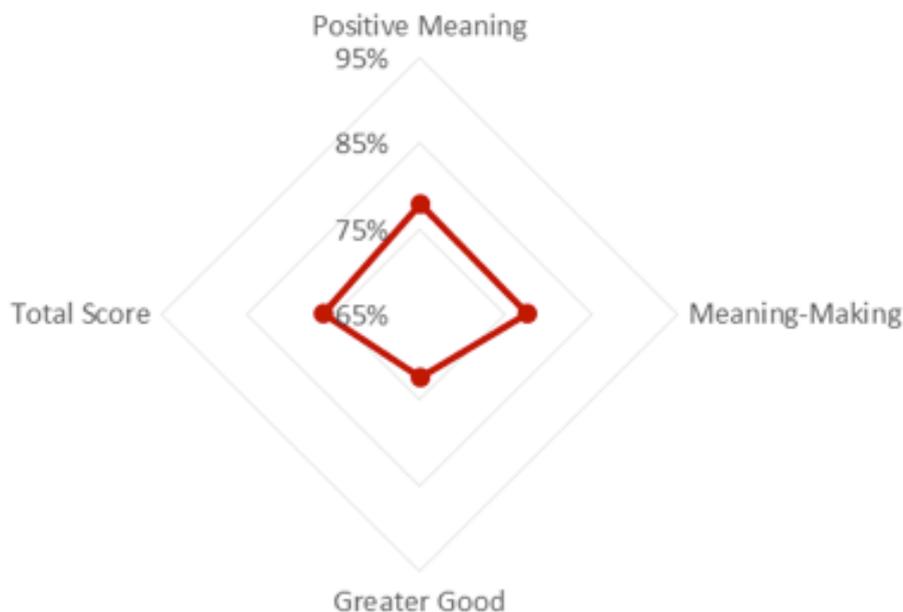
WAMI scores for a sample of the Singapore workforce. Score ranges are 10-70 for WAMI Total; 3-21 for Greater Good and Meaning-Making, and 4-28 for Positive Meaning.

Score on all of the subscales of the WAMI are in a similar range, although, relative to the total possible score, this sample is reporting that work only somewhat provides them with the ability to benefit other people or the greater good. This sample is slightly more positive about how personally meaningful to them their work seems, and the ability of their work lives to harmonize with the rest of their

lives. Thus, while this sample of the Singapore workforce may not report high levels of conflict or discordance between work and the rest of life, there is substantial room for growth in making their specific jobs and work activities provide more meaning and more opportunities to benefit the greater good.

The raw numbers may not tell the complete story. The chart below displays the subscales and total score of the WAMI in terms of how close to the maximum possible score this sample of the Singapore workforce reports attaining meaningful work.

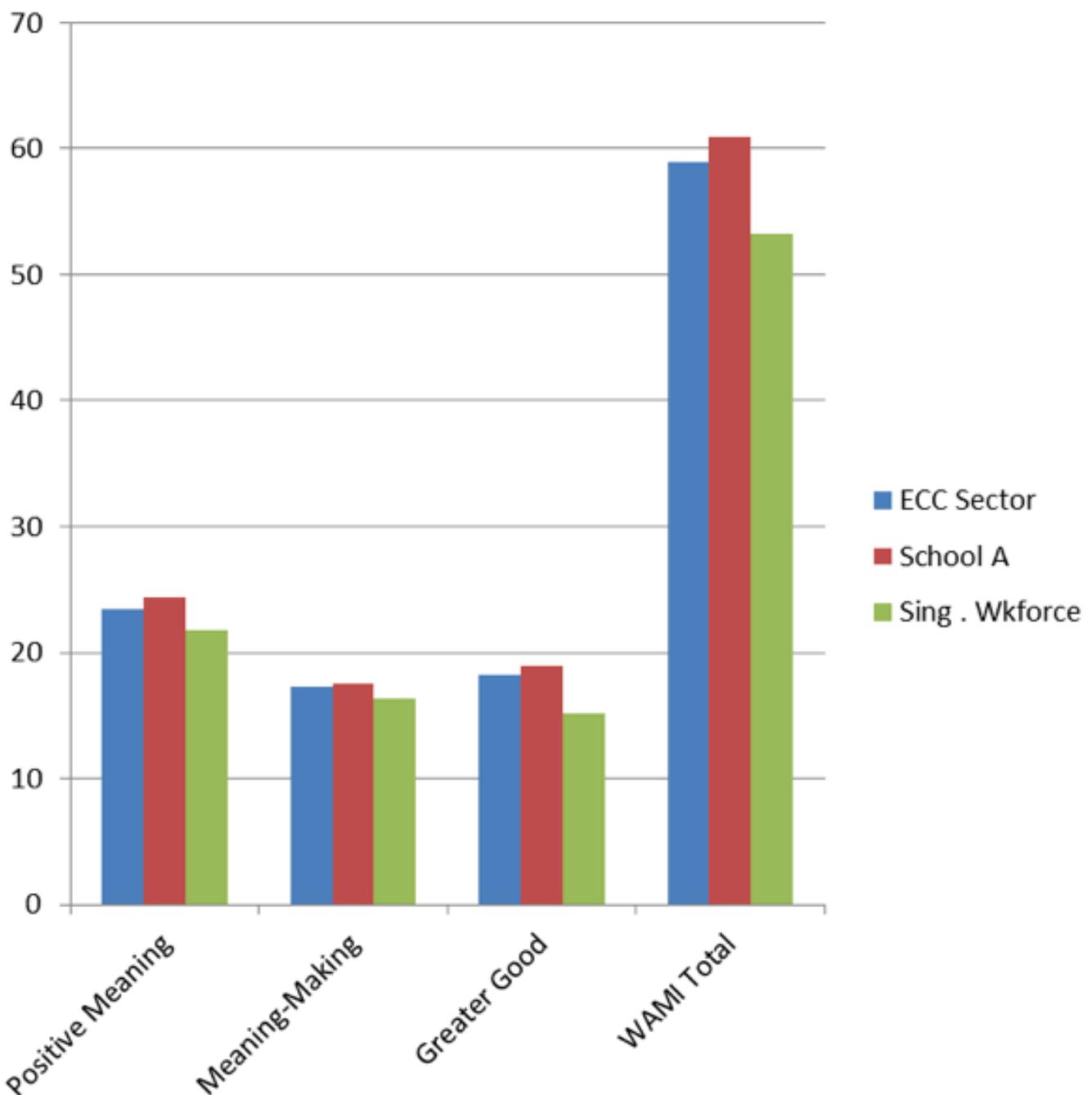
Singapore Workforce



According to this analysis, it is really the lack of opportunities to benefit the greater good or make a prosocial impact that is holding back the experience of meaningful work within this sample of the Singapore workforce. However, it must be said that scores all hover around the marker for 75% of the total possible score. This lags behind workers in specific sectors we have studied.

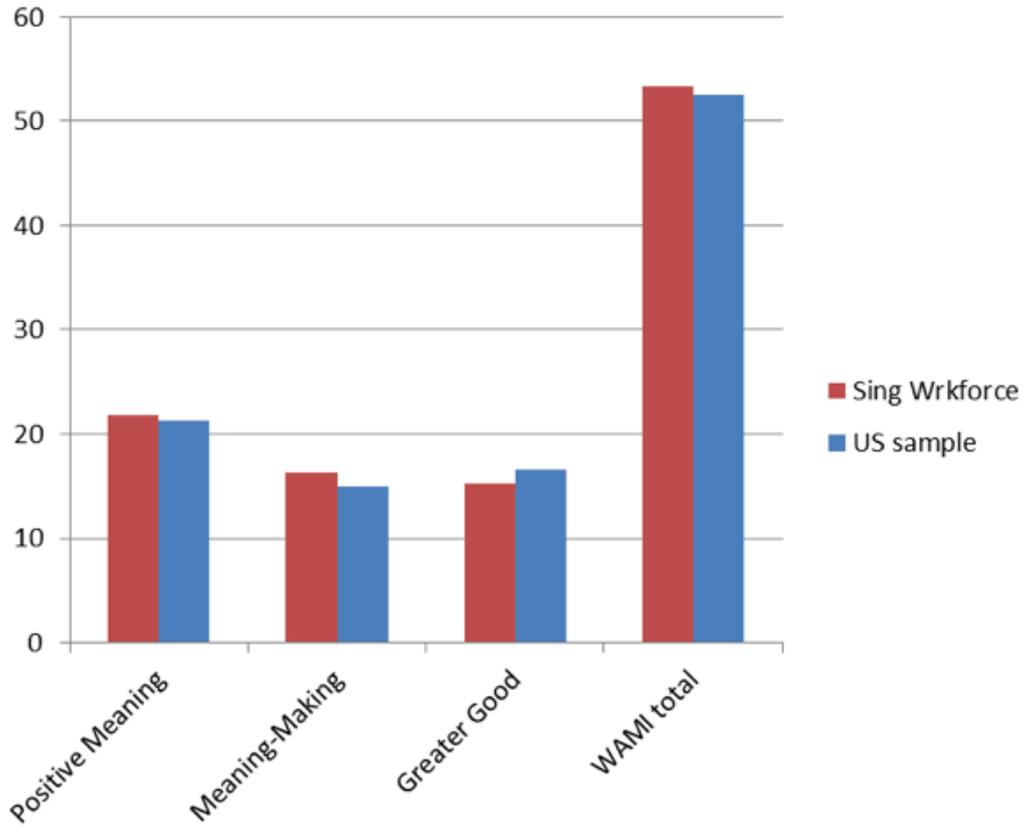
Because of our ongoing research, some comparisons with other Singapore work samples is possible, particularly including workers within the Early Child Care sector.

Below, this sample of the Singapore workforce (shown in green) is compared to the scores from a survey of the Early Child Care sector (shown in blue) and scores from a survey of a specific, highly reputable school (School A, shown in red). It can be seen that the general Singapore workforce lags notably behind members of the Early Child Care sector, particularly in terms of the overall WAMI score and the opportunity to make a positive impact on the greater good. The gap tightens with regard to finding harmony between work and meaning in the rest of life, but there is a gap nonetheless.



Finally, we can make an international comparison using a larger sample of University employees from the United States of America. It is apparent that this sample of the Singapore workforce is quite similar to the sample of American University workers. Singapore workers lag somewhat in terms of how much they feel they can make a positive impact on the greater good, but they edge out the American

University workers in terms of how readily they find their specific jobs to be meaningful and how well their current jobs harmonize with their life meaning. This is an encouraging comparison because it indicates that despite a great deal of room to grow in generating meaningful work opportunities, the Singapore workplace is on par with a fairly well-respected sector of the American workforce.



CONCLUSION

In this snapshot of meaningful work among a sample of the Singapore workforce, we find that moderate levels of meaningful work are experienced. Although these are somewhat encouraging results, there are some reasons for concern. First, the overall Singapore workforce represented in this sample lags quite a bit behind at least one of its sectors, namely the Early Child Care sector. Second, Singapore workers do not appear to observe many opportunities to contribute to the greater good, whether that means within their organization, community, nation, or even beyond. Because of the many benefits shown to be linked to meaningful work, both for workers and for organizations, it is important to identify impediments

to meaningful work, and particularly to people's ability to make a positive difference to those around them through their work. It also would be important to regularly monitor meaningful work within this workforce over time. Such a strategy would help identify emerging challenges and opportunities to reinvigorate this vital workforce. It would also be critical to understand who does not experience their work as being meaningful. Research suggests that meaningful work is strongly influential for the commitment, engagement, attendance, and happiness of workers, and it would be beneficial to make these benefits available to all of Singapore's workers.