

## Article

# The Double-Sided Nature of Meaningful Work: Promoting and Challenging Factors within the Swedish Equine Sector

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**Abstract:** Meaningful work is related to a range of positive outcomes, but also negative effects. Research regarding meaningful work and lifestyle-oriented work; i.e., when making a livelihood based on a leisure interest and personal lifestyle, is deficient. The aim of this qualitative study is therefore to explore factors that promote and challenge meaningful work in a lifestyle-oriented setting. The study focuses on the perspective of employees within the Swedish equine sector, and is based on individual interviews. The results show that person–environment fit, task significance, and occupational culture seem to be important factors in the promotion of meaningful work. In addition, the analysis also illustrates how the nature of meaningful work has an inherent duality, constructed by a balancing act between doing good for oneself and for others. The tension is reinforced by the fact that the same factors can both promote meaningful work and challenge meaningfulness. This study shows that meaningful work not only comes with satisfaction, enjoyment, and fulfillment, but also an acceptance of challenging working conditions, which may lead to sacrifices and exhaustion. The double-sided nature of meaningful work can therefore affect the employees' well-being, and challenge the willingness and ability to remain in the occupation.

**Keywords:** harness racing; lifestyle-oriented work; occupational culture; person–environment fit; riding schools; task significance; work environment management



**Citation:** Bergman Bruhn, Å. The Double-Sided Nature of Meaningful Work: Promoting and Challenging Factors within the Swedish Equine Sector. *Challenges* **2022**, *13*, 13. <https://doi.org/10.3390/challe13010013>

Academic Editor: Susan L. Prescott

Received: 18 February 2022

Accepted: 22 March 2022

Published: 1 April 2022

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## 1. Introduction

This article examines the nature of meaningful work in an environment where livelihoods are based on hobbies and personal lifestyles, and the results contribute to the current debates regarding the complex processes of meaningful work [1]. Research on meaningful work has shown an increasing understanding of the centrality of meaningfulness for work-related motivation, commitment, and well-being [2–4]. However, the innate drive to seek meaningful work can at the same time lead to negative effects, such as reduced engagement and ill health [2,3]. Much has been written about meaningful work and its positive effects, but less about its challenging consequences over time [3]. Moreover, empirical studies in the fields of meaningful work remain sparse [5], and the published results are mainly based on quantitative data. Furthermore, important gaps are remaining regarding antecedents and outcomes of meaningful work in specific occupation contexts [3], and few, if any, studies have examined the interplay between vocational interest and meaningful work [4].

Earning a living from one's leisure interest and/or personal lifestyle, here defined as a lifestyle-oriented work [6], is an important context to explore in terms of meaningfulness. On the one hand, lifestyle-oriented work offers satisfaction and meaningfulness, while on the other hand, it has the potential to be stressful and demanding; thus commitment and investment, as well as abandonment and sacrifice, are required [7]. Lifestyle-oriented work; i.e., when making a livelihood based on a leisure interest or hobby, can be seen in many occupations; e.g., animal caretakers [8–10], farmers [11], and horse farmers [6], as well as musicians, writers, athletes, actors, and artists [7,12]. The leisure interests of individuals differ markedly, but the common denominator is the attraction and the meaningfulness that the activity has to the practitioner. In addition, there is a shortage of research in

lifestyle-oriented work [7]. The aim of this qualitative study is therefore to explore which factors that promote and challenge meaningful work when making a livelihood based on a leisure interest and personal lifestyle. The study focuses on the perspective of employees within the setting of the Swedish equine sector.

To answer the aim of the study, those employed in the Swedish equine sector were interviewed. Employees in the Swedish equine sector seem to provide a good empirical setting that holds the possibility of meaningful work in a challenging environment, but where the participants experience varying levels of meaningfulness, which may lead to different outcomes and consequences. Working in the equine sector is closely connected to an individual's leisure interest and personal lifestyle [6,10], and can therefore be interpreted as lifestyle-oriented work. Moreover, employees in the Swedish equine sector considered their work very attractive [13]; i.e., a job position that an individual wants, due to positive job characteristics, in an organization perceived as a positive workplace; and a position that fosters work satisfaction [14]. Working was stated as one of the most important things in life, and the main reason why employees worked in the occupation was the opportunity for self-realization and quality of life [13]. Factors important for the work to be experienced as attractive were, among other things, practical work, familiarity with the work content, and autonomy [13]. However, the sector faces major challenges to recruit, above all, to retain trained and experienced staff (based on personal communication with managers in the sector), but activities that promote and maintain work meaningful are still lacking. These issues are of importance, as working with horses is demanding [15], labor-intensive [16], and hazardous [17].

The paper is structured as follows: First, relevant research on meaningful work is briefly reviewed, and the setting of the Swedish equine sector is shortly explained. Second, the study's data and analytical approach are described, and the empirical results are presented. Finally, factors that promote and challenge meaningful work when making a livelihood based on leisure interest and personal lifestyle are discussed, and practical implications, as well as suggestions for future research, are presented.

## 2. Research on Meaningful Work

Attitudes toward work are influenced by individual attributes, as well as work context and characteristics [18]. Furthermore, attitudes may change over time, and can be affected by other factors such as the occupational sector and industry, as well as the national culture. However, it is well established that meaningful work is related to positive work attitudes and correlates positively with many important individual work outcomes such as work engagement, commitment, and job satisfaction, as well as life satisfaction, life meaning, and general health [2–4]. Meaningful work is also an important issue from an organizational perspective, because it leads to increased employee performance and reduced levels of absenteeism and turnover [2]. Moreover, meaningful work has proven to be more important to employees than any other aspect of work, including pay and rewards, opportunities for promotion, or working conditions [19]. Overall, a sense of meaningfulness has been listed as one of the most important work characteristics to be associated with employees' well-being [3]. While a recent meta-analysis broadly supported that people with meaningful work both feel and work better [2], there is little consensus on the definition of the concept [3]. Early conceptualizations of meaningful work were unidimensional and captured workers' perception that their work is worthwhile, important, or valuable [20]. However, other scholars [21] have argued that meaningful work is a multidimensional concept, and in addition to significance and self-realization, meaningful work should contain the component of broader purpose; for example, helping others and contributing to the greater good. Bailey et al. [1] highlighted the tension between the self-oriented dimensions and other-oriented dimensions on account of meaningful work, which means that one must to examine the dimensions both together and separately. Nevertheless, meaningful work can broadly be defined as "work that is personally, significant and worthwhile" [4] (p. 375), and occurs when an individual's personality, motivations, values,

and goals are in alignment with those of their environment; i.e., job, organization, and society [4]. In line with Lysova et al. [4], as well as Hansen et al. [22] and Hackman and Oldham [23], there should be a congruence between a person's characteristics and the work characteristics; i.e., a person–environment fit, for work to be experienced as meaningful. The job characteristics model argues for the importance of levels of autonomy, skill variety, task identity, and task significance for the individual experiences of work meaningfulness [23]. Moreover, the organizational culture, which is a shared pattern of assumptions, meanings, and values about how things are done every day in the organization [24], influences employees' experiences of meaningfulness at work [20].

Since meaningful work refers to the significance or value of work, which by definition has positive valence [25], the concept has mostly been viewed as a positive construct [3]. However, meaningful work does not always come with positive effects and outcomes. Empirical studies suggest that intense and consuming work with significant meaning can have negative effects in other areas of life, such as family and friends [7,9,12], as well as acceptance of poor working conditions [26] and overwork [27]. Due to the somewhat double-sided nature of meaningful work, it is of importance to explore which factors that promote and challenge meaningful work to create work environments and working conditions that foster meaningfulness healthily and sustainably.

### 3. The Swedish Equine Sector

In recent decades, the equine sector has grown substantially in Sweden, as in many other societies, with regards to, for instance, the number of horses and revenue [28]. The Swedish equine sector is defined as activities based on the use of horses, for both hobby and professional activities, as well as the sale of horse-related goods and services; and it employs approximately 17,000 full-time employees [28]. More than 1 million Swedes (10%) are regularly in contact with horses. The sector is complex and multifaceted, and covers many different types of activities each with their own culture and identity; e.g., sports and games, as well as leisure, recreation, and therapy [16]. The traditional production-oriented agriculture functions in the industry have been replaced by more consumption and service-oriented components. Two widely disparate pictures of the nature of equine activities are visible in the literature and societal debate: firstly, as an activity mostly performed by girls and young women who ride and are interested in horses, often at riding schools; and secondly, as a professional sport practiced by professional people within trotting racing and jumping [29]. Riding school businesses have evolved as popular providers of recreational services in many regions of Northern and Western Europe [30]. Stables in Sweden are mainly situated near residential areas and do not have any agricultural operations; i.e., solely equine businesses [29]. Another major activity in the industry is trotting, or harness racing, which is a specific form of horseracing in which a horse pulls a two-wheeled cart, called a sulky or a spider, on which a driver sits. Trotting racing is an attractive form of sport and is common in Europe and North America, as well as in Australia and New Zealand. Riding schools and trotting stables differ substantially in terms of culture, organizational structure, and forms of ownership. While riding schools are often run as nonprofit associations, trotting stables are generally small businesses. The riding schools have a pedagogical and educational mission to teach and support often young individuals to handle and ride a horse. Trotting racing has a clear focus on sports and competitiveness including many hours of training and travel time to races and competitions across sometimes large geographical areas. The manual work with the horses such as mucking out, sweeping, and replacing bedding, as well as the feeding and caring of both the horses and their equipment is, however, similar for both riding schools and trotting stables.

Work environment issues are a major concern for the industry, since it is a labor-intensive sector involving long hours, a high physical workload, and low pay [16]. Despite that, research specifically on the working environment in the equine sector is limited [15]. The equine sector has not undergone the same technological development as in the agri-

cultural sector, often due to factors such as economics and tradition. This means that the majority of the hard physical work in most horse stables is still performed manually, and the industry is one of the least-mechanized sectors in Sweden [16]. In addition, handling horses is hazardous, and the equine sector is considered a high-risk work environment [17]. Moreover, working within the sector is gender equality [31], potentially making the work-life balance more blurred [6]. Furthermore, a stable culture with masculine military norms exists in the sector [32]. In addition, Kim et al. [15] showed high levels of occupational stress and problems with mental health among employees in the Korean horse racing industry related to job demand and occupational organization. Overall, the Swedish Work Environment Authority [33] has highlighted failures in the systematic work environment management in the Swedish equine sector.

In sum, research regarding meaningful work and lifestyle-oriented work is insufficient. However, the existing literature has shown that this kind of work can become a double-edged sword. To understand the complex nature of meaningful work in a lifestyle-oriented setting; this study contributes to the existing literature by adding empirical data from interviews with employees from the Swedish equine sector.

## 4. Methods and Materials

### 4.1. Study Design and Sample

This was a qualitative explorative study based on data collected through individual semistructured interviews with employees working in riding schools and trotting stables in Sweden. This study was part of a larger research project in which the overall purpose was, together with the equine sector, to identify and implement methods and practices for systematic work environment management. The project's advisory group, including representatives from the Swedish Equestrian Federation and the Swedish Trotting Association, among others, was helpful with the selection of the workplaces included in the study. The differences between riding schools and trotting stables regarding culture, organizational structure, and forms of ownership, as well as the fact that employees in the two different activities experience and value their work and their work environment differently [13], justified that both groups of employees should be included in this study. A purposive sampling [34] of 39 employees, 30 employed at riding schools ( $n = 6$ ) and 9 at trotting stables ( $n = 2$ ), first received oral and written information about the study and then were asked, individually, whether they would participate in the study; all the employees chose to participate.

### 4.2. Data Collection

The semistructured interviews were conducted, from an employee perspective, to gain an understanding of the antecedents and outcomes of the phenomenon of meaningful work when making a livelihood based on lifestyle-oriented work [34]. A narrative practice perspective inspired the interviews by focusing on patterns in their stories of work, life, and animals [35]. The employees were initially encouraged to "tell their stories", starting from their first interest and activity related to horses and the equine industry to their current situation, as well as their ideas and thoughts about the future, to gain an understanding of their work experiences. During the interview, the following six sections were covered: general background information about the participant, including their first interest and activity related to horses and the equine sector; their past work history; their current role and situation; their attitudes toward their work; critical incidents and stories; and their ideas and thoughts about the future. The questions in the schedule were followed up with probing questions to capture the participants' experiences with work and the phenomenon of meaningful work [36]. Two members of the research team conducted the interviews, which were carried out at the participants' workplaces or online between February 2019 and December 2020. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, 20 of the 39 interviews were conducted online with the use of a webcam with the visual effect remaining. Thus, the online interviews should therefore be seen as almost equivalent to face-to-face interviews [34].

There were both advantages and disadvantages to using two interviewers [36]. To reduce any disadvantages, one of the interviewers was responsible for leading the interview, while the other wrote memos [36]. The interviews lasted 20–75 min, with an average of nearly 60 min, and all but one were recorded. One of the researchers then transcribed the recorded interviews. The participants had an average age of 39 years and an average of 14 years of professional experience in the equine sector. All participants were stable workers in combination with also being riding instructors ( $n = 25$ ) or trainers ( $n = 9$ ), or had other assignments within the organization ( $n = 5$ ). A selection of background information for all the participants, as well as for employees at riding schools and at trotting stables separately, is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Background information about the participants.

	In Total ( $n = 39$ )	Riding School ( $n = 30$ )	Trotting Stable ( $n = 9$ )
Gender: Female	33	27	6
Gender: Male	6	3	3
Age: Mean years	39	41	34
Age: Min year	20	24	20
Age: Max year	60	60	55
University degree	12	12	0
Work experience: Mean years	14	15	11
Work experience: Min year	<1	1	<1
Work experience: Max year	40	40	40

Only 10% of the participants in the study were male, which created a gender imbalance in the group. However, in Sweden, there is a predominance of females employed in the equine sector, so the distribution of this study's participants was a reflection of reality. There was also a certain imbalance between the number of participants employed at riding schools and those at trotting stables, but even here, this reflected reality, as more people work at riding schools than trotting stables. The study participants and the main project reference group were informed of the most important results, and confirmed the content to achieve credibility and dependability [37]. Data collection and analysis followed the ethical guidelines of the Swedish Research Council, and one of the Swedish regional ethical boards for research approved the study.

#### 4.3. Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using a thematic analysis inspired by the recommendations of Braun and Clarke [38] (see Table 2). Thematic analysis is a method used to identify, analyze, and report patterns (themes), and offers an accessible and, theoretically, flexible approach [38]. The analysis process was further guided by Nowell et al.'s [39] recommendations on meeting trustworthiness criteria in thematic analysis. To systematize and increase the traceability and verification of the analysis, the authors of [39] recommended an auditable decision trail that guided interpreting and representing textual data.

**Table 2.** A schematic view of Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework for thematic analysis (2006).

Phase	Description of the Process
1	Familiarizing with your data
2	Generating initial codes
3	Searching for themes
4	Reviewing themes
5	Defining and naming themes
6	Producing the report



The interviews and the analysis process were conducted in parallel. The impact of meaningful work and its effects on the overall work-related health and well-being was not clear from the beginning, and specific questions concerning these aspects were therefore not included in the original question guide. Consequently, the content of this article evolved during the data collection, and became more prominent during the data analysis. The thematic analysis began with the researchers reading the transcribed texts several times in a careful manner to create a summary of each interview based on the purpose of the study. The transcribed interviews were initially analyzed with an open coding process [40]. The codes were first collected within identified subthemes, to then be emerged into themes (patterns). The memos from the interviews, for which one of the researchers was responsible, were added to the transcripts and used when structuring ideas and in differentiating and defining potential themes. The themes were then reviewed, refined, and named. According to Braun and Clarke [38], themes can be identified in two ways: in an inductive way or a theoretical, more deductive way. However, several other researchers have stated that the process is much more complex than that somewhat simplified description, and recommended an abductive approach; i.e., the constant movement from the empirical to theoretical dimensions of analysis [41]. The “level” at which themes are to be identified can also be done in two ways: at a semantic or explicit level, or a latent or interpretative level [38]. Due to the complexity and the interrelation of the concepts of meaningful work and lifestyle-oriented work, an abductive and latent approach was used in this study when coding interesting features and searching for themes and subthemes. For example, the participants talked about the importance of (I) working with their interest, (II) seeing their work as a lifestyle, (III) love of horses, (IV) passion for trotting, and (V) attitudes to work. These five codes to some extent had the same meaning: a person–environment fit, which is an important factor for promoting meaningful work. Three themes—person–environment fit, task significance, and occupational culture—emerged from the analysis. However, the analysis also illustrated how the nature of meaningful work had an inherent duality, enhanced by a balancing act between doing good for oneself and others. The same theme could therefore both promote meaningful work and challenges meaningfulness.

## 5. Findings

The thematic analysis identified three themes describing factors that both can promote and challenge meaningful work in a lifestyle-oriented setting. The findings are presented under the following headings: Person–environment fit, Task significance, and Occupational culture. The results are presented together for the two groups of participants, employees at riding school and trotting stable employees, with a distinction being made when relevant. Although separated for the sake of presentation, the content of the themes was intertwined and interrelated. The interviews were conducted in Swedish, and a native speaker translated the quotes into English.

### 5.1. Person–Environment Fit

The employees entered their work in the sector with a similar purpose: a genuine interest in animals, a love of horses, and the occasion to work with the hobby. The interest in horses was for most of the employees already established in childhood by having horses in their family or starting riding school at a young age. The interest had since been an important part of the participants’ leisure time, in which they had invested a lot of time and money. Handling horses was also described as an essential part of their lifestyle, “a way to live”.

According to the participants, work in the equine sector is not high-paying, and it is difficult to make a career in the occupation. Many of the employees also revealed that they have opted out of both education and other jobs to work with their interests. However, the privilege of being paid to work with their hobby and being able to cultivate that interest was considered more important and valuable than salary and success for most of the participants. This preference can be described by the following quotation from a

47-year-old female employed at a riding school: “I love horses and I love teaching. Life has taken a turn and I have landed here. The biggest decision was probably to resign from a good job, good career, good salary, and great challenges. Now I am mowing manure.”

Although the actual work content was perceived to be more important than wage and career, several of the participants realized that their ability to change jobs in the future was somewhat limited based on their lack of formal education and experience in other occupations. One of the participants, a 56-year-old female employed at a riding school, described the challenge as follows; “I have been here so long. I do not know anything else. I really have not done anything else.”

Even if the outcome of work performed was the same for the participants (positive emotions such as attraction and satisfaction), two different patterns of work orientation emerged during the interviews. Some of the participants, mainly employees at trotting stables, described their work more as a personal interest or even a passion than ordinary paid employment. Those employees also valued their lifestyle-oriented work more than “other” jobs, which was exemplified by the following quote from a male employed at a trotting stable: “I work with my hobby, it’s my interest, of course, and it does not feel like a job. I have had regular jobs before and there is a significant difference.” The employees’ orientation to work seemed to affect the possibility, or the ability, to remain in the occupation. Employees at trotting stables talked about seeing their work as a temporary job, and planned to stay in the occupation as long as it was experienced as worthwhile.

On the other hand, most riding-school employees implied that the work should be equated with any wage labor; e.g., in terms of salary and working conditions, and the importance of being able to remain on the occasion throughout their working life. The importance of seeing one’s work in the same manner as any other paid work was demonstrated by the following quote from a 55-year-old female. “Working with horses is often not seen as a profession; many see it as more of a calling as with medical staff. However, it is a profession, not an unpaid leisure activity. You have to make sure you have a good salary and reasonable working hours. These are your rights as it is a job.”

However, the majority of the participants saw the horses as their hobby and the tasks performed as their job.

Most of the employees made their livelihood based on their leisure interest, which meant that they spent a lot of their leisure time with horses in a stable, in a riding house, or on a trotting track, and performed essentially the same tasks both during working hours and leisure time. Foremost, they took care of their horses, but many of the participants also helped family and friends with stable work, handling, and riding horses. The boundaries between work and leisure time were blurred for many of the employees. The employees of the trotting stables testified that they did not count activities related to trotting races as working hours, with the motivation that trotting was primarily their interest and lifestyle; i.e., their hobby, and secondarily a job. Even employees at riding schools experienced unclear boundaries between work and leisure time. Several of the participants had their horses stabled at the workplace, which was experienced both positively and negatively. An advantage was that the employees could take care of their horses before or after work, maybe even on their lunch break, which was experienced as time-saving. A disadvantage was the difficulty in drawing the line between work and leisure time and feeling completely free from work.

### *5.2. Task Significance*

The participants, who began to work in the sector when they were very young, did it because they loved and cared for horses, and the most important factors to promote meaningfulness at work regarding handling horses and spending time in the stable. However, the promotion factors for meaningful work have evolved through the years into the significance of doing something valuable for others and the importance of helping other people develop and achieve their goals. Many of the riding school instructors talked about the privilege of both working with horses and teaching others how to handle and ride

horses. The journey from self-realization to prosocial activities was illustrated by this quote from a 32-year-old female: "I started working in the horse sector because horses meant so much to me but now I see how much the horses can mean to other people." Working on various forms of projects; e.g., to promote health and well-being among young people or to be responsible for the riding school's leisure activities, as well as other areas of responsibility, were also mentioned as significant work tasks. One of the riding school employees, a 60-year-old female riding instructor, described the significance and rewarding nature of her work in this way: "The best thing about the profession is being able to work with both people and horses. I am in charge of parasport riding. Just seeing the horses with their riders is amazing. It is amazing, magical. It makes you keep going." The sense of meaning in work arose when the employees in the riding schools, through their daily tasks, could make a positive contribution to the students, and they described the value of performing work that was appreciated and meant something to others. Meaningfulness was therefore associated with a sense of pride and achievement in a job well done.

The employees at the trotting stable mentioned the value and the significance to attend when "their" horses were competing. A 30-year-old woman described what created meaning in her work in the following way. "I am passionate about this, my goal as a groom is that I should be able to be with my horses when they compete and the reward for me is when they have a good race. Then I see that my work has succeeded and it is an incredible feeling. It is my driving force to go to a competition."

Even if the employees described their work tasks as important, significant, and worthwhile; i.e., meaningful, presently they also referred to some shortcomings in their daily work that could challenge the experiences of meaningfulness over time. Many of the employees indicated problems regarding work time and work rate. The daily work in the equine sector involves long working days, as well as many evenings and weekends, as both riding lessons and trotting races are mainly carried out then. The challenges of overwork and inconvenient working hours lead to negative effects such as lack of recovery and sleep, as well as difficulty catching up with other things in life, such as time for relationships and family. Some employees even believe that it is impossible to combine work in the equine industry with family life and children. There is a difficult balancing act between a job that is experienced as meaningful on the one hand, and challenging and demanding regarding working conditions, specifically excessive working hours, on the other hand. This tension was illustrated by the following quotes. The first from a 30-year-old woman employed at a trotting stable, and the latter from a 60-year old woman, employed at a riding school.

*"It is very tough and you get very tired, of course. You do it because you love it. You may not have the strength to do this kind of thing all your life. It is not human to sleep two hours and then work from six in the morning until late at night again, perhaps several times a week, because then you are completely dead. You will not be able to cope in the end."*

*"My husband wonders why I have to work every Friday night. But my students want me as their riding instructor. My riders want to be with me and, even if I would like to be free on Fridays, I do not want to abandon them. Being a riding instructor is a calling rather than just a job."*

### 5.3. Occupational Culture

Having the right knowledge and experience for the work performed is according to the participants an important factor to promote meaningful work. A common expression, mentioned during the interviews mainly by riding school employees, was the importance of horsemanship, which should be seen as good judgment and practical knowledge when handling horses. That specific and unique type of knowledge, or perhaps professionalism, is based on an idea of practical, emotional, or even intuitive knowledge, and comes from genuine interest and practical experience. One of the participants employed at a riding school described it as follows: "Even if you have relevant education, it is through experience, from the daily work in the stable, that you learn the profession." Therefore, several of the



employees believed that regular development and recurrent training (i.e., the opportunity to ride horses under expert guidance) were important factors for maintaining the work as meaningful.

The unique practical experience in the sector fosters a sense of belonging, as well as a common culture and norms, which create bonds between the work colleagues. Workplace relationships were therefore also mentioned as a significant factor for the work to be maintained as meaningful. Social interaction with others, being part of a social network, and support and help based on trust and respect of coworkers were especially mentioned as important factors. Cohesion and collaboration also seemed to be especially important, since the work is physically demanding and performed at a high work rate, often under time constraints.

The employees also made it clear, in a variety of ways, that they had strong attachments to the horses, and that they had a special relationship and unique connection with the animals. A female employee at a riding school describes her relationship with the horses like this: *“It feels like you are a horse, you become like one with the animals”*. The relationships with the horses were therefore compared to, and in some ways partly equated with, their relationships with their workmates. When the participants described the daily tasks, it became clear that they prioritized the horses' health and welfare above their wellbeing. One male trotting stable employee described it as follows: *“You are so passionate about your interest, the horses, and you want the horses to have it as good as possible, I only work for their best and their well-being.”* For example, the employees did not take their lunch break or go home until the work in the stable was finished. Furthermore, the employees testified that they went to work even though they were ill due to the difficulty of finding temporary staff, and that the horses had to receive their care.

The daily work performed in the equine sector brought positive outcomes as the opportunity to work outdoors, as well as be physically active and perform practical tasks during working hours. The job contributes to an active lifestyle that the employees appreciate and value. In addition, the opportunity to work with the horses in their natural environment was expressed as very important, valuable, and significant for the employees. Although the participants appreciated the practical work, the physical workload in the sector is challenging and demanding. The majority of respondents stated that the high physical burden in their daily tasks has given them load-related problems such as aches and pains in their shoulders, arms, and lower back. Some of them also had periods of sick leave for work-related problems. The daily work in the sector is often performed in old facilities with a lack of mechanization. In addition, a lack of suitable equipment and adapted tools, combined with an ignorance of ergonomic working techniques and a tradition, or a preference, that manual work is best for the horse's health and well-being, may affect employees' health, well-being and performance negatively. These factors influenced the balancing act between meaningful work and the challenges regarding demanding working conditions, here the physical work environment. Different tasks have different physical challenges; e.g., a high and repetitive workload in the stable, and teaching in cold and large riding arenas; e.g., unhealthy voice strain, during the riding lessons. The physical workload was an extra challenge for older employees and impossible to perform with some physical disability. A 59-year-old female employee at a riding school pointed out the causes and consequences of the physical workload as follows:

*“I love to be in the stable and mucking out, even if sounds strange. But the stable work is tough. I am 59 years old and I feel in my body on Tuesday night when you have had stable work on both Monday and Tuesday. I only work two days in the stable; otherwise, my body would suffer. There are certainly improvements, but it is difficult to change habitual behaviors and change in old stables.”*

## 6. Discussion

This study explored factors that promote and challenge meaningful work in a lifestyle-oriented setting. Work has a central and important place in many people's lives, but for employees in the equine industry, it is often seen as something more than just a source of income—it is more a lifestyle or a hobby. Those working in the equine sector are lifestyle-oriented, implying that an employee's interest and lifestyle provide the foundations for their choice of occupation. The type of work explored is characterized by its immaterial nature in the sense that the primary input is dedication, commitment, and competencies of the employees, and the individual output is satisfaction, joy, and fulfillment.

The employees invest a lot of time and engagement, as well as emotions, in the work, and the driving forces are the love of horses, as well as being able to work with their leisure interest, which is considered a privilege. The work within the equine industry has a specific tradition that includes unique care of and attention to the horses' health and welfare [32]. This contributes to the development of close connections and emotional bonds between the employees and the animals [10]. The relationship with the horses is, for the participants, even equivalent to other workplace relations [10]. Many of the employees claimed that the relationship with the horses and personally significant work tasks contributed to a deep meaning and high satisfaction, which is almost impossible elsewhere in working life. In addition, serving and helping others contributed to making the work significant and worthwhile [42]. In this context, meaningfulness arose both in specific work tasks the employees performed, and from being a part of the unique occupational culture in the sector [20].

A contribution to the existing understanding of meaningful work is that factors that promote work as meaningful seemed to change over time for the respondents. From the beginning; i.e., when the participants first engaged within the equine sector, the purpose of work was about passion for the horses and the opportunity to work with their interest (i.e., self-realization and personal significance). However, over time, the purpose evolved to be more about prosocial activities and self-transcendence, such as serving and helping others. The results were in line with Bailey and Madden [5], who argued that meaningfulness is necessarily episodic, since they found that the sense-making process was connected to specific, isolable events, rather than to the job as a whole. Based on the inherent duality of meaningful work, it is of value to include both the self-oriented and other oriented dimensions when promoting and maintaining meaningfulness at work [1].

Furthermore, the changes in purpose and approach seemed to contain an inherent and ongoing negotiation between what was best for oneself and best for others, where others' requirements were often given priority. The employees seemed willing to sacrifice their wishes and needs, as well as their health and well-being, for the benefit of others, such as the horses, students, and managers. Moreover, when employees perceived their work as meaningful, they were willing to put in extra time and effort and work hard for positive outcomes, drawing them into behaviors that may have run counter to their human interests and needs [9].

In exchange for striving to realize their dream and helping others, the employees could be forced (directly or indirectly) to relinquish other important aspects of life, such as family and friends [7,9,12], other leisure interests, and higher education [7], as well as decent working conditions [26,27] and a higher wage [19]. Prioritizing the desires and needs of others over one's own can lead to negative health effects, which also have been seen in other professions; for example, nurses [43] and teachers [44]. In addition, people with meaningful work who are unable to fully employ their skills and abilities may be at particular risk for poorer well-being [45].

However, this study showed some differences between how riding school and trotting stable employees in this study viewed their work. Trotting stable employees saw their work to a large extent as their hobby or a passion; while riding school employees clarified the importance of the work being equated with any other paid work, even though it was based on their interests and lifestyle. The analysis suggested that employees with a

sense of meaningfulness and that considered their work as a hobby seemed to be more vulnerable to exploitation by management, because unfavorable pay, benefits, or working conditions are likely to be construed as simply another sacrifice one must make to pursue the passion [9,12].

An important knowledge contribution is that factors that promote meaningful work; i.e., personal significance and prosocial activities, together with the occupational culture in the sector, have an inherent ambiguity, and can lead to meaningfulness being challenged. The same factors can both promote meaningful work and challenge meaningfulness. Furthermore, factors significant in meaningful work that arise on an individual level seem to hide, restrain, or hinder initiatives to improve the work environment and working conditions at both a workplace and an organizational level. The double-sided nature of meaningful work can therefore influence the employees' well-being negatively and challenge the willingness or even the ability to remain in the occupation. The analysis seemed to show that work that was considered meaningful and passionate added to employee health and well-being, and created a buffer against substandard working conditions in the broad sense and over short periods; but in the longer term, may result in ill health, absenteeism, or turnover.

Another interesting result and an important knowledge contribution is the employees' view of leadership. An emergent and robust body of literature has shown that leadership styles and leadership approaches play an important role in the health, safety, and well-being of employees as well as for the productivity of the business [46,47]. The results show that management and quality of leadership received no mention during the interviews when the employees told their "work stories", although factors such as work organization and working conditions as well as lack of management indirectly were mentioned as the main challenges to meaningfulness and the possibility to remain in the occupation. Bailey and Madden [48] have also seen that quality of leadership received virtually no mention when people described meaningful moments at work, while poor management was the top destroyer of meaningfulness. In the current context, employees' specific and partly unique knowledge and experience from the sector may affect both the need and the demand for leadership. The culture in the sector, here: to work in the same way as has always been done, certainly also affects the demand for other organizations of work.

The results of the study should be seen in light of its limitations. First, the results were based on empirical data in one specific occupational context, the Swedish equine sector, which raised the question about its transferability. Nevertheless, since earning a living from one's leisure interest and/or personal lifestyle can be seen in many occupations, the results could be transferred to other contexts, professional settings, and occupational groups. Finally, even if researchers have called for more longitudinal research that can better establish temporal precedence between constructs [2], the participants in this study were allowed to express their work-related experiences and relate them both to working life and leisure time over their whole lifespan. The participants represented a range of ages and work experiences, as well as workplaces with different purposes and various sizes, which should be seen as a strength. It would of course have been of interest to interview individuals who had left their employment in the sector.

However, for various reasons, it was not possible to do so within the framework of this study. The results of this study have practical implications for workers, managers, and organizations in their pursuit to maintain work as meaningful. Due to the somewhat double-sided nature of meaningful work, it seems to be of importance that the work is managed and organized in a way that cultivates meaningful work overtime [4]. The experience of meaningfulness at work is personal, but organizations can create settings that are more or less conducive to individuals being able to find meaningfulness in their work. To enable individuals to construct their sense of meaningful work, organizations should build and maintain work environments in a multilevel way, characterized by "well-designed jobs with sufficient quality, type, and opportunities for job crafting that are embedded within organizations with facilitative leaders and cultures and a broader society

that enables access to decent work” [4] (p. 383). However, work environment management seems to be a challenge in the current context, and managers of small businesses (i.e., trotting stables) seem to be guided more by personal beliefs and cultural values rather than by legislation and guidelines [49]. Furthermore, smaller businesses normally have fewer resources available in comparison to larger businesses, making it more difficult for management to handle and systematically work with health and safety issues [50]. Most likely, similar limitations, on both management approaches and other resources, apply to the nonprofit riding schools. Thus, working preventively and systematically with work environment health and safety issues to promote and maintain meaningful work content and sustainable working conditions, as well as to identify early signs of ill health, seems to be very important in lifestyle-oriented work. Nevertheless, more knowledge is needed in terms of both leadership, organization of work, and work environment management in sectors and organizations that are characterized by meaningful work in demanding and challenging work environments.

## 7. Conclusions

This paper adopted a qualitative approach to describe factors that promote and challenge meaningful work in a lifestyle-oriented setting. Drawing on empirical data from 39 individual semistructured interviews with employees in the Swedish equine sector, the results contribute to the existing literature on meaningful work by demonstrating the complex, ambivalent, and challenging processes when making a livelihood based on leisure interest and personal lifestyle. Person–environment fit, task significance, and occupational culture seem to be important factors for meaningful work. Factors important for the promotion of meaningful work seem to change over time, from self-realization to more prosocial behavior. In addition, the analysis also illustrated how the nature of meaningful work has an inherent duality, constructed by a balancing act between doing good for oneself and others, where the latter usually gets priority. The tension is reinforced by the fact that the same factors can both promote meaningful work and challenge meaningfulness. This study showed that meaningful work not only comes with satisfaction, enjoyment, and fulfillment, but also an acceptance of challenging working conditions that can lead to sacrifices and exhaustion. The article further contributes by showing that the elements perceived to promote the work as meaningful can at the same time challenge the possibility of remaining in the occupation.

**Funding:** The study, which was part of two joint projects with an overall aim of improving the work environment and safety in the Swedish equine sector, was funded by AFA Insurance (grant number 190229) and the Swedish-Norwegian Foundation for Equine Research (grant number H-17-47-281).

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Regional Ethical Review Board in Gothenburg, Sweden (protocol code 366-18, 17 May 2018) and the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (protocol code 2020-01239, 16 June 2020).

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding authors. The data are not publicly available due to confidentiality concerns, as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) requires researchers to protect the identity of participants.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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