

Perceived union support buoys 'meaningfulness of work' measures

May 13 2019, by Phil Ciciora



When employees think of their labor union as supportive and caring, says new research co-written by U. of I. labor professor M. Teresa Cardador, they are more likely to rate their union as fulfilling their psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness -- all of which are related to enhanced work meaningfulness. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

While it has long been thought that the "union premium" extends to a labor union's ability to provide higher wages, better benefits and increased job security to workers, new research from a University of Illinois expert who studies identity and meaning in occupations and organizations suggests that being a member of a labor union that's perceived as supportive fosters work meaningfulness—an unexpected dividend that may also have bottom-line benefits for organizations.

According to a new paper co-written by M. Teresa Cardador, a professor of [labor](#) and employment relations at Illinois, when employees think of their [labor union](#) as supportive and caring, they are also more likely to rate that their union helps them fulfill their psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness, all of which are related to enhanced work meaningfulness.

"Unions heavily rely on the perception that they are providing their members with benefits such as better wages and working conditions," Cardador said. "Union viability depends on that perception. Supportive unions also provide an unexpected psychological benefit. Traditionally, you don't think of unions as shaping how people experience their work. But what we show is that there's this [positive association](#) between perceiving your union as supportive and feeling that your work is meaningful.

"It adds this other dimension, suggesting that supportive unions may be able to provide this heretofore unidentified benefit to workers."

Cardador and her co-authors surveyed [union members](#) from public sector labor unions in a large metropolitan area—including workers from city, county and state government agencies—during union meeting breaks in 2017.

The researchers found that when employees perceive their union to be

supportive and caring, work meaningfulness was enhanced—and that the relationship wasn't predicated on how strongly a worker identified with their union.

"We thought that if people identified more with their union, they would be more likely to reap these psychological benefits. But we didn't find that, and what that suggests is that you don't necessarily have to love your union in order to benefit from it," Cardador said. "Even if you don't connect with your union in a strong way, the work meaningfulness associated with a supportive union persists, so workers can still benefit."

Work meaningfulness is highly valued by employees and is linked to [positive outcomes](#) for individuals and organizations, such as increased mental and [physical health](#); life and job satisfaction; and motivation and performance.

"Research shows that meaningful work is associated with a multitude of things that employers care about such as performance, motivation and organizational commitment," Cardador said. "So to the extent that the union can help employees experience those things via their perceptions of meaningful work, that's a win for employers."

For those employers who take an adversarial stance toward labor unions, the research suggests that as long as a labor union is present in the workplace and is seen as supportive by its members, "it may actually have benefits to the organization that they might not expect," Cardador said.

"It probably won't change the perception of employers who don't want a union or don't already have one in the workplace," she said. "But for those employers that do have a union, it suggests that they could benefit from finding ways to help labor unions be more supportive of their members. So instead of sparring with the union, it might be in

employers' best interests to help the union be more supportive of their members' needs. Communicate better. Encourage them to have better relationships with their members and engage in fair treatment. All those things that are associated with perceived union support."

The researchers suggest that supportive unions may provide a "triple [benefit](#)—a supportive union benefits the [union](#) itself through enhanced member commitment and loyalty; workers through enhanced work meaningfulness and other well-being benefits; and employers by positively influencing [worker](#) attitudes and behaviors toward [work](#).

"We argue that all three of those benefits could potentially occur," Cardador said. "It's a win-win-win."

The paper was published in the *Labor Studies Journal*.

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Citation: Perceived union support buoys 'meaningfulness of work' measures (2019, May 13) retrieved 26 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2019-05-union-buoys-meaningfulness.html>

| |
|--|
| <p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p> |
|--|