

## The meanings of the work of the autonomous consultant in the management area

*Os sentidos do trabalho do consultor autônomo na área de gestão*




*Los significados del trabajo del consultor autónomo en el área de gestión*

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## ABSTRACT

**Goal:** The objective of this research was to understand the meanings of the work of the autonomous consultant who works in the management area. The literature review addressed the theme of the meanings of work. **Methodology/approach:** The qualitative study followed the foundations of Edmund Husserl's transcendental phenomenology and Colaizzi's (1978) descriptive phenomenological method. **Originality/relevance:** The meanings of work for the consultants who participated in the study are altruism, autonomy, freedom, purpose, satisfaction and professional achievement. The meanings of work for the consultants who participated in the study are professional autonomy, purpose, social contribution, satisfaction, and personal fulfillment. **Main findings:** The results guide professional development and career management strategies in the field of management consulting. **Theoretical contributions:** For data collection, remote in-depth interviews were carried out with a phenomenological basis, according to Seidman's (2013) proposal, with seven consultants. **Management implications:** A better understanding of the meanings of work and the factors that drive the sense of purpose and accomplishment in this activity represents one of the contributions of this study.

**Keywords:** Work senses. Self-employment. Phenomenology.

## RESUMO

**Objetivo:** O objetivo desta pesquisa foi compreender os sentidos do trabalho do consultor autônomo que atua na área de gestão. A revisão da literatura abordou o tema dos sentidos do trabalho. **Metodologia/abordagem:** O estudo, de natureza qualitativa, seguiu os fundamentos da fenomenologia transcendental de Edmund Husserl e o método fenomenológico descritivo de Colaizzi (1978). **Originalidade/ relevância:** Os sentidos do trabalho para os consultores que participaram do estudo são autonomia profissional, propósito, contribuição social, satisfação e realização pessoal. **Principais resultados:** Os resultados orientam estratégias de desenvolvimento profissional e gestão de carreiras no campo da consultoria de gestão. **Contribuições teóricas:** Para a coleta dos dados, realizaram-se entrevistas em profundidade remotas com base fenomenológica, de acordo com a proposta de Seidman (2013), com sete consultores. **Contribuições para a gestão:** Uma melhor compreensão sobre os sentidos do trabalho e os fatores que impulsionam a sensação de propósito e realização nesta atividade representa uma das contribuições deste estudo.

**Palavras-chave:** Sentidos do trabalho. Autoemprego. Fenomenologia.

## RESUMEM

**Objetivo:** El objetivo de esta investigación fue comprender los significados del trabajo del consultor autónomo que actúa en el área de gestión. La revisión de la literatura abordó el tema de los significados del trabajo. **Metodología/enfoque:** El estudio cualitativo siguió los fundamentos de la fenomenología trascendental de Edmund Husserl y el método fenomenológico descriptivo de Colaizzi (1978). **Originalidad/relevancia:** Los significados del trabajo para los consultores que participaron en el estudio son autonomía profesional, propósito, contribución social, satisfacción y realización personal. **Principales resultados:** Los resultados orientan las estrategias de desarrollo profesional y gestión de carrera en el ámbito de la consultoría de gestión. **Contribuciones teóricas:** Para la recolección de datos se realizaron entrevistas en profundidad a distancia con base fenomenológica, según propuesta de Seidman (2013), con siete consultores. **Contribución a la gestión:** Una mejor comprensión de los significados del trabajo y los factores que impulsan el sentido de propósito y logro en esta actividad representa una de las contribuciones de este estudio.

**Palabras clave:** Sentidos de trabajo. Autoempleo. Fenomenología.

## ■ INTRODUCTION

We are living in an era of unprecedented changes and opportunities. The advancement of technology, new ways of working, and the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have changed how we work and live, and many professions are adapting to new scenarios. Having digital skills and renewing and updating oneself constantly is essential. New occupations are emerging, others are reinventing themselves, and the search for qualification and professional development has become even more critical, which makes this change in the panorama have a significant impact on the work of freelancers (Budtz-Jørgensen et al., 2019; Ribeiro, 2020; Eppler-Hattab, 2022).

This scenario affected some areas and individuals more intensely than others (Moreira, 2020; Mattei & Heinen, 2022), especially regarding technological aspects (Tirole, 2017; Gur et al., 2022). Many of these workers had to adapt in order to continue their activities.

These demands imposed on professionals result from the work world's historical evolution and reflect the core of several themes addressed in the scientific literature, such as the meaning of work (Neves et al., 2018). For the proposed study, the theme represents an aspect of life created and maintained through interactions between personal and social factors. It influences individual actions and shapes the nature of society in a given historical period (Neves et al., 2018; Ferraz & Fernandes, 2019).

In this social context, the role of self-employment stands out. Self-employed or independent professionals carry out activities independently and may have one or more partners but do not regularly hire employees (International Labor Organization [ILO], 2018; Skrzek-Lubasińska & Szaban, 2019). An example of this role is self-employed consultants who work in the management area and collaborate in developing innovation in a country (Silva et al., 2018; Costa & António, 2019; Crisan & Marincean, 2023). Many interpretations regarding this professional occupation and the consultant's image are full of criticism and preconceived concepts (Kipping, 2011; Buono, 2023; Valverde & Oliveira, 2023). The main issue identified in this research lies in the complexity of understanding the meanings attributed to the work of independent consultants in the management area since their work is marked by a diversity of contexts, challenges, and personal motivations (Dourado et al., 2009; Eppler-Hattab, 2022). The absence of a more comprehensive and in-depth analysis of the subjective elements that permeate this professional practice can result in significant gaps in understanding the perceptions and attributions of meaning these professionals give to their activities, highlighting the relevance of a detailed study (Buono, 2023).

This research aimed to describe the meanings of independent consultants who work in management. In this sense, it contributes by a) revealing the attributed meanings using phenomenology as an epistemological basis, b) expanding the debate on the work of independent consultants, and c) fostering professional development and career management strategies.

This research focuses on a professional category that, although essential for organizational development, is often ignored in academic literature (Kipping, 2011; Buono, 2023; Valverde & Oliveira, 2023). In a context of rapid transformations, boosted by the pandemic and technological advances, it is essential to explore how these professionals, who work independently, construct meanings and attribute value to their work. This research fills gaps in the academic field and offers practical support for the development of autonomous careers and the efficient management of consultancies.

Without limiting itself to the academic sphere, the perception of meaning can influence professional development, job satisfaction, and effectiveness in providing consulting services, representing direct implications for organizational practice. By directing the investigation to autonomous workers, this research seeks to understand the motivations and expectations of these consultants and the implications of this role in building meaningful and successful careers.

In addition to this introduction, we initially address the literature on 'work meaningfulness'. The use of the phenomenological method allows an introduction to the literature without the need to address the state of the art in a prior theoretical in-depth study. Unlike traditional approaches, phenomenology focuses on the suspension of judgments and the apprehension of the phenomenon in its purest form, thus justifying the limitation or absence of an extensive literature review, as pointed out by several authors. This strategy is essential to avoid research contamination by prior conceptions, ensuring an impartial analysis. According to Husserl (2020), philosophical truth must focus on the experiences of consciousness and their essences, free from theories, assumptions and influences of the empirical world, ensuring the integrity and validity of the investigation.

Hereupon, the methodological path of the research is characterized. Finally, the results and discussions, as well as the conclusions of the study, are presented.

## ■ THE MEANINGS OF THE WORK OF THE CONSULTANT

The 1970s marked the threshold of significant growth in research on the meaning of work. This field of study is vast, with challenges associated with its investigation that have resulted in diverse perspectives and sparked academic interest (Antunes, 2015; Neves et al., 2018). The diversity of contributions impacts its definition, which is still not consensual (Antal et al., 2018; Ferraz & Fernandes, 2019), and the meaning of work can be considered as part of the constructed and reproduced social reality, which interacts with several personal and social variables and influences individual actions and the nature of society at a given historical moment (Neves et al., 2018).

Research related to the meaning of work also follows diverse directions. Considering that the search for meaning occurs through access to resources, working conditions, and favourable economic aspects (Scott, 2022) or through positive associations between self-esteem, perceived self-efficacy, meaning of work, and motivations (Degand et al., 2021), or even through professional self-esteem, the perception of social support, and the sense of meaningful work (Gur et al., 2022).

Rohm and Lopes (2015) criticize the new directions and demands of the work world imposed on individuals in post-modernity, which induces the creation of new meanings as ideals linked to the replacement of the (collective) professional identity with an identity focused only on self-fulfilment, anchored in flexibility and versatility to be able to act according to the unpredictability of the market. Considering the subject from a dialectical perspective encompassing subjectivity and their entire social context is crucial since this external influence plays a significant role in their most profound subjective processes (Pereira et al., 2022; Martho & Messias, 2023).

In the context of work, there is the self-employment model. Working as a self-employed worker in the job market has become an increasingly attractive option for many professionals seeking independence, flexibility, and freedom in their careers (Antunes, 2015; Martho & Messias, 2023). With the advancement of technology (Tirole, 2017), the expansion of flexible work, and the search for autonomy, many professionals choose to become independent consultants, offering their services autonomously and assuming the role of self-entrepreneurs (Crisyan & Marincean, 2023).

Management consulting has played a fundamental role in recent decades, offering support to companies in Brazil and around the world to mitigate the negative impacts of economic globalization (Alcântara & Pereira, 2017; Crisan & Marincean, 2023). Consulting is a profession that has been highlighted in research with different directions. For example, Silva et al. (2018) emphasize the consultant as a facilitator in the development of innovation, while Costa and António (2019) highlight their role as an intermediary in the knowledge construction process, and Valverde and Oliveira (2023) emphasize the role of consultants as strategic transmitters of management ideas and knowledge.

The role of the consultant stands out as one of the possibilities for action in the self-employment model. Being a self-employed consultant implies mastering specific knowledge and skills and understanding the meanings underlying this choice and the transformations it implies in the individual's personal and professional life (Buono, 2023; Criyan & Marincean, 2023). It also involves mastering technical skills, establishing solid interpersonal connections, and building lasting client relationships (Buono, 2023). These meanings can range from the search for personal and professional fulfilment to the desire to share knowledge and help other companies or professionals with their challenges. The different meanings of being an independent consultant were explored, addressing aspects such as independence, responsibility and personal satisfaction inherent to this form of work.

## **METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES**

The qualitative approach is a legitimate way of investigating the elements of social sciences because it helps construct knowledge about reality through the interaction between individuals and the world around them (Patias & Hohendorff, 2019). In this case, the meanings are attributed to the work of independent consultants in the management area.

The paradigm adopted in the research was phenomenological, as a philosophical instance that directs its methodology, and the phenomenological method was chosen for its implementation since it describes the

meanings of individual experiences lived and related to a phenomenon, focusing on the description of what exists in common among the participants, seeking the essence of what is invariant in them (Morrow et al., 2015; Abalos et al., 2016; Bello, 2019; Bicudo, 2020; Husserl, 2020; Atmawijaya, 2023). The research was based on Edmund Husserl's transcendental phenomenology and Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenological method (1978).

The choice of transcendental phenomenology for the study with independent consultants is justified by its ability to capture the depth and complexity of individual experiences, promoting an empathetic and participant-centred approach (Husserl, 2020; Atmawijaya, 2023; Cunha et al., 2024; Nxumalo et al., 2023). It allows for a more authentic exploration of the meanings that these professionals attribute to their work, expanding the understanding of their experiences in a context of transformations.

The adoption of Colaizzi's (1978) descriptive method is based on its ability to deeply interpret the experiences lived by participants, allowing the extraction of meaningful phrases linked to the phenomenon under study. These assertions are transformed into meanings attributed to the subjects' perceptions. Organizing these meanings into structured themes enables a consistent and detailed description of the phenomenon under investigation.

The research subjects were seven independent management consultants who work in different regions of Brazil, have their own businesses, and are classified as self-employed workers (ILO, 2018). The selection of participants in a phenomenological study does not require the same concern for representativeness and proportionality as in other research paradigms. The focus is researching multiple individuals who have lived the experience under investigation and can articulate and describe it. In addition, these participants must have few differences from each other in order to facilitate the identification of experiences, common themes and the general essence of the experience for all.

The choice of seven independent management consultants is justified by their diverse experiences and regional contexts, allowing for a richer and more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study. This variety, combined with the homogeneity of the participants' essential characteristics, facilitates the identification of shared experiences and themes, contributing to developing a robust phenomenological analysis.

Consultant 1 began their career at 11 years old, selling snacks, homemade bread, soft drinks, and other products to help their mother. They elaborated on projects for their colleagues in business school and charged them for them. After graduating, they worked for five years at the Ambev factory and one of its dealerships. They were the owner of the SUPERA brain exercise school. Consultant 2 began their career at 8 when they began selling candy on the sidewalk in front of their house to buy themselves things. At 12, they were already studying programming in a course paid for by their father, who said they had to study so they would not have to work in manual labour. At the age of 13, they worked as an office boy for a company in their city. At 17, they set up their first legal company with a CNPJ (The Brazilian National Registry of Legal Entities). They specialized in business administration. Consultant 3 began their career as a child, selling fruit. They passed the entrance exam for mechanical engineering at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Norte (UFRN). When they graduated, they opened a construction company in partnership with their brother. Later, thinking about the instability of the

construction industry, they opened \$1.99 product stores in Caicó, Rio Grande do Norte, Brazil and other cities. However, they went bankrupt due to a change during the Fernando Henrique Cardoso government that doubled the dollar's value. Consultant 4 began their career after graduating in Geology. They went to work in the companies of their father and godfather, who were partners, at the invitation of one of them. They received a postgraduate degree in Management and Business. They left the family business because they disagreed with the management style of one of the managers and went to work in another company owned by their father, taking over the management and direction of the company during the period in which their father had a heart problem. Consultant 5 began their career after graduating in Agricultural Engineering at 21. They opened their technical consultancy firm for agricultural projects to provide outsourced services to a family member. Six years later, they had four company branches and hired newly qualified colleagues. They completed postgraduate studies in Finance, Marketing and Sales, and People Management. They received a master's degree in Strategic Planning for Agribusiness. Consultant 6 began their career at the age of 7 when they took care of the car of a tourist who parked on their father's farm to go fishing in exchange for a small payment. At the same age, they lost their father, and at the age of nine, they worked in two tailor shops to help their mother with the family expenses. They studied philosophy at the São Paulo University (USP) and pedagogy at Colégio São Vicente in Rio de Janeiro. They bought two university bookstores and opened another one inside Colégio São Vicente. They had seven branches, some of which also had a stationery section. Consultant 7 began their career when they were selected for the Air Force Academy in Rio Grande do Sul. They spent six months there, and, unable to adapt to the rigid and bureaucratic system of the Armed Forces, they dropped out. They took the entrance exam for Mining Engineering and then transferred to the Electrical Engineering course, where they graduated. During their specialization, they began developing a business plan based on the consulting firm they planned to open with a friend. Initially, they opened a branch together in Porto Alegre, which never became operational. They had a project related to distance learning alongside a professor from the Federal University of Pernambuco (UFPE).

In the context of this study, the selection criteria included being an independent management consultant and providing occasional consulting services to Sebrae and other entities without a formal or informal employment relationship. Another criterion for similarity in their experiences was that the participants acted as facilitators of the Empretec Seminar, a United Nations-sanctioned training course held by Sebrae to awaken entrepreneurial characteristics.

Access to the field could be facilitated by people from the researchers' circle of knowledge who were part of the system, category or group of people to be investigated.

Data collection took place through in-depth interviews based on the methodological proposal of Seidman (2013). It is a sequence of three interviews with each participant, each addressing the topics: life story and context of the experience; details of the experience of being a consultant; and reflection on the meaning of the experiences.

The interviews were conducted remotely, via videoconference, using the Google Meet platform. Data collection through interviews in a virtual en-

vironment represents an innovative approach to phenomenological research (Morrow et al., 2015).

The length of the interviews varied among the participants, with the first interviews lasting from 40 to 75 minutes and the second and third interviews lasting on average 45 minutes each, with the shortest lasting 30 minutes and the longest 55 minutes. Seidman (2013) recommends lasting 30 to 90 minutes to avoid the participant becoming tired.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim, following a sequence (first, second and third). When it was not possible to complete the transcription of two or more interviews before the next ones, the complete recording was at least reviewed by the researchers. This procedure is recommended by Seidman (2013) to identify the need to delve deeper into a subject or request more details in the subsequent interview about something that was not clear.

The ATLAS.ti® software version 9.1.7.0, developed to support qualitative research, was used to organize the collected information and assist in data analysis. The software serves as a tool for organizing and systematizing the analyses conducted by the researcher (Klüber, 2014; Souza Neto et al., 2019).

The description in the data analysis was contemplated by assertions representing the meanings through the statements, accompanied by the following coding: referring to the consultant (C1, C2, C3, C4, C5, C6 or C7); the respective interview (I1 for the first interview, I2 for the second, and I3 for the third); and the letter S followed by the number of the respective significant statement, as in the following example: (C5I2\_S23). The researchers were responsible for identifying what was essential in the data and assigning meaning to it.

The analysis and understanding of the data were defined based on the philosophical choices of the investigation, influencing the search for meanings to construct the results and the writing of the text. This study followed the definition of themes a posteriori, emerging from the data collected in the field through the process of reflection and phenomenological reductions of the data by applying Colaizzi's method (1978).

In phenomenological research, the researcher must approach the interviews without prior conceptions about the phenomenon studied, avoiding structured scripts to explore the participants' experiences freely (Seidman, 2013). Thus, in this research, the interviewees were asked about their career history, current work as a consultant and the meaning of their experience in consulting. That is how the sets of themes presented in the results of this study emerged.

The phenomenological analysis of the data was carried out based on Husserl's original ideas when he argued that in order to characterize a phenomenological study and identify its essence, two fundamental reductions are necessary: the phenomenological or transcendental (epoché), in which the researcher must suspend, without denying or questioning, all judgment about the knowledge already existing regarding the phenomenon; and the eidetic reduction, which seeks to describe its essential structure, focusing on understanding its true meaning, intuiting what is constant and eliminating everything that is beyond it or is contingent about it (Christensen et al., 2017; Bello, 2019; Husserl, 2020).

The analysis process followed the guidance of Colaizzi's (1978) descriptive method, which involves seven stages: i) familiarization with the rigorous reading and rereading of the protocols; identification of significant



statements; ii) formulation of units of meaning; iii) grouping of these meanings into themes; iv) comprehensive and detailed description of the phenomenon; v) elaboration of the fundamental structure of the essence of the phenomenon; and vii) verification of this fundamental structure by providing feedback to the participants.

This last stage proposed by Colaizzi involves validation by the research participants, allowing them to review and comment on the conclusions obtained to verify whether they are based on their experiences and perspectives, thus ensuring greater rigour in the study.

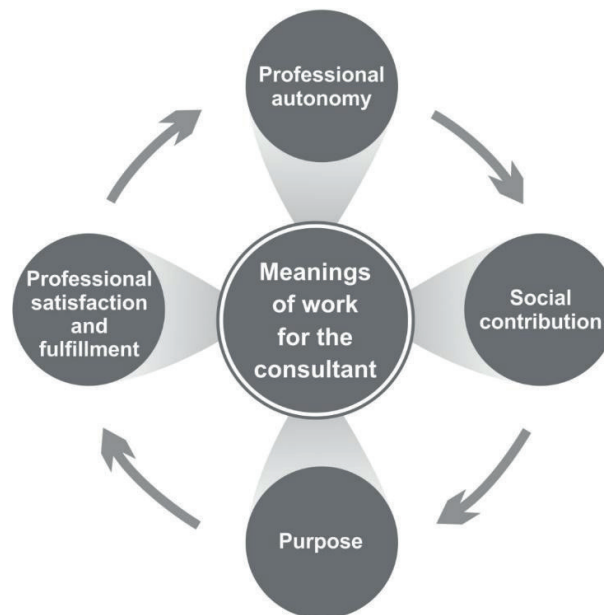
The methodological choices and procedures adopted throughout the investigative process that supported this research were described here, and the study results are presented below.

## ■ ANALYSIS OF THE UNVEILED MEANINGS

The meanings attributed to the work of a consultant for the participants of this study are aspects linked to the values they cherish, their purposes, professional satisfactions and achievements. They are related to the subjectivity that permeates the work of a consultant. These meanings were captured in the statements, reflecting a direction aligned with the characteristics and specificities of the work of these professionals. Professional autonomy, purpose, social contribution, satisfaction and personal fulfillment were identified as the essence of the experience that makes sense to these consultants. They are represented in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**

Meanings of the consultant work



When looking at themselves, research participants reflect on their commitments, values and purposes in work and life.

## Social contribution

The human tendency to be concerned about others as a source of some of their concerns and as a basis for some of their actions is a meaning that characterizes being a consultant for the interviewees. They report concrete attitudes and future intentions related to selfless and philanthropic behaviour towards others and society.

Whether as a personal value or as a way of trying to give back to society the social benefits they have received, such as free education, they mention altruistic attitudes that help consultancy make sense in their lives. One of these attempts to demonstrate altruistic attitudes is when they mention that they have already carried out or intend to carry out **free consultancy to contribute to organizations and people**. This way, they mention work that has been or could be carried out voluntarily by them for people and organizations.

The sense of being altruistic in consulting practice is revealed in the statements, “I am a person who is constantly doing charity work in relation to consulting, for people who are very troubled, in debt” (C2I3\_S9), or even when the interviewees expressed that they see themselves doing volunteer work, “mentoring, doing focused work, of a behavioural nature in terms of entrepreneurial attitudes to help companies find the best paths, in the sense of helping people” (C5I3\_S28). One of the consultants interviewed states:

I have already provided consulting services to a nursing home for seven months, free of charge. They took off. So, in the case of an NGO, I can even do it for free, [...]. I have provided many free consulting services, and sometimes, I still provide free mentoring to support and assist people in achieving better results. (C6I3\_S5)

Three consultants mentioned in their statements the performance or possibility of performing work selflessly for free. The reports reveal that this attitude in C2’s speech when it occurred, was intentional. C5 reported the future intention of providing free consulting and mentoring services to people and organizations and even creating an NGO to carry out this work once they are retired. C6 states that they have provided free consulting and mentoring services a few times to help people. The perception of social support through the ability to recognize the needs of others, offer emotional and/or instrumental support and be available to help those around them, is related to the consultant’s perception of social support (Gur et al., 2022).

Social contribution was not mentioned as a personal value for everyone but as something that does or will do them good when they no longer need or can no longer work in exchange for remuneration. In some interviews, this sense of social contribution emerges. They demonstrate a feeling of **solidarity and contribution to a better society**.

Collaborating towards a society of better people and organizations is part of the meaning of consulting in their lives, reflected in the expressions “we are here to contribute and make a better world for people” (C1I1\_S1), “helping people (...) so that we have a better business environment and society” (C2I2\_S12) or even “as a way of giving back, being less selfish and giving back to society in some way” (C3I3\_S3).

The quality of being supportive is something that some perceive in themselves as a moral obligation to help others. As a value identified in the

interviews, social contribution involves an act of greatness that gives meaning to the profession and work.

## Purpose

The concept of purpose in the work context refers to the idea that individuals seek meaning and value in their work. This purpose goes beyond the performance of the activities that comprise it, as it involves a deeper connection with personal and organizational goals and values. In this study, the possibility of using the knowledge and experience acquired over years of work to help people in their lives and ventures is one of the purposes of consultants. The meanings that make up this theme are the possibility of helping people and organizations solve problems, achieving good results, and a purpose linked to disseminating knowledge.

People seek out consultants in the vast majority of cases when they have problems to be solved. In some reports, the interviewees mentioned that they sometimes come across very critical and almost insoluble situations in their organizations regarding financial and management issues. In this sense, they report that **the possibility of helping people solve problems** gives meaning to their professional commitment. They refer to their work's effect on struggling people and organizations.

It is not just being a consultant for the honour, the profession or the money. It's for the very purpose of helping people, helping to get people out of very complex situations, helping them make their dreams come true. It is very much linked to that. (C2I3\_S7)

I like it because I can see that I helped the guy out. Sometimes that's exactly what happens. The guy is in his process, in his own "little world", and you say something, confront him or even accidentally send the message to the group, and they get it. Knowing that that help was valuable to that person is really cool. (C4I3\_S18)

Moreover, I see that people need help, and sometimes it is a conversation, the person saying to them: Dude, seek help. I have a professional to recommend to you. Here's the contact. Ask for help because you need to solve this problem. (C5I3\_S32)

The interviewees revealed that one of their purposes is to help people solve problems. They emphasize that this help can be indirect, in the form of simple guidance, or by forwarding them to a more aligned professional. Their role involves facilitating and supporting the development of knowledge and skills by individuals or organizations seeking their guidance. As an intermediary, the consultant uses their expertise, experience, and knowledge to provide relevant insights, perspectives, and guidance and acts as a facilitator in identifying and understanding the challenges, problems, or opportunities faced by clients (Costa & Antonio, 2019; Valverde & Oliveira, 2023).

In other statements, they emphasize the possibility of helping people and organizations achieve good results, which generates a feeling of pride by "helping them generate some positive habits so that they do not depend on me or anyone else to be the protagonists of their own lives and their results" (C3I2\_S17), by "helping them get out of where they are and go to much more advanced levels as professionals. And not only as a professional, because people go through this at the beginning, but especially as a person" (C4I1\_S44) or even "helping customers make money" (C5I3\_S2).

They also find meaning when participation helps people and/or organizations achieve better results. They refer to the meaning of contributing positively to improving people's lives as a professional commitment. They also state that as professionals, **their purpose is linked to the dissemination of knowledge**, as the following statements reveal.

[...] Doing some good, leaving my mark. When I am no longer here, someone will remember me: Oh, one day I talked to so-and-so, C1. Or I read something he wrote, and it was beneficial, [...] that is it. (C1I3\_S5)

[...] I want to have a very light backpack. Moreover, for me, this means not having this load of accumulated knowledge [...]. I need help keeping what I learn. And it's interesting that the more I pass it on and recycle it, the more new things come, and I see myself like this in the future, being a multiplier of knowledge. (C7I3\_S17)

For them, it is essential to make a difference by spreading knowledge. To pass on to people what they have learned from theory or practice- to leave their mark, their legacy, and to be remembered. Not for the titles they have earned but for what they have managed to contribute to the development of others. The contribution they perceive in helping people solve their problems and achieve better results, added to the possibility of being able to share the knowledge acquired with others, are some of the factors that give meaning to the work of a consultant.

As they are proficient in management, consultants aim to pass on and interpret this knowledge to those who need it, influencing and acting in the conveying of ideas through language, taking into account their rhetorical and discursive skills (Valverde & Oliveira, 2023), linked to the legitimacy of their professional career.

## Professional autonomy

Autonomy is another meaning that stands out when being a consultant. It refers to the need to have one's direction and freedom related to one's career and the feeling of professional and financial independence.

The meanings that emerged and make up this theme involve the search for financial independence, the appreciation of work flexibility; and autonomy combined with forming partnerships. They reflect the meaning perceived in the work performed, which is linked to freedom, flexibility, autonomy and dynamism in executing their activities and the results generated for their personal lives.

The participants demonstrate their propensity and need for financial freedom in reports of experiences lived prior to consulting since their youth and during their university studies when they sought alternative sources of income **in search of financial independence**.

This search was centred on acquiring financial resources through the following actions: demanding work from people who did not have time or were lazy (C1I1\_S17), lending money at interest, holding a barbecue to raise funds (C6I1\_S7) or even professional qualification as revealed in the following statement.

[...] When I was 11 years old, my father paid for a typing course for me and said that it was the only course he could afford me in my lifetime. So that gave me a direction that I would have to seek this autonomy if I wanted to advance in my life [...]. With my work, I paid for a typing course and then a programming course. When I was 12 years old, I was already studying programming. (C211\_S20)

With the need for career autonomy, consulting has always been seen as a business opportunity and valued primarily for the freedom self-employment would provide. Consultants perceive employment as something that takes away or at least limits their freedom and independence. The pillar of autonomy is so emphasized by participants that C2 does not recognize consulting as a form of self-employment, simply because of the connotation of the word “employment” that composes it, which can be seen in this statement: “Although consulting is an excellent opportunity for self-employment, I do not see employment as an opportunity, whether it is consulting or not” (C211\_S26).

The need for autonomy highlights the appreciation of consulting activities as a professional occupation and source of income that provides them with non-dependence on jobs. In this sense, Coelho-Lima and Bendassolli (2018) warn that the ideology that promotes self-employment or independent work is supported by three main pillars, which are the meanings attributed to work, such as the search for money and survival; the overvaluation of self-employment, motivated by the perception of freedom in the organization of work and the possibility of earning a higher income compared to formal work; and the devaluation of formal work.

This meaning is evident with reports such as: “I did not want to be anyone’s employee. I did not want to work [as an employee], and to this day I do not have a work card” (C511\_S2). It reflects the search for an activity that would allow for greater independence, as revealed in the following statement:

[...] I started my career as a consultant in my own business, largely because of this value that I consider very strong: not being dependent on someone telling me what I have to do, what I am good at, and where I should invest... I value this matter of freedom. (C711\_S24)

They also wanted to be independent of the market and its inherent instability. C5 once owned a consulting firm with four branches. As an agricultural engineer, they worked with technical consulting in the area and recruited graduating colleagues to work with them in the companies. However, a change in the sector in which their technical consultancy operated, at the time triggered by a national political decision, practically wiped out their market and their business.

In 1992, Fernando Collor de Melo took over as president and caused a terrible mess in the sector. Moreover, at the time, people used to say: ah, rural producers do not need financing. It was challenging at the time, but it woke me up. I thought: I am dependent on others. That does not work for me either. (C511\_S4)

It was then that they realized that in addition to not wanting to be an employee, they also needed to act in a way that was not so dependent on political and economic changes in the market. Thus, the theme of professional autonomy demonstrates a strong meaning that consultants emphasize regarding their choice of consulting.

The interviewees also mentioned the possibility of acting or deciding on different aspects related to work, such as quantity, intensity, time and place, as something that satisfies and gives meaning to the consulting activity. Freedom is an inherent characteristic of professional activities such as consulting, in which the professional acts autonomously and independently when closing contracts and carrying out work. They are also not subject to goals and schedules set by companies or individuals due to their status as self-employed workers.

The interviews mentioned meanings more closely linked to the flexibility of schedules, locations and working methods. In addition, they reported the financial freedom achieved over time, resulting from taking advantage of business opportunities identified through consulting work. They also mentioned the option of working in consulting for longer, without worrying about the limitations arising from age, given the possibility, expanded in the current technological context, of working remotely.

In the new work scenario, some people needed to learn new technological skills to adapt to online business models or migrate to high-demand sectors. However, many faced difficulties accessing technology and infrastructure suitable for remote work, including the lack of devices, stable Internet connections and adequate spaces at home, making the transition more challenging for some (Tirole, 2017).

The dynamism of the consultant's work is also highlighted by the fact that they work with different people, companies, places and challenges despite often facing the same management problems. The possibility of working in different cities and organizations and meeting different people is aligned with the **value of work flexibility**. The diversity of environments and new situations experienced by the consultants interviewed are valued.

When my daughter was younger, she said: Dad, don't you get tired of doing this job? I said: Daughter, how could I get tired of it if they are completely different people. Today I'm in one company, tomorrow I'm in another... maybe doing the same job. (C5I2\_S23)

The thing with consulting is that we face a different challenge every day, a different place every day. (C7I1\_S11)

The dynamic nature of consulting is evident. The contact with different people each time they carry out a job, in addition to the diversity of companies served in consulting and/or mentoring, provides opportunities for social interaction and a broadening of their worldview. Within this environment, an interpersonal exchange occurs between individuals, allowing for personal development and improvement of their subjectivity (Pereira et al., 2022).

The appreciation of flexibility in the profession is also revealed in the expressions "not having fixed hours" (C3I1\_S35), "enjoying life a little more" (C5I3\_S13) and "schedule freedom" (C7I1\_S55). The consultants interviewed value the possibility of defining schedules and spaces and working at their own pace when they perceive an imbalance between their work and other contexts in life, such as family. The fact that they do not have a hierarchical superior or are not linked to organizations with schedule and productivity requirements constitutes a personal value that gives meaning to their work.

Some also highlight the need for **autonomy combined with forming partnerships**, referring to decentralizing the entire process. When the work

is entirely on the consultant, the financial risks for this professional increase. C2 emphasizes the need to have people trained and led by them to carry out parts of the process. C7 also highlights working in partnership with other professionals while preserving their professional autonomy.

Thus, dynamism, flexibility, and autonomy inherent to the profession act as stimuli for the research participants (Crisan & Marincean, 2023; Martho & Messias, 2023). The autonomy highlighted in the reports can be identified as a relevant value in the work of a consultant and constitutes one of the meanings of this profession.

## Satisfaction and personal fulfillment

Job satisfaction and a sense of fulfillment are reflected in the statements of the study participants. Enjoying the consulting activity and feeling motivated to do it, in addition to perceiving it as something that transcends the meaning of work achievement, makes this work fulfil a sense of purpose in the lives of some of them. The interviewees reflect on this topic about professional accomplishments perceived by themselves and others and about satisfaction with the work. The meanings that emerged were: recognition and appreciation of the work of a consultant; consulting as a rewarding and meaningful job; consulting seen as a source of personal and financial achievements; future career plans; and personal fulfillment through the work of a consultant.

The admiration and appreciation of the consultant as a result of their work activity is something relevant to the participants of this research. They report the importance of positive evaluations of their work with organizations and people. Thus, **the recognition and appreciation of their work generate satisfaction, happiness and gratitude.**

I feel happy and satisfied when someone I admire gives me some sign that they value my work or have some admiration for me as well. This leaves a mark on me, draws my attention to the relationship with people, businesspeople. (C4I2\_S15)

I have some cool examples of entrepreneurs who send me messages of thanks for what they were able to learn, direct, or redirect [to] their businesses because of my intervention and experience. (C6I1\_S24)

The client's trust, praise, and positive evaluations of their work make consultants perceive the value and recognition given to them. For them, it is highly beneficial to act by expectations, maintaining a cohesive network of relationships capable of validating their activities, as their personal reputation is essential for the success of professional actions (Valverde & Oliveira, 2023). They use strategies and tactics that go beyond the operational results of consulting projects, aiming to promote their image and ensure stability and continuity in the market (Kipping, 2011). In addition, they view **consulting as a rewarding and meaningful job** and demonstrate satisfaction with their chosen career. This meaning is evident from using words such as 'nice', 'pleasurable', and the enjoyment of the work performed.

For me, it is really nice. It is rewarding. It is pleasurable. It is all I have ever wanted. To arrive somewhere, see that the person is lost and has no direction, and provide a solution for that, and the person to say: "Dude, thank you very much. What you

did here saved the company. You changed the course [of things]”. [...] If I became an employee again, even with a high salary, I might be frustrated and not happy and content with what I have already accomplished. That is how I feel. (C1I2\_S20)

It's something very pleasurable, which I like to do. Very tiring, but very pleasurable because I can clearly see my contribution to those people. (C2I3\_S1)

For me, it's what I like doing the most. There are several things I do and activities, but what gives me the most personal satisfaction is going inside the company. (C5I2\_S20)

When reflecting on the feeling of satisfaction and fulfilment when they can help people restructure their businesses and/or their lives and that they are now in the job they always wanted to be in, C1 recalls when they were employees. In their view, even if they were to return to this condition, with a high salary and without financial worries, they would not be as fulfilled as they are today as a consultant. C4 also highlights the feeling of satisfaction for being able to contribute to other people. The development of identity occurs individually but is influenced by collective elements. Therefore, the opinions of others, added to self-perceptions and personal choices, play a fundamental role for the individual, and identity can be understood as the result of these constantly evolving social interactions, with the professional sphere standing out as a significant component (Pereira et al., 2022).

The interviewees state that consulting is an activity that they enjoy and feel pleasure in doing. It stimulates and motivates them despite being tiring at times. Work has been a relevant topic of research, as it is considered one of the essential values of human beings and plays an important role in the search for self-realization, in the expression of subjectivity and the development of identity (Neves et al., 2018; Pereira et al., 2022). Professional fulfilment, for some of them, already includes the financial aspect, while others still yearn to reach this level of satisfaction. In this aspect, **consulting is a source of personal and financial fulfilment**. This meaning appears in the following statement:

Today, I do consulting to make money. Now, since I am all about what I do, I get so involved that money no longer means anything. [...] I confess to you that if the compensation for course X was low, I wouldn't have joined. But when I joined, it was natural to be all about things and want to succeed. And their success is my success. (C3I3\_S2)

It is clear from the statements that the interviewees see the activity as a source of their personal and financial achievements. For C5, their financial needs are already met, and due to the contribution to their income provided by the profits from investments made in other companies, they have achieved the desired financial stability. C3 demonstrates the desire to continue in consulting but still wants to enjoy greater financial tranquillity. Considering that all the participants in this research have had or currently have other businesses or ventures, this may indicate that the income obtained solely from working with consulting only sometimes fully meets their financial needs.

In their **future career projects**, they reflect on medium- and long-term aspirations. Some think about creating new businesses, others about slowing down the pace of work, others want to focus on activities more closely linked to consulting, either in a broader way or with a more philanthropic nature.



I see myself in the future with two other businesses. One is more about online retail [...]. On the professional side, I am developing entrepreneurial behaviours on a biblical basis. [...] I want to write a book based on this and a course focusing on entrepreneurial behaviours with a Christian, biblical basis. (C113\_S9)

I have already migrated to doing this work as a consultant in a different way- to be less individualistic and work more with the masses. Maybe migrating more to being an influencer than a consultant. [Being] more of a disseminator of content, experiences, and experiences than actually a consultant who is there side by side with the client. (C213\_S8)

The projections presented by the consultants have different directions, but all of them mention in some way the desire to continue with consultancy. Finally, one meaning identified in the reports was **personal fulfilment with the work of a consultant**. They reflect their motivations for starting and continuing to do what they do.

I understand that it was a dream come true. I really wanted to do this, and today I will do it. It gives me both my income and the possibility of helping people and organizations. It's cool to see companies growing and employing more people. I feel happy and fulfilled in doing this because it was something I wanted. There are many people who are happy with what they do, but maybe they never dreamed of it. I dreamed of this and today I do it. (C113\_S2)

I am very dedicated to this project right now; that is, for the first time in my life, I am practically a full-time consultant today. I'm not even ashamed to say that I am anymore. I think I am incorporating this business of being a consultant. (C312\_S10)

When reflecting on their current and future dreams, projects and motivations, the reports demonstrating the professional activity of consulting as a life purpose, as something greatly desired at certain moments in their career and providing them with personal and professional fulfilment, are more evident.

The research by Dourado et al. (2009) identified two contrasting views regarding the meaning of work, alternating between being perceived as difficult and unpleasant and, at other times, as essential for personal fulfilment. Antunes (2015) explores the relationship between work and life purpose, highlighting that, although work can contribute to personal fulfillment, a meaningful life is not limited to it. He emphasizes the importance of recognizing the role of work in building purpose without overvaluing it to the point of making it the sole relevant aspect, thus avoiding a reductionist view of life's meaning.

The meanings and formulated meanings of being a consultant revealed by the participants based on the phenomenological analysis are presented in Figure 2.

The meanings of the work of the autonomous consultant in the management area

Figure 2

The meanings and formulated meanings of being a consultant

FORMULATED MEANINGS	
MEANINGS OF BEING A CONSULTANT	Social contribution <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Solidarity and contribution to a better society</li> <li>■ Free consultancy as a way to contribute to organizations and people</li> </ul>
	Purpose <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Possibility of helping people and organizations to achieve good results</li> <li>■ Possibility of helping people to solve problems</li> <li>■ Dissemination of knowledge</li> </ul>
	Professional autonomy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Seeking financial independence</li> <li>■ Valuing flexibility at work</li> <li>■ Autonomy combined with forming partnerships</li> </ul>
	Satisfaction and personal fulfillment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Recognition and appreciation of their work are essential to the consultant</li> <li>■ Consulting as a rewarding and meaningful job</li> <li>■ Consulting seen as a source of personal and financial achievements</li> <li>■ Future career projects</li> <li>■ Personal fulfillment through the work of a consultant</li> </ul>

Self-employment goes beyond the boundaries of traditional employment, being an expression of purpose and a source of income for independent professionals. This form of work allows one to set goals and pursue projects more aligned with one’s skills and values. Autonomy connects with identity, bringing personal and professional fulfillment. Building direct relationships with clients and having flexible working hours and locations are aspects that give meaning to self-employment, allowing one to balance one’s professional and personal life in a rewarding way.

## ■ FINAL REMARKS

Considering the purpose of this research, which was to understand the meanings of the work of independent consultants acting in the management area, it is worth highlighting that work plays a fundamental role in the life of an independent professional, transcending the conventional boundaries of traditional employment. For these individuals, their profession is not only a source of income but also an expression of their purpose. Being independent in this research means having the power to shape your path, define goals and pursue projects aligned with skills and values.

The meanings revealed in the independent work performed by these consultants were a social contribution, purpose, professional autonomy and satisfaction and personal fulfillment. The autonomy provided by independent work allow them to feel more connected to their identity, bringing personal and professional fulfillment. In addition, the possibility of building direct relationships with clients and the flexibility to define work hours and locations add additional meaning to independent work. At the heart of this approach is the opportunity to obtain satisfaction and personal fulfillment and create a balance between life and work, making this a rewarding extension aligned with the individual’s aspirations and needs.

This study contributes socially to a deeper understanding of the meaning of work for freelancers, more specifically, consultants who work in

the management area, helping to elucidate the factors that contribute to the feeling of purpose and fulfilment in this type of activity. It may include elucidating how they see their contribution to society, how they find satisfaction in the autonomy and flexibility of work and how they identify with their profession.

As an epistemological basis, phenomenology raised relevant reflections to unveil the essence of the meanings of work that emerged in the study. By elucidating these meanings, this research also presents its theoretical contribution in the sense of expanding the debate and understanding of this phenomenon.

It also presents emotional, motivational, and personal fulfilment aspects, providing valuable insights into what drives these professionals, such as their search for self-fulfilment, intellectual challenges, professional freedom, and impact and influence in their areas of expertise. Understanding these factors also helps guide policies and practices that promote the well-being and satisfaction of these professionals.

The main limitations of the research include the restriction to the specific group of independent consultants in the management area; the phenomenological approach that, although rich in depth, may not capture the totality of the experiences of independent work, as it does not consider external aspects such as the effects of technology and the pandemic; in addition to the lack of comparative analysis with consultants from different sectors, which may result in a restricted view of the meanings of independent work, making it challenging to identify broader patterns or significant distinctions.

In a post-pandemic scenario, where the participants in this research are faced with the need to insert and take advantage of digital means to publicize and carry out their work, future research could investigate the impact of technology on the work of independent consultants. The results presented here can also be compared with consultants' experiences in other areas to identify unique patterns or distinctions.



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