

## **Treasure in the Trash: Work Experience, Meaning, and Workforce Sustainability in Frontline Waste Industry Roles**

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### **Problems Addressed, Aims, and Research Question**

The waste industry is facing a growing workforce sustainability challenge driven by attrition within frontline roles and an insufficient pipeline of replacement workers. Employees in driver and helper roles frequently exit due to physical strain, safety risks, and transitions to other occupations, while fewer individuals enter or remain long enough to sustain the labor pipeline.

Although technological advancements such as automated side-loader trucks and route optimization tools exist, autonomous solutions capable of replacing skilled frontline workers are not currently viable. As a result, the industry faces a widening workforce gap that threatens service capacity, safety outcomes, and long-term operational resilience.

This challenge extends beyond recruitment, compensation, or turnover. It raises deeper questions about how individuals interpret the feasibility, value, and long-term sustainability of frontline work over time. Without understanding how employees make sense of these roles as their experience evolves, organizational interventions risk addressing symptoms rather than root causes.

The aim of this study is to examine how frontline waste industry employees interpret their work through experience and how these interpretations influence workforce sustainability.

The central research question is:

**How do frontline waste industry employees with varying levels of work experience interpret the expectancy, value, and cost of their roles, and how do these interpretations influence decisions to enter, remain in, or exit these occupations?**

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### **Justification and Importance of the Research**

From a practical standpoint, the waste industry is an essential service supporting public health, environmental sustainability, and community infrastructure. Workforce instability creates operational risks, including service disruption, increased safety incidents, and rising labor costs. These challenges are industry-wide and require more sustainable solutions.

For organizational leaders, this study shifts the perspective from traditional metrics such as turnover and hiring rates to understanding employees as active decision-makers who

continuously evaluate their roles. This lens supports more effective strategies related to onboarding, retention, and employer branding.

From an academic perspective, this study addresses a gap across several bodies of literature. Workforce sustainability research often focuses on labor shortages and aging workforces but tends to treat employees as passive participants. Meaningful work and occupational identity literature emphasize purpose but are centered on knowledge-based roles. Research on stigmatized or “dirty” work explains coping mechanisms but does not fully address long-term career decisions. Motivation research provides insight into decision-making but focuses primarily on short-term engagement.

By integrating these perspectives, this study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of workforce sustainability in essential frontline occupations.

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## **Theoretical Basis**

This study is grounded in Expectancy–Value Theory (EVT), which explains how individuals decide to engage in and persist in activities based on expectancy, task value, and perceived cost.

Expectancy refers to belief in one’s ability to succeed. Task value reflects the perceived importance or meaning of the work. Perceived cost represents the sacrifices associated with participation, including effort, risk, and opportunity cost.

Although EVT has been widely applied in educational contexts, it has primarily explained short-term motivational decisions. Less is known about how these constructs influence long-term career decisions, particularly in physically demanding and stigmatized occupations.

This study extends EVT by applying it to frontline roles in an underexplored industry and shifting the focus from short-term engagement to long-term workforce sustainability. In this context, expectancy may reflect physical feasibility and skill development; value may include dignity, identity, and societal contribution; and cost may involve physical strain, safety risks, stigma, and competing opportunities.

Using EVT as an interpretive lens provides a structured approach to analyzing how individuals evaluate their work and how those evaluations influence retention or exit decisions over time.

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## **Research Design**

This study adopts a qualitative design grounded in an interpretivist paradigm using an interpretive phenomenological approach. This approach is appropriate because the study seeks to understand how individuals construct meaning from their lived experiences.

Data will be collected through semi-structured interviews with approximately 12–16 participants across varying experience levels (early-, mid-, and late-career). Interview questions will explore entry into the industry, factors influencing continued participation, and perceptions of expectancy, value, and cost over time.

Interviews will be transcribed and analyzed using NVivo. Analysis will follow an interpretive phenomenological process, beginning with open coding and progressing to thematic development aligned with EVT constructs.

To ensure rigor, the study will incorporate reflexive journaling, an audit trail, and careful consideration of researcher positionality to support transparency and credibility.

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## **Discussion and Practical Relevance**

This study has implications for both theory and practice.

Theoretically, it extends EVT by examining how expectancy, value, and cost operate in long-term career decisions within essential and stigmatized occupations. It contributes to a more dynamic understanding of motivation and workforce sustainability.

Practically, the study reframes workforce challenges in the waste industry as a sustainability issue shaped by how employees interpret their roles over time.

Findings are expected to inform strategies in several areas. First, they highlight the importance of early employee experiences, emphasizing onboarding and initial role exposure. Second, they reinforce the need for realistic job previews and transparent communication. Third, they suggest focusing on dignity, purpose, and career pathways to enhance perceived value.

Finally, this study reinforces the role of human resources as a strategic partner. By understanding how employees construct meaning in their work, organizations can move beyond transactional solutions and develop more sustainable, experience-informed workforce strategies.

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