

Why Do People Work, Anyway?

YOU PROBABLY WON'T be surprised to learn that I read the Bible. One thing I have discovered is that, from the very beginning, there was work to be done. The story of creation describes God as working and resting.

I have also learned that not everyone thinks work is such a great deal. The writer of Ecclesiastes said, "What does a man get for all the toil and anxious driving with which he labors under the sun? All his days are work and pain and grief. Even at night his mind is not at rest. This, too, is meaningless." I am afraid too many workers view their jobs in much the same manner.

Is work good or bad?

I am not a theologian, but I think it is significant that the Bible says so much about work. Work is absolutely necessary for survival. But those who understand the Bible and work realize that it raises an important question about work: Is it a curse, the result of sin, or is it a gift that God gives us to help us grow? How you answer that question may have a lot to do with the way you view work and workers. And if you are uncomfortable with thinking about the Bible, the question is only slightly different but just as real: Is work good or bad?

I will spare you the history of how religious people tried to answer that question, but I will refer to two groups who have come to some helpful conclusions about work. First, the Puritans, a much-maligned group who were not nearly as drab and stuffy as they have been characterized. They emphasized the relationship between work and stewardship responsibilities. That is, work had a purpose that went beyond the mere making of money. It was a natural outgrowth of the abilities they had been given. People were encouraged to seek a better way to do their work and be more productive. If they failed in this search or refused and chose the less gainful way, they would not be good stewards of God's gifts. Thus, man could labor to be rich for God but not merely for selfish reasons. Wealth was ethically corrupt only insofar as it was a temptation to idleness or sinful enjoyment of life. It is this "work ethic" made popular by the Puritans that has become commonly known as the "Protestant work ethic."

Second, from the Roman Catholic tradition comes the notion that work is a "calling" in the development and dignity of people, yet also has the potential to be used to perpetuate harm and injustice. This was the subject of the papal encyclical, or special teaching, by Pope John Paul II called *Laborum Exercens*. This treatise reminds us that work is as old as life on earth, and its value is to be found in the person doing the work. People are to be the subject of work, not its object. It is when people are used only as the material means of production or as only the object of work that the injustice of "capitalism" may occur.

Of course, the story of work and its influence on people is not limited to religious sources. Adam Smith, in his treatise *The Wealth of Nations*, recognized the significance of division of labor in making work more productive and the work product of the worker more valuable. His conclusion was that productive labor resulted in the making of something tangible that had value. A menial servant's labor, however, did not increase value because he produced no product. Smith obviously did not envision a modern-day service company like ServiceMaster. Even

Karl Marx recognized the importance of productive work and suggested that the labor of men and the work of their hands distinguished them from what he referred to as “other animals.” Marx went on to conclude that it was the surplus of such labor, or what we call profit, that was the subject of exploitation in a capitalist society. He, too, did not envision a company like ServiceMaster, where the producers of the profit also have an opportunity to own it.

I recite these few brief examples of how work has been viewed throughout history because they show us that work is more than just performing tasks. It is part of who we are, or at least who we should be.

But what is the role of work today as we approach the end of the twentieth century? Are the ideas of the past applicable to our modern-day experience? We live in a world of change and choice. The forces of a free-market economy are as pervasive as they have ever been, but the work environment—the very culture of the marketplace—changes almost daily. Work is being restructured and reengineered. Firms are being downsized. We are learning that not only our work must be more productive, but also the information we use in our work must be more productive. The technology of today allows work to be brought to the workers instead of the workers to work. We talk about quality circles and working in teams instead of under supervisors or managers. For some, any place where they can plug in a modem is a place of work. We are not only mixing skills and talents in a work environment, we are also mixing cultures, races, and genders. Some have suggested that we have come to an end of the job—that a specially defined task is no longer relevant because it has outlived its usefulness.

At one time we thought that by the year 2000 everyone would be involved in thirty-hour work weeks. The balance of our time could be spent in rest and leisure. But now that the millennium is upon us, it seems more likely that many of us will be working sixty-hour weeks, and the rest may be unemployed. Are we moving to a post-job world? The job was an idea that

emerged in the early nineteenth century to help organize work and make it more productive as labor was divided based on skills and talents, locations, and production requirements. But our world keeps changing, and so does the marketplace. Technology has brought more flexibility and freedom in our work. It may mean that we are heading to a post-job world as jobs were once defined, but not a post-work world. There will always be a demand for the value of the combined efforts of people, which is the work of the firm. As people work together and develop their skills and talents, they can express their creativity and enhance their dignity, all as part of performing and producing service and benefit to others. As I noted earlier, it is within the context of the firm that people produce value—value measured in who they are becoming, value measured in what they are producing, and value measured in the worth of their combined effort.

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What an exciting time to be in business! Instead of decrying the rapid pace of change and its effect on the marketplace, why not embrace it? View the changes that are occurring in our jobs and our work as an opportunity to increase the focus of our work and the product of our effort to satisfy the customer's changing needs. Never define work in a way that limits or restricts the firm's ability to change with the customer. This is an exciting challenge of the future as we celebrate work and seek to improve productivity and produce profits. But in the face of such change, some things must remain. One of these is the need to always focus on your customer.