

Rethinking Work

By **BARRY SCHWARTZ** AUG. 28, 2015

HOW satisfied are we with our jobs?

Gallup regularly polls workers around the world to find out. Its survey last year found that almost 90 percent of workers were either “not engaged” with or “actively disengaged” from their jobs. Think about that: Nine out of 10 workers spend half their waking lives doing things they don’t really want to do in places they don’t particularly want to be.

Why? One possibility is that it’s just human nature to dislike work. This was the view of Adam Smith, the father of industrial capitalism, who felt that people were naturally lazy and would work only for pay. “It is the interest of every man,” he wrote in 1776 in “The Wealth of Nations,” “to live as much at his ease as he can.”

This idea has been enormously influential. About a century later, it helped shape the scientific management movement, which created systems of manufacture that minimized the need for skill and close attention — things that lazy, pay-driven workers could not be expected to have.

Today, in factories, offices and other workplaces, the details may be different but the overall situation is the same: Work is structured on the assumption that we do it only because we have to. The call center employee is monitored to ensure that he ends each call quickly. The office worker’s keystrokes are overseen to guarantee productivity.

I think that this cynical and pessimistic approach to work is entirely backward. It is making us dissatisfied with our jobs — and it is also making us worse at them. For our sakes, and for the sakes of those who employ us, things need to change.

To start with, I don't think most people recognize themselves in Adam Smith's description of wage-driven idlers. Of course, we care about our wages, and we wouldn't work without them. But we care about more than money. We want work that is challenging and engaging, that enables us to exercise some discretion and control over what we do, and that provides us opportunities to learn and grow. We want to work with colleagues we respect and with supervisors who respect us. Most of all, we want work that is meaningful — that makes a difference to other people and thus ennobles us in at least some small way.

We want these things so much that we may even be willing to take home a thinner pay envelope to get them. Lawyers leave white-shoe firms to work with the underclass and underserved. Doctors abandon cushy practices to work in clinics that serve poorer areas. Wall Street analysts move to Washington to work as economic advisers in government.

You might object that those are examples of professionals — people who have the financial security to care about more than just their paychecks and the privilege of working in fields in which it is possible to find meaning and personal satisfaction. What about the janitor? The phone solicitor? The hairdresser? The fast-food worker?

I submit that they, too, are looking for something more than wages. About 15 years ago, the Yale organizational behavior professor Amy Wrzesniewski and colleagues studied custodians in a major academic hospital. Though the custodians' official job duties never even mentioned other human beings, many of them viewed their work as including doing whatever they could to comfort patients and their families and to assist the professional staff members with patient care. They would joke with patients, calm them down so that nurses could insert IVs, even dance for

them. They would help family members of patients find their way around the hospital.

The custodians received no financial compensation for this “extra” work. But this aspect of the job, they said, was what got them out of bed every morning. “I enjoy entertaining the patients,” said one. “That’s what I enjoy the most.”

Similarly, a few years ago the Wharton management professor Adam Grant studied a group of college students who worked as phone solicitors, calling alumni to ask for contributions to their university. As an experiment, Professor Grant arranged for a recent graduate who had attended the university on a scholarship funded by such solicitation efforts to meet the students. The graduate gave a short talk about how the scholarship had affected his life and how grateful he was for their solicitation efforts.

Professor Grant found that the money that the students raised increased 171 percent afterward. Again, there was no added compensation for the harder work — just a deeper sense of purpose.

These are just two examples from a literature of cases demonstrating that when given the chance to make their work meaningful and engaging, employees jump at it, even if it means that they have to work harder. Such cases should serve to remind us there is a human cost to routinizing and depersonalizing work. Too often, instead of being able to take pride in what they do, and derive satisfaction from doing it well, workers have little to show for their efforts aside from their pay.

But perhaps there is an upside to monotonous, routinized work. Is it possible that what we lose in work satisfaction, we gain in efficiency?

This, again, is what Adam Smith thought. In his famous example of the pin factory, he extolled the virtues of the division of labor: “One man draws out the wire, another straightens it, a third cuts it, a fourth points it, a fifth grinds it at the top for receiving the head.” Our work experience might be

poorer, but we — or at least our bosses — would be richer.

Yet more than 200 years later, there is still little evidence of this satisfaction-efficiency trade-off. In fact, most evidence points in the opposite direction. In his 1998 book, “The Human Equation,” which reviewed numerous studies across dozens of different industries, the Stanford organizational behavior professor Jeffrey Pfeffer found that workplaces that offered employees work that was challenging, engaging and meaningful, and over which they had some discretion, were more profitable than workplaces that treated employees as cogs in a production machine.

For example, he cited a study of 136 companies across many different industries that had initial public offerings in 1988. It found that companies that placed a high value on human resources were almost 20 percent more likely to survive for at least five years than those that did not. Similar differences in success were found in studies that compared the management practices of steel mills. And a study of United States apparel manufacturers found that sales growth was more than 50 percent higher in companies with enlightened management practices than in those that did things the old-fashioned way.

The findings were similar in studies of semiconductor manufacturing, oil refining and various service industries. And comparable findings were documented more recently by the Harvard Business School professor Michael Beer in his 2009 book “High Commitment High Performance.”

You get the distinct impression that if you’re trying to decide where to make an investment, the best place to look is those annual lists of the 100 best places to work. When employees have work that they want to do, they are happier. And when they are happier, their work is better, as is the company’s bottom line.

This is admittedly not news. But that only raises a deeper question: In the face of longstanding evidence that routinization and an overemphasis on pay lead to worse performance in the workplace, why have we continued to tolerate and even embrace that approach to work?

The answer, I think, is that the ideas of Adam Smith have become a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy: They gave rise to a world of work in which his gloomy assumptions about human beings became true. When you take all opportunities for meaning and engagement out of the work that people do, why would they work, except for the wage? What Smith and his descendants failed to realize is that rather than *exploiting* a fact about human nature, they were *creating* a fact about human nature.

The transformation I have in mind goes something like this: You enter an occupation with a variety of aspirations aside from receiving your pay. But then you discover that your work is structured so that most of those aspirations will be unmet. Maybe you're a call center employee who wants to help customers solve their problems — but you find out that all that matters is how quickly you terminate each call. Or you're a teacher who wants to educate kids — but you discover that only their test scores matter. Or you're a corporate lawyer who wants to serve his client with care and professionalism — but you learn that racking up billable hours is all that really counts.

Pretty soon, you lose your lofty aspirations. And over time, later generations don't even develop the lofty aspirations in the first place. Compensation becomes the measure of all that is possible from work. When employees negotiate, they negotiate for improved compensation, since nothing else is on the table. And when this goes on long enough, we become just the kind of creatures that Adam Smith thought we always were. (Even Smith, in one passage, seemed to acknowledge this possibility, noting that mindless, routinized work typically made people “stupid and ignorant.”)

The truth is that we are not money-driven by nature. Studies show that people are *less* likely to help load a couch into a van when you offer a small payment than when you don't, because the offer of pay makes their task a commercial transaction rather than a favor to another human being. And people are *less* likely to agree to have a nuclear waste site in their community when you offer to pay them, because the offer of compensation undermines their sense of civic duty.

If people were always paid to load couches into vans, the notion of a favor would soon vanish. Money does not tap into the essence of human motivation so much as transform it. When money is made the measure of all things, it becomes the measure of all things.

To be sure, people should be adequately compensated for their work. Recent efforts across the country to achieve a significant increase in the minimum wage represent real social progress. But in securing such victories for working people, we should not lose sight of the aspiration to make work the kind of activity people embrace, rather than the kind of activity they shun.

How can we do this? By giving employees more of a say in how they do their jobs. By making sure we offer them opportunities to learn and grow. And by encouraging them to suggest improvements to the work process and listening to what they say.

But most important, we need to emphasize the ways in which an employee's work makes other people's lives at least a little bit better (and, of course, to make sure that it actually *does* make people's lives a little bit better). The phone solicitor is enabling a deserving student to go to a great school. The hospital janitor is easing the pain and suffering of patients and their families. The fast-food worker is lifting some of the burden from a harried parent.

Work that is adequately compensated is an important social good. But so is work that is worth doing. Half of our waking lives is a terrible thing to waste.

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