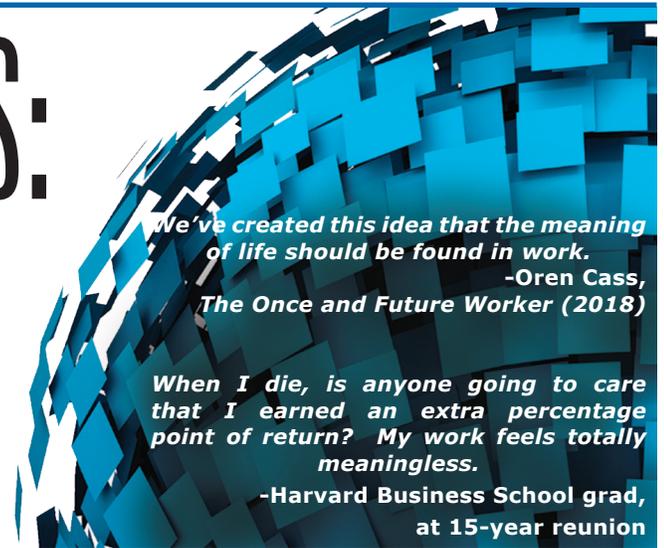


WORK AND HAPPINESS: MEANING GETS DRAINED FROM WORK, AND PEOPLE SEEK IT ELSEWHERE



CONTEXT & DYNAMICS

Attitudes about work and how to relate to it are shifting, and they are shifting rather rapidly. Just a few short years ago, for the wider society, work was seen as rewarding and meaningful; today, work is increasingly seen as boring, time-consuming and disruptive to more meaningful activities. The causes of such a wide-ranging change in perspectives are many, but they include automation, what we have called the New Economy and Rampaging Efficiencies as well as other factors, such as cultural changes in where value is placed. Being employed is increasingly seen as merely a means to an end, a way to earn income that will facilitate doing what workers really want to do outside their jobs. This will cause problems for businesses seeking to engage their employees, mostly because many corporations have often been less effective at activating employee interest in their work. Misalignment between management and employees at nearly all pay levels will result in costly conflicts.

IMPLICATIONS

- *As individuals find their satisfaction outside of work and earn less income as a result, they will be spending less money on consuming and owning things.*
- *Managers will have trouble pushing workers to do more, especially if the payoff is seen as not worthy of the effort.*
- *If the economy picks up speed, more and more employees will move jobs.*
- *Burnout is undermining worker retention, but employees' lack of engagement could eventually prove to be a large negative force on corporate bottom lines.*



What Happened?

Work is a health hazard, a time-eater and a life-consuming drag. Work is a soul-destroyer, a misery-maker and a friendship eliminator. Where did those ideas come from? After all, just a few years ago, work was a value-adder, a health facilitator and a financial liberator. Work was a wealth-generator, a satisfaction-creator and a meaning-giver. If that negative perspective is ascendant, then the attitude shift has happened in a relatively short period of time. What in the world has happened to work and its public image?

For one thing, automation. For another, the New Economy. And also, Rampaging Efficiencies. Automation has eliminated many jobs, yet led to the creation of others, but these new jobs are high-level, intense and demanding, leaving those workers displaced by machines to toil away at entry-level jobs for long hours. Work has become either intense or boring. The New Economy has seen increased competition that can come from everywhere and anywhere and is creating “gig” jobs that pay less and offer few or no benefits, requiring individuals (independent contractors) to work longer hours to make up for the lower pay and lost benefits. Work has become unrewarding. Meanwhile, Rampaging Efficiencies, in which companies focus primarily on efficiencies to reduce costs and turn more money over to shareholders, has meant that salary and benefit stagnation has lasted more than a decade, with more work spread across the fewer jobs that remain and with reductions in available expenses attached to many jobs. Work has become hazardous to an employee’s health and a time-eater.

Moreover, workism includes the belief that any policy to promote human welfare must always encourage work.

◆ The average American worker spends more hours working than workers of any other developed economy. (*The Week*, 3/15/19)

A word that originally carried a positive meaning has recently taken on a negative connotation: Workism, which means that work is perceived by officials, human resources personnel, managers and others as not only necessary for economic production but as the centerpiece of an employee’s identity and life’s purpose. Moreover, workism includes the belief that any policy to promote human welfare must always encourage work. As one author explained, “a job is usually more than just a means to a paycheck. It’s a source of purpose and meaning, a place in the world.” That is less and less accurate an assessment of work in individuals’ lives, and, in fact, “workism” has become a word connoting excess,

not unlike the way “alcoholism” describes overconsumption and dependence on alcohol. (*Atlantic*, 2/24/19; *New York Times*, 2/21/19)

Needless to say, the three drivers that are changing individuals’ attitudes about their jobs and about work in general – automation, the New Economy and Rampaging Efficiencies – do not account for all the negative attitudes associated with the term workism. Moreover, they cannot explain all the



"SIR, HUMAN RESOURCES HAS CLOGGED THE ORGANIC WASTE BINS WITH BURNED OUT WORKERS AGAIN!"

reasons that are prompting more and more people to turn away from work as a source of personal value and to focus, instead, on meaningful and pleasurable activities outside of work. But those three drivers of anti-work sentiment do offer a solid foundation for explaining why so many individuals see work as a less and less essential element to finding contentedness, happiness and meaning in their lives.

◆ At a recent 15-year reunion at the Harvard Business School, a writer discovered a sense of disappointment across many graduates, whose lives, by traditional standards, would have been described as highly successful. The common theme shared by many at the reunion was “a lingering sense of professional disappointment.” For example, one graduate, whose annual salary topped \$1.2 million, lamented, “I feel like I’m wasting my life.” (*New York Times*, 2/21/19)

◆ Seventy percent of American employees are not engaged with their jobs, and roughly 23 million are “actively disengaged,” meaning they just show up for work and do the minimum required. (*Workforce*, 3/19; *Atlantic*, 2/24/19)

◆ A recent report from Harvard University and Massachusetts medical organizations declared worker “burnout...a public health crisis.” The three big symptoms of this burnout are: exhaustion, cynicism and feeling ineffective. In addition, 95 percent of leaders in human resources say that burnout is currently sabotaging workplace retention. (*Washington Post*, 3/30/19)

The changing perspective shows up to a lesser extent in the success of Marie Kondo and her push for individuals to eliminate stuff from their lives – that is, to turn away from consumerism and accumulating things as a sign of wealth and success at work. “The question of what you want to own,” Kondo explained, “is actually the question of how you want to live your life.” And how people want to live their lives is changing.

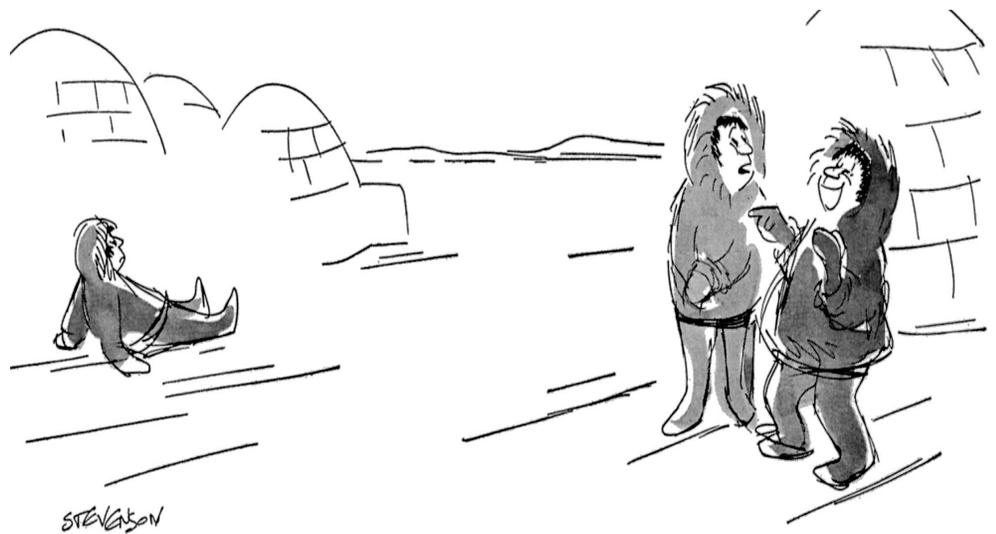
The new attitude surfaces in individuals’ search for what we have called a Better Life, displacing the

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search for an increased standard of living (Better Living) with a quest for meaning, purpose and pleasure. The shift in point of view has been in place for some time in the Hierarchy of Consumer Value that placed experience at the very top of the personal scheme as most desirable. And the emerging viewpoint became more urgent when, as we have written, anxiety – that is, stress, worry and frustration over present and future possibilities – became a normal condition in what we called the Anxious American Life. As a

result, for more and more Americans, work is becoming what it was decades ago: simply an income-generator to facilitate other more meaningful activities (see **IF 3901**).

One recent theory of how to remain employed and perhaps gain some return in personal value from work states that workers need to maintain emotional flexibility and constant reinvention. Where work is headed, according to this managerial perspective, is for employees to remain flexible and do whatever an employer wants them to do, even if that means spending time and money to meet new needs by getting additional education and training, and to do that for a lifetime of change and shifts in work life. (*GQ*, 9/30/18)



“Why is it, Oogluk, that though the years may come and the years may go, you still never fail to find it amusing when someone slips and falls on the ice?”

Smart companies will pay for that education and training, as some companies are doing now.

Happiness, Joy, Meaning - These Aren't Business Terms

In the most recent United Nations World Happiness Report, Americans fell from number 11 to number 19. Authors of the report explained that Americans enjoyed one uptick in their scoring: wages. But declines in a sense of freedom and generosity and increases in a sense of corruption sent the country's score downward. Unengaged at work and unhappy about life – those are socially explosive and personal risky realities. (*Intercept*, 4/7/19)

But just in time, researchers in the past several years have launched a new field of study: positive psychology, which is academician-talk for the study of happiness, its causes and its restraints. For a sense of where worker discontent and the individual's new sense of need are headed, we can list some recent discoveries in the field.

Take more breaks each day – The ideal workday, according to a Draugiem Group study, involves 52 minutes of work followed by a break of 17 minutes. Those who followed this routine performed better in shorter periods of time. (*Quartz*, 3/4/19)

Work less – German workers toil at their jobs 23 percent fewer hours than do Americans and emit 46 percent less carbon in that work. With environmental issues rising in society, fewer work hours could gain appeal. (*Intercept*, 4/7/19)

Work even less – When employees were asked which of several emerging human resources initiatives they preferred to see implemented, they selected “unlimited vacation.” This represents a huge shift from the recent past, when 65 percent of employees did not even take their full complement of vacation days, preferring, instead, to work through their available days off. (*Employee Benefits*, 1/7/19; *Los Angeles Times*, 4/2/19)



Work even less and less – A 2017 Intuit study said that 40 percent of full-time employees would be switching to a gig-economy job (*i.e.* independent contractors). The principal reason: control of personal time. (*Inc*, 7/27/17)

Read fiction – Reading fiction develops empathy and makes one feel more a part of the human community. It also provides “enjoyment and pleasure.” In addition, those who regularly read fiction live longer and suffer less cognitive decline. (*NBC*, 7/22/19)

Embrace pleasure (see Read fiction above) – Override the religious and cultural themes of denial and restraint and, instead, search for those things that yield pleasure. Philosophers such as Kierkegaard and Foucault have said that pleasure is essential to developing selfhood, which is another word for identity. Taking pleasure seriously can override the challenge to identity that furthers anxiety in the individual. (*Quartz*, 3/2/19)

Deactivate Facebook – Those who have cut out Facebook from their lives feel less well informed but happier. Also, those who give up the social media site have more time to spend as they wish (roughly one hour each day).

As we have written, participating heavily in social media can lead to clinical depression, and as a majority of participants in one survey stated, without explanation, social media can do harm to one's financial health. (*Washington Post*, 1/30/19)

Disconnect from email (and committee meetings) – Those who have stopped using email get

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more things done in shorter periods and have time to think. Donald Knuth, a world-famous computer scientist, wrote this: "I have been a happy man ever since January 1, 1990, when I no longer had an email address." (Knuth had access to the research Internet before it became a consumer product.) (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, 3/8/19)



"From nine to one, you will be answering e-mails. From one to two, you will be out to lunch. From two to five, you will be answering the e-mails that came in while you were out to lunch."

Discover joy – Get rid of stuff and get rid of things, as Marie Kondo and others have written, as a way to rediscover joy in life. But why stop there? Get rid of activities that do not bring joy, as well. For many people, that would include their current job. Joy at work might be difficult to find, but identifying jobs that block one's sense of joy is easy. (*Washington Post*, 2/26/19)

Take drugs – Marijuana, LSD and several psychedelic drugs provide a larger perspective on life and bring contentment, according to a batch of recent psychological studies. Psychedelic drugs, explains author Dr. Michael Pollan, break down certain kinds of mental constraints, allowing information to flow freely among different parts of the brain, upsetting its hierarchy and often yielding innovative ideas. (*South China Morning Post*, 10/14/18)

Volunteer to help others – Serving others ranks high on a list of things that make people happy. By offering the self to help others, volunteers become

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more satisfied with their lives and satisfied that they are making society better. (*Intercept*, 4/7/19)

Get some sleep – Those who get more sleep consistently rate themselves happier every day and more satisfied with their lives than those who get too little sleep. (*Intercept*, 4/7/19)

Walk in the forests – This Japanese practice (called "forest bathing") is spreading to the U.S. and joins the movement by doctors who prescribe walks in parks ("park practitioners"). "What do you hear, smell, see?" asked a medical provider of every person practicing forest bathing. Forest bathing seeks to make a person less dependent on prescriptions and more attuned to life, more aware of nature and experiencing more enlivened senses. As a recent car commercial that captured the thrust behind forest bathing explained, "Feel alive." (*New York Times*, 7/12/18)

A close circle of friends (maoi in Japan) – Maintaining a very close and small group of friends (five is the most) helps people feel happier, more alive and more satisfied than those who do not have a small circle of close friends. Those with a few good friends express greater satisfaction than those with large numbers of "friends" online. (*New York Times*, 7/10/18)

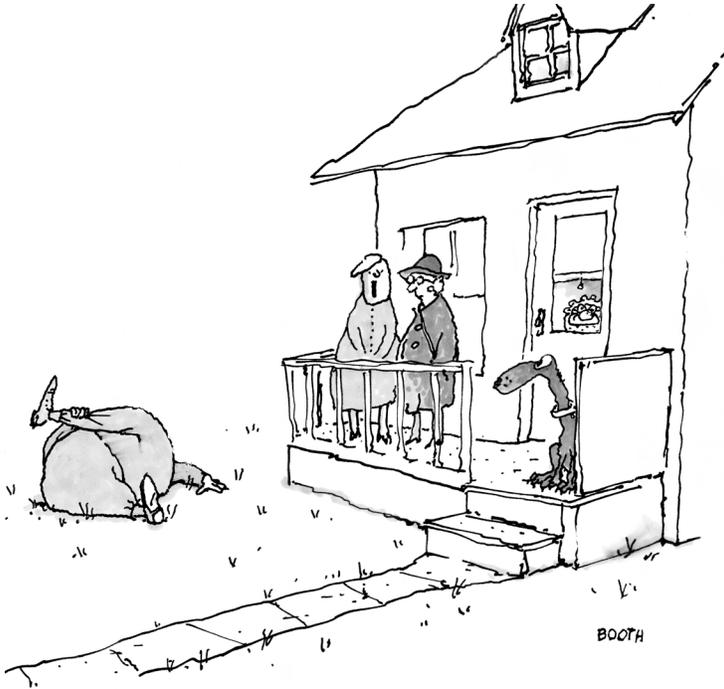
Singing and dancing – Both doing and observing dancing and singing have been recommended by the United Kingdom's health secretary as a way to lower medication intake and make people feel better. (*Monocle*, 2019)

Get "smushed" – This might be a temporary fix, but sliding under a 20-pound blanket can relieve stress. Time magazine named the heavily weighted blankets one of the best inventions of 2018. (*New York Times*, 2/24/19)

Live in Finland – The happiest people in the world, according to the UN's World Happiness Report, the Finnish enjoy low poverty and crime rates – in fact, among the world's lowest; they are among the wealthiest citizens in terms of GDP per capita;

they have one of the lowest maternal mortality rates on earth; 70 percent of all citizens in Finland go to college; and their government looks after its citizens (way beyond a solid safety net). For instance, when numbers started showing one neighborhood with increased visits to the emergency room, the government added more

sand and salt to sidewalks during winter to reduce the number of slip and falls. Moreover, Finland tried the basic income program, a guaranteed monthly stipend, with mixed results, but they tried it rather than just talk about it. (*MIT Technology Review*, 2/11/19; *Monocle Forecast*, 2019)



"Harrington challenges himself every day."

This Change Could Be Critical

A 1957 article in the *New York Times* by U.S. historian Erik Barnouw (d. 2001) explained that automation was making work easier and that the work life of the future would look quite different from that of the past. "The increasingly automatic nature of many jobs, coupled with the shortening work week," he offered, would lead to "an increasing number of workers to look not to work but to leisure for satisfaction, meaning [and] expression." (*Atlantic*, 2/24/19)

Contrary to Barnouw's assessment, employees in white-collar jobs, in the years after the historian made his

claim, expanded their workweeks, some to more than 60 hours per week, and hourly workers turned to overtime to make ends meet. A family's second job became necessary as inflation ate away household incomes in the 1970s. Eventually, workism took over, with employees seeking meaning and satisfaction in the amount of work they plowed through and in the quality of their work... and the financial rewards.

Now, six decades after Barnouw spoke of leisure becoming a critical component to one's self-worth, some in society are deciding that his assessment deserves a second look. The word "happiness" is being bandied about as the response against the effects of workism, and valued endeavors are increasingly found in personal experiences that offer learning, meaning and pleasure. Work as a value-contributor is descending down to its baseline value: a source of income.

In that regard, this emerging perspective is going to change the workplace as well as the energy and effort employees are willing to bring to their workplace. Managers have not been very good at dealing with this level of change, usually leaning on financial incentives to move workers forward. But that tool might be losing its appeal. Bringing more employees into the problem-solving, design-creating and decision-making parts of companies can bring meaning into work.

In their efforts to try new things to overcome the weakening appeal of financial incentives, corporations have tried other techniques, such as open-plan offices. After the considerable expense of knocking down walls and shifting employees around with new portable computers, those companies discovered that such changes in spatial relationships actually are detrimental to the quality of work and stymie productivity.

The current shifting attitudes about jobs, how jobs are going to fit into employees' lives and what can stimulate workers' engagement represent a new kind of challenge to corporations. How effectively corporations respond to the divergence between Work and Happiness will determine whether or not they can increase productivity and even growth.



"I don't want to change. I want all of you to change!"

Some of our previous looks at this topic:

- IF 4007** Staging Anger: Anxiety To Frustration To Bias To Outrage – Can The Sequence Be Reversed?, 4/12/19
- IF 4003** Less Of This And More Of That: Individuals Move Away From Consumerism And Toward Control, 2/27/19
- inThought 1/11/19** The Axis Of Anxiety And A Search For Solutions: The New Economy Drives A Quest For A Better Life
- inF 1314** Companies Doing Good 2.0, 11/12/18
- inThought 10/22/18** The Disorienting Environment: A Missing Grand Narrative, The Greater Restructuring And A Rethinking Of Nearly Everything
- IF 3905** From Work To Post-work: Jobs, Work And The Ongoing Restructuring Of Employment, 3/29/18
- IF 3901** Anxiety Becomes Normal: Anxiety Settles In To A Society In Transition, 1/29/18
- IF 3820** On The Road To A Better Life: Movement From A Focus On Rising Standards Of Living To Higher Standards For Life, 10/12/17
- inThought 11/20/17** Digital On Defense: Negative Effects Of The Great Digital Experiment Challenge Silicon Valley