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Digging your own grave

Sharon Beder

I am going to do something that is very rarely done and that is question the work ethic. The work ethic is one of the most neglected problems in society today, and at the root of many social ills and environmental problems. It's at the heart of what I propose is a major environmental problem; there is too much production in affluent countries. All of the things we are producing day after day are not only creating a huge environmental impact - in terms of resource use, pollution, waste disposal and so on - but in order to get people to buy this huge amount of products, we are constantly bombarded with advertisements and marketing and turned into hyper-consumers. We are taught to be discontent with our lot. Subsequently, we have a situation in our society where the work ethic has become pathological. It was once very useful and important to the development of Western societies but no longer.

The situation we have today is that everyone is getting busier. Have you noticed this? That everyone is really busy. They don't have time to see you. They don't have adequate time for their families, for relationships. They don't have time to get involved in politics. They don't have time to be informed citizens. They don't have time for personal development. They don't have time for social or spiritual development. We are all just so focused on work that the important things in life are being neglected. This imbalance, this focus on work, on busyness and long hours is creating stresses in our society that manifest as rising rates of depression, suicide, drug use and accidents (to name a few).

Employment and the creation of jobs is such a priority that environmental degradation is justified on the grounds that it will provide jobs. We're so keen to hang on to our jobs that we are willing to do whatever our employers ask of us, regardless of whether it is aligned with our principles or whether we think it is beneficial to society. What I'm going to question is whether there is a social benefit in having the majority of adults working hard all week. Few people can imagine a society that is any different. No matter how tedious a job is, it's supposed to be better than no job at all.

How did work become so central to our lives? And it is very central. It's the first thing you want to know when you meet a new person. When asked 'who are you?', people define themselves by their jobs. They are what they do for a living: a teacher, a lawyer, a factory worker. Work is absolutely central to our self-identity. It's also central to our sense of belonging because, apart from our families, the workplace is where we fit into society.

Work defines our status in society. It's how other people judge us. It's how we judge other people. Where people fit in the social hierarchy is determined by their jobs and incomes. And work determines our income because, unless we're on welfare or have an independent income, it's the only way we can have an income. Not only do we judge each other by work and income but we also judge ourselves according to the same criteria. Work defines our individual self-esteem. Our self-esteem is very low if we are unemployed. Our self-esteem is much higher as we go up the occupational ladder or hierarchy in general.

Work also, in many respects, defines our relationships because, apart from family, it is where we spend most of our time and where we interact with other people. For many people their closest relationships are formed at work. Work provides meaning and purpose in a work-dominated society. Work dominates every aspect of who we are, what we are and why we are here. In a work-dominated society happiness has to be earned through work and we tolerate the trials and tribulations of work in order to become happy. It's supposed to be the pathway to happiness.

Work is also intimately tied up with the drive for wealth creation and materialism that is at the heart of the environmental problems that we are suffering. I'm not saying that there is anything wrong with work or that work is evil. What I'm criticising is the work ethic and the centrality of work in our lives. There is nothing wrong with working. However, problems do result when work takes over and when every other value is secondary or every activity has lower priority.

This focus on work came about in Western societies - the ideology of work - came about as a result of the Protestant reformation. This has been said for a long time. This ideology of work has been very useful to employers because it motivates people to do menial, boring and degrading work by extolling the dignity and nobility of manual labour. Without that, it would be very difficult to have workers who completely subordinated themselves to employers.

The work ethic is so ingrained that it is very hard to imagine a society that is any different. Before the Protestant reformation people had a different attitude to work. I'm not saying people didn't work and I'm not saying they didn't work hard. However, work was a means to an end rather than an end in itself. People worked to feed, clothe and shelter themselves. They didn't work beyond that and they didn't work for the sake of work itself. In such societies, status and a person's position in society was fairly immutable. People didn't work to improve their status which tended to be fixed at birth. The poor were treated quite differently: they weren't treated as lazy good-for-nothings. In fact, giving charity to the poor was welcomed as a way of displaying virtue and doing good deeds. I'm not just talking about the Christian way of looking at work because, in the past, other societies have viewed work quite differently from our society. The Ancient Greeks, of course, had slaves so they could be quite denigrating about work.

What Luther and Calvin, as key figures in Protestantism and the Reformation, did was turn work into a calling, a way of serving God. In particular, Calvin argued that some people were God's chosen and the way to demonstrate to others that you were God's chosen was to be a hard worker and to reap the benefits of that work. So hard work was turned into a status symbol. People who didn't work hard or people who were poor obviously didn't have God's blessing and weren't God's chosen. This not only made a virtue out of work and made work a sign of good character – that a person was one of God's chosen - but it also legitimised inequalities in society because wealth became a sign of God's blessing. Wealth was the fruit of hard work and it meant that God had looked favourably on you. People who were wealthy were seen as God's chosen and had acquired their wealth through hard work. On the other hand, poor people were poor through their own fault and their own lack of character. Among other things, they were lazy, sinful and idle.

Even when work lost its religious quality as societies became more secular, it remained integral to the success ethic into the 19th century. From the work ethic came the myth of the 'self-made man' – of course, it was 'man' in the 19th century. The myth of the 'self-made man' was so pervasive that even the poorest of boys could aspire to it if they worked hard enough and took advantage of the opportunities offered to them. The elites in new countries like America deliberately promoted this myth of the 'self-made man'. They tried to present their society as not being based on a class system like the old country, but rather as a country where everyone had the opportunity, if they worked hard enough, to make it.

This is still part of the American dream today and is quite prevalent in Australia. However, the truth is that very few of those who are wealthy today started off poor and very few poor people become rich through hard work because, by definition, the people who are rich are a minority. Nevertheless, the myth of the 'self-made man' - that it's only a matter of hard work and taking advantage of opportunities - is still promoted today. By extension, these CEOs who earn outrageous salaries are supposed to deserve it because they have worked so hard.

This message was promoted originally by preachers as well as teachers: it was promoted in novels and school books, by politicians and by businesspeople. If you look at the 19th century school readers and storybooks for kids, there are so many fictional stories of these young boys - as I said, it was 'boys' in those days - who made good.

Of course, the story of upward mobility is not convincing to everyone and if you work on a factory floor where there are 4000 people employed at that level, getting yourself noticed by management is near impossible. Workers can't possibly differentiate themselves from their fellow workers in a situation where thousands of people are employed on the factory floor. The other way of making it is to save a little bit from your wages and build up a nest egg to be able to start your own business. Of course, these things are beyond the reach of the majority of workers who hardly earn enough to support their families, let alone put something aside.

Because the myth of the 'self-made man' is not necessarily aimed at the lower levels of the occupational hierarchy, there needs to be other mechanisms to encourage hard work. One way this has happened is that the work ethic has evolved from a 'success ethic' to a 'responsibility ethic'. This means that working hard is a sign of being personally and socially responsible: for earning one's own and one's families' living, and contributing to society through work. Those who don't, those who are unemployed, are stigmatised as being lazy and undeserving and in Australia, 'dole bludgers'.

There are different names for 'dole bludgers' in different countries but generally the stigmatisation of unemployed people is part of promoting the work ethic. It's part of legitimising the social structure and saying that everybody's position in society is deserved and earned. People who are unemployed are unemployed due to their own failing rather a problem with the social structure or the failure of government to provide enough jobs. You might ask, 'well why, if they are so stigmatised, even bother giving them welfare?' Welfare was introduced after World War II as a measure of social control rather than through altruism or a feeling that we have to do something for the poor. The assumption was that, if people didn't have some sort of income, they would be vulnerable to being politically mobilised by extremists or they would turn to crime or other undesirable activities. Welfare was introduced as a necessity, as a means of protecting property and as a means of protecting the structure of society.

The problem with welfare is that employers didn't want there to be an alternative to work that was attractive and so welfare was made as unattractive as possible. There were all sorts of work tests introduced to welfare in an attempt to weed out those who were pretending that they couldn't find a job. Stories about welfare cheats abound.

The amount of publicity given to welfare cheats is out of proportion to the number who actually cheat when you consider other forms of financial loss the government incurs such as tax fraud and tax cheating. There is a vast difference in the amount of money the government loses to tax fraud as opposed to welfare fraud. Yet the public is indignant at welfare fraud because it attracts media attention. Every now and again the media trots out an unemployed person and demonstrates how this person is 'undeserving' because they like being on unemployment benefits or they are not properly trying to find work. Everyone thinks this is terrible. It is a manifestation of the work ethic where we want to see the unemployed and welfare recipients being unhappy. If they are happy because they might be spending their spare time surfing and sitting on the beach, then that makes us angry and indignant. Part of the anger and indignation is that we don't really like working ourselves. We are actually a bit jealous. The indignation is also linked to the work ethic, the idea that these people aren't pulling their weight.

The latest manifestation of how the unemployed are stigmatised by the work ethic is 'work for the dole' or, in the USA and UK, 'workfare'. The basis of 'work for the dole' is that it is supposed to help unemployed people because they need to get work skills. In fact the idea of 'work for the dole' or 'workfare' is to make sure these people have a work ethic instilled in them and to provide a deterrent to others who might give up their jobs and go on the dole. This is what employers fear because they want a ready, reserve workforce.

It's ironic that employers are promoters of programs like 'work for the dole' when it's in their interest to have a reserve of unemployed people. They do so because it keeps people fearful for their jobs, subservient to their employers, loyal to their employers and willing to do whatever it takes to keep their jobs. The punitive conditions of welfare also enable employers to keep wages down because the demand for work is so high. As far as employers are concerned, the more people who are unemployed and the more desperate those people are to find work because welfare is so unpleasant, then the better it is for employers because they can keep wages low, keep people compliant and maintain power over their employees. They have power and influence with government because they are the suppliers of jobs. They can ensure that all other goals are subservient to business goals because business is providing the jobs that everybody wants. Business downsizing has caused much unemployment - the more companies downsize, the more their share value rises.

Of course, not everyone who is not on welfare subscribes to the work ethic. There are a lot of people who work long hours to maintain a certain standard of living and consumerism is a key

motivator for that. Consumerism is the other side of the work ethic. Consumerism is the other ethic that keeps us working long hours. People voluntarily work long hours because their pay is so poor, they think it's a virtuous thing to do, they want to climb the career ladder, they are addicted to their work, or they need the extra money to be consumers. Consumers work long hours to buy the extra things that they are persuaded they need through advertising. So we spend our time at work in these often - not for everyone of course - boring and tedious jobs and when we go home we want to have luxuries and pleasures to compensate for all that work. Because we are so tired, we need to buy all sorts of convenience items to make things easier for us.

Debt is very much a part of ensuring that we remain hard workers because people who are in debt are much more likely to be afraid of losing their jobs and much less likely to want to go on welfare or to 'downshift'. It's no accident that we now have students with large university fee debts. Even before they start their work, they are committed to a working life because of those debts. What's attracted media attention of late is the huge mortgages that people in Australia are incurring so as to eventually own their own homes. Mortgages are also something that keeps us working long hours and living unbalanced and stressful lives.

The consequences of all this are pretty obvious. There are some people who don't have enough work and are stigmatised for that and other people who have too much work, are working long hours and often don't get paid for overtime. They are stressed and suffering mental problems. All the production is causing pollution, species decline and environmental degradation. All this busy-ness is distracting us from the real problems in the world so nobody has time to think about society, the future, power structures, what's going on in the world or why we are doing these things. All these questions are very difficult to think about if you are so busy with jobs that are so exhausting that all you can be bothered doing when you get home - after you've made dinner and made lunches for your kids for tomorrow and done everything else you have to do - is putting your feet up and watching TV. There is just no time to think about the things that we need people to be thinking about.

What this world needs is not more work - it needs more wisdom. To have a culture of wisdom, we need a society in which people have time to contemplate, time to think about the problems and time to talk about the solutions.