

Getting back to why we work

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The way we work has changed dramatically with technological advances and shifting borders in Europe calling for a new focus.

The European Union aims to be a mobile and flexible workplace. Whether working in France, Germany or Poland, a teacher, carpenter or doctor should be recognized for his or her qualifications and skills. Yet when trying to move from one nation to another to learn or to work, Europeans often face obstacles.

To address this challenge, the E.U. is in the midst of adopting an educational model for lifelong learning, called the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). The EQF will act as a translation grid for all qualifications, including high school diplomas, vocational training certificates and the highest academic degrees. The grid will describe the knowledge, skills and competencies of a candidate, regardless of the country or system in which his or her qualifications were acquired.

According to the European Commission, shifting the focus from learning inputs to learning outcomes will better match education and training and the evolving needs of the labor market.

And, oh, how the labor market has changed. Technology has transformed the way we work. For this reason, it's important to revisit the different dimensions of work and the learning processes that precede and accompany it.

In the paper "[Work, Education and Civil Society: Building a Better Society Through a Full Understanding of Work](#)," authors [Joan Fontrodona](#) of IESE, Manuel Guillén of the University of Valencia and Alfredo Rodríguez Sedano of the University of Navarra study work from an

anthropological perspective. They turn to the teachings of Aristotle for inspiration and apply their findings to the EQF. They conclude that the framework comes up short. Ethics - so important to the meaning of work and to the dynamics of civil society - are hardly mentioned.

The anthropological angle

Forget about Bluetooths and Blackberries for a moment and think about who we are as human beings. Humans work and always have done. The way we work, like the way we eat, is one of the things that distinguish us from other animals. While animals kill to eat, we transform this biological need into a cultural event called gastronomy; likewise, we can almost make an art form out of working.

This paper cites three characteristics of human activity that demonstrate the different anthropological dimensions of our work:

1. Humans can adapt to most environments and situations and survive. When humans wanted to fly, they invented the airplane. To move underwater, they designed the submarine.
2. When humans take action, it produces external results and modifies who we are. When we act, we acquire virtues (or vices).
3. Humans do things alone and with others, and they also manage others.

According to the authors, contemplating these three dimensions "results in positive synergies that contribute to the development of society because we become better people and make the world we share a better place."

Advice from aristotle

For more insight into the different dimensions of work, the paper turns to Aristotle.

Aristotle refers to three types of knowledge: *theory* (universal and necessary objects), *praxis* (action) and *poiesis* (material production, technique and art). According to Aristotle, these are not just three ways of knowledge; they are three ways of life. Theoretical life contemplates the eternal and the inherent. Practical life is expressed through participation in public life. Technical life corresponds to manual work. These three ways of life can be found in all human actions.

Aristotle also highlighted that human actions always have an ethical dimension. Work cannot be described only in terms of external results; equally important are learning outcomes.

Ethical habits and E.U. proposals

The authors state, "If we accept the notion that work brings together a wide range of different dimensions, and that a number of human skills come into play and that very different habits are acquired - some technical, others ethical - we can then conclude that the preparation required to work as a professional should address these dimensions and learning experiences."

From this perspective, the paper examines in detail the proposals being presented in the European Union for the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning. In the case of the EQF, the authors feel that the presence of ethics is marginalized since the E.U. proposal makes very limited reference to the ethical dimension of a professional qualification. Knowledge and skills take precedence over professional integrity and the development of human excellence.

Lastly, the paper digs deeper into the different logics behind the human and social behavior of our times. There is a need, asserts the paper, to recover confidence about human reason to know the truth in a time when modern skepticism tends to reduce everything to a matter of opinion. This underscores the importance of ethics in the meaning of work and the dynamics of civil society.

The authors stress the importance of reflecting on why we work and what we are hoping to accomplish as a result.

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