

Rethinking our concept of work

The global economic crisis has eliminated thousands of jobs, leaving governments and economic experts struggling to find solutions.

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The widespread unemployment caused by the global economic crisis provokes a profound reconsideration of the very idea of work itself.

This is the focus of IESE Prof. [Antonio Argandoña](#)'s latest [paper](#), in which he questions whether individualistic, utilitarian societies based on self-interested motivations and relationships are truly capable of confronting the root problems behind unemployment.

These problems — from arrogance to greed to fraud — have always been present, to some extent. But the recent global financial crisis has revealed major failings of social, economic and governance mechanisms, such that the current problems we are wrestling with cannot be chalked up to a series of unfortunate events. Indeed, they are the inevitable outcome of a deeper moral malaise that has infected our social and political institutions.

Work that dehumanizes

Although work is often presented as a way of satisfying personal needs, broadening one's knowledge and skills, and giving one a sense of dignity, work can also be dehumanizing.

When we speak of work-related problems, unemployment usually springs to mind. A persistently high unemployment rate represents the collective failure of a society to provide opportunities for its citizens.

For some, losing their job feels like losing their identity. The trauma is not only personal, but is also felt at family and social levels.

Job insecurity leaves people feeling uncertain about their futures and robs them of control over their lives.

Some work can be degrading: Employees feel like commodities — faceless and easy to replace.

Other times, work becomes instrumental: People are treated as mere tools to be used by others, rather than as something to be valued.

Read the dossier [Restoring the Human Side of Business](#)

It is not the fact that a worker may produce material goods that is inhumane, but rather the way in which those goods are produced. If the work does not allow time for other activities necessary for human development and well-being, such as family, social and spiritual activities, it becomes an unhealthy interference.

Finding meaning in work

Perhaps one reason why work has come to lack meaning is because we have turned it into something purely instrumental.

Today, we measure people not by what or who they are, but by what they do, their economic success, their social ranking and what they can contribute to others.

Our society effectively makes people depend on work for their very survival. With pensions, health care and retirement arrangements inextricably linked to how much a person makes during his or her working life, people's current and future standards of living depend wholly on their economic performance.

One reflection of how far we, as a society, have drifted concerns education: Today, education is seen as a means of developing productive capital, rather than as a source of human betterment. Certain subjects are prioritized over others, such as the humanities, which tend to be viewed dimly, regardless of their importance in building a civilized society.

Work that is grand

There are basically three reasons that drive people to work: to earn a living, to develop personally and to contribute to society.

However, there is another reason as well: Work is an everyday expression of human

improvement, advancement and progress. Regardless of what we do, we must always try to do it to the best of our abilities, with a human touch and with dedication.

Work may be conceived as a service to other people, beginning with our families, and then our colleagues and customers, our neighbors and, ultimately, all of humanity.

The classic tale of three stonecutters captures it best: When asked what they were doing, the first said he was cutting stone, the second said he was supporting his family and the third said he was building a cathedral.

In the same way, while the work may be identical, the meaning it carries can be quite different, which is why Argandoña urges us all to take a deeper reflection, at a time when the concept is in crisis.

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