



# WHY DO WE WORK?

Employers should give staff greater engagement at work. If they do they might have a more profitable business.

I came across an interesting article by Barry Schwartz, a professor of psychology at Swarthmore College in the US who has written a book titled *Why We Work*.

Schwartz asks the question: "How satisfied are we with our jobs?" and cites a 2013 Gallup Organization poll that found almost 90 per cent of workers surveyed were "actively disengaged" from their jobs. That suggests that nine out of 10 workers spend half their waking lives doing things they don't want to do in places they don't want to be!

Adam Smith, the father of industrial capitalism, felt that people were naturally lazy and would work only if paid. Schwartz says this idea became quite influential and helped shape the views of management consultants that followed in his wake. Today, in modern workplaces, Schwartz believes the details may be different but the overall situation is the same: work is structured on the assumption that we do it just for the money.

Schwartz says that systems of production were developed based on Smith's claim that laziness was an essential human attribute and this way of thinking has blazed a trail ever since. Schwartz goes on to say that what Smith and his descendants did not realise is that rather than exploiting a fact

about human nature, they have actually created a fact about human nature.

Schwartz explains that people enter occupations with a variety of aspirations aside from their pay; they discover their work is structured so most of those aspirations will be unmet and they either lose their aspirations or leave that work altogether. Over time compensation becomes the overriding measure of all that is possible from work, and people become just the kind of creatures Smith thought they always were.

Schwartz says an efficiency and wage-driven approach to work is entirely backwards and is making employees not only unsatisfied but also worse at their jobs. He believes most employees don't recognise themselves as wage-driven idlers. Sure, they need their wages but they also want work that is challenging, where they can exercise some control over what they do and be provided with opportunities to learn and grow. They also want to work with colleagues they respect and with supervisors who respect them. In other words they want work that is meaningful.

Schwartz found that when given the chance to work with a deeper sense of purpose, employees jump at it, even if it means they have to work harder for no added compensation. He also believes there is a human cost to deskilling and making work routine. Instead of being able to take pride in what they do, and derive satisfaction from doing it well, employees have little to show for their efforts aside from their pay.

Schwartz also found that there is little evidence to support the view that what we lose in work satisfaction, we gain in efficiency. He mentions various studies which conclude that workplaces which offer employees meaningful work are more profitable than those that treat employees as cogs in a production machine, and employees that have work they want to do are happier, their work is better, and the company's bottom line is healthier.

Schwartz says employees should be adequately compensated but employers should also aspire to make work the kind of activity people embrace; by giving employees more of a say in how they do their jobs, offering them opportunities to learn and grow, encouraging them to suggest improvements and listening to what they say. But most importantly, we need to emphasise the ways in which an employee's work makes other people's lives better, because half of our waking lives is a terrible thing to waste. **m**

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