

Rediscovering Work

By Patrick Lencioni



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Sometimes when we're in the midst of a major event or a crisis, we don't notice big changes that are happening around us. And then, when things settle down and we get up off the floor, we look around and notice that some parts of life have fundamentally shifted. I think that is what's going on right now in the way people see employment.

When I graduated from college and started looking for a job a little over twenty years ago, there seemed to be a new attitude emerging—one that had probably been slowly taking shape for twenty years before that—about the importance of finding deep meaning and fulfillment in a job. Gone were the days of simply looking for a secure job in a stable industry. The new movement encouraged young people to find their true passions, be unconventional, and blaze their own trails.

I have to admit that I was a big proponent—and still am—of helping people discover their talents and gifts and find an outlet for them in work. It is one of my favorite hobbies. I'll also admit that I assumed that this new ascent up Maslow's hierarchy of needs would never be reversed. But given the fundamental changes we're seeing in the global economy, we may just be sliding back down Maslow's pyramid a little, and maybe even staying there for a while. In other words, I think we're going to start having lower expectations about finding the perfect, meaningful, and custom-fitted job, and developing a new kind of appreciation for the old notion of work.

Now, don't get me wrong. I'm not happy about this. The thought of fewer people going to work with a sense of idealism and passion and fulfillment is a little disheartening to me. (I even wrote a book about it.) However, I believe some hidden blessings may come out of all this.

For one, this emphasis on finding a perfect job has created something of a sense of guilt or disappointment for so many people who, because of economic or educational limitations, weren't in a position to land their dream job. They never became a roller-coaster architect or an author of children's books or a rocket scientist. Instead, they did the best they could to find a relatively interesting job in a field that would allow them to pay the bills. Given everything that's happening today, they're going to be feeling better about what they're doing, and happier than ever to simply be working. That's a good thing.

And then there are the people who were industrious and fortunate enough to find one of those cool jobs, but who experienced their own disappointment when they came to the inevitable realization that designing roller coasters and writing books and building rockets didn't turn out to be the party they expected it to be, and that a rewarding career is not the answer to all of life's problems. The fact is, even rock stars and advertising executives and fashion designers experience the drudgery of work, not unlike bank tellers and plumbers and retail clerks; they just feel worse about it because they didn't expect their work to become, well, work. Now they too can find a little relief and reset their expectations about the reality of having a job.

Finally, and most importantly, this shift away from needing a perfect job might just bring about a new appreciation for the simple gift that is work. This is something that my parents' generation seemed to understand better than mine. To be gainfully employed, to labor with integrity in any way for the good of customers or co-workers or family, really can be its own reward. That is making sense to me now more than it has at any time in my career.

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