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DOI: 10.1177/1056492602113003

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://jmi.sagepub.com/content/11/3/230
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Shifting Meanings of Work in the Wake of 9/11

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This article explores the impact of the World Trade Center disaster on the meanings that people attach to their work. In the wake of the attacks, several examples of people changing occupations appeared in the media. An analysis of people’s need for increased meaning in their work, and their exodus into work that they view as a calling, is given. It appears that for many, the disaster served to focus attention on what their work was contributing to the wider world. As a result, thousands of people in the United States have decided to pursue different careers.

I was leaving my apartment for work when I heard the first plane pass close to my building. Like many others, I assumed it was just a low-flying plane and thought that it sounded too close. Shortly after, I encountered a group of people standing outside my building, looking south to the fire in the north tower of the World Trade Center. It took me some time to put the two together and fathom what had happened. By the time I got to work a few minutes later, the other plane had hit, and in a matter of moments, we all realized that New York and the country had been dealt a serious blow.

Some of the more immediate issues all of us faced involved contacting family and friends and finding ways to contribute aid, money, and time to the efforts at the World Trade Center. As time went by, however, we turned to making sense of the events and assessing their long-term impacts on our lives. It became commonplace for people to speak of renewing family ties, reestablishing friendships, turning to their religions, and being thankful for what they had taken for granted. One major life domain that came under serious examination after the attacks was work.

I study the different kinds of meaning that people derive from their work, especially how they find meaning in challenging circumstances. For example, I have studied how people make meaning of their work after they have lost jobs (Wrzesniewski, 1999), when they work in stigmatized occupations (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001), and when they felt they had had little choice about entering their occupations (Wrzesniewski & Landman, 2002). I had never thought about studying how people derive meaning from their work when the significance of what they do is called into question by tragedy. However, the terrorist attacks led many to reassess how they had been spending their time and energy. Suddenly, family and friendships grew in importance, and communities...
mobilized to face new challenges. More mundane pursuits were pushed aside in favor of things that seemed to mean more. The work domain was one that many of us needed to reexamine following the terrorist attacks.

In this article, I discuss the topic of work and meaning in a parallel fashion. The phenomenon of reexamining the meaning of work was widespread in the wake of the attacks and was something that I experienced personally as well. In the following sections, I describe the effect of the attacks on my colleagues and myself and then turn to a broader discussion of effects on others. Finally, I offer a framework for understanding the role of work in life and how it has shifted for many in recent months.

A few days after the attacks, classes resumed at New York University (NYU). I taught an 8:00 a.m. class that morning. It was the first time the students would be back in the classroom, and approximately 10% of them who had been living in residence halls close to the attacks were now living in hotels, with friends, or on the gym floor. To my surprise, nearly every student came to class anyway, but I doubt they attended to learn about teams in organizations, the scheduled topic. We spent the first part of the class talking about how they were faring in the wake of the attacks and brainstorming about other things the administration could do to aid displaced students and others affected by the tragedy. The students sat before me, quiet and reflective, many of them in tears. When it came time for me to start covering the course material for the day, it became clear that this was a ludicrous task in the face of the fact that many students did not have their course packs, as they had abandoned them with the rest of their belongings in the evacuated residence halls. More significantly, it seemed wholly insignificant to begin lecturing on the finer points of team design to a group of stunned, tearful students. We ended class early that day, and I struggled over how to make the remaining course material seem relevant and important in the wake of the attacks.

The classroom experience of struggling to find meaning in our course was echoed in the difficulty that colleagues had in writing research papers after the attacks. Many reported sitting and trying to write but being unable to ignore that the work had less significance, that finding a way to word a hypothesis or to create a table of data suddenly seemed much less important. Against the backdrop of thousands of posters of missing people; a smoky, empty horizon; and numerous memorial services, our work world seemed smaller. As a result, many of us found it more difficult to write in the weeks following the attacks.

The attacks created a need for relevance in the context of the attacks. Academics rushed to bring their expertise to bear in explaining the events or assisting in the nation’s recovery. For example, at the University of Michigan, students and faculty spearheaded a project to disseminate knowledge to organization leaders struggling with how to respond to the attacks (www.bus.umich.edu/leading). Academic associations like the American Psychological Association opened up discussions about what academics can do help (Murray, 2002). At NYU, the Center for Middle East Studies produced a series of talks that drew standing-room-only attendance, and the nursing school ran discussion sessions for parents. Such efforts underscore the desire to reach out and to give aid to others in our work. Although this search for relevance and purpose has led some to change the ways they approach their work, it has changed the paths others have taken in their work lives in much more significant ways.

In the weeks and months following the attacks, news stories began to appear about the changes people were making in their work lives because of the attacks. It seemed that the tragedy recast how people were thinking about their work and how they were spending their work lives and, in particular, the roles they were playing on the wider stage of the world. For example, Henry J. Pinto Jr. became a firefighter in the wake of the attacks, after having decided against it in the past. Upon joining, he stated, “I was on the fence about joining because of the time it would take, then after 9/11, all I wanted to do was help” (Kutt Nahas, 2002, p. 1). Pinto is part of a general increase in the applicant pool for firefighting positions in the greater New York area. In one of the more dramatic career changes reported, actress Amy Ting enlisted in the Air Force after escaping from the collapse of the World Trade Center towers (Currier, 2002). Although she had just finished a film in which she filled a starring role, Ting reported, “After September 11, my perspective on life changed. I have always wanted to help people, so I decided to go back to pursuing the medical field” (Currier, 2002). Just as powerful is the renewed interest in teaching careers in New York City and around the nation of those who have been recruited from other careers (Goodnough, 2002). In some areas, applications are up by nearly 50% (Goodnough, 2002).
Many who are changing their careers cite a desire to leave the business world in favor of work in which they can serve others.

These examples of work transitions suggest that the reevaluation of what matters most has been widespread. In a context of uncertainty and change, in which many scrutinized their career choices, the meaning of work in life and its role in the wider world gains importance. The meaning of work has long been a rich area of inquiry for scholars of work and may shed helpful light on the phenomenon of career shifts in the aftermath of 9/11.

Many reexamined the role of work in their lives after the attacks. The world of work consumes half of waking life and varies greatly in its meaning to people. Some view their work as a drudging necessity, whereas others experience their work as a source of joy. Scholars of the meaning of work have most often studied the experience of work from the lens of unidimensional constructs such as work centrality (Dubin, 1956; MOW International Research Team, 1987), work commitment (Loscoscco, 1989), job involvement (Lodahl & Kejner, 1965), work involvement (Kanungo, 1982), intrinsic/extrinsic motivation (Kanungo, 1981; Kanungo & Hartwick, 1987; Roberson, 1990), and work values (Nord, Brief, Atieh, & Doherty, 1990). Most of these constructs relate to the salience of work in life or to the specific goals (e.g., recognition, challenge) people fulfill through working.

The kinds of meaning people make of their work appeared to shift for many after the terrorist attacks. Rather than focusing on extrinsic job concerns, the terrorist attacks caused many to ask if they ought to reframe their work lives. Sociologists (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985) and psychologists (Baumeister, 1991; Schwartz, 1986, 1994; Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin, & Schwartz, 1997) have argued for a tripartite model of people’s orientations to their work. These general orientations help to determine the experience of work and accompanying thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. The orientations represent more of an individual-differences view of work attitudes, but one’s orientation toward work may also be shaped by the job. As such, work orientation represents the interplay between the person and the job.

In their influential discussion of individualism and commitment in different domains of life in the United States, Bellah et al. (1985) argued that work is subjectively experienced by people in three distinct ways: as a job, a career, or a calling. Although job, career, and calling orientations represent distinguishable relations to work, they overlap to some extent. By definition, each orientation emphasizes different reasons for and meanings of working, but these emphases occur relative to the other work orientations. For example, those with a calling orientation work for the meaning that the work brings to the rest of life, but we cannot assume that the financial rewards of work hold no importance for those with callings. Rather, these rewards are less significant than the meaning that doing the work itself brings to the person.

Each work orientation relates to a goal structure. For example, those who have a job orientation toward work primarily seek the material benefits from work and do not seek or receive many other types of rewards from it. The work is not an end in itself but instead is a means for acquiring the resources needed to enjoy time away from the job. In essence, the main goal of those with a job orientation is to make an income.

In contrast, people who have career orientations have a deeper personal investment in their work and mark their achievements not only through monetary gain but through advancement within occupational structures as well. This advancement often brings higher social standing, increased personal power within one’s occupation, and higher self-esteem (Bellah et al., 1985, p. 66). The overarching goal of those who view their work as a career is to maximize their income, social status, power, and prestige in their occupation.

Finally, those with calling orientations find that it is difficult to separate their work from the rest of life. A person with a calling works not primarily for financial gain or career advancement but instead for the fulfillment that doing the work brings to the person. In a sense, the work is an end in itself. The goal of those with callings is to gain the deep fulfillment enjoyed while working. Those with callings often feel that their work makes the world a better place.

Although callings have traditionally meant being “called” by God to do morally and socially significant work (Weber, 1958, 1963), in modern times they have lost their religious connection but still focus on work that contributes to the world (Davidson & Caddell, 1994). However, whether the work does contribute to making the world a better place depends on the individual worker—a physician who views this work as a job and wants only to make a good income does not...
have a calling, whereas a garbage collector who sees his or her work as making the world a cleaner, healthier place could have a calling.

The calling orientation has gained many subscribers after the terrorist attacks. The examples offered earlier of career changes after September 11 reflect a desire to spend one’s life doing meaningful, fulfilling work that contributes to the world in a more direct way. Not surprisingly, the chosen occupations emphasize service to others in ways that make the world a better place. Those who recruit others into these occupations are aware of this. The teaching profession has drawn in applicants with employment ads stating, “Your spreadsheets won’t ever grow up to be doctors and lawyers.” The New York Police Department also cues the calling element of its mission with the motto, “It’s not just a job.” Such sentiments directly underscore popular beliefs about the differential impact of different kinds of jobs on the wider world.

It is difficult to track how widespread these job transitions have been, but previous research demonstrates that a renewed interest in pursuing work that one finds to be a calling is promising. Overall, those with calling orientations have stronger and more rewarding relationships to their work, which are associated with spending more time in the work domain and gaining more enjoyment and satisfaction from it (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). Most people with calling orientations claim that they would continue to work even if they stopped being paid and genuinely feel that their work makes the world a better place. In contrast, those with job orientations claim that they look forward to retirement and hardly ever think about their work after they leave for the day.

Indeed, correlates of calling orientations suggest that having a calling may confer benefits beyond the domain of work. Many people with callings put more time in at work (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997), whether or not organizations pay for this time. As well, those with callings report higher life satisfaction than those with jobs or careers (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). They also derive more satisfaction from the domain of work than the domain of leisure. Interestingly, those with jobs and careers rank the satisfaction they get from their leisure time (i.e., hobbies and friends) as higher than the satisfaction they get from work. The differences between those with callings and the other two groups are significant on each dimension. Clearly, for those with callings, work is their passion, whereas for those with jobs and careers, the deeper satisfactions exist in leisure or in relationships outside the workplace.

People with callings are likely to demonstrate good psychological health along several dimensions. Traits such as optimism (Gillham, Shatte, Reivich, & Seligman, 2001), mastery (Rawsthorne & Elliott, 1999), and conscientiousness (McCrae & Costa, 1999) may be associated with having a calling. This raises the question of whether people with these traits tend to enter a line of work they view as a calling or if any line of work will be viewed as such. Staw, Bell, and Clausen (1986) have found that job attitudes are highly stable over time and different kinds of jobs; thus, a calling orientation represents a portable benefit of those who tend to have a more positive outlook on life in general.

Overall, the tragedy of 9/11 has affected our lives in innumerable ways. Some of the effects are negative, as the general level of anxiety among many of us has increased and the number of divorces increased in the United States after 9/11. Others have been positive, as many families and friends have renewed their bonds because of a sharper awareness of the impermanence of life (indeed, the incidence of marriage increased after 9/11 as well). It may be easy to overlook the subtle shift in views of work among many children and adults. Yet, people can always benefit from reconsidering why we live and work the way we do. It is noteworthy that so many people have made life-altering decisions about how they spend a large portion of their lives. Such decisions may act to promote well-being among those who move toward callings in their work, which could act as a buffer against the stress that has accompanied the tragedy. As well, the trend suggests that in times of great sorrow and uncertainty, our inclination is to draw closer together, even in serving each other through our work. I can think of no greater tribute to those who lost their lives that day.

REFERENCES


