
THE ROLE OF WORK IN A WORLD WHERE PEOPLE AND PLANET MATTER: BUILDING ON E. F. SCHUMACHER'S LEGACY

A Schumacher Institute Challenge Paper

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The Challenge: This paper asks: 'What needs to be done so that work is meaningful?'

"Work I disliked the most was work I wasn't suited for"¹

1. Towards a dialogue on meaningful work

Ernst Friedrich Schumacher (1911 – 1977) was an internationally influential economic thinker. Taking a systems perspective, he developed a body of thought which connected ideas in energy, work, technology, development, organisation and ownership, education, traditional wisdom and religion. Today, Schumacher's writings provide a welcome relief from the overwhelming nonsense with which we are bombarded: inadequately contextualised talk of economic growth, concern about employee engagement and talent retention, international development initiatives and worry about youth unemployment – on and on, *ad nauseam*. Such talk is nonsense because it's consistently delivered without any acknowledgement of the larger context: that of the ever-growing inequality of wealth distribution and the uneven access to education, health and environmental justice that accompanies it. In other words, these kinds of economic discourses are rendered meaningless by the lack of any accompanying critical evaluation of the information. This paper aims to question the source of this meaninglessness and to promote a dialogue about the role of meaningful work. Schumacher's approach, rooted as it is in a deeply humane world-view, provides relief and direction because his words resonate with what really matters to each of us, as summarised in the subtitle of his most famous book *Small Is Beautiful: A Study of Economics As If People Mattered*.²

2. Work and Values

Table 1: Two sets of values

Individualistic/Independent	Relational/Interconnected
Money as end in itself/commodity	Money as resource/meaning
Disconnected expertise/Specialisation	Interdisciplinarity/general practitioner/lay
Exclusive/Authority/Judgment	Inclusive/Participative/Openness
Material	Non-material
Rational/Reason/Sanity	Irrational/Insanity
Authority	Dependence/powerlessness
Mind/Thought	Body/Experience
Conscious/visible/5 senses/outer	Unconscious/invisible/beyond 5 senses/inner
Competitive	Collaborative
Certainty/Known	Uncertainty/Unknown
Tangible/Measurable	Intangible/unquantifiable
Quantity	Quality

For Schumacher, meaningful work is that which respects the dignity of human beings, contributes to our society, gives us purpose and challenges us to develop or grow. Schumacher's concept of growth was far removed from the unrealistic pursuit of limitless economic growth; rather, it focused instead on improving the overall quality of life. Such a focus requires that we have a better understanding of our relationship with ourselves and with others and with our relationship to the

1 Sinetar, M (1987) *Do What You Love, The Money Will Follow: Discovering Your Right Livelihood*. New York: Dell Publishing, p. 8.

2 Schumacher, E. F. (1973) *Small Is Beautiful: A Study of Economics As If People Mattered*. London: Blond & Briggs.

issues of responsibility and sustainability. However, the relatedness and interconnectedness and interdependence of all living systems is undermined in present day Western society by a system of meaning embedded in a dominant style of representation which emphasises and produces difference, fragmentation and separation. Table 1 (above) elucidates this. Broadly, the left hand side represents the values espoused by neoliberal capitalism, a system about which Schumacher wrote: “Modern industrialism has produced its own coherent system of values, criteria, measurements, etc: it all hangs together.”³ This ‘hanging together’ is possible firstly due to an underestimation of the values on the right hand side of the table: aspects of our lives which are undeniable. Secondly, the dichotomous characteristic of the English language both produces and is produced by a particular ontology and epistemology. It silences ways of knowing and perceiving, acting and being which enable either a transcendence of these polarities or a dynamic interaction between them. We are taught to value and think in terms of parts and to be certain, or black and white. This silence is maintained in many ways: failure of society to structure itself according to what matters to its citizens; taboos, particularly those concerned with money, power and sex; hierarchical social structures based on socially legitimated issues such as power, class, age and status; and a lack of legitimacy accorded to our ‘non-rational’ existence.

3. Some symptoms of meaningless work

Some of the symptoms relating to work situated in such a system are:

- Only around 3% of people of working age direct their career towards greater meaningfulness;⁴
- Human Resources professionals are frequently more concerned with trends, and being masters of these trends, than with engaging in a critical evaluation of their role. For example, HR’s expertise in HR matters is more highly valued than knowledge of their business/sector. Also there is no acknowledgement that their power is subordinated to the Finance Department and accordingly, severely constrained so no matter how many goals speak of the importance of the organisation’s people, the reality is often otherwise;
- A current focus (even obsession) with employability skills to the exclusion of passion, aptitude and attitude – despite the saying: ‘Hire for attitude, train for skills’
- The dramatic reduction in creativity in children between ages of 4 and 14, seemingly as a result of formal education systems;⁵
- Low self-awareness of passion, strengths, interests and learning styles and the corresponding difficulty of knowing what career to pursue, how to write a CV or take a competency-based interview.

To address these questions this writer believes that we must shift to a framework which sees the human species and its issues as connected with the whole of life and life’s evolution: a framework that is more concerned with our proximity to the flow of life than with our disconnection from it. The most apparent epistemological and ontological limits which inhibit our awareness of interdependence and interconnection appear to be:

- Our perception of self as disconnected from the emotional system of life: a manageable microcosm of which is represented by the system of our families of origin;
- Under-development of the characteristics of, and capacity for, communication which promotes interdependence and interconnection;
- Inadequate understanding of the causes of conflict and our ability to manage it;

3 Schumacher, E. F. (1979) *Good Work*. London: Abacus, p. 36

4 By career I mean the entirety of one’s working life no matter how diverse or homogeneous it may be and which goes beyond the actual work one does (the ‘what’) and incorporates the motivation behind one’s work (/‘why?’) and the means by which it is achieved (‘how;’).

5 Robinson, K. (2009) *The Element: How Finding Your Passion Changes Everything*. London: Viking Books.

- Too narrow a framing of issues in the search for their resolution
- Too great a focus on the manifest symptoms of a problem rather than the system within which the problem has arisen (see the postscript for an illustration of this tendency);
- A lack of understanding of personal responsibility and a corresponding view that technology and money, amongst other non-living dimensions, will solve problems rather than provide support to enable solutions.

3. Moving toward meaningfulness: taking a Family Systems perspective on interconnection

One response to the dilemma of meaningless work is to explore the contribution that systems thinking, and in particular human systems thinking from a family systems perspective, can make to the promotion of an understanding of ourselves as profoundly interconnected. Bowen Theory⁶ appears to be particularly suited to this challenge as it is a theory of life in which the study of one's family enables one to observe one's own participation within, and therefore contribution to and responsibility for (or lack of responsibility for) the larger framework of evolutionary processes. This orientation helps make the theory personally meaningful and something to which all can relate. Bowen Theory is more concerned with the study of what *connects* living entities to one another than with difference, and holds that the capability of a system for connectedness is directly influenced by the degree of anxiety in a system.⁷ Its four key defining attributes are:

1. The goal of an individual is differentiation (not to be equated with individuation, autonomy or independence) defined as the capacity to be one's own integrated person while still belonging to, or being able to relate to, a larger colony. As such it offers a framework for the assessment of degrees of individual/organizational resilience;
2. The concept of an emotional system or field which refers to any group of people (or other forms of life) that have developed emotional interdependencies to the point where the resulting system through which the parts are connected has evolved its own principles of organisation;
3. Multi-generational transmission (the presence of the past);
4. Emotional triangles – where the 3 corners of the triangle can be people, projects, hobbies, world views, symptoms, issues.

The implications of Bowen theory are that it sees today's issues and the growth of theories and practices to resolve them as symptoms of patterns generated by anxiety. Bowen theory holds that it is the *practitioner's* intervention in the system in crisis, (whether by coaching an organisation's leader in the application of Bowen theory or by the formulation and means of application of a policy) which constitutes the crucial factor in effecting a shift towards greater connectedness.⁸

4. Postscript: an illustrative tale

One night a policeman comes upon a man searching for his house keys under a lamp post. He starts to look around with him. After a while the policeman asks, "Are you sure this is where you lost your keys?" The man answers, "No, I dropped them in the alley, but it's too dark to see over there."

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6 An excellent introduction to which is provided by Roberta M. Gilbert, M. D (1992). *Extraordinary Relationships: A New Way of Thinking About Human Interactions*. New York, John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

7 Friedman, E (1991) 'Bowen Theory and Therapy' in Gurman, A. S. & Kniskern, D. P. (Eds., 1991) *The Handbook of Family Therapy Vol 2*. Philadelphia: Brunner/Mazel, pp. 134-170.

8 This requires a practitioner who is sufficiently self-differentiated, who frames issues in terms of emotional systems, triangulation and their historical development (i.e. the inter-generational transmission of patterns).