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Value of Work in the Modern World

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Abstract: The paper focuses on the modern perspective on work and the functioning of individuals on the labour market. Advantages and disadvantages of the current changes in the labour market are discussed in the context of an individual's life.

Key words: work, an individual in the job market, value of work

Introduction

Human labour, as Z. Wiatrowski states, "is a kind of human activity, beside play, learning, (...) creation, leisure and socio-cultural activities" [Wiatrowski 2005, p.76]. It is this particular type of human activity which results in the production of material goods, services, and cultural goods. In a more comprehensive interpretation, Wiatrowski indicates that labour:

- is an activity that transforms the material world, and is aimed at satisfying basic (material) and higher (cultural and spiritual) needs;
- is a universal value, owing to which other values, including spiritual values, can potentially and actually emerge;
- offers the optimum possibility for human beings to manifest their personal qualities [Wiatrowski 2005, p. 80].

With respect to the conditions of social change, it must be noted that its characteristic has changed over the recent years. It is mainly due to "the interrelation of complex processes of change, linked to scientific and technological progress, globalization, and specific (...) mechanisms of system transformation and European integration" [Szymański 2013, p. 59], which results in rapid, frequently unexpected situations and phenomena (e.g. emigration, unemployment, poverty, euro-orphanhood). These factors significantly influence the changes in life conditions, by directly "affecting the transformations in social awareness,

spreading previously un-encountered lifestyles and previously unknown life orientations” [Szymański 2013, p. 59].

In modern societies, work, that is ”carrying out of tasks that require the expenditure of mental and physical effort which has as its objective the production of goods and services that cater to human needs” [Giddens, Sutton 2013, p. 259], constituted, in Giddens’ view, an important component of an individual’s self-worth. Work was not only the source of maintenance but also the source of activity and competence development for an individual, enabled personal and professional development within the structures of a particular organization [Kędzierska 2012, p. 23]. However, that adaptive, stabilized, clearly planned and defined model of work (and of routine), of the resulting career path and professional development, and frequently of the workplace, has begun to change. Transformations, dynamic civilizational progress, globalization and the consumer revolution of the recent decades have all influenced the shift of opinion on work, education, career, and lifestyles.

M.J. Szymański observes that the changes are also noticeable in the economy and on the job market: “a small group of people, like entrepreneurs, managers, outstanding artists and professionals, and experts, are in a position to choose the place and negotiate the terms of employment. On the other end of the scale there are people for whom finding a decent job would verge on miracle – those that are permanently unemployed” [Szymański 2009, p. 163].

Therefore the mere fact of living in the world of change and the accompanying processes force a certain view of labour. Beside the economic contrasts, mentioned by Szymański, that are the effect of labour, a new specificity of work, connected with its permanence and stability, becomes visible. In the world of constant change, work is no longer perceived as a “life-time occupation”. The market sees more and more “portfolio workers”, i.e. those boasting a range of professional skills and recommendations obtained in previous jobs. These assets are indispensable in a job-changing situation, in the conditions imposed by the reality, i.e. when an employee is no longer attached to one workplace [Bartoszewicz 2009, p. 50]. As Giddens [2007, pp. 433–437] observes, this situation generates anxiety, since such a system may result in employers’ ad-lib hiring and laying off workers. In turn, employees’ anxiety caused by the uncertainty of employment may trigger a chain of negative effects in the domain of value and sense of labour, e.g. demotivation to work diligently, purposeful indolence in creative activities, ruthless competition for the job position, lack of bonding, lack of interpersonal relations between co-workers etc. At the same time, in the labour market there is and always will be high demand for innovative, resourceful, and creative employees (*homo creator*). Baraniak [2010, p. 143] emphasizes that such persons, apart from bringing their effort and qualifications to the employment processes, can also contribute their

proactive attitudes of team work and dynamic action, which are considered crucial to economic development.

The changes characteristic of modern times, outlined briefly in the above paragraphs, trigger a new way of thinking, quite different from the previous, adaptive, stabilized attitude towards work, the workplace and professional relations, and towards a working person.

Work space and work place

Space and place in the topographic sense are described in subject literature as the area of everyday existence and movement of a human being. The location and surface of this area is usually one's home, the workplace, shopping centres, walking routes, etc. All these facilities together constitute the material and spatial environment of individuals, demarcating their lifestyle. Moreover, according to Sztompka [2009, p. 36], these facilities contain a certain amount of social and interpersonal space, where the significant factors are the people (family, relatives, friends, etc.), the type and intensity of the relations between them, and the type of contacts (passing, permanent, superficial, etc.). It may be claimed that space and place delineate a horizon beyond which an individual does not venture in everyday contacts, behaviours, and acts of cognition. In a sense, it is a fixed system of reference for an individual, who builds important expectations on the relative stability of its basic constituents. Perpetuity of the area of everyday is considered the norm. Yet this sense of normality may be undermined when some of its permanent settings have been altered [Łukasiewicz 1985, p. 120]. Such an alteration questions the obvious and natural state of affairs, the "normal" everyday. For instance, a sudden change of workplace causes the feeling of "being forced into the new framework of an imposed life" [Siciński 1983, p. 12]. The "novelty" disturbs the constant rhythm of what is known, repeatable and predictable. Thus, the rules of everyday life change, and, as a consequence, the old normality dissipates and a new sense of normality emerges in an individual. The creation of the new sense of normality alleviates the experience of change.

From the perspective adopted in the present considerations, it is crucial to narrow the understanding of space and place with respect to individuals and their work. Space is strictly connected with the experience *of* a particular place, and *in* a particular place. According to Yi-Fu Tuan, "*Space* and *place* are familiar words denoting common experiences (...). Place is security, space is freedom: we are attached to the one and long for the other" [Tuan 2001, p. 3]. A place encompasses space, creating the interior and the exterior. Thus, as Mendel emphasizes, "space is open and brings associations with freedom, while place is an enclosure of space, our own space, our light, touched and marked by our presence – it is our home, which we love" [Mendel 2006, p. 10]. Creating places

consists in symbolic or physical demarcation of borderlines between the inside and the outside [Lewicka 2012, p. 41]. We can say that space is everything that surrounds us: the external world. On the other hand, place stands for all the meanings attributed to the “domesticated” space, understood as one’s own, personal, with which one identifies themselves.

Places – also the work place – affect the persons staying there, “abiding” there. In places, one experiences various sensations, one’s own possibilities; places are the loci of “the elementary spatial organization of society’s life” [Wentzel-Winther 2006, pp. 138–139].

However, as Lewicka states, various contemporary processes of economic, political, technological and cultural change cause the diminishing of role and significance of places in human life [Lewicka 2012, p. 17]. It is visible e.g. in the scope of meaning of workplace and work itself. These changes, affecting the workplace, concern interpersonal relations, sense and significance of work, identity and continuity of place, commitment to work, etc. E. Relph [1976, p. 79] observes that the processes of globalization and homogeneity frequently destroy places, in particular their significance for people in terms of identity, of the genius loci, which shapes the identity of the individual abiding in the given place. He notices that cultural and geographical uniformity are not the new phenomena themselves, but rather cause new phenomena. What is crucial in shaping human beings and their mood in a given place is the sense of continuity. T. Beatley [2004] observes that continuity is a factor that strongly influences the identity and the experience of a place. When living a life of “permanent change”, which is characterized by instability, “fluidity” of places, including the workplaces, individuals who experience “instability” stop treating places as important, significant, and meaningful. They do not identify themselves with the places, which thus lose their significance and become “non-places”. This in turn deprives the human being of the possibility of creation, building relations, bonding, trusting, cooperating, getting attached to work and workplace, and relating to them.

The presented scope of changes in experiencing and understanding place can be referred to work as a human activity occurring at a given place and for its sake. The modern world transformations generate new professions, new workplaces, new forms of employment, expectations towards the employees, and new types of career (e.g. career with no borders, or “portfolio worker” career). More and more often, the chance of having a job (and a professional career) is given only to people who are flexible, who have a wide and ever-growing range of qualifications, competences and professional skills – which guarantees their participation in many projects with different teams; people who complete tasks before the deadline, the so called “young wolves”; resourceful, well-educated, speaking foreign languages, and being natural leaders.

The research conducted by A. Nikowska [2011, p. 33] indicates that the qualities, skills and knowledge most sought-after in employees are:

- mobility and readiness to requalify;
- using IT and mobile technologies, fluency in foreign languages, being at ease in the international environment;
- interpersonal communication and self-presentation, team work and team management, resourcefulness, and strong basic mathematical skills;
- information management, information brokering, intellectual property protection.

The above set of competences facilitates employment, following the currently trending message, that changes in the market are “too dynamic to permit doing things the same way year after year, or doing the same thing” [Sennett 1998, p. 22]. This approach does not bring destruction but progress. Still, such high demands may prompt a whole range of negative phenomena of universal (the loss of values, e.g. trust, responsibility, loyalty, integrity; emphasis on professional success at all costs), and social character (the loss of interpersonal bonds, disability to show emotions, increasing egotism, also manifested in planned resignation from maternity/paternity, a decreasing number of new families).

Work in the perspective of change and fluid labour market

C.W. Mills, in his book “White Collar”, notices that “Work may be a mere source of livelihood, or the most significant part of one’s inner life; it may be experienced as expiation, or as exuberant expression of self; as bounden duty, or as the development of man’s universal nature. Neither love nor hatred of work is inherent in man, or inherent in any given line of work. For work has no intrinsic meaning” [Mills 2002, p. 215]. Following Mills’ idea, work can be perceived as a necessity or as a fulfilment. Seeing work as necessity entails accepting it as an external obligation, under compulsion, and does not provide conditions for successful complete development. Work understood in this way is accompanied by externally imposed discipline, and frequently – by lack of satisfaction. Poles apart is the perception of work as a fulfilment. In such a perspective, work is a source of self-realization, a path to one’s own development, and a passion which allows one to live with dignity. Viewed in this way, work enables independent development of one’s behaviour, ideas and habits, so that they are predictable and useful [Chutorański 2008, pp. 28–29]. The adopted ideology gives work a higher rank and a certain worth. Owing to this, work can become a value appreciated more than others.

Thus it may be stated that work, to a great extent, “reveals the person’s social status, may bring social reward, satisfies the need of belonging, and supplies the sense of identity by defining an individual in their own and others’ eyes” [Czubak-

Koch 2008, p. 52]. It also “stimulates and motivates an individual to acquire new skills and to cope with new challenges” [Czubak-Koch 2008, p. 52]. However, work can also be a negative of all the above, due to its low worth (e.g. economic, because of poor remuneration), new trends in employment, fluctuations and instability – which in turn yields further consequences.

R. Sennett emphasizes that one sign of such changes is the motto “no long term”: “in work, the traditional career progressing step by step through the corridors of one or two institutions is withering” [Sennett 1998, p. 22]. The situation also bears on the possibility of using one skillset throughout one’s professional life. According to Sennett, “today, a young American with at least two years of college can expect to change jobs at least eleven times in the course of working, and change his or her skill base at least three times during those forty years of labor” [Sennett 1998, p. 22].

Contemporary young “world citizens” anticipate changes in the employment possibilities on the job market, and expect to have to adapt to those changes through life-long acquisition of competences and new qualifications. This fact brings about a range of changes in their perception, understanding and estimation of the sense and value of work. Young people’s contemporary way of thinking about work affects their lifestyle [3x fast, Melosik 2003, Piłula 2014], their views and definitions of the social reality (including relations, relationships, and interpersonal bonds) outside work. The analysis of subject literature has helped to identify the emerging trends in understanding work and its effects on the whole of human life and development.

One of the strongest trends is the so called “home/work balance” [Szlendak 2009, p. 209]. According to Szlendak, it is a kind of a seesaw trap, from which “one cannot escape, and on which one has to swing alone” [Szlendak 2009, p. 209]. Balance suggests a degree of risk, some danger, namely that of being unable to decide what is more important: work or family. On the one hand, investing in work, professional career and quick gains may leave no time and opportunity to set up a family. On the other hand, having a family, and engaging oneself in building relations and bonds, which is time-consuming, may prevent a person from working effectively, being promoted, or building a career path. Further educational development, professional upgrading, and learning new skills requires additional investment of time after the working hours – the time allocated for oneself and the family. Choosing the family, one risks a considerable professional loss. One risks failing to succeed at work, not gaining better gratification, not being fulfilled, feeling no satisfaction and no self-realization. Choosing work, one may also lose, when one decides not to have a family, gives up the chances for love and other relationships, becomes addicted to work, experiences burn-out and eventually loses the sense in life. Therefore “balancing” between work

and home is inseparably connected with “the uncertainty and necessity to take risks” [Szlendak 2009, p. 209], which does not facilitate making the choice, or finding the golden mean and combining the two. This ability is further hindered by the trends emerging on the labour market. Or rather, it may be concluded that if one makes a choice in accordance with the market, where jobs are replaced by projects and specialization paths [Szlendak 2009, p. 209], then the choice is simple. The job is the most important, then, and becomes an idol of a kind. To have a family, one must work to support it. At work, to keep pace with the changes and new “projects”, one must be “flexible and determined” [Szlendak 2009, p. 209]. On the one hand, being flexible makes a person take continuous educational actions which guarantee that one’s professional qualifications are always adapted to the needs of the labour market; this, in turn, increases the chances of finding employment and facilitates building individual career paths. On the other hand, flexible work hours and flexible employment mechanisms, placing the responsibility for professional development on the employee only, the risk of unemployment, and quick devaluation of one’s qualifications all cause insecurity, higher stress levels, adaptive difficulties in ever-changing work teams, the loss of interpersonal bonds [Kędzierska 2012, p. 25], and finally permanent stress, generated by the uncertainty of tomorrow in and outside the working environment.

In sum, the above conditions and requirements create a vicious circle, and the seesaw trap keeps moving: one cannot stop it to make an escape without bearing the costs of the choices made.

Another trend typical of the modern lifestyle is the desire for “instant gratification”. Following this criterion, work is seen as a tool in pursuing the career, quick promotion and high earnings. It stems from the fact that a modern individual is “under great pressure to have everything at once: a successfully developing career, children to be proud of, a loving husband or a caring wife, and a highly functioning family” [Szlendak 2009, p. 206]. But is all that available at the same time? Dedication to work rules out other personal plans, since one has to seize the chances offered by the job, in order to be promoted and to gain satisfactory gratification. Self-fulfilment is possible when job is seen not as a tool, but personally, as a recognized “personal development and source of satisfaction”. Yet such an ideal situation is unlikely in the modern labour market for a “portfolio worker”: the successful, advancing career path is rarely convergent with satisfying personal development and fulfilment. To achieve complete development, happiness and satisfaction in life, a human being requires some time to pursue passions, hobbies, and needs beyond the area of work. The desire for “instant gratification” in professional life is not always compatible with personal development or with the desire for a home built on the foundation of deep bonds and strong relations.

Another consequence of the so-called “spirit of modern work”, based on the “no long term” rule, is the loss of commitment and loyalty. Aware that they will not work in one place for a long time, the employees are insensitized to the feelings of commitment and attachment to the employer. One cannot possibly be attached to someone who offers a short-term contract, and thus does not guarantee the continuation of work, constant income, or the possibility to settle down in the workplace. Such prospects (or rather the lack of prospects for a permanent job) “corrode” trust, loyalty, mutual commitment of the employees to the work itself, to forming relations in the workplace, and to shared formal and informal undertakings. Sennett states that “trust can, of course, be a purely formal matter, as when people agree to a business deal or rely on another to observe the rules in a game. But usually deeper experiences of trust are more informal, as when people learn on whom they can rely when given a difficult or impossible task. Such social bonds take time to develop, slowly rooting into the cracks and crevices of institutions” [Sennett 1998, p. 24]. If employees realize the poor chances of remaining in the given workplace for a longer period, they automatically suppress trust, the more so when the employment is based on uncertainty of work. Lack of trust entails lack of loyalty, that means respect for one’s workplace, manifested in conscientious fulfilment of duties, caring for the good name of the company, and being honest (truthful and dedicated) towards the employer.

No commitment nor loyalty to the job, colleagues, and the idea of work bring further effects, which Granovetter [1973] calls “the strength of weak ties”. Namely, the lack of trust and commitment reflects badly on the development of the feeling of community, relations and ties between colleagues in the workplace. Modern workplaces, the hiring institutions, shape a person by arguing that in the new conditions, short-term relations are more beneficial than long-term ones, and that strong social bonds like loyalty are no longer valid. The weak ties are to some extent inscribed in the team work, where “a group moves from task to task and the personnel of the team changes in the process (...). Detachment and superficial cooperativeness are better armor for dealing with current realities than behavior based on values of loyalty and service” [Sennett 1998, p. 24]. For it is only when the employees “understand they can’t depend on the corporation, they’re marketable” [Sennett 1998, p. 24]. This fosters greater subordination and lowers the risk of “plotting” against, or exerting pressure on the employer; it also eliminates the functioning of trade unions. The workplace often shapes the employees, who transfer the loyalty, commitment, ability to make relationships and to form ties to their life outside work. This in turn affects the decisions to set up a family (or give up this responsibility), and formation of the rules of a relationship, its quality, and the kind of bonds formed.

A trend characteristic of the changes in the sense and value of work is “working time” [Adam 2009, p. 497], especially its scope. From the perspective

of work in the “fluid” employment market, the control of time consumption is either voluntary or imposed. Every second of employees’ time must be used most efficiently [Sennett 1998, p. 24]. On the one hand, the employment time is ever shorter; on the other, within this short period, in the limited number of working hours, the employee must contribute as many as possible ideas, initiatives, and actions supporting the development of the hiring institution. Otherwise they risk losing the short period of employment and the chance to enrich their portfolio with new skills and achievements. A certain paradox of work may be noticed. Even though the possibility of working, of being employed in a given workplace, allows an individual to develop, to advance professionally, and to gain new experience, it also prevents the person from experiencing universal human values (like trust, responsibility, commitment, essence of work) and needs (of belonging, unconditional acceptance, complete development, freedom). It is, in a manner of speaking, desensitizing.

Having analysed the above issues, we can formulate a conclusion. At present, work and time have been “cleared” of connotations and senses that are antithetical to the capitalist work discipline. Nowadays the traditional, cyclical organization of work and rest has lost its previous significance [Sennett 1998, p. 24].

Changes occurring in people under the influence of changes in the workplace (no long term, strength of weak ties, no commitment and loyalty) affect the emotional life of employees outside work, according to Sennett. “Transposed to the family realm, ‘No long term’ means keep moving, don’t commit yourself, and don’t sacrifice” [Sennett 1998, p. 25]. This has consequences in the form of quick, short relationships, life without commitment, without getting involved in interpersonal relations, etc. It is the family, no one else, that must develop the sense of duty, trust, commitment, and the sense of belonging to a community. All these values take a long time to be developed and structured in a person. Then what quality of relations, what sense and value of interpersonal bonds can be expected in the context of children and youth upbringing for a life in a relationship, in a family, for responsibility, for building and nurturing the relation between the child and the parent? Sennett forms several important questions, crucial from the pedagogical point of view, and calling for consideration: “How can long-term purposes be pursued in a short-term society? How can durable social relations be sustained? How can a human being develop a narrative of identity and life history in a society composed of episodes and fragments? The conditions of the new economy feed instead on experience which drifts in time, from place to place, from job to job. (...) short-term capitalism threatens to corrode his character, particularly those qualities of character which bind human beings to one another and furnishes each with a sense of sustainable self” [Sennett 1998, pp. 26–27].

The experience of short-termness and uncertainty is inherent in everyday life of employees in their workplace. The lack of security is considered the norm in this

context; the quality of relations and interpersonal bonds is warped. Experiencing work, a human being may be successful, or may be at a loss. Flexibility and lack of ties make people place their bet on the career and the expected success; when they fail, they give up on everything and cannot find themselves in another place, especially if they have transferred the workplace experience to the domestic context.

Conclusions

Work, and knowledge, have become today (and will be even more so in the future) the dominant markers of civilizational development, and above all – of the development of human beings and their society [Wiatrowski 2005, p. 77].

The changing character of work makes most people change jobs several times during their professional life, and shift from being employed to learning and professional training, or to forced intervals in employment. The “society in which the parents’ professional position used to define access to material goods and social status, in which education delineated the trajectory of professional career, and the rhythm of life was determined by the rhythm of work” [Kędzierska 2012, p. 28] is currently in decline.

Work is indispensable for an individual to achieve full development, and to become a complete human being. It is also a duty, originating from “one’s own life needs, and the role of work in achieving the whole of humanity. Without work, life cannot be sustained, and complete personal development cannot be achieved” [Wyszyński 2001, p. 34]. What can be done to prevent human work from altering the true humanity, built on lasting, timeless values? Special task is assigned to pedagogy, including the pedagogy of work. A question remains, open to discussion: how to raise a human being to a working life in the ever-changing world?

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