



“Summary of article by Edward J. O’Boyle: The Need for Work as Such: Self Expression and Belonging” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 4: The Changing Nature of Work. Island Press: Washington DC, 1998 pp 376-379

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## **“Summary of article by Edward J. O’Boyle: The Need for Work as Such: Self Expression and Belonging”**

This is a chapter from a book that sets forth some of the principles of "social economics" -- an alternative to the conventional economic paradigm. A major difference between the two views of production theory is that

conventional economists focus on instrumentality, and either set aside the problem of human dignity or presume that human material need is satisfied entirely through money. Social economists, in contrast, insist that instrumentality is subordinate to dignity and that because of the duality of human material need human beings are not satisfied by money alone. Human beings *need* work itself. [118]

The chapter briefly notes that the term, "work," can be broadly interpreted to include, for example, parenting; however, the writer then turns to exclusive consideration of the experience that employees have in working for an employer.

Human nature is dualistic, containing both individual and social components. The individualistic part of human nature seeks self-expression. The social part requires a sense of belonging. In the workplace these aspects express themselves through individual effort on the one hand, and teamwork on the other. Effective workplace management fosters and supports both sides of the workers' dual nature.

### **SELF-EXPRESSION: MEETING THE NEED OF THE INDIVIDUAL FOR WORK AS SUCH THROUGH INDIVIDUAL CONTRIBUTION**

On the individualistic side, each human being needs work as an opportunity to contribute something that represents his or her unique endowment of skills and talents. Such work simultaneously makes a contribution of something that is special and lasting, and also has the practical result of contributing to the individual's survival. Employers also benefit from the uniqueness of individual abilities, which offer a wide variety from which to draw when carrying out a production process.

At the same time, human beings are unique among factors of production in that they alone may, and often do, make the choice to withhold some of their productive energies. Conventional economic theory and practice has tended to respond to this fact by encouraging close monitoring of worker effort. The social economics alternative is "to restructure the work itself to make it

more attractive and to reward the employees for the additional work effort on grounds that a more attractive workplace makes for a *permanent* increase in work effort and revenues..." [120] The positive motivation that can be set up in this way encourages workers to propose the myriad small innovations that can result in continuous product improvement. This is the mechanism that accounts for the success, for example, of total quality management.

When people are deprived of the opportunity to work, or to do work that exercises individual skills and talents, these idle capacities are in danger of deteriorating through nonuse. On the positive side, unlike other factors of production, human capacities grow and develop -- rather than being depleted -- through use.

## **BALANCING INDIVIDUALISTIC NEEDS WITH THE SOCIAL NEEDS FOR BELONGING AND TEAMWORK**

Teamwork is organized by enlarging human motivation from individual goals pursued competitively to include common goals pursued cooperatively. To be successful, teamwork requires a blending of self-interest and a genuine concern for others. This blending is achieved (if at all) with some difficulty. [127]

A person who is working alone on a project for which she has responsibility is likely to combine, automatically, thinking and doing. Group work unfortunately has the side effect of making it possible to separate the thinking and the doing tasks, giving the former to individuals identified as management, and the latter to those identified with labor. This creates a hierarchical structure and makes true teamwork much more difficult.

Group behavior includes another potential downside: in the process of creating boundaries that establish who is *in* the group, there is also an assumption that others are *out* of it. When such exclusion is defined on the basis of gender, nationality, race, age or religion, it becomes discriminatory as well as exclusive. On the positive side, the interaction between the social satisfactions of teamwork and the gratifications of individual contribution includes some reinforcements for cooperation. For example, important aspects of learning occur through cooperative work (in teams, in mentoring situations, etc.), thus enhancing the individual satisfaction of effective self-expression.

Ideally, workplace teams are formed not only for the goals of production but in order to enhance the development of such essential personal qualities as responsibility, cooperation, solidarity (in which "a human being finds fulfillment by adding to the fulfillment of others" [134]), and caring.

Teamwork depends on management's valuing workers sufficiently as human beings to actively involve them in the decisions as to how the work is to be done. Belonging is the fruit of such valuing. This involvement, which affirms the workers as more than mere instruments of work, provides them with additional means for effectively caring for one another on a regular basis. [131]

## **THE ROLE OF MANAGEMENT IN CREATING A HEALTHY WORKPLACE**

Effective managers, recognizing the dualism in workers' needs and motivations, will establish a dual system of rewards to reinforce both types of contribution. They will recognize the firm's self interest in the fact that "[w]orkers whose need for self-expression is unmet are dissatisfied workers and that dissatisfaction, in turn, encourages them to withhold some of their productive energies, to become less efficient, and to be less concerned about quality." [126] The other side of human nature that must be expressed by work is even less recognized in the typical employment situation today. Our society's emphasis on competition has resulted in an unbalanced system of rewards that does not sufficiently emphasize the importance of cooperative behavior. Possibilities for rectifying this imbalance might include, for example, systems of gain-sharing; cash bonuses tied to the achievement of collective goals; in-kind bonuses; and intangible symbols of the company's recognition of especially effective group efforts.

The firm's interest is clearly related to the promotion of a partnership between the firm and the workers, wherein the firm gains in quality and productivity because the workers are responsible and committed, while the workers achieve an experience that is essential to their fulfillment as human beings. Firms that wish to reap these benefits cannot do so by faking a commitment to their workers. When work is organized so that it is possible to treat the workers like interchangeable parts the workers become, in effect, "more object than person." [123] A healthy workplace requires that workers are truly seen as ends in themselves, not merely as means to the firm's ends.