

America's Hamster Wheel of 'Career Advancement'

Many of those who work in the corporate world are constantly peppered with questions about their "[career progression](#)." The Internet is [saturated with articles](#) providing tips and tricks on how to develop a never-fail game plan for professional development. Millions of Americans are engaged in a never-ending cycle of résumé-padding that mimics the accumulation of Boy Scout merit badges or A's on report cards...except we never seem to get our Eagle Scout certificates or academic diplomas. We're told to just keep going until we run out of gas or reach retirement, at which point we fade into the peripheral oblivion of retirement communities, morning tee-times, and long midweek lunches at beach restaurants.

The idealistic Chris McCandless in Jon Krakauer's bestselling book *Into the Wild* defiantly declares, "I think careers are a 20th century invention and I don't want one." Anyone who has spent enough time in the career hamster wheel can relate to this sentiment. Is 21st-century careerism – with its promotion cycles, yearly feedback, and little wooden plaques commemorating our accomplishments – really the summit of human existence, the paramount paradigm of human flourishing?

Michael J. Noughton, director of the Center for Catholic Studies at the University of St. Thomas, Minnesota, and board chair for Reel Precision Manufacturing, doesn't think so. In his [Getting Work Right: Labor and Leisure in a Fragmented World](#), Noughton provides a sobering statistic: approximately two thirds of employees in the United States are "either indifferent or hostile to their work." That's not just an indicator of professional dissatisfaction; it's economically disastrous. The same survey estimates that employee disengagement is costing the U.S. economy "somewhere between 450-550 billion dollars annually."

The origin of this problem, says Naughton, is an error in how Americans conceive of work and leisure. We seem to err in one of two ways. One is to label our work as strictly a job, a nine-to-five that pays the bills. In this paradigm, leisure is an amusement, an escape from the drudgery of boring, purposeless labor. The other way is that we label our work as a career that provides the essential fulfillment in our lives. Through this lens, leisure is a utility, simply another means to serve our work. Outside of work, we exercise to maintain our health in order to work harder and longer. We read books that help maximize our utility at work and get ahead of our competitors. We “continue our education” largely to further our careers.

Whichever error we fall into, we inevitably end up dissatisfied. The more we view work as a painful, boring chore, the less effective we are at it, and the more complacent and discouraged. Our leisure activities, in turn, no matter how distracting, only compound our sadness, because no amount of games can ever satisfy our souls. Or, if we see our meaning in our work and leisure as only another means of increasing productivity, we inevitably burn out, wondering, perhaps too late in life, what exactly we were working *for*. As Augustine of Hippo noted, our hearts are restless for God. More recently, C.S. Lewis noted that we yearn to be fulfilled by something that nothing in this world can satisfy. We need both our work and our leisure to be oriented to the transcendent in order to give our lives meaning and purpose.

The problem is further compounded by the fact that much of the labor Americans perform isn't actually *good*. There are “bad goods” that are detrimental to society and human flourishing. Naughton suggests some examples: violent video games, pornography, adultery dating sites, cigarettes, high-octane alcohol, abortifacients, gambling, usury, certain types of weapons, cheat sheet websites, “gentlemen's clubs,” and so on. Though not as clear-cut as the above, one might also add

working for the kinds of businesses that contribute to the impoverishment or destruction of our communities, [as Tucker Carlson has recently argued](#).

Why does this matter for professional satisfaction? Because if our work doesn't offer goods and services that contribute to our communities and the common good – and especially if we are unable to perceive how our labor plays into that common good – then it will fundamentally undermine our happiness. We will perceive our work primarily in a utilitarian sense, shrugging our shoulders and saying, “it's just a paycheck,” ignoring or disregarding the fact that as rational animals we *need* to feel like our efforts matter.

Economic liberalism – at least in its purest free-market expression – is based on a paradigm with nominalist and utilitarian origins that promote “freedom of indifference.” In rudimentary terms, this means that we need not be interested in the moral quality of our economic output. If we produce goods that satisfy people's wants, increasing their “utils,” as my Econ 101 professor used to say, then we are achieving business success. In this paradigm, we desire an economy that maximizes access to free choice regardless of the content of that choice, because the more choices we have, the more we can maximize our utils, or sensory satisfaction.

The freedom of indifference paradigm is in contrast to a more ancient understanding of economic and civic engagement: a freedom for excellence. In this worldview, “we are made *for* something,” and participation in public acts of virtue is essential both to our own well-being and that of our society. By creating goods and services that objectively benefit others and contributing to an order beyond the maximization of profit, we bless both ourselves and the *polis*. Alternatively, goods that increase “utils” but undermine the common good are rejected.

Returning to Naughton's distinction between work and leisure,

we need to perceive the latter not as an escape from work or a means of enhancing our work, but as a true time of rest. This means uniting ourselves with the transcendent reality from which we originate and to which we will return, through prayer, meditation, and worship. By practicing this kind of true leisure, [well treated in a book by Josef Pieper](#), we find ourselves refreshed, and discover renewed motivation and inspiration to contribute to the common good.

Americans are increasingly aware of the problems with Wall Street conservatism and globalist economics. We perceive that our post-Cold War policies are hurting our nation. Naughton's treatise on work and leisure offers the beginnings of a game plan for what might replace them.

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