

COMMENTARY

# What is work to you? Empowering workers and changing perspectives

Bradley Brummel<sup>1</sup>  and P.D. Harms<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of Houston, Houston, TX, USA and <sup>2</sup>University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, AL, USA

**Corresponding author:** Bradley Brummel; Email: [bjbrummel@uh.edu](mailto:bjbrummel@uh.edu)

Asking someone, “What is work to you?” results in a variety of replies ranging from “It sucks” or “The place I get sexually harassed everyday” to “It is my calling” or “The place that I see my friends.” With a little more curiosity and an invitation to go deeper and tell more stories, most people will reveal that work involves a rich array of meaning, stories, and personal slights. The full range of the human experience can and does happen at work. This can be seen clearly in stories that are included in the classic Studs Turkel (1972) book *Working* or really anytime you give someone a chance to tell their story in a safe and inviting setting. The antiwork movement(s) presents a potential trap for people who accept or embrace the idea that work is fundamentally a curse to be avoided or a structure for repression. That limited view of work makes for great memes and viral video rants. It is easy to get people to cheer along to an anthem about how much work sucks; however, a fuller view of work reveals that work can be a key foundation in human thriving and happiness as well. We believe that one important way that industrial and organizational (I-O) psychology can support worker well-being is by introducing people to the breadth of perspectives on how humans understand work. From there, people can develop their own perspective on what work could be for them and work toward that vision.

As psychologists, we focus primarily on the individual person as the level of analysis and as the source of agentic action in the world. Workers are not helpless pawns or marionettes in a system controlled by others, we are agents who play various roles in the constructing and deconstructing systems and cultures, including all aspects of work. One of the biggest threats that we see in the antiwork movement and the intellectual tradition at its foundation is that individuals are often cast into roles that can be fatalistic, diminishing the full ability of the individuals to make choices. These include the choice to be workers and choices on how and when to work. Additionally, individuals have the opportunity to choose what they consider work to be and what role work will play in their lives. Although we agree that the nature and structures of work in societies and human history can and should be examined and questioned, we would also argue that individuals should be encouraged and empowered to choose what work is to them as a first step in crafting a worker role that suits and supports their identity and aspirations.

The I-O literature has a number of avenues through which individuals are empowered to shape the workplace. Specifically, work on idiosyncratic deals (Rousseau et al., 2006), coaching (McKenna & Davis, 2009), employee voice (Morrison, 2014), job withdrawal, and retirement (Hanisch & Hulin, 1990) all focus on ways in which individuals can influence their relationship with a particular organization or with work more broadly to achieve their individual needs. As a field, we have a strong basis in research that can be used to empower workers directly. However, we do agree with the focal article (Alliger & McEachern, 2024) that much of our work has been oriented toward the organization, capital, and management as the sources of our funding and data tend to more easily come from those sources. As such, it is worth examining the ways in which we

can work to empower individuals directly with the knowledge, skills, and efficacy to choose worker roles that fit them and to shape those roles that do exist to fit their vision for what work should be. Two ways in which we have made some impact in this have been in education and in individual coaching.

A couple of places where people looking for options for how real people (not just academics) perceive and think about all work can include the above-referenced *Working* (Turkel, 1972) and John Budd's (2011) book *The Thought of Work*, which explores a wide array of perspectives treating work as a curse, freedom, commodity, occupational citizenship, disutility, personal fulfillment, social relation, caring for others, identity, and/or service. Although they both include some strong sentiments associated with the antiwork movement, there are also several other perspectives presented. These perspectives serve as a foundation for a more comprehensive set of options for an approach to work that acknowledges the many ways that work contributes to human misery but also thriving. Additionally, in the book *The Joy of Work? Jobs, Happiness, and You*, Peter Warr and Guy Clapperton (2010) seek to empower ordinary workers to use the science of happiness in the workplace to drive their own individual path toward happiness at work. Their treatment of the subject matter is unique in its efforts to make these approaches accessible and actionable for ordinary working individuals. We include these details in the hopes that I-O psychologists concerned with the antiwork movement and the sentiments surrounding it might find utility in a path forward and out of the abyss. That there is path toward empowering individuals to create a life as a worker that defies the melancholy, alienation, and despair at the heart of the antiwork movement.

Reflecting on one's own values and perspectives on work can also be at the core of coaching relationships. As clients are able to unpack and discover what their aspirations for their work and their lives might actually be, coaches can work to build the efficacy and skills to act on the world to move toward these goals. Often the first step is to question the client's underlying, limiting beliefs about what work is and must be. From there it is possible to see new options and act to make them a reality, even if this means leaving one's current job for another. The narrative coaching approach (Drake, 2015) specifically works with clients' stories to achieve aspirations for change. A move from work as only a curse to be avoided to a more nuanced story of work can include elements of pain and joy that can be both life-changing and empowering.

It is often said that when you send a changed person back into an unchanged environment, the environment will win every time. With this in mind, we would argue that our work as I-O psychologists is to promote not only individual change but also systemic changes through individual (and group) activism. This could mean following the suggestion of the focal article to expand and reengage our research on and with labor unions, but it also reflects our roles as psychologists who work with individuals on shaping their values, habits, and intentions in the world. Coaching does not have to be limited to helping workers achieve goals set by organizations for advancement within a broken or manipulative system. It can be the mechanism that we use to shape the structures we use for human work to be fairer, more just, and rewarding.

I-O psychology's explicit concern with well-being in the workplace as a core concern beyond the performance of workers makes it clear that we are oriented toward workers and not just organizations. However, we would urge our I-O colleagues to be mindful to avoid fixating on what is wrong with the world of work and instead, consider focusing their efforts on sharing the methods and mindsets that support views of work as potential sources of well-being and thriving. Our goal should be to empower individuals to make the changes in their own lives, in their work, and in their workplaces that will bring better alignment between their experiences with work and their aspirations for what they want work and their lives to be. An impact that we would like to see for our field is that the first answer to the question, "What is work to you?" would be, "Did you pack a lunch?" because the story to come would be rich, nuanced, and full of all the things that work is and can be when we take the opportunity to reflect.

## References

- Alliger, G. M., & McEachern, P. J.** (2024). Antiwork offers many opportunities for I-O psychologists. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, *17*(1), 1–30.
- Budd, J. W.** (2011). *The thought of work*. Cornell University Press.
- Drake, D. B.** (2015). *Narrative coaching: Bringing our new stories to life*. CNC Press.
- Hanisch, K. A., & Hulin, C. L.** (1990). Job attitudes and organizational withdrawal: An examination of retirement and other voluntary withdrawal behaviors. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, *37*(1), 60–78.
- McKenna, D. D., & Davis, S. L.** (2009). Hidden in plain sight: The active ingredients of executive coaching. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, *2*(3), 244–260.
- Morrison, E. W.** (2014). Employee voice and silence. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, *1*, 173–197.
- Rousseau, D. M., Ho, V. T., & Greenberg, J.** (2006). I-deals: Idiosyncratic terms in employment relationships. *Academy of Management Review*, *31*, 977–994.
- Turkel, S.** (1972). *Working*. The New Press.
- Warr, P., & Clapperton, G.** (2010). *The joy of work? Jobs, happiness, and you*. Routledge.