

## Work and Its Discontents

**M**y son, who is supposed to be digging up some pestilential bamboo in the garden this summer, but who keeps going off to ride his bike or take a swim, seems to have no discernible need to be self-actualized through work. I gather, from recent reading on the subject, that he shares this frame of mind with many people, none of them twelve-year-olds.

Daniel Yankelovich, that indefatigable pulse-taker of American life, notes that about half the population no longer thinks about self-fulfillment in terms of work. Other commentators point out that work, defined as that which provides a sense of mastery or which consists of producing something for others, doesn't always take place on the job.

New methods, both scientific and psychological, have allowed us to learn more about work and workers than we probably need to know. The scientific approach has told us how to maximize worker effort and productivity from without, and the psychological approach has told us how to motivate workers from within. A fault I find with most such efforts is that they treat work as if it were a universal prime mover. In truth, many people see themselves first as a family member, or a citizen, or a connoisseur, or a Redskins' fan, and only second as a worker.

The single, unchanging work ethic is no more, but I wonder if this news has reached the outposts of the

HRD community. Among the hundreds of manuscripts sent to this magazine in the past year, few acknowledge work as anything but a primary value for the individual. It is ironic that HRD theorists can point out to the world the importance of recognizing different goals and values but that its practitioners can then ignore all but one.

If the body of HRD knowledge respects variety in life goals, where are the programs to back this up? Why is HRD always trying to lure people back to the work ethic?

Where are the training programs for being and remaining a good subordinate? Where are the OD models that situate the corporation in the whole human community? Where are the career development programs for the happily plateaued manager? What does the quality of worklife movement have to say to people whose work isn't their life? Where are the exercises for protecting the mind during mindless work?

Bottom-line enthusiasts will have little time for such questions, but even if we think of HRD as being primarily about maximizing worker effort, productivity and motivation, the profession must come to more realistic terms with changing attitudes about work. The next wave of workers is going to include many more people like my son, the unactualized bamboo digger.

*Patricia Seligson*  
Editor