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The Importance of Meaningful Work

A brief discussion of the findings in the author's article
"Teaching Meaningful Work: Philosophical Discussions
on the Ethics of Career Choice," **Journal of Business
Ethics Education** 6 (2009), by Christopher Michaelson

[BUSINESS ETHICS]

The Importance of Meaningful Work

Too often, business students see little overlap between the jobs they plan to do — and those they consider most socially responsible or would most enjoy.

BY CHRISTOPHER MICHAELSON

Many employees today are motivated by an interest in meaningful work, not just economic rewards. A number of forces contribute to this search for meaning at work. On a generational level, older workers near retirement may be looking for work that is potentially more fulfilling, even if it is less economically rewarding. Meanwhile, the desire for meaningful work also seems pervasive among today's young entry-level workers, a generation known, at least in the United States, for a lack of organizational loyalty and a demand for a flexible work environment. Finally, for people of all ages, greater social and environmental consciousness is affecting consumption patterns while also influencing the labor supply. For instance, concern about climate change has expanded interest in career possibilities in renewable energy and is stimulating product and process innovation.

What role do business schools have in preparing our students to choose meaningful work? For a number of years, I have conducted a classroom exercise on meaningful work that



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is the basis for a forthcoming article in the 2009 issue of the *Journal of Business Ethics Education*. In the exercise, undergraduate and graduate business students are asked three questions over the course of an academic term:

1 A year out of this program, what do you expect your job will be? This is the pragmatic question of market fit, the near-term reality that loans need to be repaid, foundations built and families supported — often prior to the full-on pursuit of one's dreams.

2 What kind of job contributes the most to general well-being? In philosophical parlance, this is the normative question of social responsibility, referring to what we should do — not necessarily what we are motivated to do for self-realization or economic necessity.

3 Practicality aside, if you could be doing anything 10 years from now, what would it be? This is the “dream job” question, as close as business students come to defining what they are really all about, what would promote “self-realization.”

What has been most striking is that there is almost no overlap among students' answers to the three questions. For the first question, students often respond with generic corporate functions such as finance, marketing and information technology; typical job titles mentioned include roles like banking manager, financial analyst or IT analyst. When students answer the second question,

education, medicine and public safety are the fields they most often deem socially responsible; typical jobs that students identify include social worker, research scientist, doctor, teacher or charity director. Meanwhile, in answer to the third question, the arts, entertainment, sports and recreation are heavily represented as dream fields — and jobs like professional athlete, entrepreneur, filmmaker and travel guide are examples of specific jobs students typically mention. Although students

acknowledge that all three objectives matter, few expect to fulfill all of them in one career. This disparity leads me to challenge my students with another question: “Why are you studying so hard and paying so much to reach an objective that in your mind is neither your dream nor something you think is especially responsible?”

This paper is based on a teaching exercise, not a scientific research study, and the results of the exercise, while striking, may not be surprising. However, the findings have potentially important implications for managers and for human capital strategy; businesses and their managers need to plan

for a future in which multiple aspects of “meaning” will need to be factored into the enticements that attract and retain the best employees. Job design and long-term work motivation for such employees — who may also turn out to have the most creative

wanderlust — will need to incorporate innovation and sustainability as core to the work, not just as incidental add-ons.

In a world that is growing more attuned to the social and environmental responsibilities of businesses, we all would also do well to examine

our own work lives to verify, before it is too late, that they are indeed worth living. Career choice is an ethical choice and a comparative luxury that would be a shame for those who have it to waste.

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