

Breaking The Job Lock:

Imagine A World Where Pursuing Our Passions Pays the Bills

By Andrew Kimbrell

The alarm clock explodes with a high-pitched screech. It is 6:30 a.m.--another dreaded Monday. Kids need to be dressed, fed, rushed off to school. Then there is 40 minutes of fighting traffic and the sprint from the parking lot to your workstation. You arrive, breathless, just in the nick of time. Now is the moment to confront the week ahead. As usual, you are in overload mode. You seem to be working faster and faster but falling farther behind. What is worse, your unforgiving bosses think everything gets accomplished by magic. But you do not dare do or say anything that might jeopardize your job. (It hurts just to think of those swelling credit card balances.) At the end of the day, when you are drained and dragged out, it is time to endure the long drive home, get dinner ready, and maybe steal a few hours in front of the TV. Then to sleep, and it starts all over again.

Sound familiar? Despite utopian visions earlier in this century of technology freeing us all from the toil of work, we are now working harder than ever--with little relief in sight. In a recent poll, 88 percent of workers said their jobs require them to work longer (up from 70 percent 20 years ago), and 68 percent complained of having to work at greater speeds (up from 50 percent in 1977). And as if all this were not grim enough, the most discouraging aspect of our jobs is that they seem to accomplish little of lasting value. Studies consistently show that as many as 80 percent of workers in our society feel their jobs, however fast and furious, are "meaningless."

It is a disturbing picture. The "land of opportunity" is fast becoming a nation of stressed-out wage slaves. Yet no one in the American political arena, on the left or on the right, seems to notice what our jobs are doing to us. Everyone from the president on down declares that creating more new jobs is our most important goal. Left unspoken are the physical and mental suffering, the powerlessness and meaninglessness, that will be endemic to so many of these "new," often low-paying jobs.

Certainly, a low unemployment rate is not a bad thing, especially for the poor and poorly skilled among us. But more jobs is not a panacea for our problems. We must pay more attention to the kind and quality of work at which we spend our days, our weeks, our lives. It is not just about jobs, or even well-paying jobs. It's about meaningful work. Economists, politicians, union leaders, employers, activists, the media--everyone needs to help create a new vision of how we earn our livelihoods. We need work that is good for body, mind, and spirit; work that sustains family and community; work that connects us with and helps us protect the natural world.

Re-envisioning Work

An important starting point for any effort to re-envision work is to remember that there is nothing natural or pre-ordained about our modern system of jobs. For most of human history,

people worked far differently than we do, usually right at home in the midst of family, community, and nature. Work was not separated from the rest of their lives; it was not an uninterrupted eight-hour stretch of duty. Many traditional cultures do not even have a work for work, much less wage-based jobs. Indeed, the word *job* in English originally meant a criminal or demeaning action. (We retain this meaning when we call a bank robbery a "bank job.") After the industrial revolution took hold in 18th-century England, the first generations of factory workers felt that wage work was humiliating and undignified. Angry about being driven from their traditional work on the land or in crafts, they applied the word *job* to factory labor as a way of expressing their disgust.

Even today many of us avoid the word *job*, preferring more upscale terms like *occupation* or *career* to describe what we do for 40-plus hours each week. Yet the older meaning of these words also reveals something about the nature of work. *Occupation* originally meant to seize or capture. (It is still used in this sense when, for instance, we speak of the German occupation of France during World War II.) What an apt description of how jobs take over our lives, subjecting us to the demands of outside rulers. The original meaning of *career* fits well with the role we play in the speeded-up global economic rat race. In the 19th century, *career* meant "racing course" or "rapid and unrestrained" activity.

In searching for ways to put meaning back into our work, we might want to revive the term *vocation* (from the Latin for "voice" or "calling"). Today, "having a vocation" or "answering a calling" usually means embarking upon a religious life—an unfortunate narrowing of the concept. We all deserve to be involved in work to which we have been called by our passions and beliefs. Following a vocation can lead to a profession—literally, a "public declaration" of what we believe and who we are. A profession is what our work should be, but so rarely is.

The Cult of Efficiency

Any attempt to transform our work from a mere job into a profession of deeply felt values sets us on an inevitable path of conflict with the values of the industrialized job system. These values—speed, productivity, efficiency—govern the workplace in remarkably similar ways in both capitalist and socialist economies. Even though we are supposed to be living in the postindustrial era—many of our jobs are now dictated by the demands of computers instead of assembly lines—our lives at work are really not much different from those of 19th-century factory workers. We are still seen as replaceable spare parts for the great machines of production. From the checkout person at the grocery store to the highly trained engineer, we are all expected to work faster, waste less time, produce more.

We are not machines, of course, and the drive for ever greater efficiency in the competitive global economy is taking its toll. More than 80 percent of Americans say their lives are more stressful now than they were five years ago; pressures at work are cited as the primary reason. More and more of us need to be medicated just to get through the workday. More than 45 million American adults are taking prescription psychotropic medications. The largest increase is not in the use of the much publicized antidepressant Prozac, but rather in a variety of drugs used to treat anxiety and stress disorders.

As a society we continue to honor the virtues of caring and empathy in our personal lives, and these must become the cornerstones of a new kind of work ethic. Empathy for the physical and mental needs of workers must replace efficiency as the paramount value of the workplace.

After all, no one in their right mind evaluates the importance of their family, friends, or even pets on a strict efficiency basis.

The Dictatorship of the Workplace

Good work involves not only the character and values of work, but also the power relationships in the workplace. Economists and politicians never mention it, but under the job system, virtually every workplace is a dictatorship. Let's face it: Most of us spend the majority of our adult lives as passive subjects in managerial tyrannies. Workers—whatever the color of their collars—have little say in forming workplace policies or conditions.

Even many of the advances for workers, hard-won through decades of labor-movement struggles, have been rolled back in recent years. While this is largely the result of corporate pressure, unions bear some responsibility for their own decline by choosing to focus almost exclusively on wage issues: they seldom explore other ways to improve workers' lives. Pay is important to anyone with a job, but a sense of purpose and accomplishment, an outlet for creativity, an opportunity for flexibility, and co-worker relationships matter, too. As the American labor movement pushes to revitalize itself by reaching out to women, youth, minorities, and the public at large, there is hope that helping workers achieve other elements of good work will find a more prominent place on union agendas.

Over the past 20 years, a variety of employee ownership strategies and more ambitious efforts toward workplace democracy have brought greater equity to many thousands of workers. A new generation of socially responsible businesses have broadened employees' role in decision making—a trend that is now spreading to some mainstream firms. Many people have found that leaving the dictatorship of the workplace and pursuing partnership or self-employment options, while fraught with risks, can be a way to more fulfilling work and lives. For some it simply means repackaging current job skills as a consulting business in order to spend more time with family or favorite pursuits; others, inspired by writers like Wendell Berry and Paul Hawken, have created independent livelihoods that make a contribution to society and the planet. Each of these efforts is a potentially important step in the re-creation of work.

A Nation of Strangers

For years we have heard urgent pleas to "preserve family values" and to "restore a sense of community" in our lives. Yet we rarely hear the advocates of these causes mention that our current job system is one of the chief culprits in destroying traditional bonds of family and community life. For generations workers have been forced to move to wherever jobs could be found, uprooting their spouses and children from family, friends, and community connections. Downsizing, corporate restructuring, shifting production to low-wage areas, and other favorite tools of the globalized economy keep almost all of us anxious and scouting for the next job. Always anticipating the next move to Seattle, Sarasota, or Singapore, we invest little energy in maintaining strong bonds to our extended family, our community, or any particular place. We have become, in investigative journalist Vance Packard's memorable phrase, "a nation of strangers." Witness the throngs at airports each Thanksgiving as millions of people return "home" to find a 48-hour semblance of family and community.

A new vision of good work involves pressuring corporations to make a firm commitment to the places where they do business, and working to end the game of economic pinball, where jobs

are endlessly bumped from location to location. It also requires that we begin to value family concerns, community connections, and ties to the places we live, above the financial gains of job mobility. This is not an easy commitment to make since it may mean missing out on more money or a job advancement. Yet if we continue to prize career success above all other aspects of our lives, we run the risk of becoming little more than global nomads seeking a buyer for our labor and ourselves.

Get Working

For the vast majority of us, even contemplating liberation from our current jobs seems hopelessly utopian. We would love to tell our boss to "take this job and shove it," but mortgage and rent notices, insurance premiums, and credit card bills remind us every day why we can not. We are victims of a kind of blackmail. For many Americans, this situation is compounded by the fact that buying things we do not really want has become a comfort and compensatory compulsion that helps us cope with jobs offering little meaning.

We can no longer let wage blackmail run our lives. We must seek a vocation that truly expresses our values and fits our needs. Thinking about our true calling, perhaps for the first time, may take considerable time and patience. We have worked for so long at jobs we "have to do" that we often have not considered the work we want and need to do.

Even when the path becomes clear, embarking on your profession may not be easy. You may have to steal hours from jobs that financial need requires you to keep. You may have to slash your monthly budget to have the time you want. You must also be prepared to face criticism as people scold you for abandoning your responsibilities and sacrificing the well-being of others to "do your own thing."

On the political front, we must push for measures that give workers more paid vacation, greater flexibility in choosing part-time work, a higher minimum wage, and paid leave to care for family. National health insurance is an important step that could free the entrepreneurial energies of workers who stay in their jobs just for medical benefits.

The calling of good work also involves mentoring young people to seek vocations rather than settling for jobs. Raising children, nurturing families, and volunteering in your community are wonderful vocations in their own right, deserving at least as much respect and support as wage employment. We must also urge teachers, counselors, and clergy to redefine work for future generations, and to understand the vital role good work must play in true education, and in spiritual and mental growth. Ultimately, of course, the most important way we can teach the next generation about good work is by example.

For many, the necessities of life, and even following a calling, may still mean working in the corporate job system. Good work in these circumstances requires us to do all we can to revive unions as active forces for workplace democracy. Unions, for their part, should become key players establishing patterns of worker participation and job flexibility. At the same time, we need to promote socially responsible business behavior as the standard, rather than the exception.

We must be patient with ourselves and others as we begin the difficult personal and collective search for good work. Yet we must remain firmly dedicated to the principle, expressed well by economist E.F. Schumacher, that our "real task is to adapt the work to the needs of the worker rather than demand that the worker adapt himself to the need of the work."

From *Utne Reader*, January-February 1999, pp. 47-49. Andrew Kimbrell is president of the International Center for Technology Assessment in Washington, D.C., and author of *The Human Body Shop* and *The Masculine Mystique*.