
Work, Play, and Meaning

As pointed out in *Affiliation in the Workplace* visions of the future of work have ranged from the apocalyptic to a technology induced nirvana of prosperity. Such extreme possibilities also emerge in thinking about how technology and automation may affect jobs and society (Eduardo Porter, *Jobs Threatened by Machines: A Once 'Stupid' Concern Gains Respect*, New York Times, June 7, 2016). Whether the path forward is positive and we enjoy increased personal fulfillment and strengthened communities, or whether we permit further worsening of inequality, so that a few prosper and the vast majority suffer, will depend on our collective will to create a just society. If that collective will falters our society, as we know it, is in jeopardy. If, on the other hand, we bend the arc toward growing social justice then we, and future generations, can look to integrating work, play, and meaning in new, positive ways. Let us explore that.

In reflecting on our connection with work, Betsy Brewer, as referenced in *Affiliation in the Workplace*, framed the question of why we work in the context of the interior processes of discovering meaning (what), being (who) and doing (how), and identified four work relationships to the external world:

- A job: based on material rewards, a transaction
- An occupation: involving greater meaning, but doing dominates
- A career: requiring personal initiative, but needing collective approval
- A vocation: calling in the service of a greater good

There is no implication that one relationship is better than another or that one should precede another. Moreover, we may move from one form of work relationship to another throughout our lives. I have found that clients frequently seek to move closer to the vocation or career forms of relationship as their work lives unfold. Frederick Buechner describes vocation as “the place where our deep gladness meets the world’s deep need.” This captures well the depth of meaning we often seek in our work. And we frequently see similar depth of meaning and feeling expressed in our leisure pursuits. For example, the intensity of emotion that accompanies support for a sports team, the spiritual tranquility that accompanies creative or pastoral endeavors, or the communal spirit that accompanies team activities. So work and play have personal meaning and strong emotions in common. What other aspects of play which, if created in work, can create similar feelings of well-being? Let me suggest they include the following:

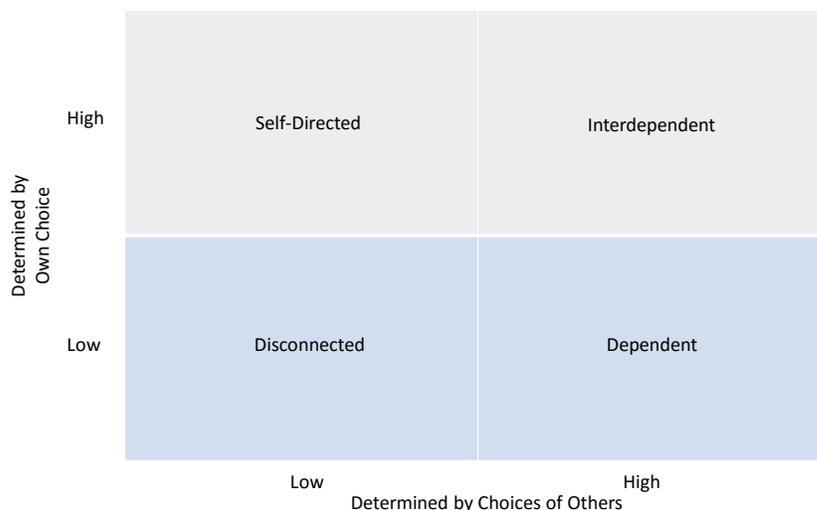
- Choice
 - Determining our own course of action
- Autonomy
 - Expressing ourselves
- Flexibility
 - Embracing change and surprise
- Respect
 - Receiving positive feedback
- Tangibility
 - Seeing meaningful results

- Novelty
 - Exercising our curiosity
- Familiarity
 - Re-engaging with happy past endeavors
- Pleasure
 - Experiencing enjoyment
- Community
 - Transcending ourselves to bring joy or value to others

These attributes naturally accompany a nontraditional, entrepreneurial career path, which is self-directed, and is at the intersection of our passion/interests, skills, and external needs as described in *How to Build a Nontraditional Career Path*. It is one reason why such a path is so appealing.

Let us look in more depth at the first item, namely choice, in examining the relationship of work and play. We can consider choice along two dimensions: the extent to which it is personally determined, and the extent to which our actions are determined by the choices of others, for example by a boss in a conventional work setting. This builds on the concepts of the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument that considers conflict along the two dimensions of meeting our own needs and meeting the needs of others. The choice framework is also related to that of evolving forms of career relationship described in *Building Workforce Strength*.

With respect to choice we can represent the framework as follows:



Since play is self-directed it will mainly be in the upper left quadrant, sometimes in the upper right, interdependent, quadrant when it involves a group activity. A nontraditional career similarly will be in the top two quadrants. However, conventional work is likely to reside in the lower right, dependent, quadrant. Someone withdrawing from the world of work will be in the lower left, disconnected, quadrant. As societal inequality increases we constrain more people to the lower half of this diagram, with a decreased sense of personal fulfillment and choice. It is awful that those in poverty often find themselves in the lower left quadrant. Bending the arc of our society upward toward economic and social justice will help people move to the upper half

of the diagram with more control over personal choices, increased personal fulfillment, and community engagement.

The implications of this framework are as follows on a personal, organizational, and community level:

- Personal
 - Lay a foundation that supports personal choice, for example by:
 - Embracing educational opportunities.
 - Selecting career directions that honor personal attributes and aspirations, such as nontraditional, entrepreneurial career paths, or working in organizations that value personal development.
 - Avoid constraining personal choices
 - By not taking on excessive debt.
 - Avoiding organizations that disproportionately reward those at the top.
 - Support our communities based on staying informed about emerging social, business, and workplace issues; engaging with those organizations that are socially responsible; and supporting public policy that benefits all.
- Organizational
 - Promote practices that support personal development as described in *Building Workforce Strength*.
 - Promote practices that honor the needs of all stakeholders and recognize the importance of individual, organizational, and community well-being as described in *Business Behaving Well*.
 - Seek to build a sense of affiliation with those in the workforce viewing workforce relationships as partnerships as described in *Affiliation in the Workplace*.
- Community
 - Pursue public policies that distribute resources equitably, gaining the benefits outlined in *Business Behaving Well*.
 - Support social and community causes that benefit all such as full access to healthcare through a single-payer, Medicare-for-all system in the United States, and strengthened education at all levels.

In taking these steps we move closer to a society that benefits all rather than a select few, that supports the exercise of personal choice rather than imposition of the views of others, and that enhances personal fulfillment through work and play, leading to an inclusive and vibrant community.

Parts of this article are based on concepts from *How to Build a Nontraditional Career Path* (Praeger, 2014), *Business Behaving Well* (Potomac Books, Inc., 2013), *Building Workforce Strength* (Praeger, 2010), and *Affiliation in the Workplace* (Praeger, 2003).