

# The meaning of work in modern times<sup>1</sup>

**Estelle M. Morin, Ph. D., professor, HEC Montréal, and psychologist<sup>2i</sup>**

Conference. 10<sup>th</sup> World Congress on Human Resources Management, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, August, 20<sup>th</sup>, 2004.

Let us start with these questions. Have you ever had a meaningful work? If so, what was it like? If not, what does it lack? Have you ever thought of the consequences of not being able to understand what is going on in one's work and to know the results of one's actions? In sociology, it is called "alienation." This phenomenon can be traced back to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, maybe even earlier...

Along with the industrialization of the societies, work was organized in a scientific manner. Time and movement studies were conducted in order to maximize the efficiency of operations and the productivity of workers. People were then treated as if they were an extension of the machine and expendable spare parts; they were asked to exert simple, narrow skills, and their performance was closely monitored by foremen dedicated to the hierarchy. This reminds us of *Modern Times* (1929), the classic movie of Charlie Chaplin.

## The modern times: industrialization and scientific management



Working on the assembly line, Charlie is driven crazy by the pace of the machine and the tough manner of his foreman. In his fantasy, Charlie gets a tick that makes him move like a machine. Stuck on a conveyer belt, he runs through the machine and becomes part of it.

What this fantasy triggers off your mind? On its first appearance, it could be the factory floor, with its automatism, standardization and specialization, its rationalism, its technology and its routine. On second thoughts, it could also be the robotization, the dehumanization, the depersonalization of the worker.

Depersonalization is a strong managerial tendency that is derived from the exclusive valorization of productivity and financial results. It consists in adopting so-called objective and impersonal attitudes toward people and to treat them like any other kind of resources, rejecting more or less consciously their

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<sup>1</sup> The author is grateful to Maria José Tonelli, professor, Fundação Getulio Vargas (SP), and Nelson Ramalho, assistant professor, Escola Superior de Ciências Empresariais de l'Instituto Politécnico de Setúbal, for their feedback and comments on the previous version of this conference.

<sup>2</sup> Estelle M. Morin, HEC Montréal, Department of Management, 3000, chemin de la Côte Sainte-Catherine, Montréal, Québec, Canada, H3T 2A7. [estelle.morin@hec.ca](mailto:estelle.morin@hec.ca); [www.hec.ca/estelle.morin](http://www.hec.ca/estelle.morin)

psychological, sociological, cultural, and spiritual complexity<sup>3</sup>. For example, customers are regarded as economic agents whose sole function is to purchase the goods or services offered by the organization. Similarly, employees are considered as resources that should devote their time and talents to the financial success of the organization. This type of vision leads directly to the denial of the actors' humanity. As Martin Buber once wrote: "*The overvaluation of productivity that is afflicting our age has so thrived and its par-technical glance has set up a senseless exclusiveness of its own that even genuinely creative men allow their organic skills to degenerate into an autonomous growth to satisfy the demand of the day...*"<sup>4</sup> The point here is not to downplay the importance of productivity and financial success, but to recognize the importance of human work, human existence and human dignity.

## **Work in the post-modern times: globalization and managerial fads**

Work has evolved a lot since the Industrial Revolution. Partly due to the progress of sciences and technologies, major transformations happened in the organizational structure and culture, with their consequences on the organization of work. In the opinion of Joanne Ciulla<sup>5</sup>, if workers of the modern times were overworked, those of the post modern times are not only overworked but also over managed, employers appearing eager to try the "flavor of the day" in order to increase the financial performance of their companies.

Although the frenetic movement of changes has been slowed during the recent years, many managerial fads still do a lot of damage to work and working conditions. Also, the globalization with its outsourcing, offshoring, and «all-of-the-other-ing» adds complexity to the problem of work. However, they also create many opportunities to change mentality and to restore the meaning of work for human beings. As we get all connected, we share more and more problems, and solutions!

## **Work and the work instinct**

According to James Hillman: "*We moralize work and make it a problem, forgetting that the hands love to work and in the hands is the mind. That "work ethic" idea does more to impede working... it makes it a duty instead of a pleasure. (...) I merely want to speak of working as a pleasure, as an instinctual gratification — not just "the right to work", or work as an economic necessity or a social duty or a moral penance laid onto Adam after leaving the Paradise. The hands themselves want to do things, and the mind loves to apply itself. Work is*

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<sup>3</sup> E. Weisskopf-Joelson (1967) Meaning as an integrating factor. In C. Bühler & F. Massarik (Eds) *The Course of Human Life. A Study of Goals in the Humanistic Perspective*. New York: Springer.

<sup>4</sup> Martin Buber (1958) *I and Thou* (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.) New York. Charles Scribner's Sons, (p. 8.)

<sup>5</sup> Joanne B. Ciulla (2000) *The Working Life. The Promise and Betrayal of Modern Work*. New York: Times Book.

*irreducible. We don't work for food gathering or tribal power and conquest or to buy a new car and so on and so forth. Working is its own end and brings its own joy; but one has to have a fantasy so that work can go on, and the fantasies we now have about it — economic and sociological — keep it from going on, so we have a huge problem of productivity and quality in our Western work. We have got work where we don't want it. We don't want to work. It's like not wanting to eat or to make love. It's an instinctual laming. And this is psychology's fault: it doesn't attend to the work instinct.”<sup>6</sup>*

What is this work instinct? In psychology, an instinct is an innate and powerful tendency. So, the work instinct would be an innate and powerful tendency to exert one's mental and physical powers, one's skills and talents, in order to achieve something, to reach a goal, to create, to express one's self, etc. Working is vital for human beings; it is a critical activity for the preservation of personal health.

To the extent that the work organization allows, work can serve as a tonic for personal identity in that it helps boost self-esteem. When an individual does a meaningful work, he actually develops a sense of identity, worth, and dignity. By achieving meaningful results, he actually achieves himself, grows, and even, actualizes his full potential. Somehow, he has an opportunity to become who he is and to contribute to the improvement of his life conditions and of his community. Work becomes problematic when an individual cannot relate to it. Some would say that this experience is «alienation».

When one thinks of work, one often thinks of a job. But work is far more than a job. Although work certainly provides for basic subsistence needs and decent living conditions, this is not its only function. Work is, above all, an activity through which an individual fits into the world, creates new relations, uses his talents, learns and grows develops his identity and a sense of belonging.

To work is to exert effort in order to make something, to achieve something, to produce a desired effect. For human beings, “to be able to do something” means to make it visible that “I”, as the subject, is active in the world, that “I” exist<sup>7</sup>. As Erich Fromm pointed it, work is an effective mean to deal with the angst of death and void. He once wrote: “*The principle can be formulated thus: I am because I effect.*”<sup>8</sup> Therefore, working is a meaningful way to prove one's existence, and hopefully, that it is worth to be lived.

More specifically, the work instinct is associated with the pleasure that provides the opportunity to achieve something, to surpass oneself, to exercise one's

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<sup>6</sup> James Hillman (1989) *A Blue Fire. Selected Writings*. New York: Harper & Row, pp. 171-172.

<sup>7</sup> Victor Jankélévitch (1980) *Le Je-ne-sais-quoi et le Presque-rien. Vol. 2. La méconnaissance*. Paris : Seuil.

<sup>8</sup> Erich Fromm, (1973). *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*. New York: Holt: Rinehart and Winston, p. 235.

imagination and intelligence, to become a better person, to know oneself, to meet other people, to help people, to feel competent and powerful, to be effective, etc. In sum, work is a major activity for human beings. It corresponds to the motivation to demonstrate one's existence, to transcend one's own death by leaving traces of one's existence.

## What is the meaning of work in our post-modern times?

There are three major approaches to the study of meaning of work: the definitions of work, the orientations of work and the coherence of work. As such, we can define the meaning of work in three ways, as illustrated in Figure 1.

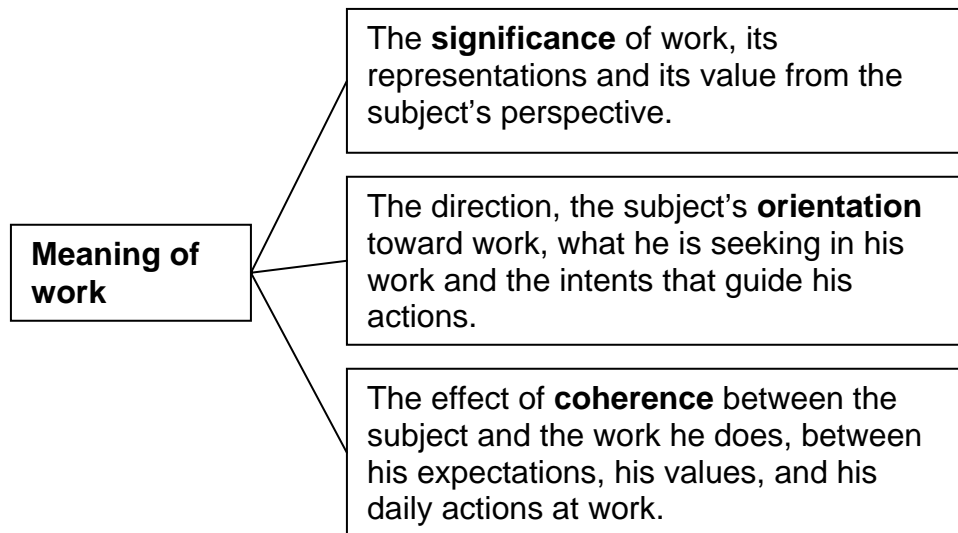


Figure 1. Three definitions of the concept “meaning of work”

### The significance of work

The concept of “meaning of work” can be defined as the significance the subject attributes to work, his representations of work, and the importance it has in his life. This way of defining the meaning of work leads to identifying work definition models, as Meaning of Working International team members proposed it<sup>9</sup>, or the centrality of work, as Morse and Weiss stated it<sup>10</sup>.

Work is central in many cultures, although every culture has its own values and conceptions about it. However, it seems that work is important and significant for a majority of people considering the time that individuals devote to work in their lives, the numerous functions which it accomplishes for them, and the fact that

<sup>9</sup> MOW International Research Team (1987). *The meaning of working*, New York: Academic Press.; I. Harpaz & X. Fu (2002). The structure of the meaning of work: A relative stability amidst change. *Human Relations*, 5, 639-667

<sup>10</sup> N. C. Morse & R. Weiss (1955). The function and meaning of work and the job. *American Sociological Review*, 20(2), 191-198

work is closely linked with other important aspects of daily life such as family, leisure, religion, and community life<sup>11</sup>.

The notion of “**work**” has several definitions, but they all share the idea of a *purposeful activity*. This notion generally refers to expending energy through a set of coordinated activities aimed at producing something useful. Work may be pleasant or unpleasant, and may or may not be associated with monetary exchanges. Moreover, it does not necessarily have to be accomplished in the context of a job. Generally, one can find at least three patterns: a job, a career and a call. Amy Wrzesniewski is testing the idea that individuals’ dispositions and beliefs about work shape their working experience. She calls it “job crafting”.<sup>12</sup>

### **The work values**

The concept “meaning of work” can also be defined as one’s orientation or inclination toward work, what the subject is seeking in the work, and the intents that guide his actions. Super and Šverko have found 5 major orientations: autonomy, social advancement, self-achievement, social interactions and risk-taking<sup>13</sup>. Ros, Schwartz and Surkiss present a theory of work values, describing four axes: conservation, self-enhancement, openness to change and self-transcendence<sup>14</sup>. Each axis is defined by basic individual values, as shown in the figure 2.

These researchers apply this model “to explore the significance of work as a vehicle for reaching cherished goals”<sup>15</sup>. Let’s take an example. John values power, achievement and self-direction; his work would be meaningful to the extent it allows him to find social status and prestige, personal success and freedom in his life. Ros and her colleagues investigated this model in 155 samples from 55 countries. In sum, there are three types of work values that seem to reach the consensus: self-actualization (autonomy, learning, self-realization, etc.), security (work conditions and benefits, safety, respect, etc.), and relations (social contact, social contribution, memberships, etc.).

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<sup>11</sup> George W. England & W. T. Whiteley (1990). Cross-National Meanings of Working. In A. P. Brief et W. R. Nord (Eds.) *Meaning of occupational work*, Toronto: Lexington Books, 65-106

<sup>12</sup> Amy Wrzesniewski, Jane E. Dutton, & G. Debebe, G. (2003). Interpersonal sensemaking and the meaning of work. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 25, 93-135.; Amy Wrzesniewski (2002). “It’s not just a job”: Shifting meanings of work in the wake of 9/11. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 11(2), 230-234.; Amy Wrzesniewski & Jane E. Dutton (2001). Crafting a job: Revisioning employees as active crafters of their work. *Academy of Management Review*, 26(2), 179-201.

<sup>13</sup> Donald E. Super & Branimir Šverko (1995). *Life Roles, Values, and Careers*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

<sup>14</sup> Maria Ros, Shalom H. Schwartz & Shoshana Surkiss (1999). Basic Individual Values, Work Values, and the Meaning of Work. *Applied Psychology. An International Review*, 48(1), 49-71

<sup>15</sup> Ros & al., op.cit., p. 50

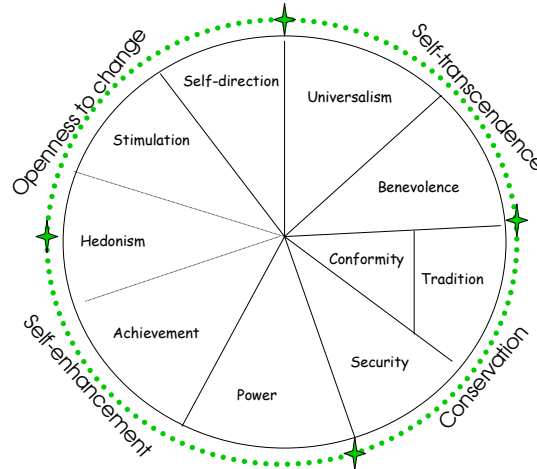


Figure 2. Structure of relations among the value types according to the theory<sup>16</sup>

### The work coherence

The concept “meaning of work” can be defined as an effect of coherence between the subject and the work he does, the level of harmony or balance he achieves in his relationship to work<sup>17</sup>. The thoughts that one has about something else tend to organize themselves into balanced systems and, consequently, any incoherence leads to activities (intellectual, emotional, behavioral, etc.) to restore that balance. The sense of coherence that the subject finds in his relationship to work gives him a sense of psychological security and serenity which helps him to cope with the challenges that are inevitably involved in performing his duties<sup>18</sup>.

In our studies on work organization, the meaning of work is defined as an effect of coherence between the characteristics sought by a subject in his work and those he perceives in the work he does. The characteristics the individual seeks in his work should reflect his work values as those mentioned previously. Studied in several works since 1960, the characteristics of a stimulating or motivating job have given rise to a field of knowledge called “job design”<sup>19</sup>.

Since 1993, we have studied different environments to determine the characteristics of a meaningful job.<sup>20</sup> The model that seems to emerge from all

<sup>16</sup> Ros & al., op.cit., p. 53

<sup>17</sup> Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990). *Flow. The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. New York: Harper & Row.

<sup>18</sup> A. Antonovsky (1987). *Unraveling the Mystery of Health*. San Francisco (CA): Jossey-Bass.; D. R. Strauser & D. C. Lustig (2003). The moderating effect of sense of coherence on work adjustment. *Journal of Employment Counseling*, 40, 129-140

<sup>19</sup> J. R. Hackman & G. R. Oldham (1980). *Work redesign*. Reading (MA): Addison-Wesley; Eric Trist (1978) Adapting to a changing world. *Labour Gazette*, 78, pp. 14-20

<sup>20</sup> Estelle M. Morin (2003) Sens du travail. Définition, mesure et validation. In C. Vandenberghe, N. Delobbe et G. Karnas (éd) *Dimensions individuelles et sociales de l'investissement professionnel*. Vol. 2,

the studies since 1997 features six factors: social purpose, moral correctness, achievement-related pleasure, autonomy, recognition, and positive relationships. Table 1 presents the characteristics of a meaningful work.

<b>Job Characteristic</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Social purpose	Doing something that is useful to others or to society, that contributes to society.
Moral correctness	Doing a job that is morally justifiable in terms of its processes and its results.
Achievement-related pleasure	Enjoying one's job, doing a job that stimulates the development of one's potential and that enables achieving one's goals.
Autonomy	Being able to use one's skills and judgment to solve problems and make decisions regarding one's job.
Recognition	Doing a job that corresponds to one's skills, whose results are recognized and whose salary is adequate.
Positive relationships	Doing a job that enables making interesting contacts and good relationships with others.

Table 1. Characteristics of a meaningful work

A meaningful work is useful to society or to others. Following the sociotechnical model<sup>21</sup>, it is important to do something that serves something or someone, something that brings a contribution to others or to society.

Work is meaningful when it is done responsibly, not just in terms of its execution, but in terms of the products and consequences it engenders. It brings us to another, often neglected, dimension in work organization models: workplace ethics or moral correctness. Recent scandals in the business world may have led to some soul searching with regard to the moral correctness of social and organizational practices, with ethical and moral problems becoming a growing concern in the workplace<sup>22</sup>. For example, Jackall describes the moral dilemma that managers find themselves in when they witness the mediocrity of decisions

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Actes du 12e Congrès de psychologie du travail et des organisations, Louvain la Neuve, UCL Presses universitaires de Louvain, 11-20.; Estelle M. Morin (2001) Os sentidos do trabalho, *Revista de Administração de Empresas*, 41(3), 8-19; Estelle M. Morin (1997). Le sens du travail pour des gestionnaires francophones. *Revue Psychologie du travail et des organisations*, 3 (2 et 3), (paru en 1998), 26-45; Estelle M. Morin & Benoît Cherré (1999). Les cadres face au sens du travail, *Revue Française de Gestion*, 126, 83-93.

<sup>21</sup> E. L. Trist (1981). The sociotechnical perspective. The evolution of sociotechnical systems as a conceptual framework and as an action research program, pp. 19-75. In A. Van de Ven & W.F. Joyce (Eds.), *Perspectives on organization design and behavior*. New York: Wiley.

<sup>22</sup> See the special topic in *Academy of Management Executive*, 18(2), 2004, pp. 37-91.

taken with regard to workers; they are torn between their personal values of justice and honesty and their career ambitions. While some people choose to follow their conscience, others sacrifice their morals and play the “survival” game<sup>23</sup>. Work is an activity that brings people and groups of people together, that gives rise to conflicts and that leads to consequences that aren’t always predictable. Work is meaningful when it is performed in a context following established rules and duties and when inspired by moral and spiritual values.

For work to be meaningful, it should also be enjoyable to the worker. For this to occur, it should correspond to his fields of interest, call on his skills, stimulate his potential, and effectively enable him to reach his objectives.

For work to be meaningful, it should also enable the worker to use his skills and judgment, to showcase his problem-solving creativity, and to have a voice with regard to decisions that involve him.

Recognition is another important characteristic of a meaningful job. Working at a job that corresponds to one’s abilities, where one’s talents are recognized, and that provides a salary that provides for one’s needs are all desirable signs of recognition.

For work to be meaningful, it should be performed in an environment that stimulates the development of positive professional relationships: a job that enables the worker to enjoy interesting contacts, good relationships with others, camaraderie with one’s co-workers, and the ability to yield influence in one’s field.

These six factors are supposed to characterize a meaningful work. But will it be the case for everyone, everywhere? Like the quest for the meaning of life, the key for a meaningful work has subjective and objective features to it. So, managers cannot create meaningful work for the employees. However, they can help by providing the employees with the proper conditions. Above all, the most important ingredient is the moral conditions of the work itself. As Ciulla states it clearly: “All employees must be treated with dignity and respect. (...) To seek meaning, one has to feel like human being.”<sup>24</sup>

## **Managerial implications**

Summing up the researches conducted in the field of the “meaning of work”, we first need to recognize that meaning is a result of a subjective experience. However, it is possible to understand the meaning that one finds in one’s work and set the conditions into the workplace to foster it. That is, we can understand

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<sup>23</sup> R. Jackall (1996). *Moral Mazes: Managerial Work and Personal Ethics*. In M. D. Errmann et R. J. Lundman (Eds.), *Corporate and Governmental Deviance: Problems of Organizational Behavior in Contemporary Society*, New York: Oxford University Press, 61-76.

<sup>24</sup> Joanne B. Ciulla (2000), op. cit., p. 225.

the manner in which individuals conceive work, and the values it represents. We can also make explicit their work goals and help them to find a way to achieve them. Finally, we can organize work so that it meets the requirements of a meaningful work. According to Ciulla and our field studies, the prime one is respect and dignity.

The last years have been prolific for the publications of handbook on healthy work. Among them, I would recommend:

- Howard Gardner, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, and William Damon's *Good Work*
- Daniel Kahneman, Edward Diener, Norbert Schwarz's *Well-Being: Foundations of Hedonic Psychology*
- Barry Schwartz's *The Paradox of Choice: Why More Is Less*
- Julian Barling and Michael R. Frone's *The Psychology of Workplace safety*
- James Campbell Quick and Lois E. Tetrick's *Handbook of Occupational Health Psychology*.

There are many implications for the management of work in post-modern organizations. In order to treat people with respect and dignity, managers can:

1. Provide them with **safe and healthy working conditions**: physical environment (air, oxygen, light, space, hazards, equipments, etc.), hours (enough to do the work, but enough to have a life outside work), salary and benefits (fairness and quality of life),
2. Give them a **purpose**: to have a purpose for working (it gives an orientation, a direction, a sense to work)
3. Promote **ethical behaviors**: to do a work morally acceptable in its processes and its results (so employees could speak of it to their people, without feeling shame or guilt, but with feeling of pride and dignity!)
4. Stimulate their **self-efficacy**: to be able to do the work they are asked to do, in an effective way (again, employees could then be pride of their achievements)
5. Adjust their **work load** (physical, mental, emotional load) as well as providing with clear orientations, sufficient resources and timely feedback.
6. Encourage **pleasure**: to enjoy the work they are doing (because they like it! It is fun! Why not?)
7. Develop their **autonomy**: to have some latitude in the realization of the work (so they can exercise their skills, judgment, intelligence, to solve problems, and improve methods and results, and by the way, they can learn, develop, improve their skills and become optimistic for their future...)
8. Give them **support**: to have the support of their colleagues and their superior when they face difficulties or problems (it is quite important in times of stress, since it buffers its negative impacts)

9. Show them **recognition**: to be recognized for their competencies and their results, to be respected by others (again, an existential need of being and being accepted by others)
10. Promote **positive relationships**: to work in a team spirit, to have opportunity to meet people and have positive relationships (related to the previous one, an existential need to be in relations with others, to belong to a group, very human!)

Managers play a key role in building healthy workplaces. First, they should have the skills and the integrity to clarify expectations and to provide clear, coherent guidance to their employees along with the mission of the organization they lead, in order to give work a sense of purpose and usefulness. They are also responsible for ensuring that the time and well-being of employees are respected. They must have the courage to make strategic decisions that promote justice, equity, and their staff's health and safety. They must also ensure that work and organizational practices respect human dignity. They should support the efforts and initiatives of their employees and encourage mutual support in difficult times.

It is important for managers to pay attention to the quality of recruitment and promotion decisions, the effectiveness of training programs, and the participation of employees in decisions regarding their work organization.

It is also important to introduce management practices that promote trust in the workplace. This also entails restoring human dignity in contemporary management practices.

Managers should therefore monitor the quality of professional relationships in their department; they set the tone through their own attitudes and behaviors. They should also have the courage to set the rules of proper conduct for their team, encouraging all employees to respect each other and to keep their commitments. Leading also means exerting moral leadership; authority granted by the skills or the position in the organization should be used for the common good. The value of leadership lies in the leader's ability to preserve and promote core values.

If only we could open up our mind and recognize work as essential to the development of human beings, not as a social duty or an economic necessity, or a burden, a fate, an Adam's penitence, etc. As James Hillman wrote it so poetically, human hands want to make something and human mind likes to think, solve and imagine. Human beings like to create through their work, and to recreate themselves through their work. Work has its own goal and brings its own joys. The fantasies that were developed by economics and finance are not efficient to make it uplift. Maslow also made his claim for work<sup>25</sup> :

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<sup>25</sup> A. H. Maslow (2000) *The Maslow Business Reader* (edited by Deborah C. Stephens), New York: John Wiley & sons, pp. 5-6.

« I gave up long ago the possibility of improving the world or the whole human species via individual psychotherapy. This is impracticable. As a matter of fact it is impossible quantitatively. (...) Then I turned for my utopian purposes to education as a way of reaching the whole human species. I then thought of the lessons from individual psychotherapy as essentially research data, the most important usefulness of which was application to the eupsychian improvement of educational institutions so that they could make people better en masse. Only recently has it dawned on me that as important as education perhaps more important is the work life of the individual since everybody works. If the lessons of psychology, of individual psychotherapy, of social psychology, and so forth, can be applied to man's economic life, then my hope is that this too can be given an enlightened direction, thereby tending to influence in principle all human beings. »

Thank you for your attention, participation and questions.

Estelle

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<sup>i</sup> Estelle M. Morin received her Ph.D. in Industrial and Organizational Psychology from University of Montreal in 1990. She is full professor of Organizational Behavior at HEC Montréal (the Affiliated Business School of University of Montreal). She is a psychologist in private practice since 1984. Her primary research interest is in the field of organizational behavior and organizational development. Her main research question is how to organize work in order to promote the well-being of employees as well as organizational commitment and organizational effectiveness. She has conducted many field studies in Quebec, France Belgium and Brazil on the meaning of work and its links with psychological well-being, psychological distress, job satisfaction and organizational commitment. In 2002, she has founded with other colleagues of various universities CRITEOS, Research and Intervention Center for Work, Organizational Effectiveness and Health, at HEC Montréal ([www.hec.ca/criteos](http://www.hec.ca/criteos)).

She is a member of the Board of *Réseau de la santé et de la sécurité au travail du Québec* and of the Board of the *Canadian Association for Research on Work and Health* (CARWH). She is author of several books, among them: *Psychologies au travail* (Gaëtan Morin, 1996), *In Search of Meaning* (Jossey Bass, 1995), *Performance Indicators* (Guérin/CGA, 1999), *L'efficacité de l'organisation* (Gaëtan Morin, 1994). She has also published many articles, mainly on the issues of meaning of work and organizational effectiveness, in French but also in Portuguese and in English, in *Revue internationale de gestion*, *Revue française de gestion*, *Revista de Administração de Empresas*, *Psicologia*,

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*Interactions, Revue Psychologie du travail et des organisations, Industrial and Environmental Crisis Quarterly, Revue québécoise de psychologie and Psychologie Québec.* She is member of American Psychological Association, Canadian Psychological Association, Ordre des psychologues du Québec and Academy of Management.