

1.3.1: The Nature of Work

EXPLORING MANAGERIAL CAREERS

The Management Challenge at Apple and Google

When Apple was developing iOS 10, a group of 600 engineers was able to debug, develop, and deploy the new programming within two years. Contrarily, Microsoft engineers were able to develop and execute the programming on Vista, but it took considerably longer and was a bigger undertaking, with almost 6,000 engineers at hand. What was the difference?

According to the study conducted by leadership consulting firm Bain & Company, companies like Apple, Google, and Netflix are 40 percent more productive than the average company. Some may think that this is a product of the hiring pool; big companies generally attract a more talented group of recruits. With unique benefits and prowess in the industry, this must be the case. Wrong. Google and Apple have found a way to answer the most fundamental question in management: How do you balance productivity while maintaining employee satisfaction and commitment?

Companies such as Google have approximately the same percentage of “star players” as other companies, but instead of spreading out the talent, they group them dynamically to achieve more throughout the day. This grouping focuses on grouping key players in the most business-critical roles, and is the key to success for the overall company. You’ve heard the saying “You’re only as strong as your weakest link,” and in the case of Apple, there were no weak links, making their productivity extremely high overall. To make matters more complicated, the fast-paced workplace and technology changes, including the diversity of employees and the global marketplace, takes a considerable toll on employee expectations, as do the overall stresses of the business performance. Apple is just one example of a company that figured out one of the pieces to this puzzle, but it is illustrative of what is happening in the workplace all around the globe.

Contemporary managers are witnessing changes in technologies, markets, competition, workforce demographics, employee expectations, and ethical standards. At the heart of these changes is the issue of how to manage people effectively. To attain corporate objectives, each manager must discover how to develop and maintain a workforce that can meet today’s needs while getting ready for tomorrow’s challenges. As a result, managers are asking questions such as:

- How can we meet the international competition?
- How can we make this organization more effective?
- How can we better utilize our human resources?
- How can we create a more satisfying and rewarding work environment for all employees?
- How can we improve the quality of our products?
- How can we improve communication and decision-making processes at work?
- How should we evaluate and reward performance?
- How can we develop the company leaders of tomorrow?

Questions such as these point to the issue of effective management. That is, what can managers do to improve both organizational and employee performance? Effective management requires an in-depth knowledge of financial management, marketing research and consumer behavior, accounting and control practices, manufacturing and production techniques, and quantitative methods. In addition, however, effective management requires “people skills.” That is, a good manager must be able to motivate his employees, to lead skillfully, to make appropriate and timely decisions, to communicate effectively, to organize work, to deal with organizational politics, and to work to develop both employees and the organization as a whole. These issues constitute the subject of this course. We shall examine principles of the behavioral sciences that can help managers improve both their own skills and abilities and those of their subordinates in order to enhance organizational performance and effectiveness.

As a prelude to this analysis, we begin with a brief look at the natures of work and of management. Contemporary challenges are discussed. Next, we consider a model of organizational behavior that will serve as a guide throughout the study of management and organizational behavior. We begin with an examination of work.

1. What is the meaning of work in a societal context?

The Meaning of Work

What is work, and how do people feel about the work they do? These questions may be answered from several perspectives. Perhaps one of the best ways to understand how people feel about their jobs is simply to ask them. A number of years ago Chicago writer Studs Terkel did exactly that. How did the people he interviewed feel about their jobs? Here are some excerpts from his book *Working*. (S. Terkel, *Working* (New York: Pantheon, 1974))

"I'm a dying breed. . . . A laborer. Strictly muscle work . . . pick it up, put it down, pick it up, put it down . . . you can't take pride any more. You remember when a guy could point to a house he built, how many logs he stacked. He built it and he was proud of it."

—**Steelworker [p. 1]**

"I changed my opinion of receptionists because now I'm one. It wasn't the dumb broad at the front desk who took telephone messages. She had to be something else because I thought I was something else. I was fine until there was a press party. We were having a fairly intelligent conversation. Then they asked me what I did. When I told them, they turned around to find other people with name tags. I wasn't worth bothering with. I wasn't being rejected because of what I said or the way I talked, but simply because of my function."

—**Receptionist [p. 57]**

"People ask me what I do, I say, 'I drive a garbage truck for the city.' . . . I have nothing to be ashamed of. I put in my eight hours. We make a pretty good salary. I feel I earn my money. . . . My wife's happy; this is the big thing. She doesn't look down at me. I think that's more important than the white-collar guy looking down at me."

—**Sanitation Truck Driver [p. 149]**

"I'm human. I make mistakes like everybody else. If you want a robot, build machines. If you want human beings, that's what I am."

—**Policeman [p. 186]**

"I usually say I'm an accountant. Most people think it's somebody who sits there with a green eyeshade and his sleeves rolled up with a garter, poring over books, adding things—with glasses. I suppose a certified public accountant has status. It doesn't mean much to me. Do I like the job or don't I? That's important."

—**Accountant [p. 351]**

"The boss . . . lost his secretary. She got promoted. So they told this old timekeeper she's to be his secretary-assistant. Oh, she's in her glory. No more money or anything and she's doing two jobs all day long. She's rushin' and runnin' all the time, all day. She's a nervous wreck. And when she asked him to write her up for an award, he refused. That's her reward for being so faithful, obedient."

—**Process Clerk [p. 461]**

Examples such as these—and there are many, many more—show how some employees view their jobs and the work they perform. Obviously, some jobs are more meaningful than others, and some individuals are more easily satisfied than others. Some people live to work, while others simply work to live. In any case, people clearly have strong feelings about what they do on the job and about the people with whom they work. In our study of behavior in organizations, we shall examine what people do, what causes them to do it, and how they feel about what they do. As a prelude to this analysis, however, we should first consider the basic unit of analysis in this study: work itself. What is work, and what functions does it serve in today's society?

Work has a variety of meanings in contemporary society. Often we think of work as paid employment—the exchange of services for money. Although this definition may suffice in a technical sense, it does not adequately describe why work is necessary. Perhaps **work** could be more meaningfully defined as an activity that produces something of value for other people. This definition broadens the scope of work and emphasizes the social context in which the wage-effort bargain transpires. It clearly recognizes that work has purpose—it is productive. Of course, this is not to say that work is necessarily interesting or rewarding or satisfying. On the contrary, we know that many jobs are dull, repetitive, and stressful. Even so, the activities performed do have utility for society at large. One of the challenges of **management** is to discover ways of transforming necessary yet distasteful jobs into more meaningful situations that are more satisfying and rewarding for individuals and that still contribute to organizational productivity and effectiveness.

Functions of Work

We know why work activities are important from an organization's viewpoint. Without work there is no product or service to provide. But why is work important to individuals? What functions does it serve?

First, work serves a rather obvious economic function. In exchange for labor, individuals receive necessary income with which to support themselves and their families. But people work for many reasons beyond simple economic necessity.

Second, work also serves several social functions. The workplace provides opportunities for meeting new people and developing friendships. Many people spend more time at work with their co-workers than they spend at home with their own families.

Third, work also provides a source of social status in the community. One's occupation is a clue to how one is regarded on the basis of standards of importance prescribed by the community. For instance, in the United States a corporate president is generally accorded greater status than a janitor in the same corporation. In China, on the other hand, great status is ascribed to peasants and people from the working class, whereas managers are not so significantly differentiated from those they manage. In Japan, status is first a function of the company you work for and how well-known it is, and then the position you hold. It is important to note here that the status associated with the work we perform often transcends the boundaries of our organization. A corporate president or a university president may have a great deal of status in the community at large because of his position in the organization. Hence, the work we do can simultaneously represent a source of social differentiation and a source of social integration.

Fourth, work can be an important source of identity and self-esteem and, for some, a means for self-actualization. It provides a sense of purpose for individuals and clarifies their value or contribution to society. As Freud noted long ago, "Work has a greater effect than any other technique of living in binding the individual more closely to reality; in his work he is at least securely attached to a part of reality, the human community." (S. Freud, Lecture XXXIII, *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (New York: Norton, 1933), p. 34.) Work contributes to self-esteem in at least two ways. First, it provides individuals with an opportunity to demonstrate competence or mastery over themselves and their environment. Individuals discover that they can actually do something. Second, work reassures individuals that they are carrying out activities that produce something of value to others—that they have something significant to offer. Without this, the individual feels that he has little to contribute and is thus of little value to society.

We clearly can see that work serves several useful purposes from an individual's standpoint. It provides a degree of economic self-sufficiency, social interchange, social status, self-esteem, and identity. Without this, individuals often experience sensations of powerlessness, meaninglessness, and normlessness—a condition called **alienation**. In work, individuals have the possibility of finding some meaning in their day-to-day activities—if, of course, their work is sufficiently challenging. When employees are not involved in their jobs because the work is not challenging enough, they usually see no reason to apply themselves, which, of course, jeopardizes productivity and organizational effectiveness. This self-evident truth has given rise to a general concern among managers about declining productivity and work values. In fact, concern about this situation has caused many managers to take a renewed interest in how the behavioral sciences can help them solve many of the problems of people at work.

Concept check

1. Define work.
2. What functions does work serve in modern society?

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