



**I WORK,  
THEREFORE I AM**

Many people garner their sense of self from work. But is this a good thing?

Eleven years ago, GE's then-CFO Keith Sherin talked to me about Jeff Immelt's early decisions as GE's CEO to stop fighting the EPA, clean up the Hudson River, and launch the company's ecomagination initiative. The side benefit they weren't expecting? Better college recruiting, Sherin said.

In contrast, after the financial crisis, big banks with tarnished reputations lost favor as employers of choice for MBA graduates. Recruiting at large financial institutions continues to suffer, *The Wall Street Journal* reported in June. Molding employee perceptions in ways that increase employee engagement can be just as important to employers as public relations efforts designed to motivate customers to buy and shareholders to invest.

For their part, employees' altruistic decisions in choosing employers, amplified across the economy, could yield benefits in shaping institutions that do more good and cause less harm. But that's a long way off. Most college-educated employees research

employers only in a surface way, stymied by their own competing motives, lack of knowledge, and the difficulty in separating a workplace's brand image from reality.

Last summer I spoke with an African American board member who has suffered and overcome a great deal of prejudice in her lifetime. She spoke glowingly of the achievements of her niece who works in a "high-powered New York law firm" that leaves her exhausted with little time for anything else. Her niece's situation was like that of many college grads, who, as part of generally accepted social expectations within their families and peer groups, build their sense of self by the merit badges they achieve first in academics and then in their positions as workers.

Yet, does it make sense to identify with systems that build hierarchies and give out badges for the wrong things? Think about some of the prominent corporate and government officials in the U.S. today. In that light, would any educated parent instruct a child to view the position a person attains as a sign of their character or their worth?

Overidentification with one's work position leads inevitably to unquestioning, corrupt cultures that perpetuate environmental and social ills. And the submission to unrealistic working hours leads, in a democratic society, to a lack of muscle to address those harms. Burnt out from the expectations of success, workers in their thirties, forties, fifties and beyond can become one-dimensional and find they have no bandwidth to engage as active citizens.

Workplaces need a broader vision, with work requirements customized *a la* personalized medicine to create individual meaning and experiences of flow. As Elena Ferrante wrote for *The Guardian* in June, let's recognize that we each represent "privileges of chance" and that "the caucus race that Alice encounters in Wonderland" in which "nobody loses, everybody wins" is our best hope.

Identifying with that vision of work makes sense.

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