

Economy and meaning seminar

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ASPIRATIONS FOR WORK WELL DONE

by

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Overview

It is generally accepted that stress in the workplace is because employees do not have the resources to meet the organisation's demands. In the same way, Yves Clot explains that stress may also result when the organisation does not have the means to satisfy employees' wishes to carry out high quality work. In this case, 'recognition policies' implemented by companies to provide employees with psychological support, and to help them to cope with not doing a good job are like putting plasters on a wooden leg. To improve the quality of life in the workplace, one must first assess the quality of the work. Since this involves many criteria and is a source of conflict and dilemma, it is necessary both for the company's performance and for employee well-being to have constant discussions about the criteria for high quality work in organisations. A 'job well done' is the key to company performance and employee well-being.

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The Association can also distribute the comments arising from these documents.

TALK : Yves Clot

Before I start, I must say that I am a bit embarrassed by the word 'nostalgia' which is in the original title of my talk¹. As far as I am concerned, there is nothing which relates more to today than work which is done well. It is a subject which will become more and more relevant because the quality of service will occupy an increasingly important place in our economy irrespective of whether it relates to trade, services to individuals, services for industry, social services, health, education and so on. As services grow, there will be more questions about quality and assessment. Therefore, rather than reflecting on something in the past, one should be more concerned about important factors for the future.

Training post office counter clerks

Let me start this talk by using an example from the work of the sociologist Fabienne Hanique whose thesis entitled 'The meaning of work : a chronicle of modernisation at the counter' (pub. Érès, 2004) discusses the transformation of the profession of French post office counter clerks. The following scene (page 202) takes place during a training session for about twelve counter clerks in the form of role-play which aims to get them used to the behaviour and language used in their workplace in different scenarios. There are documents explaining to the clerks what they should do or say in front of customers who have specific characteristics. In this example, the counter clerks must learn how to react to a client described as 'grumpy and conservative'. The scene begins with the trainer interrupting Sandra, one of the counter clerks.

THE TRAINER : Don't say '*if I were you*' or '*in your place*' or even '*I understand because I...*'. You are not that person.

SANDRA : But clients like it when we have a close relationship with them.

THE TRAINER : I agree, and you should encourage this, but a close relationship does not mean that you have to put yourself in their place. You are the post office, so you should say 'The post office offers...' or 'The post office promises to...'. You should look for whatever is the best that the post office can offer.

CORINNE : The best for them or the best for the post office ?

THE TRAINER : It's the same thing. The post office suggests what is best for its customers.

[Giggling, mockery...]

THE TRAINER : Your job is to satisfy the customer, in other words to answer his questions and identify his needs. For example, if a customer has a package which he has wrapped himself, tell him that the post office has a 'ready-to-send' range of packaging boxes which includes a guarantee of safe arrival of his package.

SANDRA : When I am a customer, I trust the person serving me when I know that what he is offering me is what he would have chosen for himself. At the counter, when I serve customers who want to post a package which they have wrapped themselves, I do not see why I should tell them to undo their package and pay three times the price to send it by buying a post office packaging box !

THE TRAINER : Well, you're wrong ! In order to trust someone, the customer needs to talk to a true professional. And the true professional is a counter clerk who knows his product range. That's all there is to it. The customer doesn't come into the post office to see Mrs. So-and-so who if it were up to her would do this or that, but Sandra, Corinne or Jackie who are professional counter clerks. You should not put yourselves in the customers' shoes.

SANDRA : If we were to put ourselves in their shoes, we wouldn't sell much.

THE TRAINER : Exactly, you wouldn't sell a lot. That's why you're here today.

¹ The original title of the talk was 'The nostalgia for work well done'.

Various criteria of professionalism

The first way of analysing this scene includes very important changes which are currently taking place in the French post office. The post office is now part of a competitive market, and has become a cross between public and commercial service. In its search for commercial success, certain aspects of the counter clerk profession have been called into question. Some counter clerks are uncomfortable because rather than give a service to a user, they now have to change their relationship into a commercial action, and the user becomes a customer. Some clerks are unhappy with what they are doing.

I suggest a rather different analysis. In fact, most counter clerks realise that the post office must increase its sales if it wants to survive. They know that if sales do not increase then the post office would find itself in a precarious position, and their jobs would be at risk. However, they do not agree that they should 'lower' their professionalism to the point where, for example, the 'true' professional is only a counter clerk who knows his products. Their work often exposes them to problems which cannot be easily solved.

Managing the flow and volume of customers

For example, one of the counter clerk's jobs is to know how to manage the flow of customers who come into the post office. A study was carried out in a Parisian post office. On the 25th day of each month, a large number of elderly people came into the post office to pick up their pension. The counter clerk told them that their pension normally arrived on the 26th, not on the 25th. One elderly person replied that the previous month he had come into the post office on the 25th and that his pension had arrived, so why was that not the case for the 25th of the current month? The conversation continued, and the queue in the post office grew longer. This customer had come to withdraw his pension, but he knew very well that it was likely that his pension had not yet arrived. Perhaps this situation may have given him an opportunity on that particular day to get ready to go out, to leave his house or to have a conversation with someone, and even though that for which he had hoped did not happen, at least his day had been eventful.

In some post offices, welcoming these elderly people and allowing them to come every month and squabble with the counter clerk is considered part of the job. In other post offices, there are employees who look at the queues and identify those customers and explain to them that they do not need to queue. I am not prepared to say which of these strategies is preferable, I just want to stress the fact that for counter clerks the concept of 'work well done' necessarily carries with it a large number of factors and, depending on the situation, different aspects may be stressful or even a source of conflict. In the role-play above, the counter clerks were shocked that the trainer ignored the problems which they face on a daily basis. A true professional is recognised by his ability to take any given situation into account, or when the situation changes to realise the different factors which enable him to make the correct decision.

A 'well wrapped package'

Let us discuss Sandra's phrase, a 'well wrapped package'. As far as a counter clerk is concerned, this expression means something very precise. The fact that the package is well wrapped or not depends on the nature of the object being sent, its weight, and the destination. In some cases, a shoe box and sticky tape may suffice, whereas in other cases it would be wiser to use the packaging sold at the post office. Professionalism consists of reviewing a variety of factors in order to make a well-judged decision in the light of the situation.

Acrobats and the paralysed

Real professionals, the so-called 'virtuosos' of work well done, are capable of supporting these different factors (accepting and promoting them), and juggling with them. First-class professionals, those who are on the ground, are true 'acrobats' compared to those higher up

the hierarchy who are ‘paralysed’, in other words, only able to cope with one factor at a time for assessment and quality. Unfortunately these are the same people who are in charge of training first-class professionals...

The forced laughter of the counter clerks

When the counter clerks giggled in the role-play, they did so for two reasons. Firstly, it was a sarcastic laugh and implied that the trainer was a little detached from reality. When children are playing, they often say ‘Let’s play as if it was like this...’. Some companies or organisations behave like children : ‘Let’s say that the reality would be like this...’. However, reality is more complicated, and using the conditional tense demonstrates a denial of reality. In fact, this sarcastic laugh is aimed at the post office’s hierarchy which, according to the counter clerks, is turning a blind eye on reality.

The second reason that their laughter is forced and self-derisory is that these counter clerks know that they have to face this sort of situation on a daily basis, and that they will still be powerless to handle it in the future.

Intensity of work and fatigue

As far as an employee is concerned, ‘work well done’ consists of achieving the goals which he has set for himself, and which the company has set for him, and arriving at a result which is satisfactory for him. This supposes that he is capable of judging what he does and what his colleagues do, discussing with them the significance of their actions, thinking about their actions both on an individual and group level and then correcting or developing them. This sort of work is intense both psychologically and socially. Unless the scale of the tasks is too great, there is no danger to the employee’s well-being. It produces a pleasant feeling of fatigue from which one can recover easily.

This intensity of ‘work well done’ should not be confused with the ‘intensification of work’, the act of optimising the maximum number of operations which are to be achieved in a given time. These two forms of intensity are very often contradictory : the psychological and social intensity of work is limited by the amount of work needed to be done.

The aforementioned behaviour and language scenarios are tools used in the intensification of work. They get right to the point, and avoid the ups and downs or any deliberation or discussion. The intensification of work produces ‘bad fatigue’ which is not a part of what is expected of employees, but what one prevents them from doing or what one forces them to concentrate on whereas they feel the need to do what they are prevented from doing in order for their work to be ‘well done’.

Well-being and performance

Contrary to what one might assume, health and performance are not incompatible. Efficiency and the effort exerted to achieve a goal is an indicator of well-being. However, effort which has no purpose or reason is exhausting. It produces a fatigue which, paradoxically, keeps one awake at night because one is worried that what has been done during the day will be inadequate and one will have to start all over again the following day. This person does not use his energy to complete his work on time but instead convinces himself that he cannot do anything about it and he should take the necessary action to cope with not doing his work well, or even deliberating about what doing good work might entail.

The definition of good health suggested by the doctor and philosopher Georges Canguilhem, author of the reference work ‘Le normal et le pathologique’ (‘The normal and the pathological’) (1966) clearly shows the link between efficient effort and well-being. This definition can be divided into three parts. The first, which can be summed up by the phrase ‘I am fine inasmuch as I feel capable of bearing the responsibility for my actions’, plays on the

dual sense of the verb 'bear', between 'faring well' and 'taking responsibility'. Paradoxically, in the corporate world, one tries to make people 'easy-going' but they should be 'serious' so that they can be responsible for their actions. The second part of the definition, 'to create things' uses the same verb and stresses the importance of leaving one's mark on the world. The last part, '...and creating links which would not exist without me nor without things which need to be linked' highlights that is not just a case of living somewhere but helping create the place in which one will live.

With this definition of well-being intimately linked to effort, responsibility, efficiency and the impact which one can have on one's environment, one suspects that the problems of well-being in the workplace must be much more serious than the rates of diseases in the workplace (including those which are not declared) lead us to believe.

Two ways of handling stress at work

The European Agency for health and safety at work (located in Bilbao) suggested the following definition of stress at work : 'A state of stress occurs when there is an imbalance between the perception a person has of the constraints imposed on him by his environment and the perception which he has of his own abilities to cope with these constraints.' There is a consensus about this definition, and it was the subject of an interprofessional agreement in 2008. I do not question it, but it seems to me that it would be beneficial to complete this definition by considering stress from another angle. Stress may arise from the fact that the employee does not have the necessary resources to satisfy the demands of the organisation, and it may also happen when the organisation does not have the means to meet the requirements of the employees to carry out high quality work.

In the first definition, one reacts to stress by offering psychological support to employees to help them to cope with unbearable conditions. In an attempt to do something well, one tries to encourage well-being by listening to employees' experiences at work and managing the psycho-social risks.

In the second definition of stress, one not only needs to deal with the psychological problems of the employee, but also to solve the problems in the organisation. To achieve this, one must recognise that there are legitimate, conflicting ideas about the quality of work. Instead of denying these conflicts one must institutionalise or formalise them by creating places where one can discuss the factors which constitute 'work well done', negotiate changes in the organisation of work, discuss further the results of these changes, modify the system accordingly, and so on. This repetitive work is essential not only to protect the well-being of employees, but also to ensure long-lasting performances in the company.

In conclusion, there is no well-being without 'well-doing', and it is pointless to study the quality of life in the workplace without first analysing the quality of work. A job well done is the link between employee well-being and corporate performance.

DISCUSSION

The quality of the discussion about quality

Question : *What is your definition of quality ?*

Yves Clot : For me, the most important aspect is not to define quality, but to enable different definitions to co-exist. What matters is how good the discussion is about quality. As consultants, we are often asked to define 'good practices'. I tend to say that the only good practice is the practice of discussion. Debating, making decisions, implementing them and debating them again seems to me the only way to understand the real world.

It is obvious that I approve of 'dissent'. Reality systematically poses problems which cannot be anticipated : it is naturally 'difficult to manage' and does not help conventional communication. Organisations which tend to operate as if one could only agree about reality – either according to the ways of Lean production or those of trade union ideologies – are in general not living in the real world. We lose our sense of reality especially in situations when we are trying to find a consensus.

A French paradox

Q. : *Is the problem that you are discussing unique to France ?*

Y. C. : Dominique Méda (Centre for studies about employment) has recorded and analysed statistical surveys about work carried out in different European countries. One of the results shows that the French are the ones who are most concerned about the value of work but, at the same time, they are the ones who most want to see the amount of time taken up by work decrease. Dominique Méda explains that this paradox is because expectations regarding work are so strong in France that the situations at work experienced everyday by the French are disappointing.

Q. : *This makes me think of studies carried out by Philippe d'Iribarne and his co-workers on the pride that one may have in one's profession, a concept which is a great deal more important in France than in other countries.*

The need for recognition

Q. : *Time spent working only accounts for 14 % of our total waking time (which includes time spent studying, enjoying leisure activities and even time spent in retirement). Do you not overestimate the importance of work relations in people's lives ? I think that what makes people happy is the recognition that they receive from others. As Descartes once wrote 'it is worthless to be useful to nobody'.*

Y. C. : The amount of time taken up by work in our available time is decreasing, but paradoxically the diversification of social time that we have makes the psychological and social function aspect of work stronger than before. The reduction in time spent at work has made us more educated, cultured and even more political people. Since we are increasingly becoming citizens outside the workplace, it is very difficult for us to accept not to be citizens inside it. We move in different circles, and we tend to think that it must be possible to achieve in one circle what we have achieved in others.

The idea that we need recognition from others in order to feel good is undeniably true, but it is not enough. We also need to feel proud about ourselves. I have observed situations in which the management says to its employees 'We know that what you are going through is difficult but we are there for you. The whole company is behind you and recognises your work.' Management can easily say that the employees are working satisfactorily but if the employees themselves do not consider their own work satisfactory, this might make them frustrated. I have also seen the opposite situation in which management despises its employees. When employees are fully convinced that their work is 'adequate', they do not care any more if they are recognised by their hierarchy or not.

Q. : *I work for a local authority and I am part of a work group which has been asked to study ways of satisfying an increasing need for recognition from staff at the same time as needing to improve our performances while keeping the wage bill constant. I understand that the concept of recognition which is a little too abstract may have pitfalls. Can you cite examples of 'good' policies of recognition ?*

Y. C. : Of course I do not intend to encourage an attitude of contempt in companies. However, I have observed in many companies and administrations that there is a sort of 'inflation' of recognition without this being offset by a requirement to do work well. In such circumstances, a request for recognition may have no foundation. On the other hand, when one is really concerned about the quality of work, including going into detail about a package which has been well wrapped, people feel very proud and satisfied. This is why managers should never abandon their demands for high quality work from their employees. If work is badly treated then people are also badly treated.

I often tell trade union representatives when I talk with them 'You should really work on this question of quality because the lower level staff feel very strongly about it : they wonder whether what they are doing is satisfactory and whether it has a purpose' As far as I am concerned, when I talk to professionals, I am more interested in what they do rather than who they are. I often ask 'What can you tell me about what you do, or what your colleagues or your management have to say about it ? Are you proud of what you do ?' If an employee is not proud of his work and feels that he is just a spectator (as opposed to an active participant), the fact that management recognises his work is of no use to him. It is preferable to implement a scheme whereby employees are gradually able to take pride in the work that they do. To achieve this, one must allow for 'disagreements', in other words a discussion which enables one to make an assessment on the basis of well researched facts.

A merger of different factors

Q. : *I think that employee satisfaction in the workplace depends on four factors : work content, interpersonal relationships, one's relationship with the institution, and shared values. In wartime, these four factors work very well. As a result, mental asylums are empty, neuroses disappear, and there is no work for psychoanalysts. War clearly involves horrifying circumstances, but at the same time it creates a situation which is psychologically very simple : we know who the 'goodies' and the 'baddies' are, and human relationships are straightforward.*

Y. C. : I too tend to define a profession according to four factors. The first is personal : there is something which is very private and individual when at work. However, there is also something impersonal inasmuch as those involved in the same task can easily be replaced. The third factor is interpersonal : there is never any professional person left on his own : one can refer to a person, a colleague, one's boss, and so on. The last factor is transpersonal : one's job is part of a broader picture, there is a group history which one inherits and which one will pass on.

In every profession, there is a 'creative discrepancy' between these four factors. My colleagues and I are studying the hypothesis that suicide at work may be more likely when these four factors are all in play at the same time. These people at risk are often extremely involved in their work and do not differentiate between personal and other factors, or between their company's assessment of their work and their own assessment of themselves.

In wartime, there is sometimes a merger of these four factors. Even though this phenomenon in the short term may prove to be positive psychologically, it may be extremely dangerous in the medium term. When the war is over and there is peace, it is very difficult to disentangle these factors. This is why wars do not only cause physical trauma, but also serious psychological trauma.

Start-up

Q. : *Do you find that some companies are better off than others when faced with the pathologies you describe ? I am thinking of family-run companies where communication is probably easier, or start-ups where people's desire to succeed helps them to overcome daily frustrations and day-to-day stress.*

Y. C. : The psychological and social state which exists in start-ups reminds me a little of a similar activity which takes place in wartime. The different factors that I mentioned come together because the employees concentrate on the business and forget about themselves. This may be beneficial for the company which functions like a well-oiled machine, but this rarely lasts a long time. This is why I am not a believer in 'small is beautiful'. Large companies have the resources which allow them to institutionalise and to deal with conflicts more easily.

The responsibility of the strategists

Q. : *I was recently at a talk given by the CEO of the French post office, Jean-Paul Bailly, who mentioned the values of the post office which are closely linked to its history. I find it hard to reconcile what he said with how you describe the training of counter clerks. I suggest that the specifications of this training were badly expressed or that the initial analysis of the employees' abilities was badly done. By 'abilities' I include knowledge, know-how and behaviour in a work situation. At the end of the talk, a young executive stood up and questioned the middle management of the post office. Jean-Paul Bailly's reply merely served to confirm what we all knew, namely that for thirty years we have been faced with a problem of middle management.*

Y. C. : The training I described was decided by post office management and not by middle management. I also heard Jean-Paul Bailly's talk about the post office's history and the need to modernise because yesterday's world is ancient history. But who will manage the conflict between these two histories ? It is the responsibility of the highest placed managers who devise the company's strategy to deal with the conflicts which create changes in the company. They are the people responsible for the quality of training offered to staff, and not middle management which is trapped between the strategies devised by the managers and the reality in the field. The post office management must implement measures where this discrepancy can be treated correctly and discussed. It is always too easy to put the blame for badly implemented strategy on middle management, as has been the case for the past thirty years.

Work time, free time and downtime

Q. : *I knew a CEO who, having worked a 60-hour week for some years and had become very rich, bought himself a house and a yacht in Cap Ferret and subsequently spent only 30 hours a week at work. He told me that work had become unbearable, and said 'the less I do, the less I want to do.' What is your reaction ?*

Y. C. : What is important is the content of what one does when at work. The flipside of work time is free time. Why can work time not be a period of free time during which people have the freedom to think, discuss and criticise ? If this were the case, there would be less need for free time, which is often downtime away from work.

I remember a talk given at an important Parisian consultancy at the time when the government was passing the Robien Law about statutory working time. In this company, negotiations had resulted in an agreement granting 13 additional holiday days to consultants in exchange for a more intense work effort. Not only were break times stopped, but also all reports had to be standardised. Instead of spending time making assessments about specific situations, the consultants had to systematically create the same report with a few changes. They were rather bitter and said 'We have obtained more free time, but during one-third of this time, we try to forget what we have been through notably being forced to do work which makes no sense. During the second third, we manage to think about other things, but during

the last third, we have to prepare ourselves mentally for going back to work.’ In the end, the increase in free time was ‘eroded’ by downgrading the work content. Two-thirds of the free time became downtime.

A political question

Q. : *In your study, did you find organisations which have think tanks or special places in order to discuss the quality of work ?*

Y. C. : I could mention a large number of experiments which we carried out successfully when we worked in organisations. In general, they immediately gave rise to a huge, collective sigh of relief, with employees feeling happy that ‘finally’ management was going to examine their role in the company. However, to achieve an institutionalisation of conflict about the quality of work, one needs to restructure the company as the title of Armand Hatchuel and Blanche Segrestin’s latest work suggests². In fact, this is really a political question.

Presentation of the speaker :

Yves Clot : professor and Chair of occupational psychology at the CNAM (Conservatoire national des art et métiers). He is also in charge of the clinical team involved in research on work and development (CRTD - EA 4132). He is a guest speaker for various companies and talks about well-being in the workplace. On a scientific level, he attempts to follow in the footsteps of Lev Vygotski who opened up the way for new ideas in psychology in Russia in the 1920s, discussing topics about the development of activity in real-life situations.

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² Armand Hatchuel, Blanche Segrestin, *Refonder l’entreprise* (‘Restructuring the company’)(pub. Seuil, 2012).