Waarom werken wij?

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Summary in English

In the late seventies of the last century a fund was granted by the International Institute of Management of the Science Center Berlin to G.W. Wilpert. He used this money to start the Meaning Of Working project (MOW). In total eight countries participated in the project (Belgium, Great Britain, the US, (Western) Germany, Japan, Israel, the former Yugoslav Republic and the Netherlands). The research was aimed at identifying the meaning of working among the general workforce in those countries and among several special target groups, for instance teachers, tool and die makers, students, retired people. Key to the research was the view on working, the centrality of working, the things the participants considered to be important in working, the importance of working in comparison with for instance family, spare time, religion, etc. The results were published by the International Research Team in 1987 (MOW International Research Team, 1987). One of the participating countries was, as mentioned, the Netherlands. The results of the survey in the Netherlands were published in 1983 (Drenth, van der Kooy, & van Luijk, 1983). This publication only contains the raw data of the Dutch workforce and the target groups. No further analyses on those Dutch data was done, or the analyses that were done were not published. Twenty-five years later a fund by the Dutch 'Stichting voor Toegepaste Psychologie' (the 'foundation for applied psychology') enabled a new project in which a representative sample of the Dutch workforce was asked to participate in the MOW research. In 2009, in the midst of the credit crisis, again a sample of the Dutch workforce was asked to fill out a survey concerning their view on working. In combination with the results of a small sample which participated in 1994 (Koopman, 1999) it was possible to make a longitudinal comparison concerning the meaning of working over a period of more than twenty-five years. This publication contains an overview of the main outcomes of the different surveys and the trends which can be identified between 1983 and 2008/2009.

The first two chapters after the introduction contain a short history of the development of the work-ethic. Chapter two begins with a description of the words 'labor', 'work' and 'action', based on the work of Hannah Arendt. It continues with a description of the most probable meaning of working among the hunter and gatherer societies and the first agrarian societies. After that a description is given of the view on working, the work-ethic, during the Greek and Roman civilisation, the middle ages, the reformation and the renaissance. The last part of this chapter consists of a description of the development of the work-
ethic in the last two centuries. Central to chapter three is the discrepancy between the ‘official’, written, work-ethic and the meaning of working for those who were ‘really’ working. The centrality of work, the importance of working, pivotal in the Protestant work ethic in Western Europe was not distinctive or characteristic for every individual worker. Chapter three contains an overview of all those measures that were taken to fill the gap between the ‘official’ work-ethic and the real life ethic concerning working, the gap between the ‘work-ethic’ and the ‘workers-ethic’. This gap was partially closed by force, those who refused to work were locked up and trained to become a hard working citizen, a training that sometimes looked (and felt) like torture. Partially the gap was also closed by economic necessity, and measures that were taken to create or enlarge this economic necessity. Partially it was done by an offensive aimed at educating and civilising workers and their families. For instance housewives were trained to become good mothers and wives, taking care of their working husbands and their children. By this it was tried to keep the husband home and away from the pub and the booze. In the beginning of the industrial revolution regularly workers often did not show up, or were drunk after they had received their money. Not only a ‘blue Monday’ was common, but also a ‘blue Tuesday’, Wednesday, etc.

Chapter four contains a description of the lay out of the Meaning Of Working project, the most important outcomes and a comparison between the outcomes in 1983 and 2008. The most important empirical results are to be found in this chapter. The results are based on a sample of 995 (1983) and 1098 (2008). A major trend which can be identified is the increase of the extrinsic motivation, an increasing group of people consider work as a means to an end, and this end is mainly income. Other aspects of work, like for instance through work you have contacts with other people, or work in itself is interesting, work as a contribution to society, seem to have become less important. Identification with the organisation one works in was rather low in 1983 and still is; when asked to compare six aspects of work ‘my company or organisation’ ended sixth in 1983 as well as in 2008. The kind of work one has to do ended on the first place. The money earned ended fourth in 1983 and second in 2008. Again an increase of the economic value of work. The increase of the economic value of work was also reflected in the outcomes of the classical Morse and Weiss (1955) lottery question. People were asked what they would do if they won a lottery price or inherited a substantial amount of money, enough to live comfortably without working. In 1983 13.7% of the respondents said they would stop working, in 2008 23.2% said they would do so. In 2008 a majority of the respondents indicated they would continue working, but under different conditions, i.e. work
less hours. In 1983 42.4% of the respondents said they would continue working in the same job, in 2008 this percentage was lowered to 15.7%.

Work itself seems to have become less important, less central in one's live as well. When asked to distribute one hundred points between work, family, spare time, religion and social activities, the number of points given to work lowered from 29.6 in 1983 to 25.7 in 2008. The importance of the family increased; in 1983 the average number of points given to family was 33.7, in 2008 this was 37.2. The number of points given to spare time increased as well: 24.2 in 1983 and 27.7 in 2008. As mentioned the centrality of work decreased. When asked 'How important is working in your total life?' the average score in 1983 was 5.05, in 2008 it was 4.41 (on a seven point scale, 1 meaning 'one of the least important things in my life', and 7 'one of the most important things in my life').

Chapter five is about the construction of 'The Princess Diana', an interactive 'serious game' aimed at establishing basic needs. The need concept, originally introduced by Murray (1938) was further developed by McClelland (1953). McClelland advocated projective techniques to estimate the importance of different needs within an individual. Only those techniques could capture the richness of the concept. Since projective techniques in general have a low reliability and, partly because of this, a low validity as well, others tried to establish basic needs using questionnaires. Differences in the need structure of an individual, measured simultaneously by a questionnaire and a projective test like the Thematic Apperception Test, were attributed to the kind of test that was used. Those in favour of the McClelland approach valued the results of the projective test, the others the results of the questionnaire. The low correlations that were found between both techniques were seen as a proof of the value of the projective test by McClelland and just the other way around by his opponents. The Princess Diana was developed as an alternative way to establish basic needs. In this computerized test the participant is the captain of the Princess Diana, a large cruise ship sailing the Caribbean. The captain is confronted with a great number of management problems, the problem is described and between two and six possible solutions are given. Each solution 'satisfies' one of six needs, for instance when confronted with a conflict between the two other managers in his or her staff if one chooses a strategy aimed at talking and harmony, keeping a cooperative atmosphere, the need for affiliation is supposed to be satisfied. When one handles very decisively, using his or her authority as a captain the need for power is supposed to be dominant. After choosing a solution the candidate is led to the next situation, which follows logically on the choice he or she has made. Result of all this is that the content of
each game differs for every individual, depending on the choices made. Result of all this is also that the length of the game differs. A fully new system had to be developed to score the outcome of the test taking into consideration that the information value of a choice made when only two alternatives are given differs from a choice made out of five or six. The same goes for an alternative not being chosen. Outcome of the test is a ranking of the individual importance of the need for power, the need for affiliation, the need to achieve, the need for integrity, the need for safety and the need for autonomy.

In chapter six meaning of working outcomes and basic needs, as measured by the Princess Diana, are correlated. Hardly any significant correlations were found though. One of the most remarkable among the few significant correlations was the positive one between the need for power and the importance of income as one of the elements of the meaning of working (.13, p < .05). In chapter six there is also a comparison between several meaning of working outcomes and a number of other personal characteristics, like sex, income, education, as well as a comparison between Big Five scores and the meaning of working. As was to be expected extraverts consider contacts with other people an important aspect of working (.25, p<.05), they highly value the possibility to learn new things (.29, p<.05) and opportunities for upgrading of promotion (.29, p < .01). The more conscientious, the higher the centrality of work (.16, p < .01). Openness to new experiences correlates highly with 'a lot of opportunity to learn new things' (.32, p < .01). A positive correlation was also found between the importance of working and educational level; the higher the education, the more central working is (.18, p < .01). Age has a strong positive correlation with the importance of the family (.29, p < .01), with religion (.21, p < .01) and a strong negative one with spare time (-.33, p < .01). Possibly in contrast with what one might expect, no significant correlation was found between age and the importance of working (-.08, n.s.). Income correlated positively with 'working itself is basically interesting and satisfying' (.17, p < .01), and negatively with 'working keeps you occupied' (-.17, p < .01) and with 'working permits you to have interesting contacts with other people' (-.16, p < .01). Income also correlated positively with the importance of income; the higher the monthly income the more income is regarded as an important aspect of working (.12, p < .01). The higher your income, the more important it is; as far as income is concerned we seem to be insatiable. The centrality of work and income are also positively correlated; the higher the actual income, the more central work is in one's life (.15, p < .01). Men and women seem to differ on some meaning of working aspects, some of those differences seem to be in accordance with
'common' stereotypes, some are not. For instance, for women the average centrality of work is higher (.11, p < .05), income is less important (.16, p < .01) and spare time is more important (.12, p < .05).

The data in this part of the project were collected in 2009, a year in which the financial and economic crisis for most people in the Netherlands became feasible. As a consequence the optimism of the respondents about their employment situation decreased and their pessimism increased. For instance in 2008 36.2% of the respondents thought that in the coming five to ten years there might be societal developments which might improve their employment situation, a few months later in 2009 this percentage decreased to 32.1%. Societal developments which might endanger their employment situation were expected by 30.5% in 2008 and by 34.6% in 2009. Worrying about their work was done often or very often by 16.8% in 2008, this increased enormously in only a few months; in 2009 44.0% said they were worrying often or very often.

Chapter seven contains a summary and the main conclusions of the project. In it the limitations of the project are mentioned and suggestions for further research are given. This chapter also contains some practical and theoretical implications of the outcomes of the project.