

Business Management

Wednesday Seminar

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Speaker Ruth Yeoman (University of Oxford)
Title Meaningful work and workplace democracy: a philosophy of work and a politics of meaningfulness

Abstract

Despite steady interest from organisation studies and business ethics, the concept of meaningful work has been neglected by scholars. In political theory, meaningful work is treated as a preference, because the irredeemably subjective content of meaningfulness threatens the maintenance of neutrality between different conceptions of living. In moral philosophy, work is dismissed as a norm-free zone of human activity governed by technical rationality. In critical social theory, work is characterised as irredeemably degraded and unstable; devoid of the forms of solidarity and identity which support a sense of meaning. However, the centrality of work in modern societies, as well as empirical evidence of the harms of non-meaningful work, makes construing meaningful work as a preference normatively unsatisfactory. In order to make the case for meaningful work as an object for public policy formation, I argue that meaningful work is a fundamental human need because it addresses our inescapable interests in freedom, autonomy and social recognition, which are met when work is non-dominated, non-alienated and dignified. To retrieve a critical conception of work which enables us to distinguish normatively between meaningful and non-meaningful work, I analyse the concept of meaningful work using Wolf's (2010) bipartite value of meaningfulness (BVM) in which: 'meaning arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness' (Wolf, 2010: 9). We appropriate the BVM to our lives through capabilities for objective judging and subjective feeling, supported by our equal status as co-authorities in meaning making. Work with the requisite structure for meaningfulness provides the context for encounters with worthy objects expressing a range of attractive values, and for fostering the relevant capabilities for judging and feeling. I propose that work enables more people to experience the BVM when it is organised democratically in social practices, where democratic participation is itself a subjectively attractive worthy object. For

organisation studies, this challenges organisational assumptions which place the burden for finding work to be meaningful upon the psychological adjustment of the individual or privilege management monopoly over meaning-making, justifying instead the establishment of work regimes which institute deliberative practices for the co-creation of meaning and value.