

Advanced 2
Unit 2: Reading
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The Great Work Myth

A

Work gets a terrible press. Pick up any newspaper on almost any day, and you'll read about how work is killing our marriages, generating stress, depriving children of "quality time," hollowing out local communities, and depressing us. Work has become the scapegoat for all our woes. The case against work is put in persuasive terms on an almost daily basis. There is only one problem with it: it's nonsense. For the truth is that, as far as work is concerned, we've never had it so good.

press = the type or amount of reports that newspapers write about somebody/something

- *The airline has had a bad press recently (= journalists have written unpleasant things about it).*
- *The demonstration got very little press.*
- *His latest novel didn't get (a) very good press (= was not praised in the media).*

hollow out (v.) = empty; to make a hole in something by removing part of it

scapegoat = a person who is blamed for something bad that somebody else has done or for some failure;
SYNONYM fall guy

- *She felt she had been made a scapegoat for her boss's incompetence.*
- *People always need convenient scapegoats to blame for society's problems.*

woes [Plural Noun] = the troubles and problems that somebody has

woe [Uncountable Noun] = great unhappiness; misery

put sth in persuasive terms = say sth persuasively

B

One survey shows that four out of ten British workers declare themselves "very satisfied" with their jobs—more than in France, Germany, Italy, or Spain. Average earnings have increased, a lot of firms offer longer maternity leave, a third of firms now offer sabbaticals, and two-thirds allow their staff to work from home some of the time. The rhetoric about longer working hours also needs to be put in perspective. The average working day has increased in length over the last two decades, but by just one minute and forty-two seconds.

firm = company

maternity leave = leave granted to a female employee for becoming a mother

sabbatical = a period of time when somebody, especially a teacher at a university, is allowed to stop their normal work in order to study or travel

rhetoric = (formal, often disapproving) speech or writing that is intended to influence people, but that is not completely honest or sincere

- *Her speech was just empty rhetoric.*
- *His speech was dismissed as mere rhetoric by the opposition.*

perspective = the ability to think about problems and decisions in a reasonable way without making them seem worse or more important than they really are

Talking to others can often help to put your own problems into perspective.

C

Despite all the improvements in work over recent decades, there is still an ingrained attitude that happiness lies outside work, that we are waiting for the weekend. This idea that work is essentially bad for us has a long history. A Russian politician described workers being alienated from the product of their labor: "What, then, constitutes the alienation of labor?" he asked. "First, the fact that labor is external to the worker. i.e. it does not belong to his essential being; that in his work he does not affirm himself but denies himself; does not feel content but unhappy; does not develop his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind." However, relentless negativity about work condemns us to precisely the sort of work that the Russian politician was trying to free us from 150 years ago. If we accept that work is dull and demeaning—a ransom paid for the hostage of our "free time"—then we are allowing alienation to remain.

ingrained = (of a habit, an attitude, etc.) that has existed for a long time and is therefore difficult to change

- *The belief that we should do our duty is deeply ingrained in most of us.*

alienation = estrangement

content = satisfied

mortify = humiliate = to make somebody feel very ashamed or embarrassed

- *I was mortified when I realized I had forgotten our lunch date.*

dull = boring

demeaning = humiliating

- *He found it demeaning to work for his former employee.*

D

Work is becoming too important for it to be of dubious quality. Work is a community, the place where we meet friends and form relationships, a provider of our social as well as our work life. One in three of us meets most of our friends through work, two-thirds of us have dated someone at work, and, according to a poll by recruitment consultancy Sanders and Sidney, a quarter of us meet our life partners there. Work is also becoming a more important indicator of identity. Family, class, region, and religion are now less robust indicators, and work is filling the gap, making it the most important fact about ourselves we mention when we meet people. "Work," as Albert Einstein said, "is the only thing that gives substance to life."

dubious = doubtful

poll = opinion poll; survey; the process of questioning people who are representative of a larger group in order to get information about the general opinion

recruitment = the act or process of finding new people to join a company, an organization, the armed forces, etc.

consultancy = a company which provides advice

robust = strong; powerful

give substance to sth = give meaning to; make sth meaningful

E

The shift of work toward the center of our lives demonstrates the futility of much of the current debates about "work-life balance." It is true that some people are working longer hours. Yet

the idea that it is being forced upon us without our choice just doesn't stack up. Take the people working the greatest number of hours—more than sixty a week. Surveys show that they are the ones who say they like their jobs the most. This may seem surprising, until you reflect that people who like something might do more of it than people who do not. People who love their jobs own up to having a "work/life problem" because they put in more hours than they are strictly required to. In truth, they are simply made to feel as if they have a problem because of prevalent attitudes. Of course, this leaves open the question of who keeps the home fires burning and of the impact on children especially. It may be that people are choosing to invest less time and energy at home than others think they should, but, if these people get more out of their work than they do out of their home, then perhaps this is a clear and valid choice for people to be making.

demonstrate = show; illustrate

futility = uselessness

current = existing at the moment

stack up = make sense; be reasonable

own up to = confess; admit

prevalent = widespread; common

F

Ultimately, our goal must be to begin seeing work as an intrinsic part of our life, rather than an adjunct to it. Theodore Zeldin, an Oxford don, has the right manifesto for the future of work: its abolition. But not in the way anti-work campaigners have in mind. "We should abolish work,"— he says. "By that I mean abolishing the distinction between work and leisure, one of the greatest mistakes of the last century, one that enables employers to keep workers in lousy jobs by granting them some leisure time. We should strive to be employed in such a way that we don't realize what we are doing is work." Zeldin throws down the challenge for work in the twenty-first century. It is indeed time to abandon the notion of work as a down payment on life, but, before we can do so, all the modern myths about work will have to be exposed: the ones that continue to stereotype work as intrinsically sapping, demeaning, and corrosive. It is time to give work a break.

ultimately = finally

adjunct = (formal) a thing that is added or attached to something larger or more important

- *The memory expansion cards are useful adjuncts to the computer.*

abolish = to officially end a law, a system or an institution

abolition = the ending of a law, a system or an institution

lousy = unpleasant

strive = try hard

down payment = a sum of money that is given as the first part of a larger payment; prepayment

stereotype = to form a fixed idea about a person or thing which may not really be true

sapping = weakening

corrosive = damaging

Full Text:

The Great Work Myth

A

Work gets a terrible press. Pick up any newspaper on almost any day, and you'll read about how work is killing our marriages, generating stress, depriving children of "quality time," hollowing out local communities, and depressing us. Work has become the scapegoat for all our woes. The case against work is put in persuasive terms on an almost daily basis. There is only one problem with it: it's nonsense. For the truth is that, as far as work is concerned, we've never had it so good.

B

One survey shows that four out of ten British workers declare themselves "very satisfied" with their jobs—more than in France, Germany, Italy, or Spain. Average earnings have increased, a lot of firms offer longer maternity leave, a third of firms now offer sabbaticals, and two-thirds allow their staff to work from home some of the time. The rhetoric about longer working hours also needs to be put in perspective. The average working day has increased in length over the last two decades, but by just one minute and forty-two seconds.

C

Despite all the improvements in work over recent decades, there is still an ingrained attitude that happiness lies outside work, that we are waiting for the weekend. This idea that work is essentially bad for us has a long history. A Russian politician described workers being alienated from the product of their labor: "What, then, constitutes the alienation of labor?" he asked. "First, the fact that labor is external to the worker. i.e. it does not belong to his essential being; that in his work he does not affirm himself but denies himself; does not feel content but unhappy; does not develop his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind." However, relentless negativity about work condemns us to precisely the sort of work that the Russian politician was trying to free us from 150 years ago. If we accept that work is dull and demeaning—a ransom paid for the hostage of our "free time"—then we are allowing alienation to remain.

D

Work is becoming too important for it to be of dubious quality. Work is a community, the place where we meet friends and form relationships, a provider of our social as well as our work life. One in three of us meets most of our friends through work, two-thirds of us have dated someone at work, and, according to a poll by recruitment consultancy Sanders and Sidney, a quarter of us meet our life partners there. Work is also becoming a more important indicator of identity. Family, class, region, and religion are now less robust indicators, and work is filling the gap, making it the most important fact about ourselves we mention when we meet people. "Work," as Albert Einstein said, "is the only thing that gives substance to life."

E

The shift of work toward the center of our lives demonstrates the futility of much of the current debates about "work-life balance." It is true that some people are working longer hours. Yet the idea that it is being forced upon us without our choice just doesn't stack up. Take the people working the greatest number of hours—more than sixty a week. Surveys show that they are the ones who say they like their jobs the most. This may seem surprising, until you reflect that people who like something might do more of it than people who do not. People who love their jobs own up to having a "work/life problem" because they put in more hours than they are strictly required to. In truth, they are simply made to feel as if they have a problem because of

prevalent attitudes. Of course, this leaves open the question of who keeps the home fires burning and of the impact on children especially. It may be that people are choosing to invest less time and energy at home than others think they should, but, if these people get more out of their work than they do out of their home, then perhaps this is a clear and valid choice for people to be making.

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Summary:

The text argues that work is often unfairly blamed for various societal issues, but in reality, job satisfaction and working conditions have improved significantly. Despite this, there's a persistent belief that happiness lies outside of work. Historically, work has been seen as alienating, but the text suggests that work is now central to our social lives and identities. It challenges the notion of "work-life balance" by highlighting that many people who work long hours do so because they enjoy their jobs. The ultimate goal should be to integrate work into life seamlessly, abolishing the distinction between work and leisure. Theodore Zeldin's idea is to make work so fulfilling that it doesn't feel like work at all. The text calls for a reevaluation of modern myths about work and a more positive perspective on its role in our lives.

Comprehension Check Questions

Ⓐ Paragraph A

1. What is the main complaint about work in modern newspapers?

Work is often blamed for problems like stress, broken marriages, lack of family time, and unhappiness.

2. What does the writer mean by saying “work has become the scapegoat for all our woes”?

It means people unfairly blame work for many problems in life.

3. How often does the media criticize work, according to the author?

Almost every day.

4. What does the author think about the negative opinions on work?

The author believes they are wrong and exaggerated (“it’s nonsense”).

5. According to the author, how is the situation of work today compared to the past?

We’ve “never had it so good,” meaning work conditions are better than ever.

Ⓑ Paragraph B

6. What percentage of British workers are “very satisfied” with their jobs?

Four out of ten (40%).

7. How do British workers compare with those in France, Germany, Italy, or Spain in job satisfaction?

They are more satisfied than workers in those countries.

8. What improvements at work are mentioned?

Higher earnings, longer maternity leave, sabbaticals, and options to work from home.

9. What does the author say about longer working hours?

Working hours have increased only slightly—by about one minute and forty-two seconds.

10. What is meant by “The rhetoric about longer working hours also needs to be put in perspective”?

It means people exaggerate the issue; the actual increase is very small.

● **Paragraph C**

11. What belief about happiness and work does the writer discuss?

That happiness exists outside of work and we just wait for weekends to be happy.

12. Who is the “Russian politician” mentioned, and what idea did he describe?

Karl Marx; he described “alienation of labor,” meaning workers feel disconnected and unhappy about their work.

13. What does “labor is external to the worker” mean?

It means the worker doesn’t feel that the work is a real part of themselves—it feels forced and meaningless.

14. What is the danger of believing work is dull and demeaning?

It keeps us stuck in the same negative and alienated situation.

15. What does the author suggest about negativity toward work?

That constant negativity makes work worse and stops improvement.

● **Paragraph D**

16. Why does the author say “Work is becoming too important for it to be of dubious quality”?

Because work plays a huge role in people’s lives—it shapes their friendships, relationships, and identity.

17. In what ways is work a “community”?

It’s where we meet friends, form relationships, and socialize.

18. What percentage of people meet most of their friends through work?

One in three.

19. How many people have dated someone at work?

Two-thirds.

20. What percentage of people meet their life partners at work?

A quarter.

21. What other sources of identity are becoming less important?

Family, class, region, and religion.

22. What replaces them as an indicator of identity?

Work.

23. What did Albert Einstein say about work?

He said, “Work is the only thing that gives substance to life.”

● **Paragraph E**

24. What debate does the author call “futile”?

The debate about “work-life balance.”

25. Why does the author think it's futile?

Because work is already at the center of our lives, and many people choose to work long hours.

26. Who tends to work the longest hours?

People who actually like their jobs the most.

27. Why might people who love their jobs say they have a “work/life problem”?

Because they spend a lot of time at work and others think they work too much.

28. According to the author, do people always work long hours because they are forced to?

No, many choose to work more because they enjoy it.

29. What question does the author say remains open?

Who takes care of the home and children when people work long hours.

30. What might people be choosing, according to the author?

They might choose to invest more time in work if they find it more rewarding than home life.

● Paragraph F

31. What does the author say our goal should be regarding work?

We should see work as a natural part of life, not something separate from it.

32. Who is Theodore Zeldin, and what is his idea about work?

An Oxford scholar who says we should “abolish” work—not by ending it, but by removing the division between work and leisure.

33. What mistake does Zeldin think people made in the last century?

Separating work and leisure as completely different things.

34. What benefit does Zeldin see in “abolishing” this distinction?

It would stop employers from keeping people in bad jobs by promising them leisure time later.

35. What kind of work should we strive for, according to Zeldin?

Work that feels so natural and fulfilling that we don't even realize it's work.

36. What challenge does Zeldin give for the 21st century?

To stop thinking of work as a burden and to change negative myths about it.

37. What myths about work need to be exposed?

The myths that work is always exhausting, degrading, or harmful.

38. What final message does the author give?

It's time to “give work a break” — to think more positively about work and see it as meaningful.

Vocabulary

Paragraph A

- **gets a terrible press** – is spoken about negatively in the media
- **scapegoat** – someone or something blamed for problems
- **woes** – problems or troubles
- **persuasive** – convincing; able to make people believe something
- **on a daily basis** – every day
- **nonsense** – something silly or not true
- **as far as ... is concerned** – regarding; about
- **we've never had it so good** – life is better now than ever before

Paragraph B

- **declare themselves** – say or state their opinion

- **maternity leave** – time off work for mothers after giving birth
- **sabbatical** – a period away from work for rest or study
- **rhetoric** – speech or writing that sounds good but may not be true
- **put in perspective** – see the true importance or size of something
- **average** – usual; typical
- **increased** – became larger or higher

Paragraph C

- **ingrained attitude** – deep and long-held belief
- **happiness lies outside work** – belief that happiness is found away from work
- **alienated** – feeling separated or disconnected
- **constitutes** – makes up; forms
- **affirm** – show or express clearly
- **denies himself** – refuses himself pleasure or comfort
- **mortifies** – weakens or makes suffer
- **relentless** – never stopping; constant
- **condemns** – forces someone into a bad situation
- **demeaning** – making someone feel less important
- **ransom** – price or payment to free someone
- **alienation** – feeling isolated or cut off

Paragraph D

- **dubious quality** – doubtful or poor quality
- **provider** – giver or source of something
- **recruitment consultancy** – company that helps find workers for employers
- **indicator** – sign showing something
- **robust** – strong and healthy
- **filling the gap** – replacing something missing
- **substance** – importance or real value

Paragraph E

- **shift toward** – movement in a certain direction
- **futility** – uselessness; pointlessness
- **stack up** – make sense; be reasonable
- **reflect** – think carefully about something
- **own up to** – admit something
- **strictly required** – exactly needed; no more than necessary
- **prevalent attitudes** – common or widespread beliefs
- **keep the home fires burning** – take care of home and family
- **impact on** – effect on
- **invest time and energy** – spend time and effort on something
- **valid choice** – reasonable and acceptable decision

Paragraph F

- **intrinsic** – natural; belonging naturally to something
- **adjunct** – something added but not essential
- **don** – university teacher (especially at Oxford or Cambridge)
- **manifesto** – public statement of beliefs or goals
- **abolition** – ending or stopping something completely
- **distinction** – difference

- **enables** – makes possible
- **lousy** – very bad
- **strive** – try very hard
- **notion** – idea or belief
- **down payment** – part of payment made in advance
- **stereotype** – fixed, oversimplified idea about people or things
- **sapping** – draining energy or strength
- **corrosive** – slowly damaging or destroying
- **give work a break** – stop criticizing work so much