

REDISCOVERING AND OPTIMIZING THE MEANING OF WORK BY NIGERIAN GRADUATES: ESSENTIAL DRIVES TO NIGERIAN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY

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Abstract

The first quarter of the 21st century Nigeria, has been punctuated by a series of economic and social challenges, among which unemployment, poor performance and poor work ethic of Nigerian graduates, stand out as gigantic monsters that daily stir at the faces of the Nigerian youths, and deteriorate the endowed human capital with which Nigeria has long been blessed. How can Nigerian youths graduating from higher institutes of learning, regain control of this situation and contribute to the economic and social development of Nigeria? Which incentives and motivational elements could be put at their disposal to be able to return to work with the enthusiasm that once existed and spurred the youths? What can Nigerian government do both on the Federal, State and Local levels to re-invent, re-establish, revamp and optimize Nigerian graduates' enthusiasm and devotedness to work? This study traces the solution to the rediscovery of the meaning of work among the youths as one of the major ways to empower the youths and redirect them back to work. The envisaged and anticipated outcome would be a reborn Nigerian society where economy and development will experience, once again, as it did in the seventies and early eighties, an unprecedented drive to success and sustainability. This study deploys a systematic and analytical research methodological framework. Navigating, first, through some important theoretical and conceptual analysis of work, work environment, work ethic, and human dignity, this study postulates that a return to the rediscovery of the meaning of work as it relates to the dignity of work and the centrality of work in the overall economic development of a nation, is the gateway to a dynamic and viable economy.

Keywords: Nigerian Graduates, Work, Workplace, Dignity of work, Work ethic.

Introduction

Nigerian graduates go through a lot of hurdles to find job after graduation. While fortunate ones are landed on their first jobs after few interviews, some spend their hard savings to scout for jobs. They deal with the retrogressive cultural elements of bribery, corruption and un-empowering and humiliating comments and labels from the society. These factors, sometimes, unfortunately, spin the Nigerian graduates into compromising their strong ethical commitment to decency and purity. The cultural factors of bribery and connection –*ima mmadu* (as the Igbos of South Eastern Nigeria would put it), in a more conspicuous manner, are gigantic ugly monsters that torment and disrupt the employability of many of our graduates. However, for the “fortunate” ones that survive this horrible unethical, spiritually demoralizing situations prior to hire, being hired at last, ushers in another kind of confusion –how to survive and work efficiently, effectively and joyfully at their jobs. This is usually a tough period and requires some extra resilience to deal with appropriately. The working environment is not only unfavorable, but hostile. The workplace, instead of being a place we spend quality time with our colleagues, building up friendships, relationships, often turns into being the weakest and somewhat dreaded place to be. Conger (1994) summarizes this austere, sad situation of workplaces in these words: “It is here that we are often inadequately challenged and underutilized. It is here that we find it difficult to see connections between our immediate work and a contribution to society. It is here that words like empowerment are promoted because such feelings are so often absent. These are contradictions of our workplace.”

Nigerian graduates long to work and spend a lot of energy and resources to explore this. They are industrious and would go to any extent to look for a job after graduation. However, the stumbling block towards their success at workplaces rest on the very fact that, to some extent, there appears some sort of disconnect between the societal and cultural formulation of “what work is” and what constitutes “a successful outcome” at work places. Some graduates would accept any work and excel in same, but others would deride

any work or employment that falls outside their area of studies or specialization. In the following pages, we shall examine what work means and the dignity accorded to it. It is believed, that a change in the attitude to work by Nigerian graduates, will go a long way to successfully driving forward, the Nigerian economy and improving the lives of the Nigerian citizenry.

Theoretical and Conceptual Analysis

Work

The definition of “work” is as broad as the sky and full of nuances that sometimes seem to contradict one another. Consequently, the closer one tries to reach it, the more elusive it appears. However, we attempt some basic understanding and usage of “work” because of the limit and scope of this paper. In general, the basic understanding of “work” has been: “an activity involving mental, or physical effort, done to achieve a purpose of result” (Miriam Webster Dictionary, 2018). But when one digs deeper into the etymological derivation of it, sad feelings cripple in:

Words indicating labour in most European languages originate in an imagery of compulsion, torment, affliction and persecution. The French word *travail* (and Spanish *trabajo*), like its English equivalent, are derived from the Latin *trepaliare* – to torture, to inflict suffering or agony. The word *peine*, meaning penalty or punishment, also is used to signify arduous labour, something accomplished with great effort. The German *Arbeit* suggests effort, hardship and suffering; it is cognate with the Slavonic *rabota* (from which English derives “robot”), a word meaning corvee, forced or serf labour. In romance languages, words from the Latin *laborare* have come to mean ploughing or tilling the earth, although in Italian, *lavoro* also means work in general. The Latin meaning was anything accomplished with

The English "work" from the old English "worc," has an Indo-European stem *werg-*, via Greek *ergon*, meaning deed or action without punitive connotations; and Latin *urgere*, to press, bear down upon or compel. It is cognate with Gothic *wrikan*, to persecute, and Old English *wrecan*.

Thus, in the word "work", violence is latent, and it appears in the form "wreak," when we speak of wreaking havoc or vengeance. "Toil" derives from Old French, meaning argument or dispute, fight and struggle. Work was compulsion and punishment, an existential affliction which promised neither wellbeing nor even an assured sustenance. Traces of this more ancient lineage are present in many Biblical references. "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread," declares the Book of Genesis; while another axiom much favored by the taskmasters of the poor is from 2 Thessalonians 3:10: "This we commanded you, that if any would not work, neither should he eat." The Book of Proverbs is particularly rich in evoking the perils of idleness and sloth. "Through sloth the roof sinks in, and through indolence the house leaks." "Love not sleep, lest you come to poverty"; "Like vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes, so is the sluggard to those who send him"; "Slothfulness casts into a deep sleep and an idle person will suffer hunger."

Brief Overview of the Dignity of Work

Amidst all these negative connotations, "work" has been construed to positively indicate a means of livelihood, a means of sustaining oneself and an activity that impacts on people's life in an amazing way. Blending the positive and negative derivatives of the meaning of work appears important in the context of this paper. The positive dimension of the definition of work traces to Thomas Aquinas's words: "to live well is to work well, or display a good activity." Hildegard of Bingen romantically relates to work: "a person becomes a flowering orchard. The person that does good work is indeed this orchard bearing good fruit...Whatever humanity does with its deeds in the right or left hand permeates the universe and makes the cosmic wheel go around." Hildegard, provokes our

understanding of work in at least three ways: first, her statement presumes that humans are fruitful and flourishing when working; second, that we are about good work; and third, that our work affects the universe itself, that our work actually contributes to turning the “cosmic wheel.” She presumes that we are not tied down to anthropocentric (or human-centered) understanding of work (Fox, 1995). In line with Aquinas, good living and good working go together. Life and livelihood ought not be separated but to flow the same source, which is Spirit, for both life and livelihood are about Spirit. Spirit means life, and both life and livelihood are about living in depth, living with meaning, purpose, joy, and a sense of contributing to the greater community (Fox, 1995). Hence, work is seen as a positive phenomenon that not only helps the human provide for daily, human needs, but that influences the totality of the community and all that inhabits the environment, including the cosmos.

Enabling Work Environment

A workplace is where work is executed or carried out. It is a location where someone works for his or her employer, a place of employment (Pierce, 2000). Such a place can range from one’s home, to a home office to a large office building or factory. For industrialized societies, the workplace is one of the most important social spaces other than the home, constituting a central concept for several entities: the worker and his/her family, the employing organization, the customers of the organization, and the society as a whole. The development of new communication technologies has led to the development of the virtual workplace, a workplace that is not located in any one physical space. Some workplace may be meaningful and fulfilling but most is not. While it is acknowledged that some people may love their work and feel they are helping others, it is thought that these people are few and far between and that most of them are either highly paid white-collar workers or in the helping professions. The perception is that for most people work is alienating, oppressive, exhausting (Pierce, 2000).

Workplace Conditions: Nigerian Graduates at Crossroads with Bribery and Corruption

Our graduates underperform or do not perform as appropriate or commensurate with their education and experience because, in part, corruption appears to be already enshrined in the Nigerian body polity. Most graduates are interlocked within the mercies of their sponsors to secure job opportunities. Bribery and corruption are eating knee deep into the fabric of Nigerian job market. All these start with bad policy-making process and trickle down to job places. Nigerian higher education system operated on bad policy-making mechanism, does not empower the younger generation to be productive or rather develop their potentials. And for the fortunate ones who excelled more than others and have their way, they abandon the country in search of greater and brighter opportunities abroad, in the developed countries. This is how the brain drain has emerged. Thus, the brain drain can only be stemmed, if much needed financial means are put at their disposal and there is a guarantee that they will not have to work themselves because of the federal government refusal to pay their retirement gratuities. This can only be achieved if cases of gross mismanagement of public funds and moral torpidude among government officials are not left unchallenged (Adega, 2012).

The socio-political and economic developments of any nation are strongly determined by the good quality and level of educational growth of its inhabitants. However, this is jeopardized when policy-makers fail to make it one of their major priorities once they get into office. A continued neglect of this important area would lead most certainly to social paralysis, which is what is presently happening in Nigeria. Bribery and corruption corrode the educational system and like cancer, spreads to most job markets in Nigeria. This has led to the younger generation brain drain from Nigeria. Incessant riots and strikes across the Nigerian university system are monsters that have really left hollows in our younger generation and to some extent, seem to have successfully given the younger generation the impression that “nothing works in Nigeria except the connections or ties one has or shares with those who matter –the employers.” So, graduating from a higher

institute of learning, the younger generation envisages more of “survival-of-the-fittest” job market structure, a battered economy which leaves no atom of hope for the future. The issue of corruption is experienced across the economic fabric and appears to be a single common denominator of all malaise that has befallen Nigerian economy. Bamgbose frustratingly observes how corruption has driven Nigerian to a shattered economy. Poor management of resources resonate more when we consider Bamgbose’s words:

The economy has been weakened by the military and civilian regimes alike. Corruption on all levels has also affected the educational system. Indeed, as Bamgbose suggests, debt- waivers granted to Nigeria to the tune of \$18 billion which would reduce the annual foreign debt-servicing payments should make the payment of pensioners faster and easier; and if “assuming that the annual debt-serving payment was \$2 billion, 60 per cent debt forgiveness will reduce the annual debt servicing payment by \$1.2 billion which translates into N168 billion per annum.”

Work Ethic

Work ethic is a terminology used generally to describe the set of beliefs, values, and attitudes that an individual assumes during work (Meriac, Woehr, and Banister 2010). It is a reflection of an individual’s dedication and commitment to work, and one’s willingness to exercise effort over and above the threshold standards required and expected by a job (McMurray and Scott 2013). This terminology was originally created by post-reformation scholars who promoted individualism among society and discredited the welfare state (Miller, Woehr, and Hudspeth 2001). The scholars believed that individuals should be fully accountable for their well-beings in life and it is through hard work that any one individual could better his or her standard of living. As the ‘work ethic’ terminology develops and evolves, its interpretation gradually collides with Max Weber’s work about ‘Protestant Ethic’ (McMurray and Scott 2013).

Making reference to the rationalization laid down by Weber, the ability to work and gain returns was considered to be an act of satisfying God's will and fulfilling the labor desired by God. The ethic in work resembles a kind of calling from the above and that individuals should work systematically and continuously to maximize the benefits of their labor and thus the glory to God (Miller, Woehr, and Hudspeth 2001). Weber's construct of Protestant Work Ethic (PWE) was theorized formally basing on religious faith and duty, holding onto beliefs and personal principles in the dimensions on centrality of work, self-reliance, hard work, leisure avoidance, morality, delay of gratification, and time utilization. Nowadays, the modern understanding of work ethic does not confine to any single culture or religion (Geren, 2011). Occupational work ethic covers a wide range of aspects and is culturally developed from a combination of the employees' family, religious, and ethnic beliefs and values (Petty and Hill 2005). According to Anca (2012), the concept of work ethic today "stresses the importance of skills, discipline, challenge, autonomy, quality of work produced,' and positive work ethic aims to increase employees' productivity through the achievement of an optimal efficiency, mentality and position."

A strong work ethic is vital for achieving goals. A work ethic is a set of moral principles a person uses in their job. People who possess a strong work ethic embody certain principles that guide their work behavior, leading them to produce high-quality work consistently and the output feeds the individual to stay on track. A good work ethic fuels an individual's needs and goals, it is related to the initiative by a person for the objectives. It is considered as a source of self-respect, satisfaction, and fulfillment.

Factors of strong work ethic are, but not limited to:

1. Goal-oriented actions: it is not about making plans or the next logical steps; it's about getting things done so that the work invested wouldn't be counter-productive.
2. Prioritized focus: focusing on qualitative activities that a person is capable and in areas where they can make a difference or a high impact based on objectives.

3. Being available and reliable: spending time on the work and building oneself up for the task.
4. Conscientiousness: a desire to do a task well, being vigilant and organized.
5. Creating a rewarding routine/system: Engaging in tasks that provide strength and energy which can be transferred to your ultimate goals, creating a habit and a habitat for success.
6. Embracing positivism: shape a problem with the statement "good, (action) (problem)", e.g. "I'm tired and it is time for a workout" leads to "Good. Workout tired" (Goldman, 1970).

Goldman (1970)'s philosophical writings draw the assumptions about good work ethic principally on:

1. The path that leads to what you want is to take action.
2. The success of action plans depend upon how congruent one's worldview is with the society's.
3. Many problems faced are only a temporary breakdown of self-management.
4. Setting time limits for achieving goals helps to overcome the edge of discomforts that time can have on subjective needs.
5. A positive problem-solving or goal attainment experience improves one's ability to cope with the next difficulty.
6. Hardships in life is a normality, they become a problem when they are the same over and over.
7. A person is what s/he does, and feelings flow from behavior.
8. Feelings can be viewed as beliefs about one's wants.

In the 1970s a good work ethic was considered as a lifestyle to meet unmet or unsatisfied wants by people. A negative work ethic is a behavior of a single individual or a group that has led to a systematic lack of productivity, reliability, accountability and a growing sphere of unprofessional/unhealthy relationships (e.g., power politics, lack of social skills, etc.)

Rediscovery of the Dignity of Work by Nigerian Graduates

The theoretical framework of this study portrays work as a dignifying element of the human person. Rediscovering the dignity of work could be considered correlational to the overall Nigerian economic development and sustainability. When the youths recapture and personalize the fact that work, intrinsically possesses some worth, and no matter the kind of the work one does, the result is that the human person, the image of God –*Imago Dei*, not only contributes to the furtherance of the creation and betterment of the universe, is also empowering oneself in a very dignifying manner.

Work has evolved into something clothed with dignity in Western intellectual tradition as we have seen from the conceptual analytical portion of this study. The human person, therefore possesses the duty and the right to work from the Genesis creation account where man ought to work to imitate God, his creator, because man alone has the unique likeness of God (Genesis, 1:27). A consequence of being made in God's image is the task of living up to that likeness through work (Sison, Ferrero, &Guitan, 2016). Hence, the primary reason for work is obedience to a divine command. This divine command extends to transforming nature of environment, such that it becomes a worthy home for human beings, and to endeavoring to reach personal perfection. These two aims are intimately related. In the first place, our fulfilment or perfection as human beings requires keeping ourselves alive and satisfying basic needs. We achieve this mainly through work in close contact with nature, such as farming, fishing, and so forth. By engaging in these activities for our sustenance, we learn and improve our skills, progressing not only technically and materially, but also culturally and even spiritually (*Gaudium et Spes*, 67; Sison, Ferrero, &Guitan, 2016).The dignity of work essentially correlates the dignity of the human person. If Nigerian graduates could give more time to rediscovering this concept and adopting it both while scouting and searching for jobs and eventually after hire at their prospective workplaces, a lot of

improvement will be registered and the economy could witness once a revival.

As Nigerian graduates recapture this dignity of work and return to work, doing “whatever” work available and supporting themselves within the realm of work ethic as discussed above, the Nigerian economy will definitely regain its power again, going by the overall concept of per capita income optimization through consistent productivity, as is obtainable in most developed countries.

Bribery and Corruptive Practices: The Bane to Nigerian Economic Recovery

In as much as this study postulates that the rediscovery of the meaning and dignity of work will assist the Nigerian graduates in redefining their attitude to work and by extension will equally boost the Nigerian economy, this study, simultaneously alludes to the fact that bribery and corruptive practices which has eaten knee deep into the fabrics of the Nigerian society are deadly monsters that could discourage the enthusiastic goodwill of the Nigerian youths and citizenry to adopting, internalizing and optimally applying this principle to work. Bribery and corruption have tactfully and systematically rendered the Nigerian youths’ enthusiasm to work impotent and frustrating. Industries need to be built and more stakeholders from both public and private sectors need to invest into creating more work opportunities. However, the truth of the matter, is that it all has to commence with the Nigerian citizenry commitment to embrace the work ethic that is value-laden, strategically sustainable and supportive for future generations. When work is viewed, not as “suffering” or dehumanizing endeavor, the life of the human person, turns around to be dignified and dignified nature of human work. A relapse into pessimism will only worsen Nigerian economic situation. Nigerians need to stay focused on the work ethic that could redefine their economic and social existence and reposition them once more on the platform of the past glory of the “the Giant of Africa.”

Recommendations for Further Research and Study

1. More efforts should be allocated by the Nigerian Government to fighting corruptive practices.
2. Youths empowerment should be given more attention by the government and communities.
3. Work ethic and dignity of work to be made essential part of the academic curriculum.
4. Not-for-Profit (NGOs) Organizations to team together with the government to create and sustain enabling workforce development programs and environment..
5. Nigerian public and private stakeholders should endeavor to create more jobs for the youths. This will go a long way to empowering the youths.

Conclusion

Within the framework of the dignity of work and cultivation of appropriate work ethic, Nigerian graduates, will stand a broader chance to developing and optimizing the use of their potentials at work. At this point in the Nigerian history where the economy is in dire distress and untold hardship frustrates most Nigerian families, this article envisages that returning to work by our graduates, not with the mentality or attitude of finding the “best” or “mostly desired” or work in the area of one’s expertise, but by doing “any work” that could give some sense and worth to one’s existence will give more meaning and hope. It has already started happening where some graduates subsist and survive on menial jobs, sometimes not even able to pay for their daily meals. This discussion, I believe will be carried further in the academia and within a variety of intellectual, psycho-social human development platforms.

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