

A Bahá'í perspective on the meaning of work and values

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The Bahá'í teachings emphasise a transformation of the meaning of work from a predominantly utilitarian activity to one with implications for personal growth and development, highlighting the fundamental spiritual significance of engaging in an occupation, as well as identifying key work values. The concept presented is that work, when performed with the attitude of service to others, is a form of worship. Furthermore, it allows the individual to better understand the purpose of his or her life. The teachings thus explicitly provide basic individual work values, as well as a framework for identifying and prioritising more specific values and associated attitudes and behaviours and for appraising and coping with the organizational environment and its values.

Furthermore, the Bahá'í perspective on the meaning of work and the role of values offers a unique basis for interpreting the significant change that has occurred in social values over the past few decades, a change evident in many domains, not least in the workplace. Fluctuations in the state of the economy, pressures imposed by the emergence of a global marketplace, and the steady introduction of new technology have had wide-ranging implications for the nature and meaning of work from both individual and organizational standpoints. Academic literature in psychology and management demonstrates that values are a key aspect of the work experience and define the meaning of the various facets of that experience, including jobs and organizations. For example, personal values are thought to play an important part in both work-related attitudes and behaviour, whilst organizational values have been shown to have an impact on individuals'

adjustment and commitment to their jobs, and have been described as the “silent power” in both personal and organizational life.

Evidence indicates that the traditional work ethic is in decline, being replaced by an increasing emphasis on self-fulfilment and the optimisation of human potential. At the same time, the success of new methods of organising work challenges assumptions about the basis of work motivation, and highlights the potential role of values in the work environment; employers in virtually every sector are turning their attention to values, on the assumption that such a focus may be the key to a happy, healthy and productive workforce. Such trends find resonance with the Bahá'í teachings on work, and when seen in the context of the Bahá'í concepts can be more readily and fully understood.

Against the background of the shifting climate of social values and the increasing emphasis in the world of work on cultivating stronger organizational values, it seems timely to consider the Bahá'í viewpoint on the meaning of work. The present paper therefore reflects on the concept of work present in the Bahá'í teachings alongside current definitions of the meaning of work and work values, and examines some of the individual and collective implications of the shift in understanding presented in the Bahá'í Writings.