

The Art and Science of Work

Imagine an individual completely immersed in some non-leisure activity and unaware of the time passing by. Before you read on, make a vivid mental picture of the person you have thought of. What is the activity that the person is engaged in?

Most likely, you have thought of an artist, a sportsperson, or a scientist. The uniqueness of these professions is that it is easy for us to imagine an artist completely engrossed in creating a work of art, a sportsperson trying to perfect the technique, or a scientist totally consumed by the quest for the answer to a particularly complicated problem. Alas, not all of us have the good fortune to be able to devote ourselves completely to art, sport, or science. Most of us are “condemned” to earn our livelihood by engaging in apparently mundane jobs (such as operating machines, balancing accounts, or “managing” other people!). We spend our day trying to battle the various challenges thrown before us and come home tired and weary. Some of us who are fortunate are able to pursue our hobbies and interests after working hours. However, even for those people, their work remains a means of livelihood and survival. The irony of the situation is that despite going through all the effort, we are often left with a feeling of emptiness and frustration with respect to what we have achieved at work. Individuals often respond to this in two ways. Some of us respond to the frustration by putting in so many more hours and so much more efforts into our work that we completely burn out. Others respond to the frustration by alienating themselves completely from their work, somehow passing time, and depending on non-work activities (such as family, friends, and hobbies) for fulfillment.

Can we inject our work with the passion of an artist, a sportsperson, or a scientist? Is it possible for us somehow to look upon our work as an artist sees a work of art or as a scientist

deals with an unfinished problem? For this, we will have to understand the spirit of the artist and the spirit of the scientist.

Work as art and the quest for product quality

Art is defined as “an undertaking or activity enhanced by a high level of skill or refinement¹” and the artist is driven by the pursuit of elegance, perfection, and aesthetics. Above all, the artist has a sense of ownership or pride in work since the work of art is seen as an extension of the artist’s own personality. Can we not cultivate this pride and sense of ownership in our work? Why can’t we strive like the artist for perfection in whatever we do?

Since earliest times, artisans were concerned with the quality of their work and took pride in creating high quality products. With the advent of the factory system in the mid-1750s and its emphasis on mechanization, quality was enforced through inspection. This robbed the creator of pride in the creation and work became a boring and tiresome task. It was only after the total quality revolution spearheaded by Joseph Juran and W. Edwards Deming that companies once more attempted to restore pride in work.

Work as science and the quest for process quality

Science is defined as “the state of knowing²” and the scientist is driven by curiosity- the burning desire to understand the why and how of nature. The scientist is so completely absorbed by the need to understand that even food and rest have no attraction. Can we cultivate this sense of wonder and curiosity on our work? Can we encourage and nourish our inner desire to know why and how things work?

As products became more complex, adopting the artisan’s view was no longer sufficient to ensure quality, consistency, and safety in products. The total quality revolution also brought in the use of statistical techniques and systematic approaches to problem solving. Work evolved

from the mere execution of set procedures to understanding the subtle relationships between input and output parameters and thereby enhancing quality, reducing cycle time, and reducing costs.

Designing jobs so that the art and science of the work is intact

Can we design jobs in organizations where we can nurture the artist-scientist in our employees? There have been various attempts at enriching jobs in organizations such that they provide meaning and satisfaction to the worker. The most comprehensive model of job design was given by J. Richard Hackman and Greg R. Oldham in the form of a theoretical model linking job characteristics to positive psychological stages³. According to Hackman and Oldham, meaningful and engaging jobs utilize a variety of worker skills, are holistic, significant, provide for substantial freedom and discretion, and provide feedback on the quality. Managers should strive to design jobs in a manner that workers can take ownership for a complete segment of the work and workers can understand the importance of their work in reaching the organization's goals.

Allowing independent thinking and questioning assumptions

Managers often believe that it is their responsibility to provide ready answers to all their employees' problems and difficulties. While a certain amount of guidance and support is expected from a manager, too much of it may prevent independent thinking and development of the employees. Managers must allow employees to think for themselves and find creative solutions to workplace issues.

Bringing the art and science into your own work

Having outlined the role of the manager, a significant part of the responsibility for brightening up ones work lies with the person engaged in the work. We need to awaken in

ourselves the curiosity of the student-scientist and look upon our work as an emerging prototype. We need to revisit our books and theories and see how they are applicable in our work and how the latest knowledge in our field can be effectively harnessed to improve our work. We need to be in touch with others in our field through reading journals and attending conferences so that our thinking is challenged with new ideas and experiences of others like us.

Similarly, we need to rekindle the spirit of perfection that characterizes the artist and apply it to our daily chores. We need to get back in touch with the pride and joy that comes from a job well done. For this, we may need to refocus our efforts on those details that we have learnt to ignore because of experience.

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References

¹ art. (2009). In Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary. Retrieved July 25, 2009, from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/art>

² science. (2009). In Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary. Retrieved July 25, 2009, from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/science>

³ Hackman, J. R., & Oldham, G. R. (1975). Development of the job diagnostic survey. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 60, 159-170.