



# THE ROYAL BANK OF CANADA MONTHLY LETTER

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## *The Work Ethic is not Dead*

NO ONE HAS EVER REPEALED the Law of Work, but it is in process of amendment. From the obscure life of organs within the body to the building of moon landing-craft, work is one of the conditions of being alive, but we need to keep up with changes in its form and significance.

Everyday work is some purposeful activity that requires the expenditure of energy with some sacrifice of leisure.

Sir William Osler, great Canadian physician and professor of medicine, whose book *The Principles and Practice of Medicine* is still a textbook after 82 years, believed "work" to be the master word in the ongoing life. It is the touchstone of progress, the measure of success, and the fount of hope. It is directly responsible, he said, for all advances in medicine and technology.

Not everyone is happy in his work. Job dissatisfaction is increasing. Workers are being infected by an uneasiness whose spread is challenging our assumptions about work and forcing us to make new definitions of jobs.

Some of the unrest and confusion is caused by the fact that we have not the compelling urgency of our forefathers. They had to work hard to survive: we have securities of this and that sort to make sure that we do not starve to death.

The late Dr. D. Ewen Cameron, internationally recognized psychiatrist who became the director of McGill University's Allan Memorial Institute in Montreal, wrote in his book *Life is for Living* (The Macmillan Co., 1948): "For half a century we have heard the most moving of lamentations from employers over the passing of the old time worker, the fellow who really loved his work, who hung around until he was satisfied that the job was done, who would think out ways to do it better. This kind of worker has not disappeared from the job; it is his kind of job that has done the disappearing."

Intelligent people, when they talk about the need for work, are not talking about returning to the twelve hour a day use of picks and shovels or wheel-

barrows or horse-drawn scrapers in place of steam or diesel shovels, bulldozers and tractors.

Young and old are willing to invest their effort in work, but they are demanding a bigger pay off in satisfaction.

That workers find fault with their jobs is not a new phenomenon. What is new is the variety of their complaints and their increased determination to do something about removing the cause.

The development of a new respect for work and the promotion of a better understanding between those who perform the work and those who employ such workers is rapidly becoming one of the supreme tasks of employer statesmanship.

Some business executives have come to the conclusion that work, not workers, must change, and that leads them to the administration of strong medicine: the restructuring of jobs.

All the change that has been brought about by economic and mechanical progress cannot be looked upon as being against the workers' interest. Though the production technology has made man an appendage of tools and machines, and has weakened his journeyman's pride and autonomy, it has brought the price of automobiles, washing machines, cameras and refrigerators within his reach.

This gratification of his material desires by the mass production economy made man free to become aware of his dormant and unfulfilled psychological needs.

### *A code of values*

The work ethic, the code of values that says you must work, is rooted in the Puritan way of life. The pilgrims who came to this continent in the 17th century filled their children's minds with copy-book maxims about the devil finding work for idle hands to do. They did this for the very good reason that in pioneer days hard and continuous work was necessary to keep parents and children from perishing. The urge to work was strengthened by the ambition to improve their level of living that animated the immigrants.

The work ethic goes further than this. An ethic is a

body of moral principles that determines the course of a person's life. The work ethic holds that work is good in itself; that a man or a woman not only makes a contribution to society but becomes a better person by virtue of the act of working.

There must be work done by our hands, or none of us could live; there must be work done by our brains, or the life we live will not be enjoyable. A person is participating in the process of living only when he is doing something.

A second-century author whose pen name was Koheleth said: "Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might, for there is no work in the grave, whither thou goest."

All work is not of the sort at which one wears an apron or overalls. Work is done by an artist or a writer just as by a stonemason or a machinist. Mary Roberts Rinehart, author of sixty full-length novels besides short stories and plays, did a book about her craft in which she warned *Writing is Work*. Kepler's calculations of planetary motions, Newton's meditations on the law of gravitation, and Selye's revolutionary concept of stress, were work, though they caused sweat of the brain and not of the body.

One motive that stimulates people to work is the thought of a desirable end. There is no job in the world so dull that it would not present fascinating angles to someone who was interested in the outcome.

A research scientist found that the human motivators were, in ascending order, possibility of advancement, responsibility, the work itself, recognition, and sense of achievement. Well-balanced people may be satisfied with the simple joy of doing something well. A man chipping rocks may be soaked in pity because of the drudgery, while the man working beside him may be proud that he is helping to build a cathedral.

### *A new environment*

Machines, allied with chemistry and biology, have given, to a vastly increased population, an abundance and variety of commodities and amenities, together with a lightening of toil, such as our ancestors in their most hopeful visions could never have imagined.

As societies advanced in making and obtaining good things, the expectations of their people rose, so that now many suffer a feeling of scarcity and deprivation. Consequently, they are more demanding about the content of their jobs.

It would be perverse to maintain that the fullness of life that is within reach of most civilized people could exist without the complex mechanical paraphernalia used in industry and science. It would be equally wrong to deny that in the process of streamlining, co-ordinating, integrating and adjusting industrial work to the machine, that work has become all but clean-stripped of meaning and of psychological significance for the worker.

Jobs seem to have been carved up with an eccentric jigsaw to suit the needs of new processes. As Dr. Cameron pictured it, they are broken down according to what the machine can do; the left-over fragments and the nursemaiding of the machine are given to the worker.

We cannot escape the law of life that what has not been produced cannot be consumed. Without machinery, productivity could not have risen to its present heights. Without this growth there would have been no marked increase in income, no marked decrease in the hours worked, and there would not be enough goods to supply the demand for them.

The change to machine production from the old craft manner of working, a change that people's minds were ill-prepared to handle, has caused stress of this and that sort. A precise, conscientious, meticulous individual is apt to break down if placed in repetitive jobs which call for work at speeds beyond his natural tempo and that employ only a limited part of his mental equipment.

The sort of union to be effected between the new jobs and workers is the problem that perplexes both management and unions. Monetary incentives will spring first to mind, but there is plenty of evidence to indicate that a full pay envelope does not settle all wants.

Someone once got the bright idea of attaching to every machine in a factory a meter that ticked up the wages of the worker in the same way as a taxi meter ticks up the fare. It was found that the workers soon lost interest in the meters; they decided it was better, safer, and more interesting to keep their minds on their jobs.

### *A hidden hunger*

Workers may carry placards on which are printed demands for more pay, more leisure, and more comforts, but most of these are the surface indicators of a nagging hidden hunger. People increasingly desire jobs that satisfy creative needs as well as provide food and shelter.

The hidden hunger has to do with the need for recognition. A group of girls was studied. They reacted with increased production to every change in working conditions (temperature, lighting, seating, etc.) including those that were for the worse. What was important to them was not the improvement of conditions but the gesture of interest.

A person wants to be, to belong, and to become. He needs to feel that he is worthwhile, doing a worthwhile job. "Let my life mean something," is his request.

His ideal job would give him a purpose in life and make him part of a world-wide society of workers. He would be proud of his work; he would have a chance to develop and to show off his strongest skills and talents; his interest and abilities would be stimu-

lated through a variety of tasks; he would be given freedom to make decisions.

Increasing a worker's decision-making authority satisfies his ego needs. When a corporation allowed its salesmen to set their own work standards and quotas their sales increased 116 per cent over groups not given this freedom.

Opportunity for self-expression is desired. Work of any kind, manual or brain, can be made the intimate expression of oneself. Without the opportunity to live up to his fullest possibilities a worker shrinks and dwindles. He loses his dignity as an individual.

### *Satisfying the hunger*

While keeping in mind the necessary connection between work and reward, there are some lines of action that may be taken to satisfy the worker's hidden hunger.

Job rotation means that the worker moves from one task to a related task within his group. Job enlargement has the worker assume several related tasks. Job enrichment makes use of more of the employee's capabilities and allows him to accept accountability for arranging his job. It expands the worker's personality by adding the managerial functions of planning and controlling to the actual doing of the job.

Making a wheelbarrow can be a satisfying job, but not if your part of the job consists only in inspecting the ball-bearings. To make a whole piece of pottery with your own hands is to live again through a heart-warming triumph of early mankind: you become a more or less conscious creator, a person who dominates intractable elements and resistant forces.

To make up natural units of work means to put the components of a job into a group so as to form a single responsibility.

Professor Frederick Herzberg made interesting discoveries about worker morale in a study in 1955. One major firm that drew upon his research changed the jobs of 120 girls, broadening their responsibility so that they could research, compose and sign letters without having them checked by a supervisor. The result was a drop in labour turnover of 27 per cent; 24 clerks did the work of 46; and \$558,000 was saved in labour costs in eighteen months.

### *Democratic leadership*

Few advanced managers need to be convinced of the need for job enrichment: their quest is for ways in which to put the idea into effect. Some managers have found the secret: they make every worker a boss of something, and so allow him to feel a personal glow of pride in every achievement.

A supervisor can provide the conditions that stir the employee's desire to achieve. He can remove the road blocks preventing individuals from gaining satisfaction on the job. This does not mean that he should be permissive or lax or that he should abdicate

his authority. He should develop in himself a democratic leadership style that encourages the employees to participate in planning and organizing their work. When this is properly done, the workers reach their personal goals in the process of meeting the firm's objectives.

Enlightened managers are increasingly aware of the inevitability of democracy as the pattern for a healthy society and of the importance of their role in supporting it. Under it, first-line supervisors become more than mechanical men carrying out executives' orders. Their own jobs are enriched, and they become more "resource persons and co-ordinators" than merely overseers.

### *Youth has its say*

Management has to work today with a more mobile and a better educated work force than was ever before available. Young people entering employment are likely to be more independent than were their elders, more accustomed to comforts, less respectful of codes of dress, speech and personal appearance, and more forthright in presenting their opinions.

They not only want to know what is expected of them, and what standards they must meet, but to have a hand in setting those standards. An essay in *Time* warned that some of them may be too educated, too expectant, and too anti-authoritarian for many of the jobs that the present economy offers them.

The advent of these young people to the work force is a fact of life to be reckoned with. They want significant jobs from the very beginning of their careers. They have high expectations for job satisfaction. Their fathers, with scars of the great depression still giving them twinges of pain, value job security very highly, but for the young there has to be more to a job than assurance that they will eat regularly.

During the first half of the century it was not uncommon for municipalities seeking to attract factories to advertise "abundance of cheap labour". They were admitting the fact that their men and women had not been educated beyond the doing of rough and routine tasks. Today, everyone is educated, not only in school and university but by newspapers, magazines, books, television and radio. Courses in all kinds of crafts and arts are available to any adult people who wish to employ their evenings in personal betterment.

The challenge facing employers is to work toward making the jobs suitable to the requirements of this new pattern.

### *The worker's responsibility*

Not all the responsibility rests upon management. Every worker has obligations to himself and to his employer.

Work is an individual thing, even if one does it in company with a gang or a group or on a production

line. It is a person's own, to do well or ill, to improve or debase.

A progressive worker is miles apart from the person who depends upon luck or a union or his personal winning ways to get him what he wants out of life. A good apple-polisher is not always a good grower of apple trees.

There are some basic truths that should be known to all workers and prospective workers, even though at times they seem to be obscured by passing events.

You should know what your job requires of you and where you stand in it. You have to conform to the rhythm of the plant or office: if you are a member of a rowing crew you cannot show rugged individuality in the way you dip your oar even if you are convinced that your way will push the shell along faster. You are entitled to hold your job only so long as you fill your position efficiently.

It is worth while to use all your equipment and to develop new skills, and thus make work exciting and absorbing. Everyone should remain in a state of growth and interest. Sir William Van Horne, who progressed from railway telegraph operator to push through the Canadian Pacific Railway to completion and to end his working life as president of the board of directors, said "What interests a man cannot be called work."

If your interest seems to be dwindling, do a little self-analysis. Have you kept up so as to remain capable of handling the job efficiently? Is your education adequate to enable you to cope with new and complex situations? Does your personality enable you to work smoothly with other people? Are you satisfied that the job you are doing is useful to society?

In addition to the care lavished on raising the standard of living we need a movement to raise the standard of thinking. No one will deny that some jobs are more interesting than others, but it is also true that one mind is more interested and thinks on a higher level than another.

The animal part of man's nature prompts him to avoid difficulties, to follow the lines of least resistance, to be satisfied with existing; but every mature human being feels the need to stretch his mind, to be intellectually aware, to replace the brute instincts with responsible action.

### *On being a craftsman*

A craftsman is one who is skilled in his job. All work, on however lowly a plane, can be pleasurable if skill is used in its performance. Even in nailing two boards together one may take pride in hitting the nail on the head.

Respect for quality performance is the chief attribute of the craftsman. His respect for his job becomes self-respect and contributes to the dignity of his life.

Taking pains with a job is somewhat akin to genius in its effects. President Abraham Lincoln was invited

to "make a few appropriate remarks" at the dedication of the Gettysburg National Cemetery. In typical Lincoln effort for excellence he used care and work in his preparation, although his address contained only 265 words. Instead of a routine and formal statement he gave the world something very beautiful.

Conscientious completeness turns out a product that gives the worker satisfaction and pride. A craftsman in any line should bear in mind the doctor whose prayer was that he might never become slovenly in his work or so disinterested as to make a habit of prescribing "the mixture as before".

To contend that the element of drudgery can be wholly eliminated from work would be ridiculous. But it can be ameliorated. Work is what we make it: it can be worthy and satisfying whether it be putting nuts on bolts, building a house, managing an enterprise, painting a portrait, conducting research, or rendering professional service.

A person can put the stamp of his own spirit upon his work so that it becomes uniquely his. Fellow street-sweepers were discussing one of their number after his death. One man said: "What impressed me was his interest in doing a good job; look at the way he took special pains to sweep clean around lamp posts. You could always tell a lamp post that Charlie had swept around."

Analyse your successes, however small, so that you discover or rediscover your skills and satisfactions. The person who is dissatisfied with his job but neglects to learn the possibilities that life holds out to him through work, or who is slothful about doing something to improve his position in life, is like a man who is trying to score a goal in a game he dislikes.

### *When opportunity knocks*

When opportunity for advancement or improvement in your job knocks at your door she is usually wearing overalls. The pursuit of happiness means work; freedom means being able to work for things you want; independence means standing on your own feet free from dependence on the bounty of others; self-respect is the result of working for what you get.

Man has to work because work is an economic necessity (unless he is content to live on the dole); because it is a social obligation (unless he is content to be graded with the beasts), and because it is a basic human right (if he wishes to gain a sense of self-fulfilment).

The value of work is a personal thing. What we do may matter little in the history of the world, but it matters very much to ourselves that we should have some work to do. Otherwise, much of life will pass us by.

Nowhere in all the world can we find a more impressive monument to hard work coupled with vision, thrift and courage, than the civilization which flourishes in Canada.