



MONDAY May 17, 2004

Experts say everyday jobs can become meaningful

By Rosemary Winters
The Salt Lake Tribune

The message light on your phone is flashing red. Your desk is barely visible beneath the piles of paperwork that should have been done yesterday. You try to focus on the most important task at hand, but you quickly switch to something else because it seems like everything must get done at once.

Why bother doing any of it? You know this stack of files will only be replaced by an even higher stack when you finish. If you walk out today, the company will find someone tomorrow to take your place. You're just one tiny cog in a clock the size of Big Ben. What are you working so hard for?

Americans spend more time at work than people anywhere else in the world, and many are beginning to wonder if it's worth the time and stress. But the problem might not be long hours or a low-prestige career, it might be a lack of spiritual connection at work.

"What I have observed is that many people are kind of numb at work," says Elizabeth Guss, founder and managing partner of Cohesion, a Salt Lake City management and training firm. "They are shortchanging themselves, as well as not being able to contribute to the goals of the organization."

Guss is part of the growing "spirit at work" movement, which encourages people to connect with work in a deeply meaningful way. She consults with businesses, teaching leadership and team-building workshops, and does individual coaching to help employees and organizations identify core values.

Guss says incorporating spirituality in the workplace means to "engage the human spirit of life, of caring and of wisdom in how we do our jobs." She believes any job can be meaningful if work is done within the context of values, such as helping others, doing high quality work or earning money to support a family.

Darlene Cohen, a Zen priest at the San Francisco Zen Center, says job dissatisfaction is often a result of inattention to the present moment. She teaches meditation techniques, which are described in her book *The One Who Is Not Busy*, to help clients learn mindfulness. Being fully present, she says, helps people reduce stress and find enjoyment in every task.

Many Americans find difficulty focusing on the present moment because a success-oriented society teaches them to only value end results, Cohen says. Workers may find fleeting satisfaction in a paycheck, a promotion or an award but not in the day-to-day tasks on which they spend most of their time.

"If you just focus on goal orientation, you get overwhelmed and life is fundamentally empty."

Instead, Cohen recommends discarding categories so that every task is valued equally and each day is a flow of meaningful activity.

Guss says people looking for a more fulfilling work life should ask: Why am I at work? What would I do if I were independently wealthy and why? She says many people find they would continue doing the same work, but they might be frustrated by their work environments or wish to work for a different organization. Others might need a career change and should look for a way to do something they love.

Diane Millis was doing something she loved when Guss coached her five years ago, but she felt anxious about the part-time nature of her job. As an adjunct professor, Millis enjoyed teaching theological classes at the College of St. Benedict in Minnesota, but she wanted a long-term position. Speaking with Guss "gave me greater clarity as to the specific contribution I could make," Millis says.

The next year, Millis secured a grant for the college to create the Theological Exploration of Vocation program to help students identify their callings, and she was named director. She gained a full-time job, teaching curricular components of the program and coordinating events and counseling. Last year, she hired Guss to train faculty and staff in her coaching methods.

"I see myself as a messenger of hope within the workplace," Guss says. "[Work] can be good; it can be satisfying. We can earn a living doing something that brings us meaning."

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Additional information:

- * The Association for Spirit at Work, <http://www.spiritatwork.org>
- * Elizabeth Guss, managing partner of Cohesion, <http://spiritedwork.info>
- * Darlene Cohen, author of "The One Who is Not Busy," <http://www.darlenecohen.net>

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