

Work and Business ethics

People have to work and trade to provide for themselves and their families needs. Today's high tech world is very different to the world a century ago, although the basic work and business ethic issues are still very similar. The world is no longer a place where the majority of people grown their own food and make their own cloths, today the majority of people living in overcrowded towns and cities, where they need to earn money to provide the things they need for basic living.

In a responsible society people ought to be treated with respect, but for many people the work place can be a place of toil or a place that brings suffering and injustice. There are many well documented examples of people through-out the world working in slave-like conditions particularly in the developing world. Businesses have a key role in the creating a healthy economy, providing jobs and income, but not all companies treat their employee fairly and conduct their business in an honest manor. There are many examples in the media that illustrate this point.

In my view the basic ethics that ought to be applied to the sphere of work are; honesty, respect, integrity, caring for colleagues, employees and clients. For example; the banker, builder, lawyer and retailer need to be trust worthy and give honest advice and information that does not exploit the customers. In the manufacture of goods the employer has to respect his employees, not forcing them to work for long hours in slave like conditions, while the employees have to do the work they are paid for and be honest and loyal. Those working in the care professions have a responsibility to care for the people in their care, with the employer and employee relationship being the same as in the previous groups. Voluntary workers at a charity day centre may be working without pay but they should also be treated with respect and not have their generous natures exploited.

The role of business

Businesses are important to the development of trade and services. They provide work, enable us to buy and sell goods, provide the food we eat and the clothes we wear, plus many other things we need in modern society. The companies and their employees pay taxes which provide the funds that enable governments to provide health care, social service and protect us through the police and armed forces. It is therefore important that they conduct their affairs in an honest and ethical way.

Issues affecting workers

There are a wide range of ethical issues affecting the work place; firstly people should be able to carry-out their work and be treated with dignity, which highlights the issues of freedom of liberty, oppression, exploitation, greed, and suffering. The poor working conditions of workers around the world are well documented. Others issues can relate to justice and lawfulness which includes honesty and integrity. In modern western society equality is high on the agenda so discrimination and human rights need to be taken into account. Then there are legal and moral ethical issues which include trust, confidentiality, and fairness. There is also a responsibility to care for others and respect for authority. This is not a comprehensive list but it does serve to illustrate the complexity of ethical issues within the workplace.

Work enables people to have dignity because it enables them to support their family and themselves, not being reliant on benefits or handouts. However with the changes in technology people cannot rely on job security. In manufacturing for example, production is increasingly being mechanised which means machines are doing a person's work and is a cause of redundancy. Although the machines do have to be controlled and maintained by human beings, so some jobs are replacing those that have been lost, workers need to be willing to be retrained and develop new skills. The work place does bring different people together in a working relationship, but this can lead to tensions of an ethical and social character, bringing to the fore issues relating to discrimination, human rights and social equality. If tensions are to be avoided, employers and employees need to develop a good working relationship, (as well as good working relationship between the employees), but sadly this does not always happen.

Conduct of Business

Business develops through the entrepreneurs and business people who have invested their money in a business which creates work, therefore the matter of ownership and property also feature in workplace ethics. The owners of a business may not be a few people but a large group of individuals who have shares in a company and need some income from their capital investment. Another type of ownership is common or public ownership (e.g. public transport or health services) where the tax payers fund the services and expect their taxes to be spent wisely and providing good services, as well as taking into account the needs of the employees.

Commerce has an important role in the modern work place. Those who have business or work in the financial services sector should conduct their affairs with honesty and integrity. In recent times the conduct of the banking industry has raised legal and moral issues. Bankers help finance business and frequently provide financial advice, lawyers give business and shareholders legal advice and place contracts into a legal frame work, both ought to act with honesty and integrity, but sadly that does not always happen.

Companies are not simply affected by ethical issues they also have to take into account commerce consideration, employment and other government laws which all have to be taken into account by responsible employers. However this said, not all employers treat their employees with respect; some treat them simply as a means of production, or as an instrument for making money. The cleaner, production worker, or domestic servant should be treated with the same respect as the senior manager. Sadly there are many cases where this does not happen, particularly in the non-western countries where workers cannot take action to protect their rights and consumers may not be aware of the condition the goods they purchase were produced in.

Society is a long way from achieving a work place utopia. Some companies require total personal commitment to the corporation even when this type of loyal service causes marital breakup and creates personal stress leaving no one gaining anything meaningful from their work. It does not matter if work is paid or in voluntary service all people want to feel their work is appreciated and meaningful.

Honesty and trust worthiness are important for those engaged in work, they also have to fulfil contractual obligations and keep promises. There are frequent examples in the press of the rogue builders who charges people for poor workmanship or for work they have not done. There are numerous cases of fraud and scams by individuals and companies which steal money from gullible people. These people show no regard for honesty or keeping contractual agreements.

The Banker is in business to make money by trading in money, people have to be able to trust the bankers, so they have to be honest and keep their word in their transactions with the customers, not seeking to exploit them for the own ends. In my view the banking crisis in 2008 was caused by bad business practice and the greed of those in senior management who were only interested in their own person gain. The Lawyer is another profession that requires those working in the profession to be honest, offering people sound advice, and have a responsibility to care for their clients. Sadly there are some in the profession that do not do this.

The business person who manufactures goods like the Banker is in business to make money, but this should not prevent them treating their workers with dignity and respect, and vice versa. Christians have long campaigned for workers rights and that the pay people receive should be the rate for the job and workers not forced to work long hours in poor working conditions or slave like conditions for little reward. Workers also have responsibilities to help and support each other and try to be loyal employees who do their best for their employer.

Conclusion

Work takes up a major part of a person's life, although people do not always connect the things they do in their daily work with their faith. Ethics play an important part in work and the improvement of working

conditions; however in many companies their positive role is not fully understood or appreciated. It could for example help people in many parts of the world where workers are forced to work in poor conditions, restore honesty and trust in business transactions, and seek to ensure that people are treated with respect. These ideals are not always present in the work place.

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