

Discovering New Metaphors for Work and its Relation to the People Who Perform It

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Work: 1. an activity in which one exerts strength or faculties to do or perform something: a) a sustained physical or mental effort to overcome obstacles and achieve an objective or result b) the labor, task, or duty that is one's accustomed means of livelihood c) a specific task, duty, function, or assignment often being a part or phase of some larger activity.

Merriam-Webster On-Line Dictionary

*The essence of a metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another. **Metaphors We Live By** (Lakoff & Johnson)*

Our understanding of the people who perform work is guided by the metaphors we use to describe them. Terms such as “labor force” and “workforce” may conjure images of troop deployments. We use the terms “labor resource” and “human resource” to describe formations of talent that may be mined or harvested, just like gold or timber. We also describe people who do work as “human capital” in much the same way as we describe other forms of capital that are invested and serve as the inputs to the production of a service or tangible good. Using this metaphor, we look to find the “return” on the “investment” of human capital along with that of other capital. “Labor market” connotes the idea of a place or an exchange where the services of workers may be purchased and sold. “Job seeker” or “job hunter” prompts the image of someone who is on a mission.

We also use metaphors to describe training and education. We regard some training as the equivalent of a manufacturing process by using phrases as “supply chain,” “just-in-time training systems,” “quality assurance” and “continuous improvement.” We consider missing competencies to be “skills gaps” that need to “bridged”, conjuring an image of a hole or space - a negative environment comprised of what isn't than what is – that can be covered by some structure. Even the word “train” suggests learning by repetition, just like a muscle is “trained” to respond to a specific command by taking it through and then repeating a specific set of steps.

Although metaphors are essential to organizing the human dimension of commerce and to develop a rational response, we must recognize that each metaphor also is associated with a set of values and filters that shape our understanding and constrain the range of available policy and program responses. So, if we define the institutions that support some form of training or education as “providers”, we may be inclined to think of the act of learning as something that is given or provided to the learner. We may be less inclined, unless we remind ourselves to do otherwise, to think of learning as something that the learner initiates – that the learner pulls as opposed to receives. Consequently, it is not difficult to understand why we establish evaluation systems that assess the performance of the providers – and hold them accountable for the failures of the learner – rather than

address the performance of the learner to pull knowledge from the environment. Using the word “resource” to describe an educational institution has the opposite effect since the learner must draw from and manipulate the resource to improve their facility with and understanding of certain theories and skills.

Revolutionary events such as mandatory universal education in the 19th century and the development of social support systems - such as unemployment insurance, publicly supported job training, broad access to high value, low cost post secondary education - constitute seminal shifts in policy and practice and required new metaphors. For example “education is a right” – a basis for mandatory universal education, replaced “education is a privilege”. Unemployment insurance changed the loss of a job from a solitary event that was the sole responsibility of the worker into a pooled risk against economic downturns shared by the worker and the business.

Our problem is that our current metaphors are inadequate to meet today’s challenges. The range of metaphors used to describe our understanding of people and work is fixed and is largely unchanged over the course of several decades. Consequently, the resulting policies and programs are largely variations of an established set of basic designs that also are unchanged from the original frameworks established many decades ago. Borrowing a metaphor from the software industry, today’s programs and policies in training and education are much like versions 1.1, 1.2, etc., and less like versions 1.0, 2.0, etc.

I believe that we need new metaphors to expand and improve our understanding of people who perform work and to develop and implement programs and policies that are consistent with this new understanding. We can accomplish this by experimenting with the metaphors of other disciplines. For example, we may regard each person as an independent enterprise. This may be especially useful in the context of distributed work models, especially if we define the enterprise – the worker - as a franchise. Taking that approach, the company granting the franchise is paid a fee to provide basic services such as work assignments, marketing, training, and back office support. In other examples, we perhaps may use a financial market metaphor to establish an exchange for trading training contracts or a risk management and risk measurement metaphor to develop a derivative market on entry-level wages. Either can provide valuable information to a prospective worker about their foreseeable prospects in a particular occupation.

It is possible that in addition to the worlds of business and finance, there are metaphors from other disciplines such as physics, cosmology, the theater, music, and religion that may offer new insights and solutions in the area of workforce development. But, in order to achieve new understandings, we must be willing to open our minds, be able to describe and apply other models to work and labor, and to assess the results against a set of desired outcomes.