What makes a good job good – getting down to basics

Published on Sep 06, 2015 by Niko Canner



In the most recent quarter, the U.S. economy grew in real terms by 3.7 percent. To put this in perspective, if this rate were sustained over the long term, a young woman entering the labor force today, at twenty two, would retire at sixty seven in an economy that is five times its current size.

Impressive as such numbers are, to quote Alain de Botton's wonderful book *The News: An Owner's Manual*: "The numbers can be disorienting. To assess a nation through its economic data is a little like re-envisaging oneself via the results of a blood test."[1] We are all in great danger of decoupling our statistical view of economic reality from an understanding of the single largest driver of economic results: human work. This danger is perhaps greatest for big corporate employers that shape work on the largest scale.

Ironically, most employers haven't actually thought that hard about what constitutes a good job or about why this question matters. The Rockefeller Foundation and Purpose have recently conducted research about just this – and in response have launched Workshift, a national campaign dedicated to building an America where all jobs are good jobs. The campaign asked Americans across the country about the impact that good jobs can have on their lives, and found that their standard for a good job boils down to four basic shared values:

- **Stability** to know that one's bills will be paid and one's livelihood will be secure
- **Opportunity** to grow skills and build toward something that matters
- **Flexibility** to take care of loved ones and respond to unexpected challenges
- **Pride** in one's work and the respect one earns for it

My own experience underscores that good jobs are possible under even the hardest circumstances. Almost twenty years ago, I worked with the collections department of one of the large credit card issuers. Thousands of employees worked in call centers speaking to often deeply indebted customers, many of whom owed more to a range of different financial institutions than they were

ever likely be able to pay, trying to secure payment for their particular bank. This is a job no nine-year-old imagines their future, adult selves doing.

Nevertheless, in the best of the call centers, we found people flourishing. We found reps who understood the value of treating customers with dignity and who undertook the work of collections from the standpoint of solving a problem both for the customers and the bank. Who measured themselves against their personal best performance and the best performance of their peers and consistently improved. Who recognized that by doing this work well they could advance into more senior roles, even without further education, and saw in the paths their managers had taken, a path abundantly open to them. Who were grateful for the living they earned, a solid wage, and saw larger financial opportunities as readily achievable based on performance outcomes they understood. And who felt treated as individuals by their supervisors, confident that so long as they did their job with the utmost professionalism, they'd be accommodated if something like a parent's or a child's sickness disrupted their ability to work.

What made the difference in the best of these call centers were the same fundamental values Rockefeller and Purpose's research identifies: pride, opportunity, stability and flexibility. This difference was big in financial terms. In 1997, when we began this work, the best sixty-person unit in the best call center of this particular bank was producing one million dollars per month in value above the average of its peers.

When the economy swings upwards, employers who fail to achieve the basics of providing good jobs suffer disproportionately from attrition and fall behind peers in attracting talent. That's significant. Even more significant is that providing good jobs – jobs that deliver stability, opportunity, flexibility and pride – elicits good work. Companies like Southwest and Starbucks have created tremendous economic value through delivering a distinctive experience at vast scale through an empowered front line. Even in companies that are less renowned, when leadership consistently focuses on making jobs good, financial value is realized far beyond the norm among their peers.

As with any aspect of business, achieving performance begins with confronting facts. The Workshift campaign confronts us with the facts, as essential as they are intuitive, about what makes a good job good. Like the basic facts relating to sound financial management, clear branding, disciplined operations, these facts must be our constant companions in the work of building a valuable business in any sector of business.

3.7% growth is great news. Even more important news would be increasing the fraction of people in our national workforce who are deeply engaged in becoming more productive, quarter in and quarter out. This imperative demands both the initiative of workers and the stewardship of employers. Good jobs and good work are the foundation on which future growth will be built, and a litmus test for whether future growth delivers benefit in human terms.

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[1] de Botton, Alain. *The News: A User's Manual*. New York: Pantheon, 2014. p 127-8