

THE HINDU Business Line

Business Daily from THE HINDU group of publications

Monday, Oct 26, 2009

[ePaper](#) | [Mobile/PDA Version](#) | [Audio](#) | [Blogs](#)

- [Home](#)
- [News Update](#)

The New Manager

- [Front Page](#)
- [Index](#)
- [Archives](#)

Features

- [Investment World](#)
- [eWorld](#)
- [Brand Line](#)
- [Mentor](#)
- [Life](#)
- [Brand Quest](#)
- [The New Manager](#)
- [BL Club](#)
- [Smartbuy](#)
- [Books](#)
- [Gallery](#)

Stocks

The New Manager - [Human Resources](#)

From alienation to meaning

There is a growing need to update the way work is viewed and structured.

— P.V. Sivakumar



Alienation, originally described in the context of blue-collar work, seems equally applicable to the modern world where the 'worker' is engaged primarily in white-collar work.

Mohit Kishore

It might sound like an unlikely place to find insights into human potential pertaining to the modern world, but Marx's ideas on alienation continue to be relevant even in the world of free markets.

It appears that the long journey spanning centuries from a factory-centred economy to a knowledge-

Stories in this Section

[In search of the common good](#)

[From alienation to meaning](#)

[Bad employees tell on your bottomline](#)

- Quotes
- SE Diary
- Scoreboard
- Open-End Mutual Fund

based one hasn't quite seen a proportional change in the way human capital is viewed. In this article, an attempt is made to bridge this gap by looking at two concepts which mark the ends of the spectrum — Alienation and Meaning.

Marx identifies four sources of alienation that 'workers' in a capitalistic society feel.

The first form of alienation is that between the worker and the product of his labour, as he has no rights to it after production.

Cross Currency

The second is between the worker and the process of production — in other words, predictable, well-defined transactions are the order of the day.

- Rates

The third is alienation between fellow human beings as a result of a class structure or hierarchy that emerges in any organised structure like this.

Shipping

The fourth source of alienation is alienation from the worker's human essence, whereby all possibility of creativity and spontaneity are stripped away from a human being.

- Ports

An important difference between humans and other animals is in the way they interact with nature — while animals interact in a static way to the external world, humans are endowed with consciousness and imagination which allows them the faculty of being able to visualise new future possibilities first in their minds, and then in the world outside.

Archives

- Yesterday
- Datewise
- Resources
- In Focus
- In Depth
- Events 2007

Of course, all these sources of alienation were originally described in the context of blue-collar or factory work which was the dominant kind of labour in those days. However, quite surprisingly, the entire concept seems equally applicable to the modern world where the 'worker' is engaged primarily in white-collar work.

It's quite astounding that the way work is viewed and structured has undergone so little updating in all these years. It appears that only a few token steps have been taken in the direction of moving away from alienation, without a clear articulation of where the destination is.



In this article, I argue that the ideological opposite of alienation is meaning, and that should be the direction towards which all future notions of work must converge.

The meaning infrastructure

A post-alienation world view would be based on the idea of 'meaning'. All the four causes of alienation identified above would need to be addressed. The journey from alienation to meaning would need to be accompanied by the creation of appropriate infrastructure. This infrastructure would consist of four key

Group Sites

- [The Hindu](#)
- [The Hindu ePaper](#)
- [Business Line](#)
- [Business Line ePaper](#)
- [Sportstar](#)
- [Frontline](#)
- [The Hindu eBooks](#)
- [The Hindu Images](#)

pillars — each mapped to a source of alienation.

The first pillar would be the creation of significant distributed ownership of equity across the firm. This would mean far greater ownership than the token ESOPs that exist in the market place today. Currently, there is an under-estimation of the value of human capital relative to financial capital. However, it is encouraging to see that a large number of firms these days adopt some form of compensation in the form of equity.

The second key aspect of this new infrastructure would be a systematic extinction of 'job descriptions', and an emergence of 'responsibility descriptions'. A responsibility description outlines outcomes, and not behaviours. How outcomes are accomplished is left to the imagination of the employee.

The third element of the infrastructure is the creation of flatter hierarchies that eliminates the needless creation of layers or artificial 'career paths' where each step tends to signify vintage rather than genuine upgrade of skills. Again, this concept is already widely in use, particularly in new ventures without the legacy of large, pre-existing hierarchies.

The fourth pillar is the recognition of innovation and creativity as key sources of value addition from the workforce. Currently, the perception of value addition is restricted to increase in revenues and reduction in costs. Innovation is seen as a response reserved only for crisis situations, as opposed to an ongoing process of articulating fresh responses to the environment.

Of course, there are many ways to create meaning, and this is just an indicative set of ideas.

An important quality of the modern 'worker' (or indeed human beings in general) is the belief in one's own uniqueness. This belief translates into a need to create customised experiences for oneself in all dimensions of one's life. It's time society updated the way it views work to reflect this desire.

(The writer is a management professional. He can be reached at mohit.kishore@gmail.com)

More Stories on : [Human Resources](#) | [Management](#)

Article E-Mail :: [Comment](#) :: [Syndication](#) :: [Printer Friendly Page](#)

Copyright © 2009, The Hindu Business Line. Republication or redissemination of the contents of this screen are expressly prohibited without the written consent of The Hindu Business Line
