
THE
GOOD WORK COMMISSION

Provocation Paper 3

The meaning of work

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Summary

- Businesses have an interest in the meaning of work because (a) they need to understand the strategic landscape of the employment relationship; (b) they design work environments and in doing so can enable, if not create, work of meaning; and (c) because some studies argue meaning relates to the 'commitment' and 'discretionary effort' people are willing to show to their work: through leadership, people management and how organisations conceive their own purpose, meaning may influence the effectiveness, performance and productivity of organisations. The psychological horizons of business organisations have therefore changed.
- Although there is a tradition in Western culture of placing a high value on work, interest in different aspects of meaning has grown markedly over recent years – how it relates to identity ("the project of the self"), what shapes it, and the 'fit' between individuals and jobs. We talk about seeking, finding or losing meaning in work much more readily today than appeared to be the case in the early or mid 20th century, as if 'job satisfaction' is no longer enough.
- If the current mood can be summed up (at least prior to the recession), work is *both* a means-to-an-end and a means of self-expression. The financial motive in work is dominant for most people, but research has consistently uncovered a balance of motives that underlie work.
- Although meaning is subjective there are only a limited number of 'archetypes' of meaningful work existing in a society at a given point.
- We can learn as much about the meaning of work from times when unemployment is rising as we can when jobs are easy to come by.

1. The most important thing about work is to have it

There is a famous study of the people living in the village of Marienthal, not far from Vienna, after the main factory shut its gates in the great depression of the early 1930s.

The immediate consequence of losing one's job is an increase in poverty, but researchers noted that joblessness carries a singular psychological burden. Unemployed people do not tend to take up the violin, read more books, or enjoy quality time with their families; indeed, although people had enough to eat, use of the library dropped by a third, clubs closed down, and wives complained that formerly energetic men took extraordinary amounts of time to accomplish simple tasks. People stood on street corners, waiting. They slept more because it kept them warm, saved their clothes and helped them forget their worries. Time weighed heavy, but they talked to each other less. And what little money around was spent not on necessities, but on trinkets.

The reason, argued the social psychologist Marie Jahoda, was that work provided people with a fundamental 'sense of reality' which could not be obtained through any other activity or institution. Work gave time structures to the day. It prompted contact with others and the opportunity to participate in a collective activity or purpose. It offered status in a community and a ready-made identity. None of these occurred at the whim of employers. They were imposed on people as part-and-parcel of going to work.¹

Unemployment demonstrated the limits of individualism, she argued, because self-respect needed to be embedded in a social context, offered primarily by work, to be valued at all, hence the 'scar' of long-term unemployment. Habits of mind or character grew on the foundations established by time routines, imposed interactions and collective endeavour, which individuals – or most individuals, at any rate – could not just create for themselves. Remove the work and a sequence of psychological states would follow: fear and distress, resignation, adaptation to changed circumstances, and finally, if unsuccessful in the search for work, blank apathy and withdrawal.

The reference is instructive not because the situation today is comparable, which it clearly isn't. Talk of a recession of historic proportions is so far still far removed from the UK unemployment peaks of the early 80s or 90s, let alone the era of Hitler and his total war machine (in 1938, previously social democratic Marienthal voted for him as it would have voted for anyone who brought the hope of work). It is instructive because thinking of work in terms of the 'meaning' it provides is sometimes seen as a luxury appropriate to good economic times, but prone to strike the wrong note when the economy is contracting. Actually, it is much easier to generalise about the experience of work in periods when jobs are not so plentiful. The most potent lesson of the

¹ See Marie Jahoda, *Employment and Unemployment: A social psychological analysis*, Cambridge University Press, 1982

twentieth century regarding the nature of working life is that while work itself can be good or bad, the absence of work over a sustained period of time represents a serious threat to individual and social wellbeing.

Richard Layard, the economist turned happiness researcher, has written of the 'double-whammy' of structural (as opposed to temporary) unemployment: the fall in income is amplified by 'the psychic loss' of feeling less significant. Being unemployed is strongly associated with mild to moderate mental illness, especially anxiety and depression, as well as physical conditions such as the onset of heart disease and high blood pressure.² As long as the period out of work is not too long, most of these effects reverse themselves.

The sociologists Peter Kelvin and Joanna Jarett have described the burden of unemployment in the 1980s as being 'a seemingly unending amount of free time' combined with 'an inability to make use of it'. Unstructured time is hard to make sense of or find satisfying leaving people bored, frustrated and angry with themselves. Normally, consumer culture feigns no place for boredom, offering a constant diet of choice and novelty. With joblessness, boredom returns to haunt the days unsparingly.³

Like the air we breathe, it is easy to overlook the role of work in modern social life – until it becomes more scarce. At its very least then – and independently of the qualities of a job or an employer – what work means is a foundation of economic, social and psychological stability for individuals, communities and societies. Jobs can just be jobs and the means of sustaining life. Which is why one of the greatest services any nation can do to enhance both the quality of work and the quality of life of its citizens is to have policies that sustain full employment.

² See Richard Layard, *Good Jobs and Bad Jobs*, CEP Occasional Paper No.19 (2004)

³ Zygmunt Bauman, *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor*, Open University Press, 1998

2. Three approaches to ‘the meaning of work’

However, generally when people speak of the ‘meaning of work’, they use the phrase to refer to rather more than the value of simply having a job. What is the ‘meaning of work’?

To cut a long, potentially abstruse story short, much of the literature coalesces around three broad approaches to the meaning of work question.⁴

The first is concerned with interpretation. The Latin root of meaning is *sensus* and relates to sense-making, the faculty of judging and knowing. In this approach, ‘the meaning of work’ is about the values that are placed on work by the individuals who do it. What work *means* is concerned with attempting to answer the question: what does work mean to you? The question seeks interpretations and to understand differing orientations towards working.

A second approach draws on the Germanic root of the word for meaning, *sumo*, and refers to direction, purpose and significance. This approach is more evident in everyday speech when we talk of experiencing ‘meaning’ in work, or that work gives ‘meaning’ to the rest of life – or any phrase such as ‘meaningful work’ or ‘meaningless work’ or even ‘giving something back’. Meaning in this second sense is more personal: ‘do you consider your work to have meaning to you?’ The question seeks more than an interpretation of work, but rather asks whether work has substance, significance, purposefulness and importance. Meaningful work is expressive of one’s nature or identity, to do with fulfilment and the realisation of potential.

Also relevant is a third approach to meaning which is concerned with the ‘fit’ between a person and their work – how their values and expectations affect their actions. This version is sometimes called the ‘coherence effect’ and is of some practical importance, not least to employers. The kinds of end states people desire and feel they ought to be able to realize through their work, and how their job matches up, inevitably affects the energy, flexibility and productivity they are willing to give. Employers may not be able to control meaning – it’s a very personal substance, after all; but they can probably *enable* it through how they design jobs, develop policies and procedures, manage people, use skills and communicate.

The point of trying to explain ‘the meaning of the meaning of work’ a little is not to enjoy a philosophical detour for its own sake, but to clarify the issues involved in meaning. Often the claim is overheard among leaders or HR professionals that people or ‘young people’ (Generation Y) have a strong desire for rewards related to ‘meaning’ to supplement those related to ‘money’.⁵ Being

⁴ See Estelle Morin and Francisco Aranha, *The Meaning of Work, Mental Health and Organizational Commitment*, Report R-585, Studies and Research Projects, IRSST, 2009

⁵ See, for example, A to Z of Generation Y, *Financial Times*, 17 June 2009

able to try and isolate the nature of this want is important to understanding what role employers may have in grappling with it. It is also true that if one was forced to describe how work today is different from, say, work in the early 20th century, one answer is that interiorly located, non-material aspects of work – expression of potential, the nature of fulfilment, commitment, engagement, discretionary effort, the whole arena of motive and its effect on behaviour, and in particular meaning – are very prominent notes in the overall culture of contemporary work. The 21st century appears to have a hunger to know more of the meaning in work. Even a UK government strategy paper was called 'Full and Fulfilling Employment' (2003), though admittedly it had more to say about the full than the fulfilling.

3. What Do People Want From Work?

When people are asked casually why they work, or when inquisitive children ask their parents why they have to go to work, the answer that seems most successfully to fend off further questioning is to explain work in terms of income. We do it to earn a living. It is a means-to-an-end. In different generations the answer has also held good in many studies as offering a primary motivation underlying work.⁶ For many, work is clearly driven by its external consequences rather than its intrinsic satisfactions. Nevertheless, the consistent message of research is that while the economic rationale is dominant, it is not the only value attached to working; a balance of motives exists.

According to one study, asked if they found their work to be a 'means-to-an-end', 51 per cent agreed. The same survey found 69 per cent saying their work was a 'source of personal fulfilment' and 78 per cent that it was 'stimulating and/or challenging'⁷. Meanwhile, there was very strong resistance (86 per cent) to the notion that work was meaningless.

The broad pattern has been echoed in more substantial investigations of the meaning of work, too. A study of 15,000 workers from the US, UK, Japan, West Germany, Sweden and Israel found that the 'economic rationale' was pre-eminent for just over half of the sample respondents. But the survey also uncovered deep commitment to the value of working. Fractionally under half the respondents favoured the 'expressive' rationale – that work offered interest, friendship, identity, a chance to be useful. Two out of three had a strong attachment to working as a life goal, with work coming second only to family when people were asked the importance of different roles in their lives.⁸

It can sometimes come as a surprise to read news stories about lottery winners who choose to carry on working. Yet their decision is consistent with research findings. In 1955, two sociologists, Nancy Morse and Robert Weiss, first asked the question, 'If by chance you inherited enough money to live comfortably without working, do you think you would work anyway?' A total of 80 per cent answered yes. The question has been repeated by others in large-scale research exercises in 1969 (67.4 per cent), 1974 (73 per cent), 1977 (71.5 per cent) and 1987 (86 per cent).⁹ On the other hand, it could be argued that the question does not distinguish sufficiently between work in an abstract, idealised form and the particular job situation individuals find themselves in.

⁶ See John Goldthorpe, *The Affluent Worker: Industrial Attitudes and Behaviour*, Cambridge University Press, 1968; and C Baldry et al, *The Meaning of Work in the New Economy*, ESRC Future of Work Series, General Editor Peter Nolan, Palgrave MacMillan, 2007

⁷ The Work Foundation, 2006

⁸ MOW International Research Team: *The Meaning of Working*, Academic Press, *The Meaning of Working*; MOW International Research Team, Academic Press, Harcourt Brace Jovanoich, 1987

⁹ See Al Gini, *My Job Myself: Work and the Creation of the Modern individual*, Routledge, 2000

The idea of work fulfilling a 'psychological need' has a long history. Arguably, a lot of the social-psychological literature on this point can trace its roots to the classics. Immanuel Kant noted, 'If a man has done much he is more contented after his labours than if he had done nothing whatever; for by work he has set his powers in motion'.¹⁰ In other words, what makes work so humanly important is that through it, and around it, life can take on its wider purposes.

It has been noted that almost all the great visions of utopia down the ages do not imagine the elimination of work altogether, but rather suggest shortening the working day, increasing variety, sharing the dirty work, as if the absence of work is beyond the limits of human understanding (at least in Judaeo-Christian culture). None of the early church fathers believed Adam and Eve to be idle in the Garden of Eden; 'the agreeable occupation of agriculture', as St Augustine put it. Meanwhile, our understandings of human origins are inextricably bound up with the business of work: Genesis, read as a mythological essay, identifies work closely with creation and the inauguration of leisure.

¹⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Lectures in Ethics*, trans. P Heath, Cambridge University Press, 2001

4. Meaning as fulfilment

It is difficult to generalise about what is meant when a person seeks or experiences meaning as by its nature it is highly subjective. In addition, the discussion of meaning at work tends to blur subtly different issues: for some it is about the intrinsic qualities of the work, for others about the work environment, and still for others about the harmony between an individual and a job. Nevertheless, the point has been made that while subjective, there are probably only a limited number of 'archetypes' associated with meaning existing in a society at any one time.¹¹ These can, in theory at least, be identified by social scientists through surveys.

According to the organisational psychologist Estelle Morin, six key categories have emerged from studies since 1997. They are social purpose (doing something useful to others); moral correctness (the justifiability of work processes and results); achievement-related pleasure (enjoying one's job and developing one's potential); autonomy (use of skills and judgements to solve problems and make decisions); recognition (adequate salary and affirmation); and positive relationships (trust and interesting contact).¹²

Elsewhere, eight categories of meaning in work have been identified.¹³ They are:

1. The possibility of attachment to the workplace or the work;
2. The possibility of engaging in social relations at work and caring for others;
3. The feeling that the work is useful and a necessary part of a larger meaningful project;
4. The feeling that the work accomplished is important to the well-being of other people;
5. The possibility of learning and the pleasure of finding fulfilment in one's work;
6. The possibility of contributing to the development of work procedures and the improvement of working conditions;
7. The experience of autonomy that gives a sense of freedom; and
8. A sense of responsibility and pride on one's work.

It is, of course, quite possible to challenge these features as over-idealised and unconnected from the reality of working life. In response, we might reply that it is necessary for societies and employers to think about what kind of work they would like to create.

¹¹ MG Pratt, and BE Ashforth, Fostering Meaningfulness in Working and at Work, in Cameron, KS, Dutton, JE and Quinn RE (Eds) Positive Organizational Scholarship: Foundations of a New Discipline, Berrett_Koehler, 309-327

¹² Estelle Morin, The Meaning of Work in Modern Times, 10th World Congress on Human Resource Management, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 2004

¹³ Taken from J Isaksen, Constructing Meaning Despite the Drudgery of Repetitive Work, Journal of Humanistic Psychology, 2000

In the 1970s a number of governments in Western democracies launched initiatives that aimed to improve the quality of working life. Strikingly, these often strayed into issues of meaning. The *Work in America* report, for example, a report – remember – commissioned by a government, ventured that: ‘When it is said that work should be ‘meaningful’ what is meant is that it should contribute to self-esteem, to a sense of fulfilment through the mastering of one’s environment and to a sense that one is valued by society’.¹⁴ It was possibly of its time.

Writing from a managerial standpoint which attempts to marry the individual’s search for meaning with an organisation’s interest in performance, Roffey Park Management College has suggested meaningful work has a number of underlying qualities.¹⁵ Work becomes meaningful when it is ‘inherently worthwhile’ – personally compelling jobs which allow people to lose themselves in tasks; it relates to a feeling of interconnectedness and trust shared with other people at work; to autonomy and respect – the freedom to make choices and be fairly treated; to balance – the management of personal commitments outside work; it is about the idea of doing something for the common good and benefiting others; and, finally, the alignment between personal values and the values that pertain in a place of work. No fewer than 70 per cent of the managers who responded to a survey claimed to be looking for ‘meaning’, the figure rising to 80 per cent for managers under 35.

In an innovative argument, the philosopher Mike Martin has contended that meaning in work is primarily concerned with motive.¹⁶ Meaningfulness necessitates three inter-related motives to be present. First, there are *craft* motives; individuals seek after and embrace professional ideals that evoke their talents and interests. Second, there are *compensation* motives; these might include pay, but go much wider, into areas such as power, authority, leadership and recognition – self-interested concerns, but not necessarily egotistical ones. Third, there are *moral* motives; these involve trust, caring and vocation. Each of these sets of motive is a wellspring of intrinsic satisfaction in work.

A notable feature of most lists of the characteristics of meaningful work is that they mix essentially self-interested motives with other-directed motives. Martin has argued that motives are invariably mixed. Meaning flows from our understanding of our own identity, but the exercise of defining a self, if it is to be more than merely cynical, involves reference to goods that extend beyond ourselves. The judgement about which activities are worthwhile is never entirely subjective: our notions of meaningfulness in work tend to descend from an assumption of shared values about public goods. Meaning struggles to be meaning if it is a matter of personal pleasure and preference alone.

¹⁴ *Work In America: Report of a Special Task Force to the Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare*; WE Upjohn Institute for Employment Research, MIT Press, 1973

¹⁵ Linda Holbeche and Nigel Springett, *In Search of Meaning at Work*, Roffey Park Institute, 2004

¹⁶ Mike Martin, *Meaningful Work: Rethinking Professional Ethics*, Oxford University Press, 2000

Meaningful work can be further illuminated through a contrast with older ideas of 'vocation' or 'calling'. A vocation can be seen as connoting with an unshakable ethic of public or community service, a practical ideal of activity in which a person's work becomes morally inseparable from his or her life; it 'subsumes the self into a community of disciplined practices and sound judgement whose activity has a meaning and value in itself, not just in the output or profit that results from it'.¹⁷ The concept of vocation certainly explores very similar territory to meaningful work. But there does also appear to be a difference because vocation is premised on a sense of other-directedness and self-denial while meaningful work is very concerned with self-making, identity and self-reference. Experience has to be personalised to have meaning. The contrast between vocation and meaningful work is at its sharpest if we think of vocation as a calling to the service of others and meaningful work as the personal experience of that service.

¹⁷ Robert Bellah et al, *The Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, Berkeley University Press, 1985

5. Is meaning new?

Of course, it is one thing to identify the features of meaningful work, quite another to explain why more people and more organisations appear to be inquiring after meaning. Meaning is ‘in the air’ of the modern world of work in a way that was not the case in earlier periods – as if mere ‘job satisfaction’ is no longer sufficient. How should we explain this phenomenon?

One important argument is that peoples’ needs and wants from work have changed in the course of the late twentieth century. The argument is often made (it follows in the steps of Abraham Maslow and his ‘hierarchy of needs’), but not so often supported by evidence. One social scientist who *has* amassed evidence of changing values is Ronald Inglehart and the World Values Survey he pioneered.¹⁸ The survey now purports to cover some 70 per cent of the world’s population in 43 countries and has been deployed annually since 1970 with some modifications over time.

The central finding of his research has been that values in advanced societies differ markedly from those that pertain in less advanced ones. Economic growth, security, and faith in the power of science and technology that are the most important priorities for countries in the process of industrializing are not the priorities of those that have reached a stage of advanced, or as he put it, ‘post-industrialization’. Among these, ‘post-materialist priorities’ such as self-expression and the quality of life become progressively more pronounced within the culture as a whole, as opposed to the simple accumulation of wealth. In turn, this has a bearing on the motives and meaning of work: ‘There is also a gradual shift in what motivates people to work: the emphasis shifts from maximising one’s income and job security towards a growing insistence on interesting and meaningful work... [and] we find a growing emphasis on more collegial and participatory styles of management.’

The argument remains highly contentious. Even though social and industrial change ought theoretically to relate to the rise of the search for meaning, the mechanisms of transmission remain mysterious. The argument has frequently been made that the process of industrialisation – given iconic expression through the assembly lines so often associated with Fordism and Taylorism – resulted in a loss of meaning from work, variously attributable to the division of labour, the segmentation of whole tasks, deskilling, technology, time and motion men, targets, and the dehumanising effect of machinery. However, over recent years a more popular argument has emerged that technology, and in particular information and communications technology has been the cause of higher demand for skilled workers educated to a relatively high level, more interesting and potentially fulfilling work, and new organisational forms. The adoption and dispersion of ICT has tended to reduce the need for people to do routine tasks while increasing the need for people

¹⁸ See Ronald Inglehart, *Modernization and Postmodernization: Cultural, Economic and Political Change in 43 Societies*, Princeton University Press, 1997

in areas that require intellectual problem-solving and complex communication.¹⁹ Some 42 per cent of workers in the UK are now counted as professionals, managers, or associate professionals (the top three official occupational categories), while a third now have a degree. More knowledge intensive work does not entail more meaningful work. However, it is arguable that it helps create the conditions in which questions of meaning and fulfilment occur for more people.

Others have made theoretical and philosophical arguments, which help explain the rise of meaning. Meaning is related to the search for identity or what, after the 1960s, has come to be called the 'project of the self'.²⁰ It flows from a narrative of expressive individualism in which it is common for people to think in terms of themselves as being 'on a journey' or living out a narrative or as a kind of problem in search of a solution. We are encouraged to think of ourselves as having unique characteristics and special potentialities which we have a natural desire to express. The philosopher Charles Taylor has argued that the way we talk about identity and meaning today would have been incomprehensible to our forbears of a couple of centuries ago. 'To know who you are is to be oriented in moral space, a space in which questions arise about what is good or bad, what is worth doing and what not, what has meaning and importance for you and what is trivial and secondary'.²¹ 'Moderns', he has claimed, are engaged in a constant 'act of becoming' utterly unfamiliar to previous generations and he has criticised this stance as being symptomatic of a slide towards self-referential subjectivism – the idea that value resides in individual preference.

¹⁹ See Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society, The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture, Volume 1*, Blackwell, 1996; and D Autor et al, *The Skill Content of Recent Technological Change: An Empirical Exploration*, *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, MIT Press, vol. 118(4), pages 1279-1333, November 2003, pp 1270-1333

²⁰ See Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity*, House of Anansi Press, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 1991; and Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, Polity Press, 1991

²¹ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, Cambridge University Press, 1989

6. Conclusion: Employers, meaning and performance

Why should employers be interested in meaning?

First, because they are concerned to understand the strategic landscape in which the employment relationship takes place. Contemporary business is profoundly interested in what is going on inside the heads of people because it affects behaviour and behaviour links to the effectiveness of organisations. The search for meaning can be seen as a *recherché*, self-indulgent, elitist discussion; or – as with the argument above – it can be viewed as one of the great cultural cues to what is happening at work and in society at large. Employers need to understand it because it is affecting them in many different ways: corporate social responsibility and the need for employers to have a ‘purpose’ are part of the same cultural mood. What gives 21st century work its distinctive flavour is the mixture of material and non-material motives and issues that shape it. There is evidence that what people want from work is to feel useful, fulfilled at least to some degree, to participate in a collective effort and that work should be performed in an environment that respects fairness and dignity.²²

Second, employers greatly influence the work environment. Some of the studies referred to above argue the experience of the work environment is one of the main determinants of meaning. For example, Pratt and Ashforth claim work becomes meaningful when an individual perceives a fit between his identity, his work and his work environment.²³ The purpose of the work, the job role, the work group and corporate culture are all properties associated with the employer (if not always totally under an employer’s control). Something that *is* under an employer’s control is ‘job design’. Creating job roles that over time help induce a more positive experience of work, and more positive attitudes towards a job role and employer, ought to be seen as simple sound management, but also have a strong bearing on meaning, too.

Doing so is often inexpensive. For example, building managed autonomy into jobs and ensuring recognition through affirmation are hardly costly management techniques. Here, it appears obvious that meaning links up with a host of more basic concerns in work: feeling adequately paid, being clear on one’s role, having some say in the issues which affect one’s work, feeling a degree of job security – in other words, with ‘good work’. ‘Good work’ or what the International Labour Organisation calls ‘decent work’ – in essence a set of standards to govern the employment relationship – clearly have an impact on whether meaning is felt. Here, too, it is obvious that national policies that seek to engage with the quality of working life can affect meaning. However, it is also worth adding that they are a necessary but not sufficient precondition for meaning: being well managed and well treated is no guarantee that people think they do meaningful work.

²² See Morin and Aranha, *op cit*

²³ Pratt and Ashforth, *op cit*

A third reason why employers have an interest in the rise of thinking about meaningful work is that some studies argue meaning is related to commitment and discretionary effort, to corporate culture and leadership. Therefore, meaning is another lever in the armoury of people management. Leaders, says Roffey Park, in their style, their integrity and the messages they send, create the 'social architecture' of an organisation which 'provides context (or meaning) and commitment to its members and stakeholders'.²⁴ Sometimes, the argument is put rather mechanically. If a company offers 'meaning' to its staff, 55 per cent would be more motivated, 42 per cent said they would have greater loyalty, and 32 per cent more pride, claimed one survey.²⁵ Treating meaning in this way, however, has been challenged. It makes companies appear omnipotent and workers gullible and passive. It 'instrumentalizes meaning' – turns meaning into another means-to-an-end – which can feel like a conceptual outrage. Also, there are questions about the ownership of the 'psychological space' of meaning: is it shared between employers and employees or more something individuals define and find (or don't find) for themselves? Nevertheless, there is evidence that the experience of meaning does affect the degree of commitment individuals are willing to show to organisations.²⁶

Whether we are fully comfortable with the idea or not, it would seem to be a simple fact that the merging of issues of meaning with the ordinary matter of working for a living is very relevant to life in the 21st century.

²⁴ Roffey Park Institute, op cit

²⁵ People Management, 23 December, 2005

²⁶ Morin and Aranha, op cit

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