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Bringing attention to the 'skills gap'

Joe Ferullo | May. 20, 2014 NCR Today

There is a growing awareness that the career mantra "do what you love" is actually doing more harm than good. That sounds counterintuitive, I know, but feels like an important step away from a focus on "self" that has gone on too long.

I know this guy Mike Rowe -- you'll probably know Rowe, too, if you Google him: he reported for years on a Discovery Channel show called "Dirty Jobs," that celebrated work no one thought counted for much but in truth kept our world functioning: garbage collectors, road workers, etc.

Rowe has set up a non-profit called "Profoundly Disconnected [1]," focused on bringing attention to the "skills gap." There are thousands of jobs going unfilled, he says, because Americans don't value them anymore -- what we used to call "the trades:" electricians, plumbers, skilled carpenters, and more. Those crafts were a big deal when I was a kid -- in my working-class neighborhood, you were encouraged to develop a "trade" if only as something to fall back on in hard times. No matter the economy, pipes would still burst, lights would burn out. Trades had value.

But over the years that changed, and two recent articles help explain why. In the online magazine *Slate* earlier this year, Miya Tokumitsu took on a near-holy tenet [2] of the last couple of decades, questioning the value of advice given each year around this time to a flood of college graduates: do what you love.

Not surprisingly, this became controversial -- as will a follow-up article in the New York *Times* [3]by philosophy professor Gordon Marino.

Both argue that "do what you love" career advice has severed work from the idea of duty and responsibility -- to family and to society. Marino points out that his father didn't necessarily "love" his job, but took satisfaction that it enabled him to provide for his family and send his children to college. He never questioned the trade-off, because he defined work as other-directed: what did his job provide for others?

My father was the same. For most of his life, he ran the family bakery, worked seven days a week, got up before dawn and came home in the dark. He very much did not "love" it, but he valued his work: he and his brother made a good loaf of bread that fulfilled a need in our community, and this "trade" allowed him to provide for his family through good times and bad.

But the calculus switched as society moved toward a "Me Generation" self-focused culture. "Do what you love," which sounds indisputable in concept, contributes in some measure to a world where kids value celebrity and fame, where we now have, for example, seemingly hundreds upon hundreds of programs to train film directors and television actors and pop singers -- while the work once valued goes begging.

Most people are more than just one thing, have more than just one talent -- the career path you chose was once based on what would best serve you, your family and your society, all in balance. I love a good movie as much as the next guy, but honestly the world only needs -- and can only sustain -- just so many university-trained film

directors.

The important thing about Rowe's foundation, and the articles in *Slate* and the New York *Times* is, that they exist at all. For a very long time, "do what you love" was all that was heard -- and was never examined beyond its obvious positive message. But as the skills gap and pay gap widen, as inequality rises to the forefront as a concern, it is past time to look closely at what is valued in the workplace.

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[1] http://profoundlydisconnected.com
[2] http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/technology/2014/01/do_what_you_love_love_what_you_do_an_omnipresent_
[3] http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/05/17/a-life-beyond-do-what-you-love/?_php=true&_type=blogs&_r=0