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Dignity at Work: **Why it Matters**

Throughout the history of social science, dignity is a word that is continually used to express concern about various aspects of work. Within these concerns we see a set of implicit understandings of what dignity is, and what it does, and profoundly, dignity as an essential need of the human spirit. Beginning with some of the earliest insights that inform contemporary analyses of work we can see that, in different ways and relating their concerns to different eras, writers on work and organisation each conceptualise increasing industrialisation as entailing a possible denial of dignity.

Most recently the dignity at work debate has been colonised by the focus on bullying and harassment. The high profile campaign for ‘dignity at work’ (cf: Amicus and The Andrea Adams Trust) draws attention to the everyday bullying behaviours that occur in the workplace serving to intimidate and oppress employees, coming both from the workplace hierarchy, and, whether through cultural consensus or individual mal-intent, from peers. This reflects a feeling that some fundamental rights are coming under pressure. The proposed UK ‘dignity at work act’ advises that ‘every employee shall have the right to dignity at work’.

Linked to the focus on bullying there have been varied calls for building cultures of respect where some of the core concerns of this campaign are clearly related to substantive structural matters not dissimilar to earlier concerns relating to autonomy and worth. Nevertheless, the campaign for ‘dignity at work’ focuses very much on indignities caused by intimidation from over-zealous managers or competitive colleagues and tends to miss that dignity at work is related to a wide range of issues not always linked to bullying.

At a broader level there are valuable critiques of contemporary work that highlight the inequalities in access to well-paid work and safe and secure working conditions along with the role of ‘mis-management’; all specific tangibles of the achievement of dignity at work. Contemporary critical accounts of work and a related focus on potential denials of dignity offer a balance to the hyperbole of the Knowledge Economy rhetoric and question what the realities (and potential indignities) of work are for the majority of people. Whilst recognising that ‘bad’ work or ‘mis-management’ is unlikely to disappear there is a call to ensure that policy makers and companies recognise what the ingredients of good work might be – a recipe that clearly reflects the International Labour Organisation’s (ILO) definition of ‘decent work’ in its emphasis on equality of access, employee voice and just reward. Given the focus on ‘good work’, and the growing concerns regarding its lack, an examination of work in the knowledge economy through the holistic lens of dignity at work seems timely.

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