

Life-Work Balance in a Digital Era

Introduction

1. For several decades, the most significant changes in workers' lives have come from computers. Their impact is astronomical and extensive. Everyone is affected – from the shipper in the warehouse to the company's chief executive. The mechanic who repairs cars and the surgeon who operates both use diagnostic tools. Assembly line workers may not appear to be directly affected, yet they are, because computers monitor and evaluate their production.
2. On May 1st, 2007, International Workers' Day, the Social Affairs Committee of the Assembly of Québec Catholic Bishops proposes a reflection on finding a balance between the value of our work and the demands of new technologies. There is an unavoidable human dimension in work. In fact, many people look to their jobs for self definition and personal development. Yet if the work itself and the technologies we use become more important than keeping the human dimension, then they have lost their original purpose and threaten human dignity¹.

Positive and Negative Aspects of the Digital Revolution

3. On-line libraries are universally accessible. Email and cellular phones provide almost instant communication anywhere on the planet. The noble ideals of solidarity, fraternity and cooperation have never had so many *tools* at their disposal. If a catastrophe levels one region of our world, in no time at all, countries and agencies coordinate and send disaster relief teams to the devastated areas.

¹ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, Vatican Publishing House, 2005, No. 271.

4. Yet, these efficient new information and communication techniques (NICT) can also, in less than no time, devalue currencies and manipulate stock markets. The result is that workers, who previously expected job security, may suddenly lose their jobs. This happens often and the toll in human suffering is incalculable. It's a strange world where tools that are specifically designed to connect people can also turn human beings into digitized abstractions.
5. In a recent article, the sociologist Diane-Gabrielle Tremblay quoted statistics on the increase in self-employment and telecommuting. It has reached the point that what once were considered *atypical* work scenarios; today represent 40% of the job market. (free translation)² The new technologies contribute greatly to this situation by facilitating offshore outsourcing to keep costs low. There is a great temptation to exploit foreign laborers and deprive people of their right to jobs that respect human dignity, whether they are immigrants in our country or workers in companies that we have set up elsewhere. *The demands of competition, technological innovation and the complexities of financial fluxes must be brought into harmony with the defence of workers and their rights.*³
6. The digital revolution has provoked a *crisis of meaning* which affects all our senses. Today, many doctors rely less on patient examinations and more on machine printouts to make a diagnosis. Similarly, navigators and farmers don't rely as much on their own instincts to predict storms, nor fishermen to locate schools of fish. But if we put all our trust in instruments, we run the risk of losing our ability to fine tune our senses. To what extent will we permit tools to lead us away from one another and from our own instincts?

Rediscovering the art of living

7. We must find our own life-balance and develop a proper work ethic with a healthy appreciation for values. The fruits of our labor should benefit people. We should focus on the common good as we maximize the positive effects of the digital revolution and minimize the negative. Our greatest risk is that we lose the sensitivity, warmth, and compassion which we should have for one another. An improper work-life-balance endangers our spiritual values and quality of life. Our fulfillment as human beings presupposes that we remain connected to ourselves and to our world. Technology becomes dehumanizing when it distances us from

² Diane-Gabrielle Tremblay, *Travailler c'est ...*, Proposals compiled by Brigitte Trudel, RND, January 2007, p. 17.

³ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, Vatican Publishing House, 2005, No. 314.

these realities. As technology has simultaneously invaded the working and leisure worlds as well as family life, all fields of human endeavor risk being exploited.

8. Family and work are two inter-dependent realities in the life experiences of most people. Government policies must favor a family -work conciliation, taking into consideration the limitations of a private concept of family and an economic concept of work. These two dimensions are affected by multiple factors: increased commuting distances, working two jobs, physical and psychological fatigue, tensions and family crises, and unemployment.⁴
9. The quest for balance aims for a better quality of life for the individual and the community. It can be found in self-employment, in small businesses that use local products, in cooperatives, and in all places where taking initiative and fostering personal creativity are valued. In the context of a global market and fierce competition, this search for balance may lead people to make a choice between professional, i.e., financial success and work that is more precarious, but which offers a better quality of life.

Taking the time

10. While modern technologies train people to expect faster results, an interest in gardening, taking long and leisurely walks, even pilgrimages to Compostella, or watching a film such as *le Grand silence*, demonstrate that men and women, the main characters *in* and observers *of* this digital revolution, are seeking to find a life-work-balance, before life quickly and noisily passes them by. The family is the important anchor in achieving this life-balance struggle ... and we need time. Other people, beautiful scenery, and even our homes will only share their nurturing aspects if we actually investigate these possibilities at a slower pace. This is what the Church proposes with its tradition of keeping Sundays as a day of rest. In fact, Christians have always considered the Lord's Day a time to celebrate the faith, in particular the Eucharist, and to participate in nurturing encounters and creative experiences.
11. We must provide a place wherein we can establish a sensitive rapport within tangible contexts: families, groups and associations, nature and the environment, and our faith community. This quest for balance contrasts sharply with increased interactions with virtual beings on screens. During their childhood, as in their early years in school, children need

⁴ Idem, *Compendium* ... No. 294.

guidance to develop their personalities and establish a proper balance between a virtual and the real world. Work will then assume its proper place at the service of humanity.

12. Following the examples set by France and the United States, are we ready to initiate a media fast - a week without television or computers? The purpose is to tear us away from our screens and force us to deal with reality. This exercise should draw our attention to life essentials: a relationship with God and others, self knowledge, and respect for our physical and human environment.

Conclusion

13. The quest for balance between the value of work and the demands of new technologies must include a definite concern for human dignity at work. The digital era and ensuing changes call for important ethical decisions. *If solidarity, participation and the possibility to govern these radical changes are not the solution, they are certainly the necessary ethical guarantee so that individuals and people do not become tools but the protagonists of their future.*⁵
14. This May 1st message affirms the conviction and challenge that work, as defined by new technologies, must foster personal growth. Learning about a work-life-balance must start at an early age and take place within a family context. The positive effects of this new age should harmoniously interact with God's creations which are constantly evolving.

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⁵ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, Vatican Publishing House, 2005, No. 321.