

Is Our Attitude About Work Broken? with Barry Schwartz (Transcript)

PODCAST

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Chris Congdon: Why do we work? It's a simple enough question, but the answer is actually more nuanced than you might think. According to our guest today, it's not just about a paycheck and his research has really uncovered some things that people are struggling with. And what are some things that we can do to make us happier at work, welcome to Work Better, a Steelcase podcast where we think about work and ways to make it better. I'm your host, Chris Congdon, and I'm with our producer Rebecca Charbauski.

Rebecca Charbauski: Hi Chris. We were both so excited to talk to Professor Barry Schwartz today. His book, *Why We Work*, gets at the heart of why so many people wake up in the morning and just don't really want to go to work today.

CC: Yeah, he's got a pretty passionate argument about the way society thinks about work, and he really feels like that's broken

RC: And his research is backed up by some serious credentials. He's an emeritus professor at Swarthmore, a visiting professor at UC Berkeley. And in addition to *Why We Work*, he's the author of *The Paradox of Choice* and *Practical Wisdom*.

CC: And he's given four TED Talks, which are very popular, seen by more than 25 million people. Yeah, we highly recommend those.

RC: And we'd also like to ask that if you enjoy this conversation with Barry, please like us and share this episode with a friend or colleague who are also thinking about work.

CC: Barry, welcome to Work Better. Thanks for joining us today.

Barry Schwartz: Thank you so much. It's great to be with you, Chris. I'm looking forward to our conversation.

CC: Oh, I am too, because I feel like we've just got a ton to talk about. And I want to start out grounding us in the book that you wrote about why we Work. And even though you wrote that before the pandemic, it feels even more relevant now because it feels like everybody is rethinking work and the role of work. And you said something about how our society thinks work is broken. And I just wonder why did you say that and do you think that's still true today after what we've been through?

BS: Well, it is a terrific question. We could spend days just unpacking that. The reason I think our attitude as a society, our attitude toward work is broken, is that we have all kind of accepted the idea that work is about a paycheck. And if you get the salary and benefits right, nothing else matters. And if you get them wrong, nothing else matters. So basically nothing matters except the paycheck. And what that has done is that it has led enterprises to focus on return on investment and profitability and efficiency, and essentially to ignore what it feels like to go to work every day. There's a lot of research indicating that people who are enthusiastic about their work, who think they have autonomy and responsibility in their work, who think their work is making some sort of a difference in the world do better work. It isn't just that they walk home with a smile on their face, they actually do better work.

So it helps the bottom line to create a workplace where people want to be. And yet so few workplaces are like that or we're like that. We all know these wonderful Silicon Valley slides in the workplace. And yeah, all of that, even there, most of the discussion has been about the sort of irrelevant frills, the icing that there's a place to do yoga and you can bring in your dry cleaning and all that stuff, but the question of what it is you do for the eight or 10 hours a day that you're there rarely gets discussed. So even in these models of enlightened work, it's not clear to me how enlightened it's so that's why I think work is broken. It seems to me a crime that people spend half of their working lives going to a place they don't want to be to do a job they don't want to do, especially when this is not inevitable.

It can be different. And then along comes the pandemic. And what the pandemic did is it sort of gave the workforce more leverage because you simply could not continue with business as usual. And employers at first very, I think suspicious, realize that they simply would have to let people work sort of on their own schedule in their own place or else they were going to have to shut down. So they reluctantly gave up control, this sort of micro control that they probably preferred crossed their fingers and hoped for the best, and employees felt like they had leverage in a way they didn't before. So they could actually start making demands not about what they got paid, but about what they did and how they did it. And I think this brought a real increase in enthusiasm for doing the work and also brought its own set of problems.

And I'll have asked myself, do I think this is sort of going to launch a permanent alteration in the way work is done and thought about? And I wish I knew the answer to that. My worry is that as soon as economic hard times return, if they do and the leverage goes back almost entirely to the employer, people will take whatever job they can get for whatever pay they can get. And so this will just look like a blip that interests but does not usher in a major transformation. I think the jury is still out.

CC: Well, in some ways. I mean, I'm seeing what you're talking about right now. I mean, we know that people are rethinking their relationship with work. You can't go through a major trauma where you're literally facing death on a daily basis everywhere you look and not have that cause you to rethink a few things in your life. And so we saw the great resignation, but just yesterday I read something where the writer had coined the term the Great Stay that we're starting to see that shift where people are staying, the quit rates are going down at least in the us and they weren't as high maybe in other parts of the world in the first place. But what I'm wondering about is if you think about this idea of the pandemic having been a collective trauma that we all faced, and yet we're trying to recover in some way and find kind of the right balance for what we want out of work. And I'm just curious what you think about that journey that people are on right now. I mean, does that make sense that thinking about this as kind of a trauma response as a way for us to consider how people are feeling right now?

BC: I think so. And well, I know I wrote a book some years before the book while we work called The Paradox of Choice. And that book was about how, although there's no question that choice is good, there can be too much of a good thing. And when there is too much of that good thing, it paralyzes people. I didn't write about the workplace in that book, but I think you can take that sort of model that there's a kind of optimal amount of freedom. And when you have less than that, you suffer in one kind of way. And when you have more than that, you suffer in another kind of way. And the trauma that you're describing that Covid brought essentially blew everything up and created problems for people. Like now I'm working from home. When does my workday start? When does my workday end? When does it stop? I spent my whole life as an academic. And one of the great things about being an academic is that you work extremely hard, but you basically work when you want to work. You're in a classroom for six hours a week and an occasional meeting. And aside from that, your time is your own.

CC: You've got a lot of flexibility.

BS: A lot of flexibility, and it takes some discipline to figure out how to take advantage of that flexibility. Now, constraints started to come into my life when we had kids and we were trying to manage raising kids with two careers, and all of a sudden a lot of that flexibility got hemmed in by other considerations. But in the early going, it was really the main challenge was when do you put the damn book down?

And I had to learn how to do it. And I think a lot of people who started working from home, while they love being able to wear sweatpants, they started encountering this problem of when do I stop? There's always more to do. There's always more to think about and it's hard to separate yourself from the work, and this is especially true if it's work that you find valuable and engaging. And they had no practice, very little practice in dealing with this. So that's what I meant when I said it was a pandemic that liberated people, but it also created its own problems. I'm hopeful that although I gather there's a fair amount of burnout, people are increasingly learning how to balance the work they do with the other things that matter to them in life without this artificial geographical boundary that separates your workday from the rest of your life.

CC: Yeah, it feels like we're still on a journey because I was just going to share with you our most recent research with employees that shows people are still to borrow a word from Adam Grant, he talks about languishing. And I think I would describe what we're seeing in the numbers as kind of languishing because engagement numbers are kind of flat, productivity is a little, it might be up a little bit, but kind of still lagging, definitely lagging behind the pandemic. And the one thing that really struck me is that the work life balance indicators have been dropping. And so it feels like people still haven't figured that out yet.

BS: I don't think it's an easy thing to figure out. I really don't. I expect it to take time, and I expect that some people, there are people who don't want meaningful work. They want to be able to put in an honest day's work, and then when they leave, not give it a thought until tomorrow. So the center of their identity is really in other things, their friends, their family, what have you, and working from home poses a problem for them without offering a compensatory benefit because they don't want to be consumed by work. But there are an awful lot of people who would like some reason to feel like what they were doing every day made a difference in some way and was worth devoting themselves to. But I don't expect this to be an easy adjustment for anybody.

CC: No, I have to remind myself because I'm one of those people that I just love what I do. You describe me perfectly. I was working last night in my home office and I had to say to my husband, I'm going to just keep working until you tell me that we're going to have dinner. Because I was just really, but I know that that's not everybody's reality. Whether they want it to be by choice or whether it's just the nature of their work is kind of a grind. And so I'm curious, we've been having conversations here about, dare I say, joy at work, and I'm just curious what you think about that. Do you think it's even a reality that people would find joy in their work even if it's just something they do from nine to five?

BS: I think challenge, autonomy and meaning in your work really matter. They help you look at yourself in the mirror. Joy, it just seems to me, is the cherry on top of the cake. If you find a way to give people a little bit of joy, then maybe they won't mind the rest of their workday so much.

CC: That is so interesting. I want to pick your brain a little bit about another problem that I think is related that a lot of leaders and organizations are saying, at least in our research leaders have said like their number one priority for this next year is employee wellbeing. And maybe that's a little bit more attainable than joy, but I'm just curious, if you were advising an organization who is focused on employee wellbeing, how would you guide them? What questions would you ask them or where do you think they should be focusing their attention?

BS: So I've had a little bit of experience in connection with this, which was really eye opening for me. I've given a couple of talks to companies whose job is to create websites that contribute to employee wellbeing. And what I found out is that what that means in the industry is reducing the company's health insurance bill. How do we keep people healthier? And so there are all kinds of interventions focused on what people eat, whether people exercise, whether they consume too much alcohol and drugs and all of it. The one thing that is never discussed is what they do when they're working. It is all about getting people to take better care of themselves when they're not working right. And that struck me as so cynical. If you really care about employee wellbeing, then you start with what do they do when they're here and not, what do they do when they leave?

And most companies who express an interest in employee wellbeing are really interested in reducing absenteeism and their health insurance premium. Who knew? I thought that a company that said, our aim is to enhance employee wellbeing actually cared about that, but that's not what they're hired to do. They're hired to save the company's money. So that was really disappointing to me. There are some companies that understand that if you're really interested in employee wellbeing, your focus should be on the jobs and not on the fringe. And they try to do that, but it's a harder sell because employers often don't want to give up control. And almost without exception, if you want employee wellbeing to go up, you have to give employees a sense that you trust them and respect them and value their autonomy in the workplace. And employers don't want to do that.

CC: So I don't disagree with you. I, and I think people can feel when it's disingenuous, right? I think people get a sense like, my organization really cares about me, or my organization just wants to keep the cost down and keep everything running. And so you need me to be healthy because you need me to show up and do my job, as opposed to, you want me to be healthy for my own sake. But with going down, there are some jobs that that's kind of tough.

BS: I think there's room for finding meaning in a lot, not all, a lot of mundane activities. There's wonderful research that a colleague of mine and friend Amy Nuki has done studying hospital janitors and on the hierarchy of hospital employment, they are surely at the bottom. Yeah,

CC: It's a tough job.

BS: It's a tough job. You punch your clock, you wash your floors and empty trash and yada, yada, yada. There's a long list of things that they have to do. And the interesting thing about the job description is there isn't a single thing on it that mentions other people. And what she found is that there are some janitors for whom they are interacting with material objects and not with patients, but there are other janitors. Every time they go into a room, what they're asking themselves as they empty the trash is, what can I do to help make this person more comfortable? One person likes gospel music. So while the janitor is taking care of the sanitary conditions in the room, she's singing gospel. There's a big patient and the nurse has to turn the patient to avoid getting bedsores, and so the janitor helps the nurse turn the patient because it would be a very difficult task for the nurse on her own.

Every room they go into, they are asking, what does this person need? And taking seriously the possibility that they can help contribute and that this is not irrelevant to the health outcome. If you make patients feel better, you increase the chances that their recovery will be more rapid. So these people get paid crap. They have no status and are for most of us invisible, and yet there's a subset of them for whom it's a calling. There's enormous meaning in what they do. There's this old saying about, you see two people laying bricks, and you ask them what are they doing? And one of 'em says, I, I'm laying bricks. And the other one says, I'm building a cathedral. Well, if you're building a cathedral, laying bricks is not so bad.

CC: So I want to ask you a little bit about something that's been on my mind a lot. We think about the needs of different generations at work, and it occurs to me that as a society, we've convinced people that the ultimate achievement is actually to stop working. That the sooner you can get to an earlier retirement, the more that you have achieved your life objective. And yet we've got a huge generation of baby boomers and Gen Xers not far behind who are hitting a point in life where it's like, is that really what we should be trying to do? Is it to help people move into a state of no longer working? Or do we need to rethink what work looks like?

BS: Well, I think the latter, I think especially given how much longer people live, retiring at 60 or 65 is no bargain. And the same thing is true in my own walk of life, the academic institution, they used to be mandatory retirement. Until that became illegal, then you had all these really talented, engaged and still active people who had to stop at 65. And it was, we had this binary notion, you are either working full time or you are retired. And it always struck me that it made sense to lighten the load of people as they get older and less energetic and less capable of putting in a full day's work, but still take advantage of their expertise. So instead of retiring, you go to a status where you teach one course a semester or one course a year, and your replacement doesn't have to be hired because you are still there to teach your specialty.

And the size of your colleague group is larger because it includes all of these people who are now part-time. And we suffer, I think, from poverty of imagination about using these incredible skills, reservoirs of wisdom that senior people have. And this is not just true in the academic world, it's true in general. So I do think there needs to be a different model because 30 years of playing golf does not strike me as feasible. John Maynard Keynes, the great economist of the 20th Century, was so convinced about the trajectory of efficiency as the economy continued to develop that. He said the main problem people were going to face in 30 years was what to do with all their leisure time when they were making a full salary on 10 hours of work a week, that people would just go crazy with boredom because they could get a full salary and work a quarter. As much as they were doing well, he was wrong about that, wasn't he? But it seems to me that retirement just poses this challenge and people would in general reject it if there were an alternative that made sense. So that work was not all consuming, but it was engaging enough that you could do it and want to do it while still engaging in other activities that you'd sort of put on the shelf or put on hold when you were working full time.

CC: So you're prompting me to want to go back to when we talked about some of your work about choice and choices, because in our line of work, we think a lot about those physical workplace, not just having enough room to have everybody come into work, but how do you create places that influence behaviors and how people feel and their experience at work? How do they feel about work? So I'm curious what you think about this kind of flexibility from a physical perspective at work in the context of choices. What do you think that ideal space should look like?

BS: I've given that a lot of thought. I tend to be oblivious to my surroundings. Oh, really? My wife mocks me for being so insensitive to the physical space I'm operating in, but I know how important that can be for a lot of people and in connection with choice. When I give talks on that topic, the last slide I show is a cartoon from the New Yorker that is a fish bowl, and there's a baby fish and a parent fish, and the caption reads, you can be anything you want to be no limits. And the reader laughs because you look in the fish bowl and there's nothing there. So you can be anything you want to be, but there's really nothing you can want to be. You just float around and eat your little bits of food. So that was my first reaction. But then I started thinking about it and what I came to realize is that people need fish bowls. The fish bowls need to have more in them than a little plastic castle. But you need something that puts constraints on what's possible. And so when you're designing a workplace, you want it to be flexible enough and varied enough so that people with different tastes and different job responsibilities can find comfortable settings to work in. But you don't want basically just a playground where anything is possible and spaces can be reconfigured easily on a daily basis. So what has struck me about what your company does is it seems whether this was deliberate or not, I don't know. It seems like you've had an understanding that you need flexibility but not infinite flexibility. And if people say they want infinite flexibility, they're wrong because when they get it, they won't know what to do. And so you need to make it possible for office configurations to be changed, but you also want it so that they can't be changed like that.

CC: There's a curious behavior that we've observed for years and years that when you give people a lot of choices, you still find people gravitating back toward the same spaces as human beings. We find these places that we feel most comfortable, that we love for whatever reason. And even if you have 10 different options available, you might often spend your time in two or three of those spaces.

BS: And I think partly that's a reflection of people realizing that if everything is a decision, it's impossible to get through a day. There was an interview in Vanity Fair with Barack Obama while he was president, and the interviewer asked him why his choice of apparel seemed so rote, dark suit every day, and a white shirt or a blue shirt. So Obama said to the interviewer, have you got any idea how many decisions I make in a day? You really want me to be spending time deciding what to wear? It's not surprising to me that people end up going back to the familiar because they're still going to face all kinds of decisions every day, and they don't need to decide which cubicle to be working in.

CC: Yeah, there is a lot of cognitive load around decision making that is for sure there is. Yep.

BS: So you want to restrict it to the parts of your day and your life where you can't avoid it. Decisions have to be made.

CC: Yeah, I think that makes sense. And I think that goes back to feeling like you've got some control over your work and some autonomy. Hey, I want to ask you something. I feel like Barry, like you and I could talk for the whole day here. I want to ask you something that's kind of more personal though before I let you go, which is, we have been thinking about this notion maybe joy isn't the right aspiration, but meaning and purpose and autonomy and all of those things. And I'm just wondering if there's something that you've experienced in your work life that gave you that feeling, something that's memorable to you, and I was just wondering if you'd be willing to share a story about that with us.

BS: Well, I'd be happy to, but it's not a terribly interesting story. I took a job in 1971 at a small liberal arts college called Swarthmore College outside of Philadelphia, a very, very prestigious place with very high achieving students. And I took it for sort of practical reasons. My wife was still in graduate school. We were in Philadelphia, so I could take this job and she wouldn't have to uproot herself. And I figured two, three years, she'll be finished and then we can look for jobs together. And what I discovered was that it was actually, for me, the perfect place. And the reason it was the perfect place is that it was remarkable in how much discretion it gave faculty about what they taught and how they taught it. So even if you had to teach the introduction to psychology class, what was in it was up to you.

You weren't handed a syllabus and a textbook. You were the master of your domain for good or for ill. And the result is that I spent 45 years essentially never having to do anything I didn't want to do. Now, there are very few people who can say that about their work life, and I realized I was not smart in choosing it. I was lucky in choosing it, but I was at least smart enough to recognize what a gift this was.

And I know that it's unrealistic to imagine that you can organize enterprises in general in this way with this much flexibility. And I don't think it's the worst thing in the world occasionally, to have to do something you don't want to do. But the critical thing is if that's where the center of gravity is, then you start each job getting ready to look for the next one. If the center of gravity has you more in charge of how you spend your work time, then I don't think you're looking for a better opportunity. So for me, I fell into it. If you had asked me when I took the job, what's important to you about a job, this would not have been on my list. But it turned out that it was absolutely decisive and it shaped my career. I got interested in intersections of different disciplines in a way that would never have happened if I were teaching, say, at a large state university. And I had these things that I was absolutely responsible for delivering year after year after year. So as I say, it's not a sexy story because it wasn't like an epiphany. I just, well,

CC: I don't know, Barry, if I could spend 45 years of my life never having to put together another budget or have a budget meeting, I think that would come pretty close to joy at work.

BS: Well, I did serve several stints as the chair of the department, and then certain joyless activities started to improve my workday. But you can handle that for five years in a 45 year career.

CC: Yeah. Yeah. Well, Barry, I just want to thank you for being with us today. It's just been a delightful conversation. I know I've gotten a lot out of it. And dare I say, a couple moments of joy in this conversation from talking to you. So thank you so much.

BS: You've asked wonderful questions, Chris, and it's been a pleasure to talk to you.

CC: Oh, thank you so much.