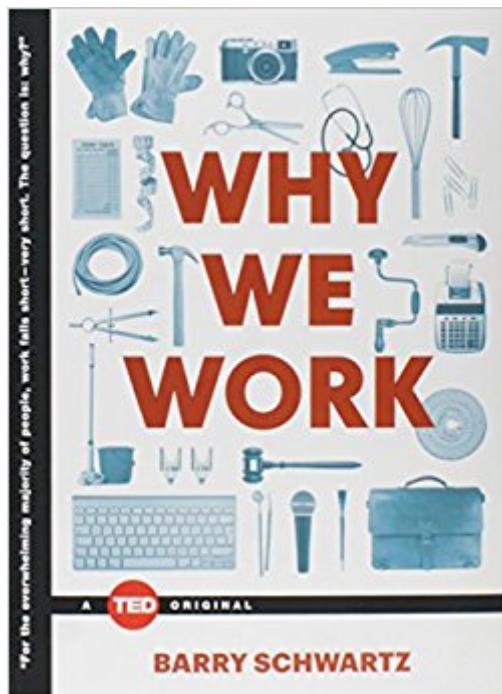


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# Why We Work (TED Books)



## Synopsis

An eye-opening, groundbreaking tour of the purpose of work in our lives, showing how work operates in our culture and how you can find your own path to happiness in the workplace. Why do we work? The question seems so simple. But Professor Barry Schwartz proves that the answer is surprising, complex, and urgent. We've long been taught that the reason we work is primarily for a paycheck. In fact, we've shaped much of the infrastructure of our society to accommodate this belief. Then why are so many people dissatisfied with their work, despite healthy compensation? And why do so many people find immense fulfillment and satisfaction through ceremonial jobs? Schwartz explores why so many believe that the goal for working should be to earn money, how we arrived to believe that paying workers more leads to better work, and why this has made our society confused, unhappy, and has established a dangerously misguided system. Through fascinating studies and compelling anecdotes, this book dispels this myth. Schwartz takes us through hospitals and hair salons, auto plants and boardrooms, showing workers in all walks of life, showcasing the trends and patterns that lead to happiness in the workplace. Ultimately, Schwartz proves that the root of what drives us to do good work can rarely be incentivized, and that the cause of bad work is often an attempt to do just that. How did we get to this tangled place? How do we change the way we work? With great insight and wisdom, Schwartz shows us how to take our first steps toward understanding, and empowering us all to find great work.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Barry Schwartz has long been one of the most astute and compassionate observers of American life. In *Why We Work*, he makes a compelling case for building organizations that run with the grain of human nature rather than against it. If you want to make work more meaningful, for yourself or for your team, you need to read this wise and powerful book." • (Daniel H. Pink, author of *Drive*) "In a masterful book that delivers a deep understanding why we work, Schwartz makes a convincing case that getting the answer wrong bears profound costs for employees and managers in any organization. A highly recommended, thought-provoking read." • (Amy Wrzesniewski, Professor of Organizational Behavior, Yale University) "A meaningful look at why we've lost meaning at work, and where we can find it." • (Adam Grant, Wharton professor and New York Times bestselling author of *Give and Take*) "A delightful, accessible book that glides across centuries of business and industry to reveal the underpinning moral foundations of how and why we work. If you have a job, or hope to have one, read *Why We Work*." • (Laszlo Bock, Senior Vice President of People Operations at Google and author of *Work Rules!*) "Invoking plenty of Adam Smith, Karl Marx, John Maynard Keynes, and even a bit of Bruce Springsteen, Schwartz's inspiring manifesto forces us to question the very nature of modern-day work. Via fascinating anecdote and plenty of data, the book forcefully claims that how we work isn't working." • (HuffPost Books) "A concise 90-page treatise on work that should be required reading for every boss and manager." • (Chicago Tribune) "A terse and engaging book. [a] fine book." • (Forbes.com)

Barry Schwartz is a professor of psychology at Swarthmore College and the author of *Why We Work*, *The Paradox of Choice*, and *Practical Wisdom*. His articles have been published in *The New York Times*, *The New York Times Magazine*, the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Parade Magazine*, *USA TODAY*, *Advertising Age*, *Slate*, *Scientific American*, *The New Republic*, *Harvard Business Review*, and *The Guardian*, and he has appeared on dozens of radio shows, including *Morning Edition*, *Talk of the Nation*, *Anderson Cooper 360*, and *CBS Sunday Morning*.

"*Why We Work* is an elegant book that confronts a collection of some of the seemingly unsolvable and unrelated problems of our time, including: Why a majority of employees are not engaged in their work. Why children are pre-destined to learning based on the perceptions and expectations of their teachers. Why doctors and lawyers are forced to become unethical. Why products and services are sold aggressively to customers regardless

of whether they will benefit them. Why unskilled workers don't have the leeway to have interesting work. The author Barry Schwartz presents a balanced discussion of how these and other issues have resulted from a mis-read of Adam Smith's belief set forth in 1776 in *The Wealth of Nations* that people hate to work and do so only for money.

This followed by the scientific movement led by Frederick Turner and the research of B.F. Skinner has relegated us to the ideology that work by its very nature is not and cannot be fulfilling. He then describes how a variety of theories, inventions, scripts, rules, management controls, work incentives, data-driven schemes, etc. have been used in negative ways to make companies successful because of their efficiency vs. in positive ways to increase the motivation of their employees. This view of history and progress that ideas and technologies that at the time seem correct but are eventually discredited and replaced by new ideas that may also be later discredited is presented by Schwartz in a straightforward and disarming way that is completely different from most of the political and social science books we read today, where conservatives and liberals, Democrats and Republicans draw themselves into opposing camps each arguing and baiting the others until nothing is accomplished. Schwartz frames our opportunity differently with this powerful dichotomy: we are what society expects us to be. If society asks little of us, it gets little. It is clear that, under these circumstances, we must be sure that we have arranged rules and incentives in a way that induces people to act in ways that serve the objectives of the rule makers and the incentive setters. If society asks more of us, and arranges its social institutions appropriately, it will get more. With only four reviews posted so far, this book is destined to generate some interesting and opposing reviews based on the diverse work experiences and philosophies of its reviewers. I, for one, am an optimist about this. I've spent my career working for a string of organizations that were either already or about to be recognized for their powerful and successful business models. Although they typically already had strong training & development programs, I was hired to open up dialogue that would make their employees even better, more motivated and more self-directed. We built new leadership programs, simulations, job descriptions and social media that got incumbents talking about and improving their best practices and customer experiences to make them ever better. Most of those companies were motivated to get their employees thinking like the workers Schwartz describes who had the flexibility to make their jobs better. I highly recommend *Why We Work*. It not only gets you thinking but offers some structure for making things better. It is an elegant book.

I recommend this book to anyone seeking to improve their management or to make their own career

more fulfilling. It makes a critical correction to the widely accepted, and flawed, view of worker motivation. When trying to explain why the book was powerful to a friend, a fatty-foods analogy (really) generated an “aha!” from her. So I’ll use that explanation hoping it wasn’t the wine she was drinking that made me make sense. Remember partially hydrogenated oils? Several generations considered them a positive human invention. By the 1990s, however, scientists had shown that their manufacturing produced trans fats that damaged our hearts and killed tens of thousands of people a year. The FDA finally banned them this year. A century after we started using them and two decades after we knew they were killing us, we finally rid ourselves of this poison. Human progress is replete with damaging forays, like partially hydrogenated oils, that we eventually expose as such and, at the slow tempo of societal progress, reverse our way out of them. Today we are deep into a destructive foray regarding our conception of worker motivation. We created an idea two centuries ago that people hate work and do it only for money and other extrinsic rewards. This human invention (which is what an idea is) is not a widespread food ingredient but a ubiquitous workplace element. It doesn’t cause heart attacks (directly, anyway), but it does cause heartache, disgruntlement, disengagement and low productivity. As a result, if your workplace is like most, four out of five of your workers would rather not be working today. The science is in: It’s not human nature to hate work and treating workers as if they do causes damage to them and to business. It’s unlikely my explanation of the key point of *Why We Work* has convinced you to rethink what you’ve been taught about worker motivation. The book, however, will. My enthusiasm for this book is not based only on reading it, but also on living it. My job is to help corporate managers bring purpose into the jobs of the employees they manage. Every week I see, and measure, the boost in worker engagement, productivity and wellbeing that results from, essentially, heeding the advice in *Why We Work*. My only issue with the book is that it never fully clears Adam Smith’s name. The father of economics never meant to say that people work out of self-interest alone. The man we think sent us down the wrong path never pointed us down that path. Schwartz acknowledges this late in the book, but only in passing. I would have liked to see a fuller treatment of Smith’s work. This is probably my own side issue stemming from a geeky interest in economic thinkers. In fact, Schwartz’s restrained correction of Smith’s legacy is probably a good thing. It’s the quality that allowed him to keep his book to a 100-page fast and easy read, appropriate for busy managers. If trans fats are any indication, it might take another 20 years for Schwartz’s well-documented theory on worker motivation, and where we went wrong, to become widely adopted. You don’t have to wait, however. Invest a couple of hours now reading *Why We Work*. It will help you pull out of a

damaging foray you didn't know you were down in. It will likely and brighten your work life.

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