



## The Significance of Work in People's Lives and Life Chances

Work is a really important part of a person's life. Nothing shows the importance of this more than the loss of a job, being made redundant or not being able to find a job.

This Factsheet will look at the significance of work in people's lives and will be useful for any aspects of the specifications linked to work but also for stratification topics.

Work can be quite difficult to define. People generally see work as 'paid employment' but work does not have to be paid. There are many activities done by people in paid work which are also carried out by those who don't receive payment for them e.g. people employed as clearers, childminders, painters, gardeners. All these jobs are carried out by individuals, some who get paid for the jobs and some who don't.



Take the case of a professional footballer who gets paid for playing the sport. People who are part of a Sunday football league or local football team do the same thing but don't get paid.

Therefore, perhaps work should be defined more by the social context in which we do the activities rather than what we actually do.

Work is a significant part of a person's identity. People will ask you what you do and you are often defined by the type of work you do. Work constitutes a key part of how we construct and define, and make sense of, our own and others' identities.

**Activity:** Think about the ways work can influence a person's life and write a list of all the ways you can think of.

Working, whether paid or unpaid, is good for us in many ways including our health and wellbeing. It contributes to our happiness, helps us to build confidence and self-esteem, and rewards us financially.

**People work for different reasons – people are motivated by different factors.**

**Extrinsic Motivation** occurs when we engage in an activity to earn a reward or avoid punishment, for example a person might work to get paid or to stop a person criticising them for doing nothing.

**Intrinsic Motivation** involves engaging in a behaviour because it is personally rewarding; essentially, performing an activity for its own sake rather than the desire for some external reward e.g. working because a person enjoys what they do.

### Activity:

*How does work influence our lives?*

*Using your list, complete a table similar to the one below and briefly explain, with examples, how work can influence each of these factors.*

Factor	The influence of work
Sense of personal identity	
Values and Attitudes	
Status in society	
Life chances	
Health and Life expectancy	
Leisure time and activities	
Income and lifestyle	
Self esteem	

*Compare your answers with other members of your group.*

*Then, write a paragraph, using examples, explaining the importance of work in people's lives.*

### Extrinsic vs. Intrinsic Motivation: Which Is Best?

The primary difference between the two types of motivation is that extrinsic motivation arises from outside of the individual while intrinsic motivation arises from within. Researchers have also found that the two types of motivation can differ in how effective they are at driving behaviour.

In some cases, people simply have no internal desire to engage in an activity but do so because they will receive their wages at the end of the month. However, work which is stimulating and challenging can lead to people performing well in their job because they want to rather than because they need some reward.

Marx attempted to show that work is central to a human being's existence. He saw work as separating humans from other animals

Marx felt that workers are often separated from the product they are producing and because they are not involved in the process, they are alienated from the product and from fellow humans. Marx therefore believes that when people are alienated at work they only work for the financial rewards (extrinsic motivation).

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**Activity:**

*This paints a very bleak picture of working life. Do you think this is still the case today?*

*Try to look at both sides of the argument here:*

<b>Alienation is still evident in the workplace today</b>	<b>Alienation is not evident in the workplace today</b>

*Write a brief conclusion based on the points you have written.*

**Is work of declining significance in people's lives?**

Work is still important in people's lives as shown by the experiences of people who are unable to work, cannot find work or are made redundant. Lack of work is still a primary cause of poverty, and the associated diminished life chances associated with it (damage to self-esteem and status in society, effects on family life, health and ability to participate in social life etc.) Therefore, work is still a significant part of a person's life.

However, Postmodernists argue that society is no longer principally based on production but has become a consumer society. In a society such as this, consuming goods has become a much more significant source of identity than work. A person's identity is often based on what mobile phone you have, what car you drive rather than on what job you have.



Doherty (2009) identifies the main features of a consumer society where work has lost its central place in people's lives:

- Many jobs have become less skilled, with little work satisfaction and interest
- The security of jobs for life have disappeared and work has become more insecure.
- Working hours have become more flexible with many short-term temporary jobs and fixed term contracts and zero hour contracts.

More than 50 years ago, Dahrendorf (1959) predicted that, as a Europe-wide response to globalisation, there would be a decline in permanent full-time employment and the growth of part-time, temporary or seasonal employment. This certainly seems to be the case today.

The uninvolved, uninteresting, short-lived and insecure nature of many jobs means work has become a part of what Beck (1992) called a 'risk society', in which people's lives have become much more individualised, and the individual stands alone in an increasingly insecure world.

Many people do not have much attachment, commitment and dedication to their work. Consequently, work has lost its once-central importance in people's lives.

Bauman (2005) therefore argues work has ceased to be the central axis of identity.

**Activity:**

*Using the information above, take a look at both sides of the argument here and add some points to each side of the table below:*

<b>Work is still significant in people's lives today</b>	<b>Work is not so significant in people's lives today</b>

*Write a brief conclusion based on the points you have written.*

*You can use this table for revision.*

**Work and Life Chances**

There is a strong link between work and activities outside of work. Our work shapes our life chances, what we can afford to buy, where we live, where we shop etc.

Life chances refer to people's opportunities of obtaining those things defined as desirable, and avoiding those things defined as undesirable, in any society.

**Work and Leisure**

Parker (1971) suggested that people's occupations and the way they experience their work, such as the amount of independence and satisfaction they have, and the activities people engage in during their work time have important influences on their leisure activities, which can influence the identities they project to others.

Parker suggests that there are three patterns:

<b>Work-leisure pattern</b>	<b>Nature of work</b>	<b>Typical occupations</b>	<b>Nature of leisure</b>
Opposition	Physically hard and dangerous work 	Mining, steelworkers	Leisure is a sharp contrast to work – an opportunity to escape work
Neutrality	Boring and routine work 	Routine clerical work, assembly line work	Leisure for relaxation with home and family
Extension	Work involving high levels of personal commitment 	Professionals (e.g. teachers, doctors)	Leisure is work related with a blurring of the distinction between work and leisure. Work extends into leisure time

**Activity:** Can you add any more jobs to each of the categories in the table on Page 2?

So, the work that people do has a significant effect on their leisure time.

**Activity:** As a group conduct your own piece of sociological research. Ask your parents and other adults what job they do and what they like to do in their leisure time? Is there a similar pattern to the one suggested by Parker?

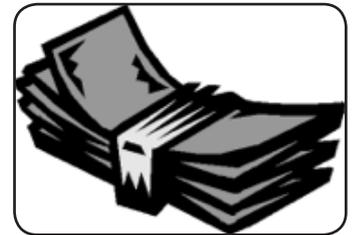
**Exam Hint:** It is important to use evidence in your exam answers. This evidence could be your own research so make sure you can explain the research you have conducted, what you have found and what it shows about the significance of work

It may be that work is not the central focus or interest in people's lives it once was, but it is still the only means for most people to earn money and is therefore a principle factor in influencing people's life chances.

A Department for Work and Pensions report – 'Is work good for your health and well-being?' found that those of working age who are in work generally have better physical and mental health, better diets, better housing, better educational opportunities for their children and more leisure choices than those who are not working. These factors also increase as earnings from work increase.

Money clearly matters and significantly influences life chances.

The conditions under which people work can also impact on their life chances and the quality of their lives (e.g. do people work shifts, is the work secure, is the environment clean and safe, etc.) All these factors can affect life chances.



**Activity:** List all the ways you can in which work might influence people's life chances.

Therefore, although patterns of work have changed in recent years, for the vast majority of people work matters, and continues to play an important role in their life chances and in fulfilling their important personal and social needs.

**Exam Hint:**

1. Outline three ways in which work may be important in forming an individual's identity

You could include: status, self-esteem, friendships, leisure activities, attitudes, values, life chances, health

2. Outline three ways in which a person's work might influence their lives outside the workplace

You could include: leisure activities, type of work, who they work with, shift working

3. Evaluate the view that work is still significant in the lives of most people

You need to look at both sides of the argument here:

- It is still significant in terms of identity, status, self-esteem, friendships, leisure activities, attitudes, values, life chances, or health.
- It is not so significant due to the changes in society, consumer society, etc.

For any question that asks you to evaluate, you must always write a conclusion.