We Can Work it Out

Ever wondered what the single issue that we Transitioners need to prioritise above all others? Climate breakdown? Biodiversity and species extinction? Drinking water shortages and soil loss? Or perhaps we should be bringing a more lateral approach to the question?

Within the overdeveloped world employment can be identified as the single most significant human activity, both in terms of its far-reaching effects, and it’s irresistible influence, on the social and natural environments.

In industrialised cultures the concept of employment has many purposes, fulfils many roles and defines much thinking. Employment consumes and channels human energies and aspirations, directs the ways in which we relate to each other, humankind, other species and planet Earth. Within this framework it is a powerful medium for exemplifying such fundamental values as moral right and wrong: indeed ‘employment’ is regarded as a moral absolute. We persist in seeing those in employment as the only worthy members of society, regardless of whether they alleviate suffering or produce landmines. On the other hand, and paradoxically, we regard those who are unemployed and living low impact lives, wasting fewer resources, as worthless, parasitic ‘wasters’.

Our societies have not come to grips with the problem of meaningful employment, but within the Transition movement a pressing task must surely be to help raise the question of what is actually meant by ‘employment’, and to examine it as an issue. The post- industrial revolution world traditionally defines it in terms that are actually irrational outside of its consumerist context: our task therefore must be to re-evaluate employment in terms of its relationship to, and place within, our lives and the planet.

This mission could be approached through looking at the many different aspects of employment as an issue; citizens / basic income, the division of labour and leisure time, the implications of structural unemployment, the relationship between work and social status, downshifting, voluntary work, the overworked and underworked, work and the whole person, job satisfaction, paid idleness, unearned income, self-sufficiency, the relationship between labour and consumption, low impact living, ethical production and consumption, and so on.

Our transition can provide a meeting point for all those who are sympathetic to this challenge to the employment consensus. It means we could publish materials discussing appropriate experiences, schemes, issues, alternatives and doing and thinking.

This will also help enable us to campaign for a change in employment perceptions, redefining them in terms of humanity’s inevitable return to less materialistic, more sustainable lifestyles in the long term.

Another useful starting point would be for us to crowdsource information on the availability of employment opportunities that are neither hostile to the environment and life, nor nonsensical when assessed outside of a capitalist rationale.

As hands on Transition schemes develop it will become increasingly evident that there needs to be created and promoted a concept / social position alternative to the ‘employed’ v ‘unemployed’ labels.

Such schemes would appeal not only to the unemployed, they would attract into socially- and environmentally- worthwhile work all those people who have much to offer but perceive themselves as mere producers and consumers, their potential and their lives wasted by the rationale of a failed economic system.

Perhaps a first step in this aspect of our transition could be the establishment of voluntary local work transition schemes for all those unable to find fulfilment in their employment / unemployment and leisure pursuits.

Nothing motivates us more than something in which we have a personal stake, and what bigger stake could we have than being empowered to decide whether or not we waste our lives on the utter nonsense of unemployment - or much conventional employment? In Transitioner thinking surely no work can be too lowly when it is uncoupled from an exploitative means of production and instead linked to the purposeful endeavours that must emerge to grow and service planetary sustainability.