

We should stop teaching children myths about work and success

March 4 2021, by Luke Zaphir



Credit: Yan Krukau from Pexels

The narratives that define our culture are subtle sometimes. We all like the shared belief that hard work has good outcomes. For instance, you go to school to get a job. If you work hard in your job, you'll have a good

life, live in your own house and achieve your dreams.

We teach these ideas to children in the hopes they'll be hard working and entrepreneurial.

But there are a couple of myths underneath these values. Firstly, there's an implication those who succeed deserve it. And this implies those who don't have high paying [jobs](#) only have themselves to blame.

Next we have the narrative it's good to have a job, but we should also be more ambitious and strive for something better. Again, if we don't get it, we have ourselves to blame.

We can see these two narratives in the way some politicians talk. Remember, for instance, when in 2015, then [Treasurer Joe Hockey said](#) people looking to buy a house just had to "get a good job".

We can use philosophical tools to see how both these narratives are myths.

Myth 1: personal success comes from effort

This myth is based in meritocracy. It's a common feature of [neoliberal discourse](#) and in theory it's an admirable belief, and aspirational—anyone can succeed and be their best selves. Your achievement depends on how hard you try.

But there's a dark side to this view. When a person doesn't succeed, we often [blame the person](#) for not working hard enough.

There is often a mistaken judgment those who do not measure up have been lazy, stupid or lacking initiative. This is known in philosophy as a [modus tollens](#) fallacy. It goes like this:

- A causes B
- B did not occur
- Therefore A did not occur.

Or, in our example:

- Effort causes success
- Success did not occur
- Therefore the person did not put in effort.

Many politicians and [community leaders](#) intuitively believe many [young people](#) are not in work due to [laziness](#), [poor work ethic](#), or some kind of [personal indulgence](#).

And yet, people may have lost their job, due to the pandemic, for instance. [It's demonstrably false to say to most people on JobSeeker](#) are the lazy dole bludgers of neoliberal legend, given twice as many people received payments in 2020 than in 2019.

Or people on JobSeeker never had the opportunity to succeed in the first place due to systemic racism, gender inequality, natural disasters and poorly designed economic policies. They may be suffering mental health issues that prevent them from being their best selves.

There are many factors in play when it comes to financial success. But [one of the greatest predictors is family wealth](#). Two children, from different families, putting in the same amount of effort may experience completely different outcomes because of the wealth of their parents.



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Education, nutrition, parental attention and culture are factors in success too—but nothing [quite matches the raw advantage of coming from a wealthy family](#).

If we're willing to say work success can be disrupted by COVID-19, let's just admit there might be other causes too.

Myth 2: You should feel ashamed if your job isn't ambitious enough

[It's a common trope](#) in political statements, and society more generally, [that people need jobs](#). Jobs are good. And implicitly, if you have a job, it's good enough.

But this is often not the case due to what's known as a [conformity bias](#).

This is when we adopt the beliefs and behaviors of others from their [social cues](#), rather than using our own judgment or reasoning. Humans are social creatures and we aim to fit in with one another—conformity bias is part of that.

That's why we see certain jobs as more [prestigious than others](#) and value people's contribution more or less as a result.

And we often value the money in a job more highly than any other quality in a job.

This social attitude creates a [bias in our thinking](#) that higher pay means your job is more valuable. [The high salaries of some CEOs](#) feature in the news as implicitly positive examples.

The flip side of this bias though, is the undervaluing of the low earners.

Nurses serve a vital role in society as members of frontline medical staff [but get paid little](#) compared to [the doctors](#) they work alongside. [Teachers](#) performed an enormous task last year, shifting huge swaths of educational content to an online format (as well as needing to cater to the emotional needs of millions of children) and [their pay](#) is similarly low.

It gets worse for casual jobs, [unskilled jobs and jobs that lack managerial authority](#). These all have low occupational prestige, despite being characterized as essential.

We are biased against retail workers and [cleaners](#) due to their low wages. We could make the argument serving others makes their job seem inferior, but this doesn't check out as pilots, doctors and lawyers serve others too.

The amount of training and investment in the career undoubtedly plays a role in the development of the bias. Artists and creatives [are not highly salaried](#) and yet still work long hours but this matters little to those who prize high earnings above all other qualities.

And yet, having a job society sees as prestigious isn't what will make you satisfied in life.

[Studies have shown job security](#), [autonomy in a role](#), and [work-life balance](#) are crucial factors to job satisfaction.

When we talk to our children (and ourselves) about what a good job is to us, we need to talk less in terms of wages and earnings.

We need to be talking about how meaningful it is, how much autonomy we have in it, and whether it allows for a meaningful balance with the rest of our time.

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