

An abstract painting with a textured, expressive style. The top half is a deep, dark red with visible brushstrokes. The middle section is a horizontal band of yellow and green, suggesting a horizon or a body of water. The bottom half is a dark, textured blue and purple, also with visible brushstrokes. The overall effect is one of intense color and dynamic movement.

Stephen Fineman

WORK

A Very Short Introduction

OXFORD

Work: A Very Short Introduction

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Stephen Fineman

WORK

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Preface

The story of work is fascinating because it is the story of us—how we strive for security and reward and, for some of us, meaning and individuality. Work—paid or unpaid, voluntary or obligatory—is woven into the fabric of all human societies to become part of our identities and key to life’s narrative. From an early age, it captures the imagination of children, prompted by ‘...and what do you want to be when you grow up?’ type questions.

Different eras bring different work opportunities and choices: some types of work remain while others are superseded by economic upheavals or technological invention. Living is problematic, at the very least, without paid work; for many people it is catastrophic. Yet jobs are rarely fairly distributed and the personal rewards are hugely variable: we can love or hate our work, or simply endure it. Work can be literally a killer or, contrastingly, a source of much vitality and pleasure.

Many of us are experts about work because, in one form or another, we have done it—or seen others do it. These experiences inform our basic understandings, and are privileged in this book. But work does not exist in a social vacuum. It is influenced by our families, schools, economic ideologies, and workplace cultures—to mention but a few. In this book, I try to convey something of this

mosaic by looking at work from both the inside and the outside. I speak as a social scientist, but a somewhat eclectic one. The sources I draw upon include psychology, sociology, anthropology, management, and social history, as well as popular media accounts.

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