

Beyond the Silo

Phil Jump asks whether, in pursuit of industrialisation, economic efficiency and regulation we have become so process-driven that we've lost sight of the importance of outcome and purpose.

The story is told of two stonemasons, each engaged in the building of a Cathedral. During a site visit, a Bishop asked one “what are you doing?” to which he replied, “I am dressing this stone to fit that gap.” The visit continued, and a short time later the bishop asked another stonemason the same question. “I am helping to build a Cathedral that will rise from the ground to bring glory to God” came the reply.

The difference in perception is obvious, and I have heard this illustration applied and employed several times in shaping attitudes to the activities of a local church. Yet it strikes me as one that throws light on the world of work and employment with equal effect.

It is easy to see this as a critique of a particular human attitude, yet I can't help asking whether the way in which work is managed and organised conditions us to think in that limited way. I find myself asking this question in the light of a number of recently published reports into significant tragedies, all of which seem to echo a depressingly familiar refrain “numerous opportunities were not taken” to intervene and achieve a less harmful outcome.

To return to our story of the two stonemasons, we might describe one as being focussed on process, while the other worked with an appreciation of the product. There is of course a need for both, and indeed those moments

within any shared endeavour when clear attention to specific detail is vital, without being distracted by the bigger picture. Yet I wonder whether, in pursuit of industrialisation, economic efficiency and regulation we have become so process-driven that we've lost sight of the importance of outcome and purpose.

Many of the stories that have hit our headlines recently seem to focus on troubled and dangerous individuals who everyone could see posed a threat and needed intervention.¹ Yet as they passed through the system, the narrative seems to be one of being “processed” and passed on. It strikes me that what each of these episodes cried out for was for someone to take responsibility for that person as a whole, recognising that a solution is not found by simply completing a process that ends at the border of their particular department or organisation.

And while there are instances that might occasionally grab our headlines, I sense that this is an approach to work that prevails across many organisations beyond our statutory bodies. I am not alone in living with the frustration of being passed from department to department when trying to resolve a particular service issue – no one seems to have access to the whole picture, or indeed be able to engage with me as a customer, rather than a series of problems to be resolved or identified as being

the responsibility of someone else. But while this might be frustrating for me as a customer, I wonder how demoralising it must also be for those who operate within these silos. The opportunity to see the bigger picture, engage with the whole person and sense a “job well done” seems somewhat limited – yet at the same time, I can recognise how with pressures to be consistent and competitive, this is an instinctive way of organising from a commercial perspective.

Is this another example of why a faith perspective on work is so valuable? It offers an understanding of work that is founded on God-given human purpose and vocation rather than simple economics or efficient process. This has value for both customer and provider. The underlying assumption in the story of the two stonemasons, is that one had a far more fulfilling and purposeful experience of work, yet I wonder how many people in contemporary work contexts can't even see their equivalent of the cathedral they are building. Perhaps as AI and other innovations disrupt and re-shape the world of work, this might also be an opportunity to reclaim the idea of human fulfilment as being a defining factor in our workplace organisation, rather than just the bottom line. And perhaps too, we will have less causes to lament that “opportunities were missed” in the wake of tragedy. 

1. One example is Axel Rudakubana, who had a history of violence and killed three young girls at a dance class in Southport on 29 July 2024.



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