

THINKING ABOUT WORK



WE USE MANY TERMS to describe our daily labor. Among these are *work*, *job*, *career*, *occupation*, *employment*, *profession*, and *vocation*. Each term suggests a distinctive way of thinking about work.

Work focuses on the energy or effort expended to get a task done. It doubles as a concept in physics. In this sense it is a neutral term. *Work*, however, can also bear negative connotations. It connotes hard, unpleasant labor—the opposite of play.

Job describes a discrete, self-contained kind of work. A job implies a time-limited task. A jobber performs piecework. To speak of our work as a job marks off what we do for a living from living itself. “It is only a job,” we say, “not my life.”

Career, by contrast, conceptualizes work as a serious, lifelong pursuit. *Career* literally comes from the idea of running or galloping at full speed on a racecourse. Applied to work, *career* describes the course our lives run in. Work and life are blended in the concept of a career. To be a “career soldier” means that you have given your life to military service. It is not an interruption. For a careerist in any field, work is life, to be pursued with excessive ambition and to the exclusion of all else.

Occupation, like career, connotes work which takes up (or occupies) a significant portion of one’s life. The term, however, isn’t as lofty as *career*. People pursue a career but

settle on an occupation. Or it settles upon you—like a military power occupying a foreign country. A career describes what you live for; an occupation, what you do for a living.

Employment also focuses on how we use (or employ) our time in work, but the connotation here is contractual. *Employment* specifically refers to the work done for pay. An employee barter work for a paycheck. Carlyle ruefully called this ubiquitous feature of modern economies a “cash nexus,” which he felt thinned out and attenuated the relationship between the worker and employer.²⁸ Faculty notoriously resist being regarded as mere employees, as Eisenhower discovered while serving as president of Columbia University after referring to a faculty member as an “employee of the university.” “Faculty are not employees of the university,” the faculty member sniffed; “they are the university.”²⁹

Profession is how we, as faculty, prefer to think of our work. Professional work requires extensive education and specialized training. Such training puts the professional in charge. Professionals see themselves essentially as independent contractors who determine the nature of their work and who collectively set standards for and admit aspirants into their guilds. Professionals trade their expertise for significant rewards in the marketplace.

Vocation is the most overtly theological term for work. The root meaning comes from “calling” in Latin (*vocare*). To describe your life’s work as your vocation is to imply that your work is a response to a divine call to serve. It is to think of labor not merely in utilitarian terms, as a way to “earn a living,” but as a way of consecrated living. Lamentably, the term *vocation* has been spoiled by modern usage. Vocational training now refers to preparing workers with nontheoretical, practical skills. Etymologically, however, it is more proper to speak of finding a vocation (or calling) than being trained in a vocation.

At various times I think of my daily labor at BYU in all these ways. It includes jobs which must be done and work that keeps me from play. It constitutes a career around which

I've built my life, as well as something which occupies most of my waking hours with its incessant demands. Gratefully, it provides gainful employment. What is more, it pays me to do some things I love (at least when I get to do faculty work rather than administration) and which draw upon hard-won professional expertise.

But most of all, I think of my work as my vocation. Like so many of you, I feel a strong sense of calling about my career at BYU. What keeps me going is the sense of participating in something bigger and more important than a job or employment. Something even bigger than a career or profession. Something which I feel called to do by talent and by heaven. I'm grateful to have a job in these tough times, but especially grateful for a job that is also a vocation.