Love of labour has its risks

Our jobs often define who we are and provide satisfaction, but it’s not all good, writes Barbara Pocock

To the ancient Greeks, work was a curse that got in the way of the higher-order pursuits of the mind and spirit. The Protestant work ethic changed all that, making it an ethical responsibility to work and contribute to society. More recently again, neoclassical economic theory has positioned work as “a bad” – something humans try to avoid in favour of leisure, making it necessary to pay us for the time we give over to work.

However, it seems work is far from all bad. While many of us don’t like all aspects of work, or necessarily our jobs, chances are we look to work for part of the meaning of our lives.

In the past 30 years, we have fallen in love with paid work. Women, in particular, have joined men in this love affair, entering the labour market in greater numbers, albeit many of them for less than full-time hours.

Much of the rising rate of employment participation is driven by money and mortgages, but a lot of it is about the increasing role of work as a place where we “make” ourselves, our social connections, and our sense of contribution. While work can sometimes be a source of pain, it can also be a place of pleasure, identity and satisfaction.

Recent research in US zoos, for example, shows that despite low pay, few career prospects and a lot of hard labour, most highly educated zookeepers (more than 80 per cent with a degree) love their jobs and would put up with a lot of ill treatment before they would consider giving them up.

While this occupation – viewed as a calling by many zookeepers – is at the high end of job commitment, many other workers share this positive perspective on their work’s meaning. Having a meaningful job has benefits for workers and managers. Those who find it more meaningful are more likely to have less negative work-life interference.

International research tells us they are also likely to experience greater personal well-being, job satisfaction, and work-unit cohesion contributing more unpaid time to the workplace (not always good) and taking fewer days off.

However, there can be a dark side: like the zookeepers, when we love our jobs too much, we may be willing to put up with exploitation and give too much to work and too little to other positive life activities, such as family, friends, health, spiritual life and thought.

In March 2012, we surveyed a large sample of Australian workers, asking them if they would enjoy having a job even if they didn’t need the money. An astonishing 83 per cent agreed, most of them strongly. A similar proportion found their work “very meaningful”, while slightly fewer (79 per cent) felt their work made a positive difference.

While these beliefs are more common among professionals and higher-educated workers, more than half of those in other occupations – including labourers, plant operators and sales workers – were similarly positive. A little more than three-quarters of both women and men agreed or strongly agreed that their occupation was a significant part of their identity, and a similar proportion felt their social relationships at work were an important part of their lives.

When work means so much to us, what does it do to our lives beyond work? How does it drive overwork, especially given that we can now carry our work with us anywhere on mobile devices? What new risks arise when we retire or become unemployed? If work is everything, what is the value of all else?

Does the increasing construction of ourselves through work, and the alignment of the pleasures of work with its hungry demands, eat away at our social well-being? Or is there a positive story of more meaning and more productivity?

The implications of this are especially important for carers, and thus for women: if the most common and recognised way to “be someone” is through paid work, and this form of identity-making is growing stronger, is it becoming harder to be, for example, a carer, retired, or out of the workforce?

We can love our jobs too much, and we need good management, and good labour laws – including limits on working hours – to ensure that our love of the job doesn’t put us at risk. Such love can have a dark side, which we need to manage and understand if we are to make the most of work and its place in a meaningful life.

Barbara Pocock is the director of the Centre for Work + Life at the University of South Australia.