

The transformation of work values in Israel

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In nearly all modern societies, work fills a basic and central role in human life. The centrality of work is demonstrated by the personal responsibility individuals assume for their work, the amount of time they devote to it, and the significance it has within the general context of their lives. Work has important social and economic implications as well, on both an organizational and general social level.¹

In 1981 and again in 1993, a representative sample of the Israeli labor force were asked a series of questions related to their view of the value of their work.² The same questionnaire was used in both years to enable a comparison of the work values in each year. Work values were conceptually defined on the basis of the following categories: the centrality of work as a life role; valued work outcomes; and the importance of work goals.

Defining the concept

The concept of “work” can be difficult to define. For some individuals, work provides a means of self-expression, a way of forming their identity and acquiring social status. For others, work is an instrumental means and a basic existential need. Work has had different meanings in different civilizations throughout history. Survey participants were shown a list of 14 operative definitions of the concept of work, and then were asked to select the four they considered most rep-

resentative of their own concept.³

The responses indicate a number of notable changes in how Israeli workers defined work between the 1980s and the 1990s. The majority of participants in both periods chose “something for which one gets paid” as the primary definition of work, but the percentage choosing this definition increased over the study period, from 68 percent in 1981 to 83 percent in 1993, suggesting a more materialistic orientation. (See chart 1.) By contrast, there was a significant decrease in the proportion who defined work as “something done in order to contribute to society (the State),” falling from 40 percent in the 1980s to 18 percent in the 1990s. (Table 1 compares the rankings of the factors identifying the central role of work in both survey periods.)

Additional changes in the definition of work reflect a tighter labor market in the 1990s, compared with conditions prevailing a decade earlier. These changes were mainly expressed in choices of definitions that emphasized the limitations placed on the worker and the extent of control imposed on the individual in the workplace. In an early 1980s study of workers’ attitudes in eight countries, including Israel, the definition of work as “something for which one is accountable” received the lowest rating in Israel and was far more popular in the other seven countries. In Japan and Germany, for example, about 50 percent of respondents selected this definition as best representing work for them, compared with only 12 percent of Israeli respondents.⁴ During the 1990s, however, the proportion of Israelis ascribing importance to this definition increased to 29 percent, indicating a change in workers’ attitudes. In the more difficult job market and with the considerable increase in the number of people employed through personal contracts (as opposed to collective contracts), work-

ers attached greater importance to their work, and their attitudes shifted toward becoming more like those of workers in Western countries.

Central role

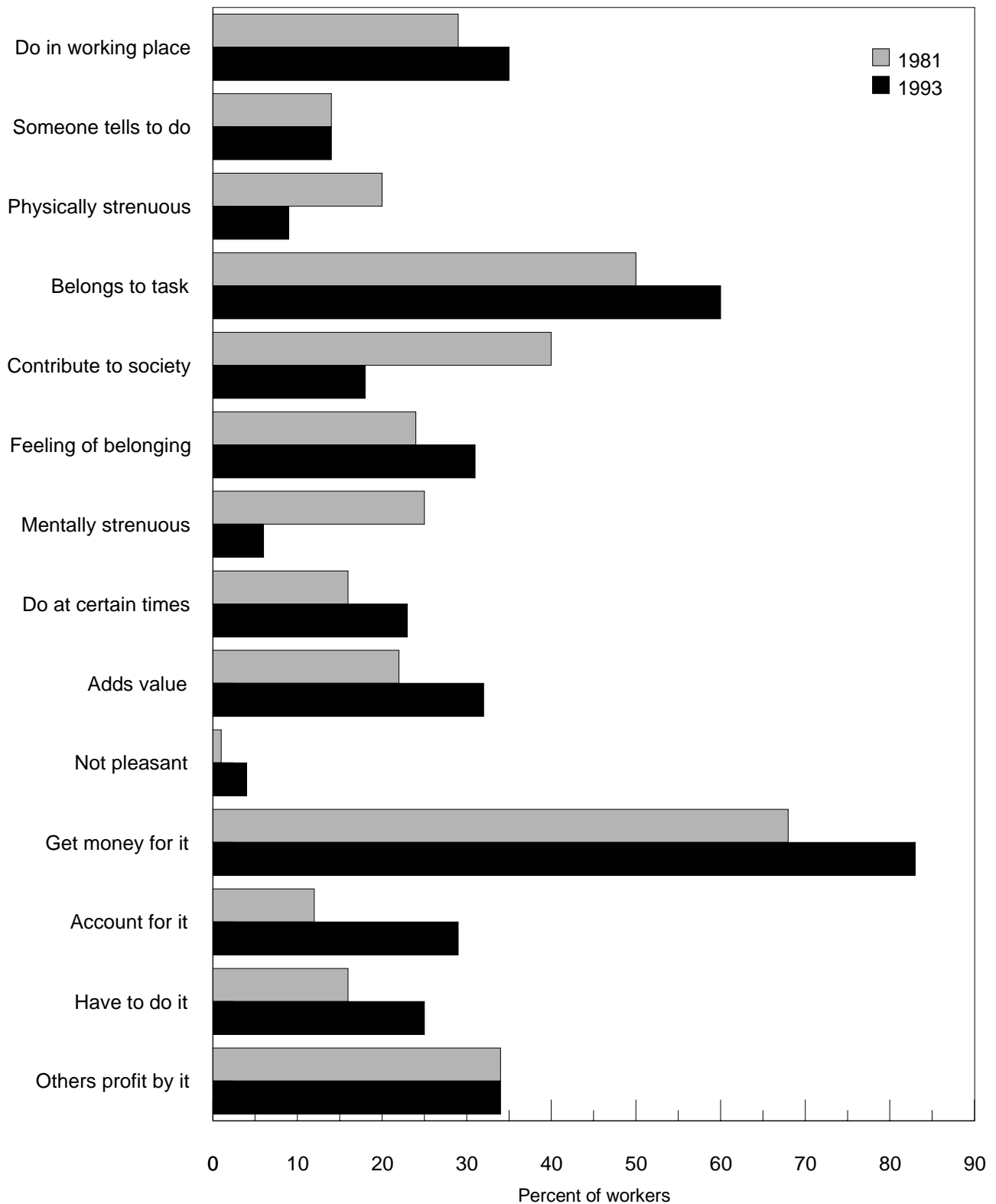
The general importance ascribed to work in the life of the individual at any given time was assessed in two ways. First, survey participants were asked to respond to the question, “What is the importance and significance of work in your life?,” using a 7-point scale, from 1 (“One of the least important things in my life”) to 7 (“The most important thing in my life”). Next, the importance of work in the life of the individual was compared with other central aspects of his or her life, such as family, leisure, community, and religion. No significant differences were found between the two periods in the average response to the direct question regarding the central role of work. In both periods, work was perceived as relatively high in importance (about 5.5 on the scale).

Although a significant increase occurred in the importance placed on leisure over the period, the data indicate that work continued to occupy a central position in the life of the average Israeli worker; the increased importance of leisure was not at the expense of the centrality of work. To illustrate the differences in importance of life areas in both the 1981 and the 1993 surveys, participants were asked to allocate a total of 100 points to indicate the importance of the following factors in their lives; following are the results:

	1981	1993
Total	100.0	100.0
Family	43.1	42.9
Work	27.8	31.2
Leisure	17.9	20.1
Community	4.5	3.6
Religion	4.8	2.2
Missing data	1.9	...

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Chart 1. Responses to various factors identifying the central role of work, Israeli workers, 1981 and 1993



Value of work

To evaluate the relative importance of a variety of expressive and instrumental meanings ascribed to work, individuals were asked to allocate 100 points to six functions or outcomes arising from work: (1) those that provide or promote status or prestige, (2) income, (3) filling (passing) the time, (4) interpersonal relations, (5) service to society, and (6) interest and personal satisfaction. A significant decrease occurred in the number of points assigned to: "Through work I benefit society (the State)," from 13 points in 1981 to 6 points in the 1993. Moreover, this aspect of work ranked third in 1981, while it placed tenth in the 1990s. Work as a means of providing income, on the other hand, was first place in both samples, with the importance assigned to it increasing from about 31 percent in 1981 to 43 percent in 1993. The number of points assigned to work as a source of personal satisfaction and interest decreased significantly, from 26 percent to 19. Following are the results of survey participants' response to the six value of work factors:

	1981	1993
Total	100.0	100.0
Income	30.5	43.0
Intrinsically interesting	25.9	19.2
Serves society	13.3	6.3
Interpersonal contacts	11.0	10.8
Time absorbing	9.3	10.1
Status and prestige	8.4	10.7

Work goals

Participants were asked to rank the relative importance of 11 goals of their working lives, including expressive, economic, personal, and other goals. There were significant differences in the rankings of economic benefits and convenience. Particularly noteworthy was the importance placed on "wages received for work," which climbed from third place in 1981 to first place in 1993. (See table 2 and chart 2.) The importance of "interesting" work fell from first

to second place over the period. The importance of "job security" rose from 10th place in 1981 to sixth place in 1993. The increase is mainly due to the deterioration of the Israeli tenure establishment, the relative weakness of the Israeli general trade union, the rapid shift from collectively negotiated contracts to personal job contracts, the relatively high unemployment rate, and the slow rate of economic growth.

What the findings mean

The composition of the Israeli workforce did not change significantly between the 1980's and the 1990's; thus one cannot attribute changes in results of the two surveys to changes in the sample.

Work centrality is important because previous studies demonstrated a positive correlation with other organizational variables, such as job satisfaction or participation in decisionmaking, but a negative relationship with both absenteeism and employee turnover.⁶ The increasing importance ascribed to work in the Israeli worker's life is also indirectly evident in responses to a "lottery question," which asked whether participants would stop working if they won or inherited sufficient money to allow them to live comfortably without having to work. In 1981, 88 percent of the workforce answered that they would keep on working, compared with 90 percent in 1993.

The centrality of work becomes more meaningful in conjunction with the increasing importance ascribed to leisure in Israeli society over the last decade (see the tabulation above). The findings show that the Israeli worker consistently places money or wages paid for work above other work goals. Israeli workers have become more individualistic and materialistic in the 1990s and less collectively oriented, as instrumental achievements outweigh contributions to society. These issues will presumably influence labor relations and organizational policy in the Israeli job market in the coming years.

In the current climate, workers tend to place themselves in the center, pursu-

ing materialistic values, self-benefit, career growth, status, and prestige. As workers place the satisfaction of their personal needs above the needs of society, they may become less committed and loyal to their organizations. The competition that characterizes individualistic societies can also influence the interpersonal and social relations system in the workplace (as reflected by the data). Replacing collective values with individualistic ones also may affect the willingness of some members of society to serve in the military reserve forces—not an insignificant concern in a nation such as Israel.

Many of the changes taking place in Israeli society and its labor market are due to economic and technological developments that are part of global pro-

Table 1. Ranking of various factors identifying the central role of work, Israeli workers, 1981 and 1993

Factor	1981	1993
Get money for it	1	1
Belongs to task	2	2
Contribute to society	3	10
Others profit by it	4	4
Do in a working place	5	3
Mentally strenuous	6	13
Feeling of belonging	7	6
Adds value	8	5
Physically strenuous	9	12
Have to do it	10	8
Do at certain times	11	9
Someone tells you to do	12	11
Account for it	13	7

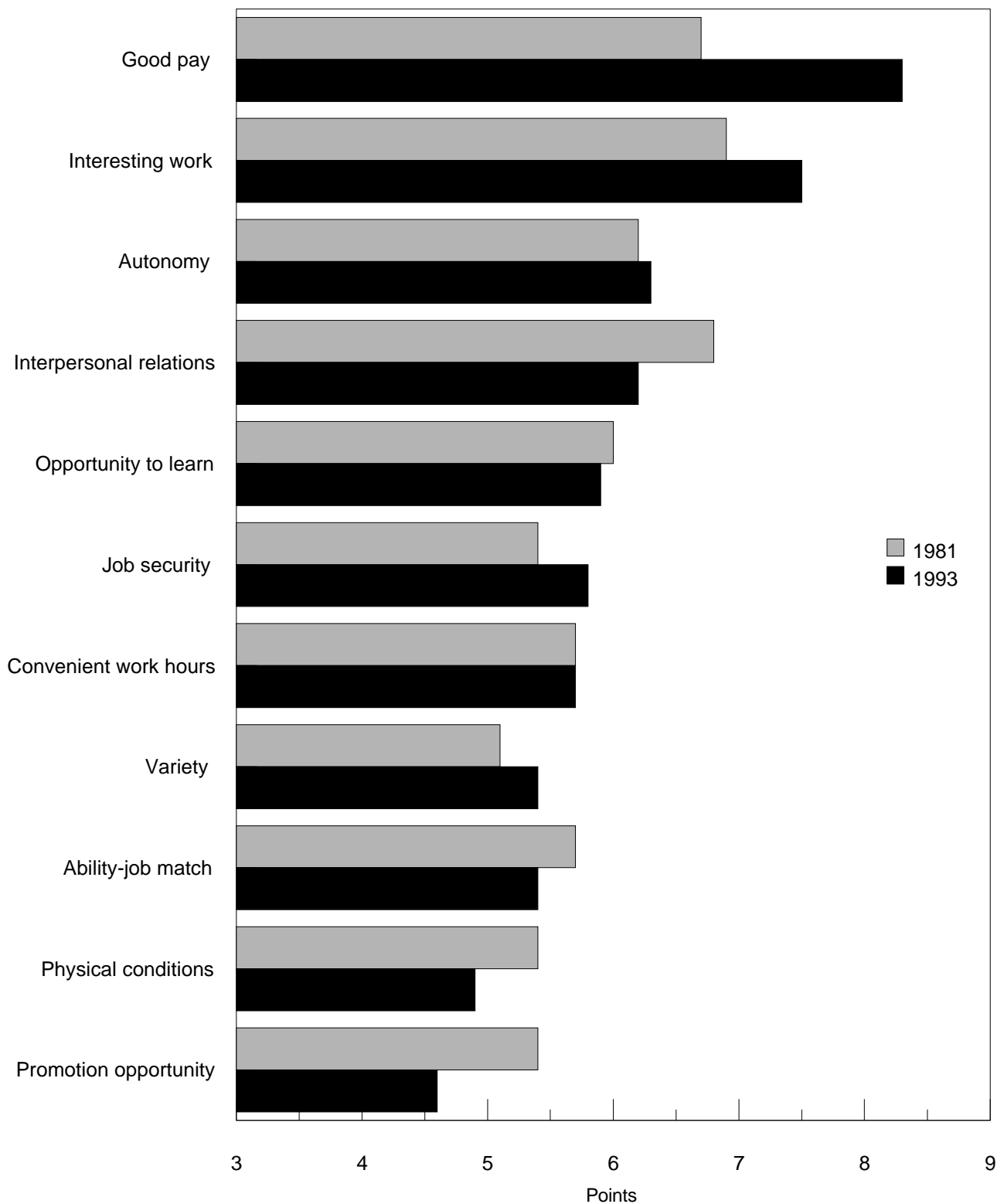
NOTE: 1 = the highest ranking; 13 = the lowest.

Table 2. Rankings of the importance of various work goals, Israeli workers, 1981 and 1993

Goal	1981	1993
Interesting work	1	2
Interpersonal relations	2	4
Good pay	3	1
Autonomy	4	3
Opportunity to learn	5	5
Ability-job match	6	8
Convenient work hours	7	7
Promotion opportunity	8	11
Physical conditions	9	10
Job security	10	6
Variety	11	9

NOTE: 1 = the highest ranking; 11 = the lowest.

Chart 2. Importance of work goals on a scale of 1 (least important) to 10 (most important), Israeli workers, 1981 and 1993



cesses not unique to Israel. Individuals are investing more in their training and preparation for the world of work, increasing their human capital, for example, to improve their prospects in the labor market. Although many of these changes have resulted in higher living standards and other economic benefits, their negative consequences should not be ignored.

THE MEANING ASCRIBED TO WORK by Israeli workers is complex. Various mo-

tives and preferences influence the central role, goals, and other functions of work in the life of the individual. These attributes not only influence the way work is defined, but also shape the meaning of work. Managers striving to improve organizational functions must recognize that proposals and plans for change should be consistent with worker attributes and values. Organizations should be aware of the attitudes and work values of their employees, in order to adjust organizational goals and re-

wards accordingly. □

Notes

ACKNOWLEDGMENT: The author thanks the U.S. Israel Bi-national Science Foundation (BSF) and the Israeli: Association for Research Foundation for funding this research project.

¹ MOW—International Research Team, *The Meaning of Work* (London, Academic Press, 1987).

² The sample size was 973 in 1981; 942 in 1993.

³ MOW—International Research Team.

⁴ MOW—International Research Team.

⁵ See Itzhak Harpaz, *The Meaning of Work in Israel, Its Nature and Consequences* (New York, Praeger, 1990).

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