



ERGONOMICS AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Laerte Idal Sznelwar^{1*}

Abstract

The purpose of this text is to raise questions for our professions, for those that are based on the sciences of work, such as ergonomics and the psychodynamics of work. This is not a scientific article, but a summary of issues that we have been working on in recent years and that pose significant challenges not only as subjects involved in activities focused on the world of work, but also for the perspective of the development of our professions in scenarios where social relations are not favorable to the recognition and inclusion of work in social debates that have the potential to shape the future of production and work. We invite readers to read this text critically and to reflect on it, which may result in actions to favor changes in the direction of companies, institutions and, more broadly, in our society, with regard to work and its role in the construction and care that we must have for the world.

Keywords: Activity-centered ergonomics; Professional development; Recognition; Work transformation.

General questions

One of the great challenges faced by professionals who work with ergonomics and also by those who use it to improve the world of work is the registration of actions in longer terms. What results from an action, how long an improvement lasts, what kind of inscription in the lives of workers and in the work situation results, are questions that arise especially when thinking about the effectiveness of an action. Are they one-off actions or something that effectively transforms work and, even more, prevents future setbacks?

It does not seem very easy to answer these questions, especially because it cannot be thought that it is possible to "measure" the results of an ergonomic action if we want to deal with the issue of work in a comprehensive way. We can indeed obtain some concrete results that mirror what happened in a work situation; It is always possible to show that something has improved in terms of the workplace, the accessibility to some place, the characteristics of the tools, the ease of use of a computerized computer system, the conditions of the work environment, among others. We can include in the possibility of measurement, some indirect indicators linked to health issues, absenteeism and turnover, as examples. However, even though there are some indications that there are improvements, we cannot help but question the

¹ University of São Paulo (USP). <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7703-0476>. * Email: laertes@usp.br



effectiveness of the changes when we think about the long term and, even more so, about what we consider as working. This does not take away the value of improvements made in different workplaces.

Here, we adopt a point of view that defines work as a possibility of professional development, considering that work is always something that takes place in the relationship with others and for others. As a result of work that provides conditions for personal and collective development, it is necessary to consider the possibilities of enriching subjectivities, as well as the strengthening of what is collective in production systems and the development of professions and culture, if we think more broadly. From this perspective, it is more complicated to define measurement modalities and the construction of indicators that reflect this possible scenario. However, it is possible to think of several aspects of work that can be evaluated, both by the workers themselves, by those directly responsible for a given team, and by managers, at different levels of the hierarchy. It is about evaluating the work based on criteria centered on what is provided for people and collectives to develop. Adopting this perspective, we bring ergonomics closer to other work sciences, especially the psychodynamics of work. This dialogue can be very fruitful, even more so when one considers that there are significant challenges linked to contemporary work. We cannot say that the most classic problems linked to work, such as the emergence of accidents and physical illnesses, have been satisfactorily solved, on the contrary; Nowadays, psychic disorders are added to what was better known, which have become very prevalent in various work situations.

The long-term enrollment

Work is inscribed as something lasting throughout life; even if there are important interruptions in the path of workers, due to the loss of employment or even due to accidents and illness; work is inscribed in the life of each one for long periods. The base of 35 years to retire is, almost as a rule, exceeded during active life. Therefore, work accompanies people's lives, even in cases where the activity developed is not formally considered as work, as is the case of many human activities developed more in the context of guaranteeing reproduction ("domestic work") and also the construction of social ties ("voluntary work").

Long-term enrollment can be a process of enrichment of subjectivity, or on the contrary, it can be a process of impoverishment of subjectivity, especially when the subject does not find favorable conditions to engage in a professional activity that allows him to belong to a certain collective that is constituted by rules and traditions that come from a history of insertion of a



certain profession in society. Treating the world of work as a world of occupations can be a serious mistake if the idea of occupation is not in line with the idea of profession. If being busy means something ephemeral, without a deeper meaning with regard to the contribution of subjects and collectives to the development of organizations, culture and society, it is a disservice that has significant impacts, not only in terms of the health of the subjects, but also with regard to the polis itself.

Therefore, one of the points to be addressed by ergonomics and work sciences also concerns the possibilities found for each one to follow a significant path that allows subjects to build a meaningful work life, since this would not only be a means of subsistence, but would be central in the lives of all of us. since it is something fundamental for the construction of health. This is because human activities, especially work, have a significant impact on the psyche. This impact has to do with the confirmation of identity, with the possibility of developing and complementing one's love of oneself, with the perspective of continuing relational life; some aspects already treated by psychoanalysis and re-elaborated by the proposals of the psychodynamics of work.

By thinking about the issue of work in this way, we bring new challenges to our performance as ergonomists or even as professionals inserted in some activity that concerns work, whether in the scope of the psychodynamics of work or even in many others that deal with these issues, including law, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, engineering sciences, management sciences and health sciences, among others. In addition, the issue of work permeates several other activities that have a more directly political nature, such as those related to actions of the public powers (executive, legislative, judiciary) and also representation activities, such as unions. The theme of work permeates many other human activities, which are also work, and it is no wonder that one of the international organizations deals exclusively with this aspect of human life – the International Labor Organization (ILO).

This position is radically contrary to what was advocated and is still advocated, based on Taylorist and Fordist ideas. Even though there have been different moments in the choices made in the world of work organization, such as the enrichment of tasks and even more daring ideas, such as the installation of semi-autonomous groups, in a more or less explicit way, one still acts based on assumptions, such as: "I think, you execute". In the case of proposals aimed at enriching tasks, the main proposal was to rotate so that the workers inserted in the operation could do different things; however, this type of proposal did not give them more autonomy so that they could change their operating modes, change the rhythms of production and decide



together on how to do it; as is the case with proposals based on semi-autonomous groups. We still observe a prevalence of a point of view that requires a conception and a project of work situations based on what certain professional groups, responsible for the project and management of production and work, have as responsibility as delivery, for example, a project that can predict as much as possible about what will happen in the reality of production and that determines what is prescribed, often in a very rigid way. The "I think you execute" still prevails. These professionals are inserted in situations, most of the time, quite distant, from the situations of operation, from the reality of production and work. They are professionals who live under the constraint of predicting as much as possible, without considering that this is not possible, not only because of the distance they find themselves in relation to the real of production, but also because there are always emerging phenomena that make up the real. In this sense, it is necessary to consider as significant and fundamental initiatives by ergonomists and other professionals to bring the design and operation activities closer together, through different approaches to try to simulate and predict future work.

By thinking about work, from a perspective of professionalization, we maintain access to the possibility for subjects to develop their intelligence and skills, becoming more and more competent, in addition to being more integrated into some collective. Being a professional means sharing values and ways of insertion as citizens in a given society.

To this end, it must be thought that the division of labor in society does not obey only criteria delimited by professional fields. The issue of effectiveness and efficiency is still treated in a very restricted way, without thinking about how that activity fits into a broader context, that of the professions. In any sector of human activity, or even when thinking about the relationship between different sectors, it is clear that it is important that there is a social division of labor, including the distinctions between what is done in different professions. It is also important that there are distinctions between cooperation and coordination activities, which are expressed in activities closer to the operation itself or in management and production support activities. However, what was most observed were fragmentation processes, in which the subjects are inserted in tasks that correspond to a very small part of the production processes. As a consequence, many activities in human work have become more prone to lose meaning, devoid of social recognition and appreciation, even if they are important for the achievement of the objectives of production.

Another point that can be significant when we position ourselves for the defense of professions and for the development of new professions of the future concerns the content of



what is proposed for people to do. As already described in the previous paragraph, work should not be inserted in some task that results from the fragmentation of production processes, but rather to develop something challenging and meaningful; It is not a matter of repeating gestures and obeying orders, as provided for in the most traditional ways of organizing work. A reinforcement for this point of view is that working has never been strictly respecting what was foreseen and prescribed, as shown by numerous works focused on the ergonomics of the activity and also on the psychodynamics of work. To work is to account for a real that resists the desires of those who conceived, designed and manage production. Thus, to act as prescribed is, in the vast majority of cases, to fail. Work is something that is added to the prescription so that the production comes out satisfactorily. Therefore, it is important to consider that it is a professional activity and, the more this is recognized, the greater the chances of success.

Between the prescribed and the real, creativity

Our ability to act in the world and develop our own conditions of existence is one of the characteristics of our human condition, nothing is given in advance and cannot be considered as definitive. Even with precarious conditions and reduced capabilities, humans can surprise others and themselves with what they are or become capable of doing. The possibility of creating, reinterpreting and contributing to the development of society is always present. The obstacles come from the other side! When we say that a task is both a constraint and a possibility, we are putting ourselves in the perspective that any goal we have to accomplish something is delimited both by the context and by our desires and possibilities. When we deal with the context, we are referring to the relationship with others and the possibilities that are provided to us to be able to act. There is always at stake the prospect of expanding the possible, of thinking about our tasks from a point of view that we can enrich and expand.

Unfortunately, there is still a prevalence of a heteronomy based on ideas that seek to restrict activities to fragmented, often repetitive and meaningless tasks. This can be considered outdated, since the most recent guidelines on the organization and management of work advocate that subjects should always seek to do more. Therein lies a euphemism; because it is about doing more in a restricted perspective, not based on the possibility of professional and personal development, but on doing more within very restricted possibilities in relation to the contribution of each one in certain production and service processes. We do not advocate the idea that we can do everything and that we have infinite capacities, that would be excessive. On the other hand, we defend the idea that work should provide scenarios where it is possible to have more autonomy and freedom to be able to act in accordance with what resonates



between the desires of the subjects and the effective contributions to produce and work with quality. Quality in the sense of a job well done and in accordance with the rules and traditions of the professions, not in its formal and measurable aspect.

These ideas reinforce a position that work is a fundamental mediator for the development of subjectivity, as it is from it that we reinforce contact with the world; It includes: matter, tools, machines, nature and what is alive, especially the other. This contact always takes place, first of all, affectively. While we seek to act, the world acts on us, resists our action, escapes us. This experience of body to body with a world that we do not control, which sometimes shows us our limits, failures, insufficiencies, which frustrates us, but, on the other hand, challenges us and mobilizes us to face these difficulties, we call the real of work. In this confrontation, the possibilities for the development of new ideas, new ways of acting, new possibilities of expression, new perspectives for working together are opened.

We reinforce the idea that the possible are always relational, in contact with others, and this relationship is mediated by organizational choices that provide the conditions for the strengthening of the possibilities of self-realization and individual and collective professional actions. Therefore, it is necessary to think about how these choices are made, considering that work is the protagonist in all production systems and that work is not a pure and simple insertion in an instrumental rationality that refers exclusively to means and ends and that can be evaluated by indicators of efficiency and effectiveness. Everyone's work, regardless of profession and hierarchical level, takes place in the experience of reality. This reality is shaped by these choices that can restrict or even prevent the subject from being able to live the experience of working. It is not only about personal resources to be able to face the challenges of reality, but also about having the possibility of developing through the mobilization and construction of one's intelligence. All production processes are posed to the human as a challenge; This is where the most interesting thing lies and can be considered fundamental for following paths that favor the development of subjectivities that are always inserted in a certain relational context. The development of subjectivities depends on organizational conditions in which the processes of recognition and, consequently, of the constitution of the pleasure of working, are not blocked.

Therefore, the possibility of being creative; Creativity, being one of the human characteristics, an ever-existing potential, should be inserted in any and all production contexts, be part of any task. This, inspired by the sciences of work, especially the psychodynamics of work and ergonomics centered on the activity, would be a safer step for work to be effectively adapted to the HUMAN BEING. In this sense, we could think of production, tasks and activities



necessary to carry them out; in short, work as a possibility for humans to overcome challenges, be recognized and walk a path towards self-realization and emancipation. Also considering the reinforcement of their identity and the construction of health.

Between losses and impediments, why not change the ways of organizing work?

From what has been written so far in this article, it is evident that it is not just a desire or a dilettantism to talk about creativity in the world of work; It is a necessity, doing more or differently than prescribed, so that production occurs satisfactorily is something fundamental in any production system. There is no planning, there are no procedures, there are no rules, there are no instructions that account for reality. Even if all are necessary, they will never be enough for the workers, by strictly adhering to what is prescribed, to produce satisfactorily. Transgressions are necessary to achieve goals. The debate on the rule should always be present, since it is necessary for it to evolve as all production systems do. Let us remember that every system of production is entropic, therefore, it tends to disorder, a fact that always requires new orders. The problem is that this ordering often takes place in invisibility; This is because, in many production systems, there is still a denial on the part of those responsible for the ineffectiveness and inefficiency of the prescribed. This has to do with something that has spread a lot in our societies from Taylorist and Fordist ideas, the one that advocates predictability and almost absolute control over production and work situations. Work considered as an occupation, in a scenario of denial of the importance of developing a professional perspective for any and all work activities.

In our view, the concept of "occupation" contains a false possibility, that of considering that someone can live for years doing the same thing and without the possibility of developing, of being recognized in their professionalism. It is a loss, an impediment, with serious consequences not only for the health of the subjects, but also for the development of companies, institutions and society. This impediment can be considered as a true existential damage, that is, the fact of not being able to develop through work is preventing the subject from developing, in a horizon of plenitude, his or her life potential.

To consider that work can have an alienating character, which does not promote development, is to create serious obstacles for people to become more creative and more intelligent, more capable of living together thinking about the idea of work as propitiated by civility. On the other hand, if we consider that the idea of professions would be the basis for the development of subjects and that it would occur throughout their lives, both at the level of



companies, institutions and society in general, there would be profound changes in the modalities of work organization and in the content of tasks. This is because, instead of considering itself as something fragmented and defined from the sum of small gestures and small actions, adopting the perspective that these are integrated actions that would be inserted in values, traditions and perspectives for the creation of new ways of acting, we could radically change the work and production scenarios. This is true for any type of activity, if we consider that there is always a possibility of inserting a certain type of work in a certain profession.

This position has to do with different initiatives already developed by various institutions, especially the decent work initiative proposed by the International Labor Organization. Reinforcing this type of initiative and positioning oneself against the idea of precarious work, which is very much based on informal work, in "odd jobs", is a great challenge, especially because we are dealing with the very survival of the person and their family; survival that is increasingly inserted in scenarios of uncertainty. It should be noted that this phenomenon is no longer restricted to the less favored class, inhabitants of urban peripheries and workers with low formal qualifications. Middle-class workers with a formal contract, including those with a higher education level, sometimes representatives of traditional occupations and socially recognized as professions, are also increasingly threatened by the precariousness of work.

On the political level, this trend is contextualized in the implementation of labor and social security reforms (or counter-reforms) that, especially after the parliamentary coup of 2016, promoted the dismantling of the wage society — a construction that began in the 1920s and which, despite its limitations, represented a political horizon for the expansion of social rights and social welfare. On the economic level, the short-term perspective, of the dismemberment between production and financial gains, in the disarticulation between what is produced and its consequences in societal and environmental terms (externalization); including the economic value of what is immaterial; It produces a very restrictive and dangerous horizon in relation to what is considered the success or failure of a company or an organization. On the ideological level, neoliberal ideas reinforce the idea of non-professionalization, that is, the prospect opens up that everything reinforces work as a mere occupation; Or even more, the idea of entrepreneurship transforms everyone into potential entrepreneurs of themselves, no longer inserted in a certain collective, a certain professional category, but isolated and who must handle production and produce results without considering integration with others. Cooperation and solidarity are also at risk, which are weakened by the prospect of competition with everyone



and with oneself. A scenario conducive to isolation, emergency and a higher incidence of harassing practices; finally, the entry into the universe of desolation.

In a perspective of conclusion

Considering the issues mentioned in this text, it is not surprising that, for many, work has become poorer in meaning and social ties. However, it is worth noting that this trend affects even professions with high social prestige, high pay or that require a high level of education. At the other end, there are professions of low social prestige that, contrary to what is commonly imagined, could in fact provide dignity and personal and professional growth, were it not for the precariousness of working conditions and the resources available to do a good job.

Thus, we pay attention to the importance of also discussing professional activities, how they are experienced and how they are regulated — not so much with a focus on laws, but on rules, procedures, discourses, technologies, among other management mechanisms adopted by companies and institutions. Novelties in these aspects are usually promoted as innovative solutions to quality and efficiency problems. Often, however, what follows the implementation of such "innovations", which incur significant financial expenses, is the reduction of professional autonomy, the possibilities of cooperating with colleagues and even the possibilities of carrying out work with the desired quality. In other words, the potential of work as a vector of professional development, creativity, self-esteem, living-together and enrichment of subjectivity is diminished. These themes, as already presented, are central to the perspective of the psychodynamics of work and can be included in a proposal to think about the meaning of work and expand the notion of decent work.

The discussion undertaken here, regarding the meaning of work and perspectives for professional development, does not reduce the importance of issues related to the formal regulation of work, but complements them. It should be noted that the theme, despite its importance, is often neglected by the various actors involved in conversations and negotiations related to work.

Therefore, broadening the perspective that production should always be based on what professions are and, in their development, can be a path; understanding that, regardless of experience, there are certain conditions that need to be built so that it is possible to have genuinely sustainable work contexts in a broad sense of the term, both for people, organizations, and for society; in short, for the development of culture.



Note: In this text I chose not to make bibliographic citations, since it is an essay that is the result of a professional experience inspired and influenced by different authors. Among these authors, I cite Alain Wisner, Antoine Lavoie, Christophe Dejours, Edgar Morin, and many other professors and colleagues who keep the flame alive for the development of Living Work and its contributions to personal development, collectives, organizations, professions and, more broadly, to the development of culture and the care of the world.