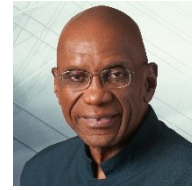




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The Search for Meaningful Work

“Journalism has become ground zero for the vocation crisis” is the headline of an article in the June 25 edition of the online newsletter *The Conversation*. An extract from the article reads as follows:

As an occupation, journalism is attractive to many people because they can be paid to do work that’s interesting and socially beneficial.

In this regard, it is similar to otherwise very different jobs like nursing, teaching, social work and caregiving.

These are “vocations,” in the sense that sociologist Max Weber [described them](#) more than a century ago.

Based on strong personal commitments, vocations promise recognition and a sense of self-worth for doing work that’s connected to broader values: healing people, fighting injustice, imparting knowledge, serving the cause of democracy.

The article was based on the US experience, but the vocation crisis is also evident throughout the Caribbean.

Relatively low salaries, compared with other professions, is one factor attracting people away from the vocations. Many are willing to sacrifice higher pay for the fulfilment of a meaningful job, up to a point. However, at a minimum, salaries must be adequate to support a modest middle income lifestyle, and with enough job security to make the wage earner eligible for a mortgage. Salaries must also be sufficient to permit long term retirement savings. Salaries in the Caribbean often do not meet these minimum requirements. In the public sector, salaries tend to be below what is required, while private sector employment and self-employment may not offer a guaranteed monthly income sufficient to satisfy banks' criteria for a mortgage.

Many of the growing number of activities which offer opportunities for work that is enjoyable and personally rewarding offer little or no job security. The list includes cultural practitioners, sportswomen and men, and a range of jobs associated with travel and tourism, such as event planners and restaurant workers. In other professions, such as teaching, nursing and communications, workers face a choice between better paying jobs in the private sector which do not offer much security of tenure, and jobs in the public sector where pay is lower, working conditions are poor, equipment is out of date and not well maintained, and morale is low. Under these conditions jobs which would otherwise have been rewarding become a source of frustration and disillusionment.

These factors contribute greatly to two challenges which Caribbean economies face: the brain drain and declining public sector productivity. Workers aspiring to meaningful jobs will have equipped themselves with skills which are in demand in North America and elsewhere. The higher US and Canadian incomes can make all the difference to the emigrant's prospects, compared to remaining at home, even though when they go abroad they may face the same dilemma between their vocation and a job that pays the mortgage.

Those who do remain at home often settle for jobs in the public sector, or corporate jobs which offer limited scope for creativity. In the public sector they face the reality that everywhere in the Caribbean schools, health facilities and other public amenities are outdated and poorly maintained. Often they are also inadequate for the purposes for which they are intended, insufficiently staffed, and needed equipment and supplies are not provided for. It comes as no surprise, under these conditions, that public sector productivity remains low.

Governments in the Caribbean can do little to limit the brain drain, because these small societies can offer relatively few opportunities, compared to the variety of talents our people possess. (See my [Economic Letter](#), January 2024.) However, Caribbean governments can and should address the staffing and equipment shortages in health, education, policing and other essential public services, invest in the modernisation and ongoing maintenance of public property and infrastructure, and procure the equipment and supplies that public servants need to do their jobs. A properly staffed, housed, and equipped public service is key to the improvement in public sector productivity; it will require a reordering of government priorities, to make way for the needed expenditure by the elimination of expenditure which, while desirable, is not as essential for the competitiveness and future growth of Caribbean economies.

My Economic Letters may be found under "[Commentary](#)" at [DeLisleWorrell.com](#).