Publication: The Straits Times, pB3
Date: 4 June 2025
Headline: 'Workism' isn't the enemy

'Workism' isn't the enemy

It's not wrong to find meaning and identity primarily in your work. The danger lies elsewhere.

Matthew Hammerton

Criticism of work is nothing new. Long hours, low pay, uninspiring tasks – these are longstanding and justified grievances. But in recent years, a different concern has emerged: not that work is miserable, but that we expect too much from it. According to this line of thought, finding meaning and identity primarily in your job – a tendency now labelled "workism"– is misguided, even dangerous.

That critique deserves a closer look. While workism can certainly go wrong, dismissing it outright risks pathologising a life choice that, for many people, is both reasonable and fulfilling. To understand why, we need to clarify what critics are actually opposing.

At the heart of the debate lies a common confusion: Much of what critics call workism is actually "statusism" – drawing most of your meaning and identity from your place in a social hierarchy.

When you work for status, the goal is to have a job that looks impressive regardless of whether the work itself is meaningful. Titles, salaries, credentials, even lifestyle branding, become the currency of success. By contrast, workism is about finding meaning in the work itself rather than the image it projects.

This distinction matters because grounding your life in the pursuit of status is deeply problematic in ways that workism is not.

First, status hierarchies are inherently zero-sum. For someone to rise, another must fall. That makes statusism a competitive pursuit. When you derive your identity from your rank in the social order, other people's success becomes a threat, and their failure a cause for celebration. This fosters a corrosive, adversarial mindset that erodes trust, solidarity and our natural impulse to cheer for others.

Workism, by contrast, need not be competitive. A person who finds meaning in building houses, curing diseases or mentoring students can often do so without undercutting anyone else. In fact, the opposite is often true: One person's contribution can complement another's, and meaningful work becomes a cooperative endeavour. We can celebrate one another's efforts and successes without fear that they undermine our own.

There's a second issue with statusism: It misidentifies the source of meaning. If someone earns a prestigious title through dishonesty or harm – say, by exploiting legal loopholes to enrich themselves at others' expense – the status itself seems hollow. And if the title is meaningful because it reflects real achievement, then the value lies in the achievement, not the status marker. To fixate on the prestige is to confuse the symbol for the substance.

Worse, the modern world often gets these symbols wrong. High-status roles don't always correspond with social value: A hedge fund manager may outrank a nurse in public esteem, even though the nurse arguably does more to improve lives. Status, in short, is a flawed and unreliable proxy for contribution.

This is why critiques of statusism, however valid, should not be mistaken for critiques of workism. Still, not all concerns about workism rely on that confusion.

Some critics argue that workism leads to an unbalanced life – one that crowds out family, friendship, community and leisure. By contrast, the "well-rounded life" is presented as a healthier, more sustainable model, a mosaic of overlapping sources of meaning and identity.

This ideal has its attractions. But it's not the only way to live well. Some people thrive by concentrating on one life domain, not from obsession but from authentic alignment. A devoted artist, researcher or founder might find that her talents, temperament and circumstances suit a work-focused life. Such a life can be intense, but it can also be coherent and impactful. For some, that trade-off is deeply fulfilling.

Another concern is that workism is risky. If your identity is tightly tied to your job, then a professional setback – getting fired, burning out, losing motivation – can trigger an existential crisis. Someone with a broader base of meaning can better withstand those shocks.

This risk is real. But we shouldn't compare the well-rounded life to a caricature of workism, where work is everything and all else is neglected. That extreme exists, but it's rare. Most people who centre their life on work still care about their relationships, hobbies and community. They may not distribute their time equally, but they don't ignore these other domains entirely.

So the more realistic comparison is between the well-rounded life and moderate workism – a life where work is the main source of meaning, but not the only one. In this more grounded scenario, the difference in emotional resilience isn't all that stark. Yes, well-rounded people may have more fallback options. But moderate workists usually have them too, just not to the same degree. And that marginal difference isn't necessarily decisive.

If choosing a life of moderate workism allows someone to develop their talents more fully, or make a greater positive impact on the world, that gain in meaning may well justify the small added risk. A life of impact, even one a bit more vulnerable to disruption, can be worth it.

Of course, work should never be imposed as the only legitimate path to meaning. Societies should respect those who find purpose through family, spirituality, community, or recreational pursuits. But if someone finds their deepest fulfilment in their work – not for how it looks, but for what it is – we should not pathologise that choice.

Workism, rightly understood, is not our cultural disease. At its best, it's simply one way of living meaningfully.

• Matthew Hammerton is associate professor in philosophy at the School of Social Sciences, Singapore Management University.