

MIKE NICHOLS



The value of a job

Has America lost its will to work?

Marlyd Velez, a 37-year-old Milwaukeean at the Wisconsin Job Center on Milwaukee's near south side, says she has had surgery on both feet since May and isn't able to fit them into a pair of steel-toe boots quite yet.

Still, she's looking for a job — and not just for the paycheck.

"I can't stand being without a job," she says, standing outside the center, where she receives advice on her resume and peruses job listings. "I know there are people who would love to just stay home all day, but I can't.

"I like to feel useful."

The optimists among us, those who believe a job brings more than bread to the table, who think the value of most work lies, too, in the dignity it brings to the soul, want to believe most people still feel that way in America. But there are indications otherwise.

Workforce participation — the number of people employed or looking for a job — has fallen to the lowest level in America since the late 1970s, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The national rate is now under 63%. The rate in Wisconsin is higher, almost 68%, but down from 72% in 1997.

As Dave Daley points out in the accompanying article, lots of companies see a conundrum: They can't find workers at the same time that 8 million Americans are standing in unemployment lines and many more aren't even looking.

Is Marlyd Velez just a throwback to an old-fashioned ethic? Has much of America lost its will to work?

Demographics play a sizable role in declining workforce participation numbers in Wisconsin and across the country. Americans are getting older at the same time that more people are staying in school longer. There is a gap, too, between what many people learn in school and what they actually need to know to get a job.

But there are also indications that more people no longer see the value of working.

The number of Americans receiving Social Security Disability Insurance benefits has doubled in the past 20 years — a period when the U.S. population increased only 19%, according to a recent WPRI analysis. Many are surely unable to put in long hours. But disability determinations are increasingly being made for mental illness and muscular-skeletal issues such as back pain

— conditions that make it difficult for doctors to definitively determine whether an individual is able to work, according to a study by the Secretaries' Innovation Group.

The same study determined that, despite passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 — legislation intended to provide workplace accommodations — people with health issues are less likely to work than were their counterparts in 1981.

Meanwhile, a study by the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis points out that America — where a strong work ethic was once seen as part of the American identity — is not faring well compared with other developed nations. Workforce participation among males ages 25 to 54 is lower here than in Canada, Japan and many European nations.

Many Americans continue to resist becoming too reliant on government, even when they need it. Velez, for instance, says she hates "to have to come and ask for help."

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But she also suspects that not everyone has the same motivation to become or remain self-sufficient. "There are people with health issues," she says. "But," she adds, "you can tell that half the people don't have a job because they don't want one."

Arthur Brooks, author of "The Conservative Heart," cites a phenomenon he calls "learned helplessness." Assistance programs that seem sensible in isolation add up to an overarching message, he writes, that nobody intended to convey: "You can't do it, so we're going to carry you."

That's not just bad for the economy.

"Work," he writes, "gives people something welfare never can. It's a sense of self-worth and mastery, the feeling that we are in control of our lives." Research indicates that people who work are happier than those who don't, he points out.

Work can be a drag, no doubt. Studs Terkel's classic, "Working: People Talk About What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do," proves that. There always have been people convinced that they can never be anything but a machine or a mule. But there is also the waitress who loves to serve and the stonemason who sees immortality in Bedford limestone.

There are policy issues here. We need to resist big job-killing increases in the minimum wage that have become the cause du jour. (The Earned Income Tax Credit is a much better tool.)

But we also need to remember something too often forgotten: The only thing that can make you unhappier than going to work on a bad day — having to help build something, whether it's a bridge or a book or a burger — is not even wanting to go to work at all. And almost any job on a good day can, in Terkel's words, be a search "for daily meaning as well as daily bread."

Marlyd Velez seems to know that. Too many other Americans have been made to forget.

Mike Nichols is the president of WPRI.