

Who Do You Want to Work With?

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When you are a kid in Argentina, there are invariably three questions that you'll always get asked whenever you meet a grown up person:

- How old are you?
- What's your favorite football team?
- What do you want to be when you grow up?

The answer to the first question depends on the moment, of course, and it's simply a test to see if you know how to count. The answer to the second depends on your parents (this is like religion down there) and the city where you live (but there's a 90% chance your answer will be either River Plate or Boca Juniors).

The third question, however, is problematic, no matter what the answer is. Because at a large degree we build our lives around that "what do you want to be?" question, whether we like or not what we do, whether we believe or not that what we want to do is doable or not, or if it pays well or not, or if we will like at all, or if we will end up doing something completely different whatsoever by the time we retire.

This single question shapes a lot our lives, without even realizing it, and we pollute otherwise peaceful kids with the realization that there's much more to life than school and Wii and friends and chocolate milk.

The problem is, for me this is clearly the wrong question to ask. We should be asking kids "who do you want to work with?", instead.

There's an old adage that goes like this: "It's not what you know, it's who you know". Life is made of relationships, not pure knowledge got through 12 boring years of study, in a terrible environment made of vertical authorities and obligatory dissertations about horribly dull subjects.

In this blog I've often held the hypothesis that most problems in software teams are not technical, that the technical problems have been solved long ago. I think that the root cause for many software problems are social problems, like team cohesion or communication. Likewise, in terms of social relationships, in terms

of society, the root causes for our problems lie in our capacity to understand each other.

And in spite of all the efforts and money spent every year in workplace health problems, in spite of all the deaths and the acknowledgement of the existence of assholes in our jobs, we still ask our kids “what do you want to be when you grow up”.

This question seems harmless by itself, but looking closely, it supports several fallacies:

- It implies that all professions are carried out similarly whatever you choose to be and whenever you work; that is, you will be as happy and able to carry out your craft whether you are an independent SAP consultant, a blacksmith in Patagonia or if you are a freshly graduated doctor on internship at Seattle’s Grace Hospital. This is simply not true. The amount of initiative, self-drive, learning opportunities, job stability, are simply not the same, and lots of people learn this really late. I know it too well: I have learnt it quite late.
- It implies that you will not be independent. When you ask the kid about professions, you are not expecting an answer like the previous “blacksmith in Patagonia” thing, because in our society, being able to ask such a question means that you have the means to send your kids to school (or at least you expect to do so). If you live in a “favela” in Rio de Janeiro, and you barely have enough to eat, you don’t think that much about the future. And if you do, the kid will most probably answer that he wants to be a football player or a TV star. In these places and situations (where most of mankind actually lives and dies every day) the present moment eats all your CPU time. Which means that the medium-class kid will most probably answer with the name of a profession, and apart from some honorable exceptions, universities don’t teach how to be independent, but just how to be another animal in the herd. Which cuts off lots of possibilities, needless to say.
- It implies that social groups built around different professions are all comparable. They are not. They do not have the same motivations or ethics. I’ve studied physics (a rather nerdy career) and then switched to economics (a supposedly rather trendy one). The groups of people that gather around professions are not at all comparable, and I must say that I’ve finally settled down working in a field where, as Jeff LaMarche told me once, “the asshole ratio is astonishingly low”. You couldn’t say it better. And I couldn’t be happier about it.
- Finally, it implies that the kids know how much money you get in different jobs. This is not a minor point; if a kid wants to choose a path depending on economic reasons, she should be able to do so without external input. I know too many people who regret not choosing a path over another because they did not know the market conditions of each one.

In short, we do not teach our kids to question the world we’re living in, to search

for lots of answers before taking decisions, and also, to question the authority, simply because we haven't been taught to do that. And given the natural human inertia to avoid change, it is somehow natural that our questions to kids reflect what our parents asked us. We tend to repeat mistakes, and that not only works at a macro level, but also at micro level. It is part of human nature.

By asking "who do you want to work with" you ask explicitly your kid to choose between allies and assholes, and given that choice, guess who most kids will choose? The question will also prompt them to learn to accept their own choices, too, because it prompts a thought process much more elaborated than just answering "doctor" or "lawyer" or any other similar politically correct answer.

Kids are much more intelligent than we are, and then we send them to school to avoid having them telling us repeatedly how stupid we are.

Finally, by asking "who do you want to work with?" you are also implicitly asking "who you don't want to work with?", which is the second most important question you should ask, and whose answer is not implied by the first. Dilbert is a funny comic, but I don't see why we keep on behaving that way, when our working life could be much more enjoyable, by any standards.

Try it: if you have a kid, or the next time you meet one, ask her or him this very two questions. You will be surprised of the answers, and you might as well learn something about your own life, too.