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Upper Intermediate Student’s Book

Life

The gift economy

The banking crisis of 2008 again raised concerns that our economy is based too much on individual greed. Such an economic model, critics say, comes from a false understanding of human nature. Human society is not made up of individuals pursuing private gain through competition with each other. The real essence of human nature lies in the social bonds that we make through family, friendships, professional associations and local communities. These bonds produce a sense of common purpose and shared values, in which groups of people strive for the things that are for the common good: a sound education, a pleasant environment to live in, a healthy population. It is this idea of shared social interests that is at the heart of the gift economy.

Gift economies thrived in earlier times when people lived in a world of greater abundance and when their wants were fewer. Stone Age hunter-gatherers had shelter and enough food and did not need many possessions – a few weapons for hunting and clothing to keep warm. They helped each other by sharing food and tools without any expectation of payment or immediate reward. But this is not only an idea that applies to a more primitive way of life. There are also many recent examples of the gift economy at work.

In the past, American companies operating in Japan found it difficult to attract Japanese recruits, even though, compared with Japanese employers, they offered more generous wages, shorter work hours and better promotion prospects. But these factors were traditionally not so important to Japanese employees, who did not think of their services as being ‘bought’. Rather, they felt they were entering into a long-term – ‘gift exchange’ – relationship with their employer, which was of mutual benefit.

This relationship had many aspects. At its most basic it involved the simple exchange of physical gifts. For example, if the employee got married, the company sent a gift and even a departmental manager to represent it at the wedding.

Another company gift which is still popular among Japanese employees is the yearly company vacation. On these organised weekends co-workers share dormitories, eat together and visit the same attractions, largely at the company’s expense. For their part, the main gift given by the employees to their company is their hard work and this is why each Japanese employee gives such great attention to accuracy, quality in their work and promptness in its delivery. Even the simplest tasks are carried out with extraordinary care.

Elsewhere, the Internet is facilitating the re-emergence of the gift economy. Neighbourhood groups use online networks to share tools and skills. Someone who needs a long ladder to repair their roof does not need to go out and buy one; they simply put a message up on the neighbourhood discussion board and soon a neighbour will offer theirs. They will probably even help them with the repair, because helping and giving is part of human nature. Via the Internet, knowledge and advice can be shared on almost everything, from how a nuclear reactor works to how to plan your holiday or build your own canoe.

All this is very well, but these are hard times: helping our neighbour with his roof isn’t going to pay the bills, I hear you say. But in an indirect way it is. The point is that by stressing the co-operative side of human nature, the gift economy helps us all. It keeps in check the excesses of big commercial organisations that seek to exploit situations for their own gain. So the big supermarket chains must understand that it is in the common interest not to force small shopkeepers out of business. Big industrial farms must realise that they cannot go on intensively farming the land until there is nothing left in it. Other large companies should not always seek to drive the hardest bargain possible with their suppliers, but just pay them fairly. That is the real lesson of the gift economy.

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