This week we have been recognizing essential workers, as well as our patrons, who are essential to the OI! In today’s workbook we get to explore activities that highlight the tasks of essential workers in antiquity!

In antiquity, security was also a concern and there were officials who helped with the security of the community. The Dynasty 20 granite statue (ca. 1127 BC) pictured here comes from the site of Medinet Habu and the individual on it is described as “chief of the Mejday, Bekenwerel.” In other words, Bekenwerel was the chief of police.

E14663, on display in the Joseph and Mary Grimshaw Egyptian Gallery

To learn more about the ancient origins of modern jobs, check out the OI’s exhibition catalog, Our Work
Shabti of Mekiretef

E8101, on display in the Joseph and Mary Grimshaw Egyptian Gallery

Shabti (sometimes called ushabti) figurines were placed in tombs in ancient Egypt to do work for a deceased person in the afterlife. In life, all Egyptians were supposed to help work on government-controlled agricultural (farming-related) projects. In the afterlife, of course, no one wanted to have to do this work. So, the ancient Egyptians came up with shabtis, magical workers who would spring into action if their deceased owner were ever called to work in the afterlife. The number of shabtis in an individual’s tomb increased through time, and in the Third Intermediate Period, tombs were ideally stocked with 401 shabtis, one for each day of the Egyptian year, along with thirty-six figurines of overseers, one for each ten-day week, to keep order.

Many shabtis, including this one, have the Book of the Dead Spell 6 written on them:

“O shabti, if I am summoned or if I am detailed to do any work that needs to be done in the realm of the dead . . . you shall detail yourself for me on every occasion of making the fields arable, of flooding the banks, or of moving sand from the east to west; ‘Here I am,’ you shall say.”

What jobs would you want your shabtis to do for you?
The Ancient Work of Cats Scavenger Hunt

Cats were a big help to essential workers like farmers and traders in the ancient Near East. No wonder ancient Egyptians honored them by making cat statues, mummifying their pet cats, and even worshipping cats!

Watch this short video about the history of cat and human collaboration, then take a scavenger hunt of related objects through our virtual collections on the IDB!

How to search for objects:
1. Go to oi-idb.uchicago.edu.
2. Type or copy and paste the registration number for the object (Example: A9325).
3. Check the box “Images Only.”
4. Press Submit.

What is this Egyptian cat statue made of?
E11390

Cats kept mice from eating the grains that farmers grew. Ancient farmers often stored extra grains in huge jars. What creature is scratched onto this storage jar?
E23634

This statue shows a woman grinding grain into flour. What time period is this statue from?
E10638

What food was made in this clay mold?
E1986
Cats were important members of a ship’s crew, keeping rodents from eating stored food and even the ship’s ropes! What is the boat in this picture made of? E17973

What two things are shown painted on this jar? E10762

Cats were valued in ancient Egypt for many things, including killing venomous snakes. What was this snake-shaped object used for? E16950

Cats were usually seen catching and eating mice, but something different is going on in this scene. This mouse is dressed like an ancient Egyptian pharaoh or another important official! What is happening in the rest of the picture? E13951

What accessories did this cat statue used to have? E18826