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Reconsidering employment

A future social contract for work

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Work in the UK is broken. We work too hard, too long, are not getting paid enough and are not productive enough.¹ What is more, our labour market is largely exclusionary. The work devotion we are asked to show is not compatible with other life commitments, resulting in the exclusion of large pockets of society. It also requires untenable levels of work commitment and overwork, especially from those whose work capacities are already questioned – namely, marginalised workers such as minority ethnic workers. The current way of thinking about work is not helping us as workers, us as a society and also our climate. It doesn't even make economic sense as it doesn't make the most of human contributions, especially considering the challenges we face in the future of work.

Ideal worker

One of the main problems with work culture is that of the 'ideal worker',² namely, that you need to prioritise work above all else in your life, work very long hours to show dedication and commitment to work and be productive. "Nobody ever changed the world on 40 hours a week", to quote Elon Musk.³ The chief executive of Goldman Sachs expects his junior analysts to work 100 hours a week to provide value for their clients.⁴ Alongside the rise of

¹ Harari D (2023) *Productivity: Key economic indicators*, House of Commons Library.

<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn02791/#:~:text=UK%20labour%20productivity,the%20pandemic%20in%20Q4%202019>

² Acker J (1990) 'Hierarchies, jobs, bodies: a theory of gendered organizations', *Gender & Society*, 4(2): 139–158

³ Smith, D. (2018) "Elon Musk said 'nobody ever changed the world on 40 hours a week' — and he couldn't be more wrong" Business Insider website. 27 November 2018. <https://www.businessinsider.com/elon-musk-nobody-changed-world-40-hours-a-week-not-true-2018-11>

⁴ Kelly, J. (2021) "After Complaints Of '100-Hour' Workweeks, Goldman Sachs Is Allowing Bankers To Take Off On Saturdays" Forbes website. 23 March 2021. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jackkelly/2021/03/23/after->

digital technology, and ironically with the rise of flexible working, workers are expected to work all the time and everywhere. You have to be “always on”,⁵ to the point where it feels like your work now has the prerogative to demand all your waking hours and possibly your unconscious hours when we consider how much we think about work.

Not only is working such long hours detrimental to workers’ and their families’ wellbeing – for example, by not allowing parents to spend time with their family – it also largely excludes workers with any responsibilities outside of work. This includes caring for children, family or friends and self-care – namely, anyone with a disability or long-term illness, and those with responsibilities to their community, friends, pets or any other aspect of life that can collide with the long-hours work culture. Any indication that you may have responsibilities outside of work is likely to result in doubt of your work commitment and productivity, regardless of what you actually produce.⁶ This long-hours working can be especially detrimental for marginalised workers whose work capacity is already questioned – such as mothers, disabled people, minority ethnic workers and LGBT+ workers – as many already overwork and go above and beyond to prove their worth. In the UK, 88 per cent of workers experienced burnout recently, costing the UK £28 billion yearly,⁷ with burnout and other mental health problems being especially high for marginalised workers. What is worse, we are not burning out to enhance the world or bring forth a new future for humanity. Two out of five Britons feel that their work is not making any meaningful contribution to the world⁸ and 69 per cent report that they are burning out precisely because their work lacks any real purpose. At the same time, many of our meaningless jobs are actually helping to accelerate the global climate crisis, and other social costs that we as a society have to bear indirectly.⁹

complaints-of-100-hour-workweeks-goldman-sachs-is-allowing-bankers-to-take-off-on-saturdays/?sh=520cb5be6af6

⁵ Chung H (2022) *The Flexibility Paradox: Why flexible working can lead to (self-)exploitation*, Policy Press

⁶ Williams JC, Blair-Loy M and Berdahl JL (2013) ‘Cultural schemas, social class, and the flexibility stigma’, *Journal of Social Issues*, 69(2): 209–234

⁷ HR News (2022) ‘88% of UK workforce have experienced burnout in the past two years’, HR News website, 30 August 2022. <https://hrnews.co.uk/88-of-uk-workforce-have-experienced-burnout-in-the-past-two-years/>

⁸ Dahlgreen W (2015) ‘37% of British workers think their jobs are meaningless’, YouGov website, 12 August 2015. <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/society/articles-reports/2015/08/12/british-jobs-meaningless>

⁹ Chung H (2022) ‘A social policy case for a four-day week’, *Journal of Social Policy*, 51(3): 551–566

New forms of work as a solution?

The rise of homeworking during the Covid-19 pandemic shifted ideas around work – where and when it can be done, and how it can be done more productively.¹⁰ Despite the hesitation of managers in allowing workers to work from home prior to the pandemic, what the pandemic showed was that workers not only were able to work productively from home, but also in many cases were more productive than before. This was despite a wide range of factors that may have prohibited productivity, such as the global pandemic itself, children being at home and the lack of support networks that people relied on to help balance the demands of work and family. This shifted the attitudes of managers and workers alike, who realised that people can be more productive and focused when they work at home. The pandemic and homeworking also changed many workers' attitudes around their preferences and what was possible around work–life balance.¹¹ Many realised that, by cutting down on their commuting and preparation times, they had more time to spend with family and take part in other activities outside of work. Having to contend with a global pandemic and many deaths surely changed people's attitudes around what was important in life, and how best to spend their time on earth. Homeworking has also provided many marginalised workers – such as minority ethnic and LGBT+ workers – a safe haven for work, as they do not need to contend with the micro-aggressions of the office.

However, as the work-centric ideal-worker norm has not changed, what we observe is that homeworking and other types of flexible working can also fuel the long-hours work culture. Flexible workers tend to work longer, harder and generally have work encroaching on their family time.¹² Due to traditional gender norms, flexible working can also exacerbate gender inequality patterns. Men have a higher tendency to work longer, whereas women and others are pressured into doing more housework and childcare, or at least maintaining the unequal division of domestic work at home.¹³ Especially with the recent call from employers for a return to the office, it is likely that if left alone, hybrid working may create a two-tiered labour market where women and other marginalised workers are less likely to come back to

¹⁰ Barrero JM, Bloom N and Davis SJ (2021) 'Why working from home will stick', working paper, National Bureau of Economic Research

¹¹ Chung H, Seo H, Forbes S and Birkett H (2020) *Working From Home During the Covid-19 Lockdown: Changing preferences and the future of work* 29/07/2020, University of Kent. <http://wafproject.org/covidwfh/>

¹² Chung H (2022) *The Flexibility Paradox: Why flexible working can lead to (self-)exploitation*, Policy Press

¹³ Chung H and van der Lippe T (2020) 'Flexible working, work–life balance, and gender equality: introduction', *Social Indicators Research*, 151(2): 365–381. <https://doi.org/DOI: 10.1007/s11205-018-2025-x>

the office while white cis-hetero men do return and reap the rewards of proximity bias that managers tend to hold.

Despite these problems, what homeworking has shifted is the notion of productivity. Namely, that if you trust workers and allow them more autonomy over their work, they are likely to be more productive. Homeworking has also changed the notion of the worker somewhat to someone who has an identity and responsibilities outside of work – especially as during online conference calls we can see the worker outside of the office and in their home space.

Another interesting new development is the rise in the popularity of the four-day week. This movement suggests that the full-time norm be changed to a 32-hour four-day week. It argues that long hours worked by workers can be largely performative,¹⁴ meaning that it is done to show others such as their colleagues and managers that they are committed and productive, rather than long-hours actually providing value to the company. By providing more rest time, a shorter working week allows workers to concentrate better during work hours, making them more productive, and enabling companies to save on costs. A four-day week also removes any redundant work – such as unnecessary meetings and paperwork – drawing from the expertise and knowledge teams have built rather than the reduction of work tasks being decided by the managers alone.

A number of trials across the world evidence that this approach can be successful,¹⁵ not only in knowledge-intensive and creative industries, but also in industries such as social care or hospitality, by improving motivation, wellbeing, productivity, recruitment and retention and reducing sickness absenteeism.¹⁶ This movement's key strengths are in directly questioning the notions of productivity and routes to value creation, while also promoting the notion that workers are no longer male breadwinners who rely on their female partners to carry out housework and childcare. It understands that workers have other responsibilities outside of work, and by attending to these responsibilities they can be more productive. What is more, as the success stories show, providing workers more right to time can not only improve a company's productivity and value creation, but also support individuals to take on activities

¹⁴ Slack (no date) 'The state of work 2023', Slack website. <https://slack.com/resources/why-use-slack/state-of-work>

¹⁵ Lewis K, Stronge W, Kellam J, Kikuchi L et al (2023) *The Results Are In: The UK's four-day week pilot*, Autonomy

¹⁶ Pang A S-K (2019) *Shorter: How working less will revolutionise the way your company gets things done*, Penguin

outside of their working life (for example, setting up a hobby company or spending time exploring new ideas that are risky and thus may not necessarily be linked to secure income), which may result in greater problem solving and higher value creation for society.

The problem with the four-day week at the moment, however, is that although there have been some efforts to try to push it at the national level, it is largely applied at the company level. This does little to resolve the current gender role gaps as male-dominated sectors are the least likely to apply the policy, leaving women to continue to pick up the domestic work. What is more, without the support of the state in pushing this type of working-time reduction at a larger scale, it is unlikely that cash-strapped companies and sectors will be able to implement such a policy. This is especially true for low-wage sectors, where there needs to be an initial investment in reducing the working hours (and load) of workers through job shares.¹⁷

However, even in low-wage sectors, the investment will eventually pay off at the company level due to improved work retention and recruitment and a reduction in absenteeism and sickness, and at the societal level by getting more people in employment paying taxes, reducing the costs of health problems and burnout, and bringing benefits to families.¹⁸

Taking this into account, sectors like health and social care could benefit from more state intervention to incentivise workers who have left the sector due to bad working conditions and burnout to come back with the introduction of the new system. Finally, although the four-day week is a move towards protecting workers' right to time and recalibrating the value of labour at the societal level by appreciating the need for workers to spend time doing work outside of paid work, perhaps it is not enough. The next section thus outlines additional issues we need to consider when we think about the new social contract of work.

New social contract of work

First, we need to reconsider the type of jobs we value. The monetary value that work generates does not represent the true value of the labour put in nor the benefit it reaps. For example, social care and childcare are incredibly valuable work for the wellbeing of the person receiving the care and for the peace of mind it can

¹⁷ Jump RC and Stronge W (2020) *A Scottish Four Day Week: Initial costings for implementation in the public sector*, *Autonomy*. <https://autonomy.work/portfolio/scottish4day/>

¹⁸ Chung H (2022) 'A social policy case for a four-day week', *Journal of Social Policy*, 51(3): 551–566

provide for the loved ones of that person; yet it is generally paid very little. This is despite the global care crisis – namely, the shortages of care workers across the world. The value of care work is so undervalued in monetary terms because it is shaped by socially normative views. The main one being that on the unpaid care work of women. Care work has been largely carried out by women for free across history. In this patriarchal society, care work is regarded as feminine labour that does not need to be remunerated as women are not regarded as (the main) breadwinners for the family.¹⁹

The same kind of logic could be used for other types of work with regards to monetary values and social costs – for example, environmentally friendly work that may not result in large profit margins and may cost more in terms of monetary value but can be hugely beneficial in reducing environmental costs and with it social costs.

Second, work has to be a social right. The post-war welfare state was based on the idea of the full employment model (of mostly men). For example, in the Beveridge report²⁰ – the blueprint for the UK welfare state – it is proposed that the welfare state holds the responsibility of providing citizens with full employment, to enable “freedom from idleness”. What full employment means here is:

“having always more vacant jobs than unemployed men, not slightly fewer jobs. It means that the jobs are at fair wages, of such kind, and so located that the unemployed men can reasonably be expected to take them; it means, by consequence, that the normal lag between losing one job and finding another will be very short.”²¹

Work was considered part of the social right guaranteed by the state and a way to legitimise the state’s existence and enhance social security and social cohesion. The full employment model further worked to foster economic growth using the Keynesian approach, where providing state-funded/provisioned jobs and other investment into the public sphere was used to get the economy flowing and growing. Although, on the one hand, the state needs to enable workers to have time away from work, as mentioned above, there also needs to be

¹⁹ See also Fraser N (2016) ‘Capitalism’s crisis of care’, *Dissent*, 63(4): 30–37

²⁰ Beveridge W (1942) *Social Insurance and Allied Services*, HM Stationery Office

²¹ *Ibid*: 18

a guarantee for workers to have work as a social right. Many studies note the benefits of working on individuals' mental and physical health.²² For many people, work is where they socialise, build bonds, learn and enhance themselves.

Although this may all sound like a utopian dream, not only was this approach widely used across industrialised countries throughout the early 20th century, but also such an approach is still observable in many countries today. For example, in countries like Sweden, close to a third of its working population is employed by the government.²³ In South Korea, the government aims to provide older workers with work as part of welfare so that they can have an active and independent life in old age.²⁴ Furthermore, ensuring work as a social right for a broader population – again including those with care responsibilities, minority ethnic groups and LGBT+ workers – is not only necessary in terms of social justice but also to ensure societal growth. Studies have evidenced the strength that diversity brings to an organisation in terms of problem solving, leading to greater productivity.²⁵ Lastly, when we consider the social right to work, we need to provide workers with the right to work in *meaningful* jobs, ones that create social value and reduce social costs. What I mean here by social costs are a wide range of costs that work can create for individuals, their families, society as a whole and the environment.^{18l} For example worker burn out results in negative outcomes for the worker's individual health and well-being, higher costs for the NHS, problems for the labour market with regards to human capital loss. Worker burn out, work devotion can also hinder good relationship building between the workers' children and other family members which can in the longer run result in problems for future workers – namely children – with regards to behavioural problems and cognitive development.²⁶

²² Kameråde D, Wang S, Burchell B, Balderson SU and Coutts A (2019) 'A shorter working week for everyone: how much paid work is needed for mental health and well-being?', *Social Science & Medicine*, 241

²³ OECD (2021) Government at a Glance 2021: Country Fact Sheet Sweden. OECD.

²⁴ Korean Government "Senior job and social activity support project"

http://www.mohw.go.kr/react/policy/index.jsp?PAR_MENU_ID=06&MENU_ID=06390201&PAGE=1&topTitle

²⁵ Larson E (2017) 'New research: diversity + inclusion = better decision making at work', Forbes website, 21 September 2017. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/eriklarson/2017/09/21/new-research-diversity-inclusion-better-decision-making-at-work/?sh=267e29904cbf>

²⁶ For more see Chung, H. (2021). Shared care, father's involvement in care and family well-being outcomes: Literature review London: UK Cabinet Office, Government Equalities Office.

Conclusion

Given where we are and in light of the global challenges we have in relation to work, we need to radically reconsider our social contract and notion of work. Work should be a right for members of society, to develop our world. Also, we need to reassess work, not only focusing on its monetary value, but also examining the social value it creates with regards to wellbeing, as well as how it can reduce potential social costs, especially in relation to equality, cohesion and sustainability. In this sense, we need to eradicate the ideal-worker norm based on long hours. This isn't something that would go against value creation, but rather enable us to better use human labour, leading to real progress and value for society. This would also make monetary sense when we consider the longer-term consequences for wider society. Work is broken at the moment, but we can make things better.

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