

Funding the Future

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Thirty-eight per cent of young people who could work are not doing so. They're not lazy or indifferent. Nor have they dropped out. They just can't fit into the machinery of conformism that modern employers demand of them. As a result, vast numbers of talented young people aren't delivering of their best for this country.

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This is the transcript:

Why aren't young people working as much these days? That's a difficult question to answer. And I'm asking it about what is commonly called Generation Z; broadly speaking, those under the age of about 24 in the UK at present.

Now of course I do know that between the ages of 16 and 24, a great many people are in education of some sort. They might still be at school, or in college, or at university, or even in post university education of some sort, which still means they're not in the workforce. Whatever it is, of course, that's a valid occupation on their part, and a benefit to us, we hope.

But, taking those people out of account, there is still very obviously a significant trend

going on in the UK, where the number of young people not working is growing much faster than in any other age group. And this is deeply worrying.

Now I see two fundamental reasons for this, and I'm basing this upon some research by John Burn-Murdoch in the Financial Times, but also a lot of commentary over the last few months on data produced by the Office for National Statistics.

And one of the reasons why there is no doubt that there is an increase in the number of people at that age not working is because of the amount of ill health that is being recorded by people of that age, most especially if they are not in education, from which many of them have been excluded as a consequence of that ill health.

Roughly half of the 38 per cent of young people between the ages of 16 and 24 who aren't working - I stress that - 38 per cent not working - roughly half of those aren't working because they have autism or some condition related to it.

Another 10 per cent now appear to have mental health-related issues.

Others have physical disability-related issues. The number who are not working because they haven't got some form of health-related issue or ability-related issue, which denies them the opportunity to work is very low.

So, what we're seeing is a significant increase in the number of people with mental health conditions in particular. A decade ago, 28 per cent weren't working, and now 38 per cent aren't working, and the rise is very largely down to mental health.

What has caused so much harm to young people in this age group? Well, of course, Covid is one of the obvious explanations. COVID hit people in this group incredibly hard. They were forced to survive massive uncertainty in their lives.

They failed to have the attention that they need needed from teachers, from supervisors at universities, from lecturers.

They didn't see their friends and colleagues for a long time and that had knock on effects on their mental well-being.

There's no doubt this is true, and we're seeing the consequences all over the place.

We're also perhaps more aware of issues around autism and other related issues now than we have before, and I think that's incredibly positive because at some point in time we're going to work out just what the value of people with autism, ADHD and all sorts of other conditions which mean they are simply not neurotypical are for the benefit of humankind, and let's be clear being normal is not all that it's cracked up to be because people who are normal suffer mental ill health.

Being divergent can actually be highly creative. And so what we need to do is

understand how to put highly creative people to use in our society.

But here I come to my other thing. Because I sort of know a bit about this generation. I've taught some of them. I've known a lot of them. I have offspring in that generation. I talk to others. And what I gather from so many, and from the commentary, is that they're pretty disenchanted with the workplace.

And I don't blame them. I think they've got every reason to be disenchanted by the modern workplace. Because, frankly, modern employers treat them with - I am not going to be polite here - contempt. That's the best I can say.

When I was looking for my first job post-university, I wrote my CV. I was unusual in those days; I actually had a typewriter. I was always pounding a keyboard and was pretty good at it. And so I went off and bashed it out. I sent it off to some firms. I got called in for an interview. One interview later, I was offered some jobs and I had to choose between those who have made me those job offers.

The whole process, actually for me, lasted not more than a few days. And, that was brilliant.

It doesn't work like that anymore. If you're a young person wanting a job now, it's virtually as if you've got a full-time job applying for a job. You have to, first of all, make an online application. You have to distort, contort, and manipulate your CV to fit into whatever document format they require.

Then you almost certainly have to go through a series of online tests of ever-increasing obscurity, each of them taking a lot of preparation time and involving a lot of stress.

Then you might have to prepare an online presentation to give to somebody in the organisation. So, after going through around three rounds of these testing and application processes, you might eventually talk to somebody, but it's almost certainly going to be online, and you will have been expected to prepare something in advance to try to impress them.

If you manage to impress somebody online with the conformity of your expectation with those of the organisation, and you note there, I stress, your conformity with the expectations of the organisation, they might then, finally, in about the fifth round of the process, invite you in to take part in an exercise day, where you will be compared against 30 or 40 other candidates, after which you might get an interview.

This is farcical. It's contemptuous of the young person that the employer thinks that they can take up so much of that person's time.

It's contemptuous of the whole of their education that the employer thinks everything must be distorted to the employer's needs when at that point in time, the young person is still open, malleable, and forming themselves, and it is up to the employer to implant

in due course their values and their requirements onto the candidates they think suitable, and not to expect that those candidates have already formed that awareness, knowledge, and understanding.

It's also contemptible, and I mean that word, for those who don't fit into the stereotypes. Because all of this is about putting people into boxes.

When I look back on my interviewing career, and I spent a lot more of my interviewing career as the interviewer rather than the interviewee, because I hired a lot of people in my time, I reckon that on average it took me less than five minutes to hire somebody after they come in through the door and sat down to have the interview process take place.

If I knew I wanted somebody, within two or three minutes of them arriving, the rest of the half an hour that I was going to commit to the process was all about confirming my opinion.

If I decided I didn't want somebody, and that sometimes was very quick indeed. Then I went through the rigmarole of trying to pretend that the remaining half an hour was going to be useful.

And how did I even vet them before they reached there? I would get a pile of CVs to go through, and I used my judgment to shortlist.

I can remember once shortlisting one person out of a hundred, and I said I didn't want to see anymore, and I can remember the agency who sent me the CVs saying but you've got to interview a pile of people. I said, "I want that person." And it turned out that I was absolutely right; that person was absolutely brilliant for the job until they decided to go and become a vicar; I can remember them going off and doing that, which was very frustrating because we couldn't find a way to accommodate God, part-time, into a part-time work role, which this person could still have done. So, anyway, that didn't work out in the end, but it was three-plus years after the interview.

My point is this. The recruitment process should be one in which people engage their own discretion, their own understanding, their own expectations. And young people aren't getting that respect by anybody doing that.

Instead, they're being pumped into a machine from the outset. And what do they feel as a consequence? They feel like they're part of a machine. They feel like they're being treated with contempt as the cogs roll around them. They don't feel as though they're a person. So why should they treat the employer with the respect that the employer isn't giving them?

I don't know. I really don't know. I don't understand it. If employers want to recruit in this way, don't expect to have committed employees.

And those young people who are getting through the process to joining, there's lots of evidence that Generation Z and whoever their slightly older peers are, are really not now fitting easily into the world of work.

And we can't say this is just down to COVID, or it's just down to doing some home working at some point in time. No, young people don't buy the values of the system.

They know full well that the system is now rigged against them. However hard they work, they're not going to end up with a decent pension because they aren't available. The ones that they're being offered by their employers are frankly never going to provide them with security.

And they're not going to have the means to pay to ever buy a home. Damn it, they have enough problems paying the rent, and they're having student debt-laden upon them on top of the tax bill, making their marginal tax rates in very many cases higher than those of generations before them, including many of the managers they're working for.

This is absurd, of course they feel alienated, of course they don't buy into the system, of course they're looking for something else. And they're realising that there are more important things in life than progressing up the greasy pole in a way that my generation never did.

Of course, there have always been people who've dropped out, always people who've done their own thing. And I always encourage them to. There's the natural entrepreneurial flair that we should encourage.

But when it comes down to it, the same reason why young people aren't working - because they have poor mental health, or because their autism or whatever is affecting them, literally alienating them from the system - are the same reasons why people when they get into these jobs are saying "Thank you very much, but no, thank you. I don't like what you're offering me I don't like the way you're treating me and I want something different."

We need to respect that. We need to provide young people with opportunity. We need to respect the fact that they must have a chance in life. And we must respect the fact that they now understand that they have their own needs and that the world will not be something that will accommodate them. Therefore, they're making it their own way.

I don't blame them. I think it's brilliant that they are. It's time we actually got on and instead of moaning about the fact that young people aren't working for some reason, ask the question, why aren't they working and required employers to change their employment systems, because until employers respect young people, we're going to have a really big crisis in this country.