

Why are people so good at their hobbies?

Published: January 12, 2026, 9:23 pm

The question always asked about the UK economy is, why are we so unproductive? Might it be that UK businesses do not seek to use the skills, talents, curiosity and drive of their employees in useful ways, which is why so many of those employees direct those talents into their hobbies instead?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CSW5IJYV61c?si=FeYcvCJs24XF3ijg>

This is the audio version:

https://www.podbean.com/player-v2/?i=i4bjh-17346e6-pb&from=pb6admin&share=1&download=1&rtl=0&fonts=Arial&skin=f6f6f6&font-color=&logo_link=episode_page&btn-skin=c73a3a

This is the transcript:

Why are people so good at their hobbies? It's a question I've often asked myself because I have hobbies, and I go to events organised by people who are the leaders in the field in the hobbies in which I'm involved. And what I see time and time again are people who are simply outstanding at what they do.

Whatever their craft is, whatever it is that they're pursuing, however they do it, what I recognize is people who produce work of amazing quality. They release into their hobbies their frustrated energies, usually created by the fact that in their workplace, they are not asked to use their skills to the full. And as a result, they create things that

are little short of works of art.

And even those who don't do that become the administrators at these sorts of events that I go to.

I go to exhibitions where people who do not run exhibitions as their mainstream employment activity put on events of significant size. They manage and coordinate all the logistics. They set up the arrangements. They do the accounting. They arrange the insurance. They can manage the flows of people in and out. They can arrange the catering. And everything else that goes with such a thing. And yet, during their working day, they're probably not asked to do anything requiring that degree of skill.

And I find that immensely frustrating because one of the biggest debates that there is in economics is why some countries, like the UK, are so apparently labour-unproductive. Why is it that the skills that are bought from the people of this country and put to work in our businesses produce so little output for such high levels of input compared, for example, to France, where they are supposedly up to 20 per cent more productive than we are?

Well, I think that if those people who asked that question went to some hobby exhibitions and watched what happens there, they would find some of their answers. Now, this is part of what Danny Blanchflower, who I work with on occasion, calls the economics of walking about. You have to go out into the real world and open your eyes and see what's happening to answer the questions which theoretical economics appears unable to address.

And in this case, the answer to the question appears glaringly obvious. If we look at what people do in their hobbies, they are being allowed to develop their own skills and put them to use in applications that they find interesting. That results in amazing work.

When they go to work, managers tell them to do the tasks that they think they want done. They do not require the employee's input. They do not ask for their opinion. They do not invest in their skills. They do not seek to develop the person, and they set the standards for output that are required that are very often too low. The consequence is that the employee is not motivated to deliver for that employer who is giving them no incentive to cooperate with them. And as a result, we get low productivity.

This is the choice of the manager. It isn't the choice of the employee. The employee - and I am talking about thousands and maybe millions of people who do hobbies to an exceptionally high level in this country - their choice is to work to the best of their ability when they're given the opportunity to do so. So, it is the manager's fault for not letting them do that in the workplace.

Good management would seek out the skills of the people who work for them, would mould their jobs to provide the opportunity for those skills to be put to best use, would

provide the training to ensure that the person can improve on their innate abilities, and will encourage them to innovate so that best outcomes are achieved.

But that doesn't happen. And that's why we're in trouble. If only we could put the skills that people actually have in this country to use in the way that I know they exist because I can see them being delivered in people's spare time, then we could solve our productivity crisis. But we won't, because we believe in having businesses that deliver just in time, to formulas, in accordance with preordained scripts, creating products that are frankly uninspired. And that's why we have low productivity.