Funding the Future

Why is work getting worse?

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Britain is facing a crisis at work. People want to work, they want to contribute to society, and they want opportunities to develop their talents. But employers are increasingly denying them the chance to do so.

The latest British Social Attitudes Survey reveals something remarkable. Only 4% of people who could work say they do not want to. Meanwhile, 73% believe their work benefits society. Yet job satisfaction is declining.

Why?

One statistic helps explain what is happening. In 1992, more than 60% of British workers had substantial discretion over how they organised their work. Now that figure is just over 30%.

Employers are taking control away from workers, replacing initiative, creativity and professional judgement with standardised procedures and rigid systems.

At the same time, wages have stagnated, opportunities for promotion have diminished, and people increasingly struggle to fulfil their potential.

This is not just a problem for workers. It is creating an economic crisis. Employers are wasting human talent, undermining productivity and creating frustration instead of fulfilment. And artificial intelligence could make matters considerably worse.

In this video, I explain why Britain’s workplaces are failing their employees, why this matters for our economy, and whether we might be approaching a workplace revolt.

Work should serve people, not just employers.

Is your work becoming less fulfilling? Let me know in the comments.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E1FjWolL-6A?si=HAGD1rFhHxE-GW0e

This is the audio version:

https://www.podbean.com/player-v2/?i=az8ue-1bac3f4-pb&from=pb6admin&share=1&download=1&rtl=0&fonts=Arial&skin=f6f6f6&font-color=auto&logo_link=episode_page&btn-skin=c73a3a

This is the transcript:

Work is facing a crisis in Britain. Surveys show that people want to work in this country, and they want to advance in their workplaces. They want better pay too. But their satisfaction with work is falling. Workers are increasingly lacking control over their jobs, and opportunities for people to develop their talents at work are disappearing.

Employers are creating frustration instead of fulfilment because of what is called ‘routinisation’, which means that tasks in the workplace are being deskilled. So is Britain heading towards a workplace revolt because people have had enough of this trend?

The fact is that people really do want to work. The latest British Social Attitudes Survey shows that only 4% of people who could work in the UK do not want to do so. That does then mean that most of the unemployment in this country is involuntary. And 73% of people do, surprisingly, believe that their work benefits society these days. That is a figure that has increased since 1989. Then it was 54%. So the idea that the quality of people’s work has necessarily declined is not maintained by this survey. But why then is job satisfaction declining? That is the challenge that the British workplace is facing.

And job satisfaction has declined broadly since 2015.

Most people want to work fewer hours, and fathers are particularly driving this change. People also want opportunities for promotion and advancement at work, and increasingly, they’re being denied these chances.

Employers are not recognising the talents within the people they already employ. And as a consequence, the chance for people to earn more is disappearing because they cannot get the promotions they need in the places where they are, and very often cannot afford the risk of moving employment with everything that goes with it. So what people want are opportunities to fulfil their potential at work, but they’re being denied

them.

And the reality is that work is also failing people financially. Real earnings have increased since 2015, but in overall terms they have hardly changed since 2008. We've now had living standards stagnating for nearly two decades in the UK, for most people. And workers cannot see routes to sufficient financial reward from work. And nothing seems to be changing.

Unsurprisingly, people are disenchanted as a result. And that, when compounded by the fact that opportunities for promotion appear to be unavailable in so many employments, means that people cannot see a way to improve their positions, and that is causing stress.

And at the core of all of this problem in the workplace is a very surprising statistic. Workers are losing control over their jobs. In 1992, over 60% of people in the UK enjoyed substantial discretion over how they organised their work. Now, barely 30% have that freedom. Most workers once could choose how they would deliver the outcome that their employer wanted in the way that they thought was appropriate. And that suited a great many people, and most especially those who are not neurotypical. But now fewer than one-third have this opportunity.

Those with autism, ADHD, and other neurocomplex conditions are suffering badly as a result. And we are seeing that problem as one of the drivers of the number of people who are now not in employment, education or training, and who are under 25, but many others are also suffering for this reason as well.

There has been a fundamental transformation of employment in the UK. Where once people had to bring their initiative to work, now the demand is that they don't. And this is something that has been widely noted. Employers have deliberately restricted workers' discretion. Standardisation increasingly dictates how tasks are performed, and compliance systems have replaced individual professional judgement. And even senior professional occupations are experiencing this change.

I saw it in the world of academia. I know it is happening in professions like the law and accountancy. It is happening in the civil service. Employers are prioritising consistency over initiative and creativity. And that means that people are losing their autonomy, and this has serious economic consequences.

Workers are losing the opportunity to exercise their judgement. Frustration does then replace enthusiasm, and personal engagement falls away. Initiative disappears when employers discourage independent thinking. Talented people cannot use their abilities to the full. And that is particularly true when they're denied the opportunity to advance within their workplace. And as a consequence, productivity is suffering because employers are suppressing human potential.

This, I think, is an unaddressed issue within the economic conundrum that faces this country. It seems we are definitely creating increasingly unfulfilling jobs, even if people recognise that there is a social use to them. In other words, the late David Graeber's prediction that we would have bullshit jobs in this country is coming true.

These jobs exist, and their economic impact is being seen in low productivity and stagnant wages. People are becoming little more than human automatons even when they're doing something useful. Their abilities are being wasted by rigid systems, and my belief is that artificial intelligence could make this considerably worse.

What happens then when workers finally reject this situation? In my view, work must serve people and not just employers. Everyone deserves sufficient income to live with dignity, and financial security must always replace fear and uncertainty. And that is one of the crises within our economy that we recognise now. But it's also vital that workers have autonomy over how they work.

Opportunities for development and advancement are essential, and fulfilling work should be an economic objective because it is part of the goal of letting somebody fulfil their potential in life. And if you can't fulfil your potential in life, you will be disenchanted, fed up and alienated from the world around you. And that is what we are seeing. People are alienated from the workplace for this reason.

So are we going to be heading for a workplace revolution? People want to work, and they want to contribute, but employers are increasingly denying them meaningful autonomy. Financial rewards and advancement opportunities are inadequate. But there's, in any case, not enough opportunity to deliver meaningful work. And if AI does make this situation worse, will the time have come when workers will demand better control over their working lives? And should enlightened employers be thinking about this and now offering it? Do we need this change?

As far as I'm concerned, this is a big issue for the politics of care and the economics of hope. Many of us spend a great deal of our lives at work. If that work is not fulfilling our potential, it demeans us. My concern is that this is what we are seeing on the basis of this latest British Social Attitudes Survey. The surveys tend to be reliable. They're heavily relied upon for forming policy in government. But the point is: who is going to take action on this one?

Government does not employ most people in this country. I know if you believe the far right, you'd think it did, but that's not true. Only one in six people in the UK work for the government. The rest work in the private sector. And the fact is, when is the private sector going to notice that it is alienating one of its key resources, and that is the people who work for it? When will we get work that is fulfilling and which delivers for the well-being of the people who undertake it? Not everybody wants to be self-employed. They shouldn't have to be for this outcome to be delivered. I am looking for a world where work is meaningful.

That’s what I think. What do you think? There is a poll down below. Let us have your comments.

Poll

[poll id="587"]