

Why do we work the way we do?

Bob Tricker – Comment – Director Magazine, London July 2000

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COMMENT

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The nature of work has changed. For years we have been told that work in the future would be different: a string of jobs, frequent retraining, a continuous learning experience. Forget lifetime employment. Work would be fragmented, uncertain, continuously changing. Forces for change would be global. We had to be flexible, mobile, capable of coping with stress. Of course, we would also have more leisure time, more money and overall our working life would be shorter. Now that future has arrived.

So what? We seem to be working harder than ever. Nine to five no longer applies. Flexitime, part-time, in-your-own time working patterns are commonplace. Self-employment has blossomed. Some work from home. But for others more leisure time is called redundancy and the shorter working life enforced early retirement. But something much more significant has actually been occurring. Our perception of the role of work in our lives is changing.

Of course, changes in the nature of work are hardly new. At the start of the nineteenth century more people worked on the land than in all other occupations put together. In those days work was not something you went to: it was part of your life. It needed the massive industrialisation and urbanisation of the 1800s and early 1900s to bring about a separation between work and the rest of life. Employers now felt they owned the time of their employees. They required good time-keeping, productive work in “their time”, with anything else done in “your own time”. Employees went to work, punched the time clock and received their wages for the hours worked.

My grandfather, an indentured watchmaker, moved from a country town to Coventry, where he spent the rest of his working life in the tool room of the Standard Motor Company. Periodically, the industry slumped, the factory closed and my grandfather was ‘out of work’.

Those were the days of the employer owning the time of the employee. A sight you seldom see these days was typical then - factory workers crowding round the time clock at the end of their shift to be among the first to punch their cards and clock out. But that is social history. What will future social historians write of the work situation at the start of the 21st century? Perhaps that another paradigm shift occurred, potentially as significant as that which happened during the industrial revolution. People had to face up to a new reality about work: once again work had become part of life. Many of us no longer go ‘out to work’. The distinction between the employer’s time and the employee’s own time has become blurred. For some this is because they now work for themselves, just as the farmers, craftsmen and merchants did before industrialisation. For others it was because the relationship between employer and employee has changed. In high technology business – information technology, media, bio-chemicals and the rest – the boss is dependent on the expert. The professionals know more than their boss. Job mobility is high. Opportunities are everywhere. Workers now own their own time. Even my AGA service engineer is now working for himself – out of an office provided by his previous employer.

Of course, we are not quite there yet. There are still manufacturing industries whose workers key on and off work through their terminals. There are some service

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companies, in which the work is highly structured, offering little opportunity for individuality or creativity, and others in which staff are still treated with Victorian discipline. But the pressures are all against that. Call centres, the contemporary equivalent of the mass-production factory, need to provide motivated work groups and stress-reducing office layouts. Retailers, fast-food outlets and restaurants need enthusiastic and well-trained staff, if they are to provide the high levels of customer service that are increasingly demanded.

Which brings us to the key question of the new paradigm. Why *do* we work? Is it because we have to or because we want to? Do we work to get the money we need to enjoy all the things we want and want to do? Or do we enjoy work because it is an important part of our lives?

Over 200 years ago the economist Adam Smith asked, “to what purpose is all the toil and bustle of the world?” answering that “it is our vanity which urges us on...it is not wealth that men desire, but the consideration and good opinion that wait upon riches...”

More recently, Sir Richard Branson in his book *Losing My Virginity* [Times Books/Random House 1998] captures the essence of the new work paradigm, that work and the rest of life are no longer separate:

“A business has to be involving, it has to be fun, and it has to exercise your creative instincts.” “I can honestly say that I have never gone into any business purely to make money. If that is the sole motive, then I believe you are better off not doing it”

Is work enjoyable for those who work for us? (Or should I say with us?)

Branson also stands the conventional wisdom of a dozen codes of good corporate governance codes on its head:

“Convention dictates that a company looks after its shareholders first, its customers next and last of all worries about its employees. Virgin does the opposite. For us, our employees matter most. It seems common sense to me that if you start off with a happy, well-motivated workforce, you’re far more likely to have happy customers. And in due course the resulting profits will make shareholders happy.”

Understanding this paradigm shift helps to explain why the working time directive has not had much impact on the UK’s long-hours culture. We work long hours because we like working long hours. Remember we still do not work as long as our American colleagues; even quite senior executives in America take only two weeks annual holiday. It’s a matter of culture – what one expects. The paradigm has changed. If people really do enjoy their work, the more they work the greater their enjoyment. But they have to be working on their own terms.