

'Bullshit jobs' and the search for meaning in work

In 2013, the innovative anarchist and anthropologist David Graeber introduced the evocative expression 'bullshit jobs' to describe what seemed to him to be an epidemic of pointless jobs. Soon enough the term went viral, rapidly spreading around the world. Graeber unearthed and opened up for debate a major phenomenon – the meaninglessness of work – but the theories and measures he proposed could now perhaps be improved upon.

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In mid-summer 2013 David Graeber published a short essay entitled 'On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs: A Work Rant' in the radical online magazine *Strike!*. He was instantly taken aback by the buzz it generated. The magazine received a deluge of first-hand accounts from workers describing how they had recognised themselves in Graeber's statements. Relying on those accounts and the theoretical tools of his original field of study, anthropology, Graeber delved deeper into these ideas, publishing a comprehensive work on the topic in 2018. His proposition was now well established: bullshit jobs were becoming increasingly pervasive as 'a form of paid employment that is so completely pointless, unnecessary, or pernicious that even the employee cannot justify its existence'². This in turn had a devastating impact on the mental health of workers. To illustrate the scale of this phenomenon, Graeber referred to a poll commissioned by the private research data and analytics group YouGov UK, which had concluded that 37% of the 840 respondents believed that their job did not 'make a meaningful contribution to the world'.

Where did this 'bullshitisation' of work come from?

Although David Graeber can be hugely credited with initiating an international debate on a hitherto relatively obscure subject, it is important to recognise that his explanation for this phenomenon is out of kilter with the main results emerging from the field of labour studies, not least in terms of the phenomenon's origin. In keeping with one of his previous books,³ he maintained that the proliferation of useless jobs had very little to do with any capitalist rationale. Instead, he ascribed its cause to the desire of senior staff to acquire status, and pointed to a quasi-feudal logic. As in the case of the lords and masters of old, what mattered to today's top executives was, he claimed, having a 'an entourage of followers that is both the visible measure of one's pomp and magnificence, and at the same time, a means of distributing political favor'⁴. In other words, the bosses were creating thousands of pointless jobs for the sole purpose of building themselves a court of deferential staff.

1. Coutrot T. and Perez C. (2022) *Redonner du sens au travail. Une aspiration révolutionnaire*, Seuil.
2. Graeber D. (2018) *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory*, Allen Lane, page 9-10.
3. Graeber D. (2015) *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy*, Melville House.
4. Graeber D. (2018) *Bullshit Jobs*, page 176-177.

5. *Conditions de travail et risques psychosociaux [Working conditions and psychosocial risks]* (2016) by Dares surveyed 24 000 workers and is representative of the entire working population in France.
6. These are the professions in which over 10% of the employees gave this answer.

Although that theory may effectively explain some circumstances, it overlooks the fact that managers are under the constant watchful eye of financial stakeholders. Through investment consultancy firms, these stakeholders look at the management ratios on a quarterly basis and exert pressure with a view to securing a permanent reduction in salary costs. This, the widespread development of management based on figures, undoubtedly provides the foundations for job ‘bullshitisation’. Specific management approaches (such as ‘lean management’ and ‘new public management’) aim to monitor work closely so that it meets the expectations of the financial stakeholders. On the one hand, these systems create many executive and managerial jobs which may seem pointless or tedious to their holders but which perform functions within this power mechanism (such as reporting, standardisation, monitoring of tasks, and process management). And on the other hand, employees subjected to these mechanisms see their work become governed by numerical targets and procedures that are completely disconnected from their actual job.

Job meaningfulness is not just about usefulness

The second limitation to Graeber’s analysis concerns the very nature of the phenomenon, which he restricts specifically to the idea of social usefulness: to his mind, a job which has meaning is synonymous with a job that benefits others. However, one major 2016 French survey on working conditions conducted by Dares⁵ offers findings that complicate the conclusions Graeber draws in his work. When asked, ‘In your work, how often do you feel that you are

doing something for the benefit of others?’, only 5% of those surveyed answered ‘never’. Moreover, the profiles most inclined to regard themselves as ‘useless’ differed completely from those who supplied testimonies to Graeber. These people are not, as stated in the book, computer scientists, telemarketers, lawyers, or human resources, marketing or finance managers; they are, in fact, mechanical workers, workers in processing or material handling, domestic workers, cashiers, etc.⁶ Not, therefore, overpaid idlers but holders of strenuous jobs that are often insecure and poorly paid. One might thus suggest that their relative feeling of uselessness (at least before the pandemic) to some extent reflects their social devaluation.

Of course, the testimonies cited by Graeber do not simply convey a feeling of uselessness. Often, they also express a profound boredom at work, or even a feeling of guilt in terms of the impact their work has on its recipients or on the environment. But the Dares survey also shows that, as with feelings of uselessness, boredom at work does not affect skilled workers only. That may seem like an obvious point, but it was not really apparent from the testimonies that Graeber received following publication of his essay.

The many dimensions of a complex phenomenon

In our collaborative work, Coralie Perez and I have suggested a conceptualisation of the meaningfulness of work that has three dimensions: social usefulness (*I believe I am doing work which meets genuine needs*); ethical consistency (*I can work without undermining my personal or professional values*); and the capacity for development (*I can learn and improve myself through my work*). By combining these three dimensions, we have demonstrated that, in France at least, loss of meaning plays a major role in the mental health of workers as well as in resignation decisions.

This conceptualisation has allowed us to carry out a more detailed classification of different professional groups. According to the 2016 Dares survey, factory workers (especially those in processing, mechanical and material-handling jobs) as well as commercial and sales employees find remarkably little meaning in their work. That sense of meaninglessness was echoed by banking and insurance clerks, as well as security personnel – all relatively low-skilled professions.

Is meaningful work then simply the privilege of those at the top of the social hierarchy? In fact, it’s more complicated than that. The workers with the highest score on the ‘meaning’ scale are (female) childcare workers and nursery assistants, and, more generally, care professionals (home helps, cleaners, doctors). This group also includes teachers, trainers, social workers and guidance counsellors. Thus, the act of working with the general public increases the worker’s sense of meaning by enhancing both the feeling of social usefulness and the capacity for development, even if this can create ethical conflicts.

In fact, the sense of finding meaning in one’s work can be found amongst profiles as varied as managers, employees with few qualifications, and workers in small firms. Public-sector workers or workers in associations are more likely to see their work as meaningful than private-sector employees, while women on average consider their work to be meaningful more than men do precisely because they are more likely to work in contact with the public.

Meanwhile, the presence of elected staff representatives, and in particular trade union representatives, has a marked influence on the perception of meaningful work. When there is a staff representative body installed in the establishment where they work, staff tend to be more critical of the quality or usefulness of their job, implying perhaps that the existence of collective representation stimulates critical awareness.

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The impact of the health crisis

The Covid-19 pandemic to some extent altered our perceptions of meaningful work. According to the Tracov⁷ poll conducted by France's Ministry of Labour, 'frontline' health professionals and teachers experienced an increased sense of social usefulness, but also more ethical conflicts. Applauded by the population, they were required to work in conditions far more difficult than before the pandemic in public services that had been weakened by years of budget constraints. As for the 'second-line' workers (including home helps, cleaners, cashiers and security guards), who regarded themselves as serving little 'useful' purpose before the health crisis (with the exception of the home support workers), they now felt that their contribution was appreciated more. The same can be said for social mediation professionals (those employed in social work and guidance, as well as culture and sport initiatives), who needed to support people in difficult circumstances. Conversely, people working in the arts and entertainment industries, who were forced to shut down, lowered their assessment of their work's meaningfulness, in terms of both ethical consistency and social usefulness.

↴ The workers who are the most likely to consider themselves as 'useless' often occupy insecure and poorly paid jobs.
Photo: © Belga



Bullshit jobs are bad for your health

Graeber emphasised how harmful the feeling of uselessness and emptiness inherent in 'bullshit jobs' is to mental health. The data in this area is absolutely compelling: employees who experienced a significant deterioration in the sense of meaning they derived from their work between 2013 and 2016 were twice as likely to suffer from depression as a result.⁸ However, Graeber struggles to pinpoint the reasons for this, despite the ample availability of scientific literature dealing with ethical conflict and lack of appreciation in the workplace.⁹ Johannes Siegrist's 'Effort-Reward Imbalance' model, for example, throws a spotlight on the issue of lack of recognition. The Scandinavian questionnaire COPSOQ, a benchmark for assessing psychosocial risks, enquires into the 'meaningfulness of work' and the sense of 'doing something important in your work'. The 'work clinic' approach, advocated in particular by Yves Clot, establishes how 'prevented work', that is to say, work that is 'neither done nor to do', lies at the heart of ethical conflict and mental illness. Similarly, Christophe Dejours' theory on the 'psychodynamics of work', that we rely above all on others, illustrates how the development of mental health in the workplace hinges on both a 'usefulness judgment' made by hierarchical superiors or supposed beneficiaries, and on a 'beauty judgment' from peers who acknowledge namely one's respect of standard practices.

Graeber's lack of grounding in the discipline of labour studies in his exploration of the 'bullshit jobs' phenomenon can to some extent explain the limited scope of his proposed solutions, which can basically be summarised as the introduction of a basic income. Many labour specialists advocate rather as an 'anti-bullshit' strategy a complete shift in the social paradigm, centred around a democratisation of the organisation of work. Graeber's hope that the introduction of a basic income would allow us to cast bullshit jobs aside is a highly paradoxical proposal from an anarchist thinker who sought the wholesale dismantling of states – something he himself recognised. Even more paradoxical was his viewpoint that bullshit jobs were mainly the domain of highly qualified graduates. Even without looking through the eyes of an anarchist, it seems to make more sense to work towards rebuilding the power of workers over the conditions and purpose of their own work, with the assistance of trade unions and associations¹⁰, rather than wait for the state to release workers from the stranglehold of bullshit by introducing a generous and unconditional income. Democracy in the workplace is the best antidote to the 'bullshitisation' of jobs. ●

7. <https://dares.travail-emploi.gouv.fr/enquete-source/le-vecu-du-travail-et-du-chomage-pendant-la-crise-sanitaire-liee-au-covid-19-2021>
8. <https://dares.travail-emploi.gouv.fr/publication/quand-le-travail-perd-son-sens>
9. For example, he writes that the feelings experienced by telemarketing personnel, who are required to 'ambush' people, is complicated and, in fact, cannot properly be put into words.
10. As proposed by Philippe Davezies: Davezies Ph. (2014) *Individualisation of the work relationship: a challenge for trade unions*, Policy Brief 03.2014, ETUI.