
Improving the Relationship between Work and Health: The Impact of the Future of Work

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Introduction

Our capacity to improve the relationship between work and health depends on the future of work. Gordon Betcherman and Graham Lowe, in their report for CPRN, argue that we, as a society, have a high degree of influence over the future of work – over whether it will be liberating or oppressive, whether it will be rewarding or insecure.

In an essay titled, *Well-Being and Time*, Geoff Mulgan and Helen Wilkinson argue that the most fulfilling activities are those entailing autonomy, demands on skills, and absorption. Psychologists describe these characteristics as ‘flow.’ Work with flow is satisfying and rewarding.

"Many people . . . find leisure time less fulfilling and challenging than work . . . even assembly line workers experienced ‘flow’ more than twice as often in work as in leisure."

Canadians’ Anxiety is Justified

Disturbing long-run trends

Unemployment

Underemployment

Non-standard work

Polarization in incomes, hours, and job quality

Earnings stagnation

New management practices

Weaker institutional "anchors"

Safety net
Stable employment
Worker rights

Each of these changes, taken alone, is surmountable. Taken together, they require a transformation of social and labour market institutions.

In effect, market forces are deinstitutionalizing work. We have to reinstitutionalize it.

Implications

Changing labour markets and weaker institutional anchors load a heavy burden of risk on individuals.

Risk-based systems create both winners and losers.

- Losers risk a downward spiral, leading to social exclusion.
- Social exclusion clearly creates problems of inequality.

But there are also problems of efficiency – which erode the foundations for economic growth:

- People resist change/fight the system
- Human capital goes undeveloped (especially children born in exclusion)
- The consumer base is depressed
- The dead weight costs of public and private security crowd out growth-enhancing investments.

The Social Paradox of Technology

Liberation:

- Telecommuting helps with the work/family balance.
- Technology reconnects people. Letter-writing is back!
- Research and writing tasks have been transformed.
- Hierarchy is breaking down.
- Distances become irrelevant to economic development.

Oppression:

- With no boundaries between work and family life, family gets crowded out.
- Workers at home are isolated, out of the career track.
- Speeding up the pace of work creates more stress.

How can we keep the liberating effects and get rid of the oppression?

The Future of Work is not Predetermined

Despite clear competitive constraints, Canada has room to shape its own workplace, based on Canadian values.

Three interdependent challenges:

- To support sustainable economic growth and improve the quality of life.
- To distribute economic opportunity, jobs, income, and security fairly.
- To foster social cohesion, so that people believe that they too have a chance of being winners.

Governments, employers, community, union, and education leaders can invent new institutional "anchors" for a post industrial society. Together they control at least four policy levers:

- Macroeconomic policy
- Education and training systems
- Distribution of work and time
- Worker representation.

We need to widen the public debate on the future of work – think outside the box on each of these policy levers – that is how to create the new anchors.

Policy Levers

Macroeconomic policy – widen/balance the debate

- Establish employment as a long-term priority
- Base the growth agenda on investments in "intangibles"
- Identify new forms of tax revenue – a BIT tax?

Example:

- Employment targets: need to focus not just how many jobs are created, but what quality of jobs – pay, autonomy, flow, rights etc.

Education and training – still the best insurance policy

- Preserve/improve quality
- Ensure access to PSE – foster saving, enable borrowing
- Provide infrastructure for learning

Example:

- Ensure access throughout the life time. Parents beginning to realize they should start saving early – building up a trust fund for PSE costs. We also need better borrowing systems, so that investment in learning is seen as good collateral.

Distribution of work and time

- Distribute working time over the day, week, year, lifetime
- Rebalance work and family, work and training, work and retirement
- Acknowledge unpaid work, value volunteers

Example:

- Rebalancing time. See it as something fluid, something that can be saved and borrowed. Students, especially adult students, also need to be able to save up time – time to go back to school for upgrading at any time in their lives. So we need both money banks and time banks.

Worker representation – more voice, more personal control

- Give employees a voice in the workplace – "high performance" HR policies
- Enable nonstandard workers to create solidarity – mutual aid
- Reinvent collective representation for a post-industrial economy.

Example:

- Reinvent collective representation. The changing nature of work runs counter to traditional unionism. Collective bargaining focuses on entrenching work rules, rights etc., and has trouble adapting to more fluid forms of work. Unions may have to reinvent themselves to remain viable in their existing circumstances.

Yet a collective voice is essential for greater dignity and respect. Non-standard workers may have to begin to create their own collectivities – mutual aid associations, perhaps. Or a new role for the deployers of temporary workers – offering benefits and other forms of collective security. And small firms need to think through how they can ensure that collective rights are respected.

Conclusion

We face the challenge of rethinking every labour market institution and regulation from top to bottom. We need to pose questions along these lines:

- What biases have we built into these institutions and regulations that actually encourage market forces of polarization?
- To what extent have we stacked the odds that losers will be marginalized?
- Is there a way to ensure that work (no matter how menial) will be liberating, rather than oppressive? Even housework can have flow!
- How can we put the concept of flow at the centre of the way work is organized? – giving each worker some measure of autonomy, a chance to use and develop their skills, and the opportunity to become absorbed in, and committed to, what they do.

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