Bullsh*t Jobs. The Rise of Pointless Work and What We Can Do About it

David Graeber

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ARE YOU A 'DUCT TAPER'?

In 2013 an anthropology professor coined the concept of 'bullshit jobs'. Writing for the political magazine *Strike*, David Graeber proposed the theory that certain jobs are inherently useless or pointless.¹ They waste time and resources, and produce nothing of value. The moral and spiritual damage to people performing tasks that they believe do not need to be performed is profound — the very antithesis of the work ethic that associates work with self-worth. His theory was based on a hunch but borne out by survey data. He expanded this as a subsequent book, which is reviewed here.

GRAEBER DESCRIBES 5 TYPES OF POINTLESS JOB AND ILLUSTRATES THEM WITH CASES

- *Flunkies*, who serve to make their superiors feel important, for example, receptionists, administrative assistants, and door attendants;
- *Goons*, who act to harm or deceive others on behalf of their employer, for example, lobbyists, corporate lawyers, telemarketers, and public relations specialists;
- *Duct tapers*, who temporarily fix problems that could be fixed permanently, for example, programmers repairing shoddy code and airline desk staff who calm passengers whose bags do not arrive;
- *Box tickers*, who create the appearance that something useful is being done when it is not, for example, survey administrators, in-house magazine journalists, and corporate compliance officers; and
- *Taskmasters*, who manage — or create extra work for — those who do not need it, for example, middle management and leadership professionals.

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His contention is that at least 50% of jobs fall into these categories. How and why did we come to this state? He argues that the increase in automation, instead of freeing up people for more leisure time or more time for productive work, has instead led to the creation of 'bullshit jobs'; a moral and political response to the anxiety that people who are *'happy and productive with free time on their hands are a mortal danger.'*

Graeber cites Orwell, *'I believe that this instinct to perpetuate useless work is, at bottom, simply fear of the mob. The mob [the thought runs] are such low animals that they would be dangerous if they had leisure; it is safer to keep them too busy to think.'*²

These jobs, confoundingly, are not more likely to be lower paid, menial jobs but more likely to be in the private sector. Moreover he describes a general rule that, *'the more obviously one's work benefits other people, the less one is likely to be paid for it.'* Graeber contends these result from *'managerial feudalism.'* The idea here is of jobs purely as vehicles of status and income in and of themselves, rather than for any other benefit to the individual or society, and likens the living of this reality to a *'kind of hell.'* Healthcare work is often not highly paid work and the status offered is debatable. Controversially, some aspects of healthcare work could arguably fall into one, or several, of the categories of 'bullshit jobs'.

Consider also, if you will, the GP who 'monitors' a person with severe depression who really needs specialist input and for whom primary care measures have been exhausted; or perhaps offers a patient with hip pain analgesia when they really need a hip replacement (but one is not forthcoming). Are they a 'duct taper'? What about the GP who conducts tests of limited or spurious benefit to the patient in order to complete their Quality Outcome Framework targets. Are they a 'box ticker'? Could a GP ever find themselves deployed as a 'flunky' or a 'goon'? Worryingly, could the GP in question start to see their work as less meaningful and might that have

an impact on the quality of their work and life? Or are we all socialised to see work that we hate or find meaningless as a noble self-sacrifice, one that brings us closer to wealth, power, comforts, and pleasure?

How do we find a way out of this mess? Graeber suggests the solution may be as simple as offering people the Universal Basic Income, removing the need for a relentless pursuit of money and status, and releasing people to perform work in a more naturalistic, productive, and meaningful way. A free society if you will. According to Graeber, a whopping 37–40% of workers in affluent countries already feel their jobs are pointless. If we let them decide for themselves how best they could benefit humanity, he argues, how could we possibly end up with a distribution of labour more inefficient than that which we already have?

David Graeber died suddenly in 2020 having just completed his last book, co-authored with David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything. A New History of Humanity*, published posthumously in 2021.

Emma McKenzie-Edwards,

Emma is an Oxford GP and medical educator. She teaches medical students at the University of Oxford.

Email: emma.mckenzie-edwards@phc.ox.ac.uk

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