

# ‘Meaningful Work in the 21st Century: what makes good jobs good, and what gives them their occasional dark sides’

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## ABSTRACT

Australians are giving more and more time to paid work. Many draw much meaning in their lives from their paid work – whether it is from their pay, the tasks they do, the difference these tasks make to others or their communities, the skills they exercise, the things they make or learn, or the relationships or social connection work brings.

What kinds of meaning do we draw from work, how much does it matter, and how does meaning vary – between people, over the life course, and compared to other things we do? How do workers and employers divide up the spoils of good jobs and bad jobs: is lower pay offset by the pleasures arising from a job in a logical way, and how can bad jobs be made better?

This presentation reflects on how the meaning of work varies between jobs and by socio-economic status. It considers how the terms, conditions and contexts of work add to, or detract from, the meaning of work in our lives. The lecture argues that particular terms, conditions and contexts matter a great deal to the meaning we draw from work, and that what the makers of these terms and conditions do – employers, unions and governments – can help make work more meaningful in lives that are increasingly shaped by the stamp of work. Finally, I argue that good jobs also have a dark side: they can become ‘extreme’ jobs. Changes in the composition of work and weak regulation of working time contribute to these extremes.

## Introduction

A week or so ago Crikey.com published something fresh from their fax machine. It was a memo from newsroom staff to managers of *The Advertiser*. It outlined a litany of problems at the newspaper that had led morale on the newsfloor to reach a ‘very low point’, including abuse, bullying, threats of dismissal, a lack of reasonable direction and leadership, conflicting instructions, bans on certain words and subjects, lack of trust, conflict, news fabrication, unrealistic workloads, excessive hours and unpaid overtime. The memo said ‘We think it is unfair, unhealthy, and unproductive to expect us to be in early, work late, eat lunch at our desks, and not leave the office. We think that with better workload management, less wastage of time and more trust we should be able to be both flexible and more productive’. (What a constructive group of workers!)

The memo concluded with the following words ‘We love our jobs’<sup>1</sup>.

What kind of love is this, and how does it survive such a chilly, menacing climate?

In this talk I want to explore what work *is* to us as workers and as a society. When do we love it, and what does that mean? What is the upside of this meaning, and does it have a shadow, a dark side?

I plan to talk for about 35 minutes, and have time for comments and questions.

I want to explore how such love and meaningfulness can thrive – even in the midst of the conflicting interests that exist in a workplace – and at the same time must be controlled so that it does not lead us to act against our interests (for example, by working ourselves to death).

I also want to reconsider the concept of work as something we want to avoid. Commonly, work is

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<sup>1</sup> Its final paragraph went on: ‘We want to do them well. We understand this will always be a stressful environment, but that cannot be a blanket excuse for the politics, the workloads, and the abuse. This needs to change and we want management to work with us to make that change happen. We honestly believe that if there is cultural change staff will be happier, will work more effectively, and the paper will improve as a result’. (‘Internal memo’, published by Crikey.com on 12 October 2009).

seen as something we want to shirk. In seeing it like this, I think we have under-done the meaningfulness of work – in our analytical research work, and in the practical activities of unionism and management. Work is not all bad and we have not paid enough attention to what makes it good – and how to get more of the good. However, what makes work good, can also make it bad for us: it can trap us in extreme jobs, and for too much of our lives.

On the way through I will introduce you to eleven workers I have met in recent times. These meetings have arisen in a range of research projects conducted at the Centre where I work<sup>2</sup>. Over the past four years we have recorded the views of over 1,200 Australians about their jobs and lives – including people in diverse locations, occupations, industries and income and age brackets – through a variety of research projects<sup>3</sup>.

There are a few messages from these conversations. Most importantly, many find a lot to like in paid work. Like the journalists above, they do not like some aspects of their jobs, but they like *parts* of their working lives – and these parts are remarkably consistent across jobs and workers that are very diverse.

I will discuss four of these positive elements:

- firstly, a sense of efficacy, identity, contribution and/or vocation;
- secondly, the opportunity to learn;
- thirdly, social connection through work; and
- fourthly, positive spillover from work into the home<sup>4</sup>.

I argue that the shift to service oriented work and to para-professional and professional jobs is creating more scope for these characteristics to be enjoyed. However, they are *not* enjoyed in many workplaces. So, in this contribution I want to argue that while we have long viewed work as a bad thing and something we want to do less of, in fact many draw positive things from work. I explore this positive side of work through some examples, and argue that we don't pay enough attention to it as employers, unionists and researchers.

This leads me to summarise the good attributes of work – about which perceptions appear to be widely shared - and how we can amplify them.

Finally, I want to explore the dark side of the pleasures of work and the meaning we draw from them, arguing that we need to *control the consequences of this pleasure* and meaning.

Two angles are relevant to this final argument.

Firstly, the pleasures we draw from work also fuel 'extreme' jobs: in loving their jobs the journalists at *The Advertiser* say they are working much more than they want, putting up with perceived bullying and abuse, and fabricating news. What new voluntaristic hell is this? How does drawing meaning and identity from work – loving being a journalist, for example - fuel unethical, unsustainable work patterns? What role does the starving of meaning in other parts of our lives beyond commodified work – play in this? Is it worthwhile – and practical – to regulate against 'extreme' jobs?

Secondly, engagement in work and its pleasures and meaning, is also motivated by our *lack of* veneration and support for 'not working' – especially for retiring, for caring, for contemplation. We need to speak up for these activities of non-work. As long as we increasingly find pleasure, meaning and identity through paid work, then we find it harder to stop working, to spend time thinking or

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<sup>2</sup> I acknowledge my colleagues who have helped collect and make sense of them especially Dr Pip Williams, Dr Natalie Skinner, Dr Jude Elton, Dr Jane Edwards, Dr Helen Masterman-Smith, Jocelyn Auer, Kim Windsor, Catherine McMahon, Suzanne Pritchard and Jen Manning.

<sup>3</sup> I acknowledge the partners who have helped fund these projects including UnionsSA, the Brotherhood of St Laurence, the WA, SA and Victorian Governments, the Liquor Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union, the National Centre for Vocational Education Research and Lend Lease Communities. Details of the specific projects can be viewed at <http://www.unisa.edu.au/hawkeinstitute/cwl/default.asp>. I am responsible for the content and analysis in this paper.

<sup>4</sup> There are other positive aspects of work, perhaps most obviously the way that it functions as a means to social inclusion and citizenship. However, workers do not talk about this very much; governments do rather more.

caring<sup>5</sup>. What are the consequences of this for our lives and the human condition? Are we creating something we might call ‘anorexic social meaning’ in larger life as we feed our working selves and starve meaning from activities like care-giving, social life outside workplaces, and contemplation?

## Is work ‘a bad’?

Academics, unions and employers generally have tended to view work as ‘a bad’: that is, something most people would like less of, or that we would shirk if we could.

Neoclassical economists have always characterized paid work as a trade off against leisure: people choose between selling their time to employers in exchange for money, or keeping it for their own leisure. (That there might be third choices – care and responsibility for others, for example – doesn’t enter this equation: it is golf or the office. This says a lot about economists).

In this conception, work is ‘a bad’ - something you want less of - in contrast with ‘a good’ – something you want more of. If you get your way, you will work less, in exchange for more of your free time.

Economists are not alone in the academy in characterising work in this way. Most industrial relations theory – with the exception of the unitarist school – positions work as a site of conflict and struggle with the inequality between the power of employers and employees resulting in a need for workers to collectively organize and bargain – with the goal of maximizing their end of the wage-effort bargain<sup>6</sup>. It is assumed that workers want to minimize their effort and maximize their wage, while employers seek the reverse. In this world ‘the worker brazenly accompanies his (sic) labor power right into the workplace and stands protectively by it’ arguing ‘the terms of its sale’ (Rees, 1998: 221 quoted in Brook 2009: 538)<sup>7</sup>.

Unionism is founded on a belief that work is ‘a bad’: it frames work as something that workers need to organize around in order to combat exploitation and poor terms. Unionism is structured to protect against work’s unsafe or deathly consequences, or unfair terms at work. In this light, much of unions’ discourse is about how work is bad, employers are bad, and there is a perennial struggle around work and its terms.

Employers also act as if work is ‘a bad’. Many believe that workers will try to minimize effort, and the ‘wage-effort’ bargain plays out in complex legal instruments, in daily struggles in workplaces, and is a major terrain of political activity in most industrialized countries where a formal labour market exists. The current struggle over award standards in the hospitality sector – and how they should be taken to a common denominator – is an example.

Thus paid work is conceptualized in both academic theory and the practical life of employers and unions as a bad: something we would rather not do.

I am not arguing that work is *all good* or does not involve the human sale of time and effort, characterized by structural power inequalities that must be met by collective employee voice. However, I want to draw attention to the fact that many workers see much in work that is good, that many aspects of our selves are increasingly *made* through work, and that scholars, unions and employers need to recognize that the dark side of work has a lighter shadow. I want to explore what makes a job ‘good’ and meaningful.

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<sup>5</sup> I am not dealing here with the ‘work-spend’ cycle and the material stimulants to working more, so that we can spend more, although I recognize that these are also powerfully implicated in our tendencies to work more. They have been appropriately highlighted by Hamilton and Denniss and Hamilton

<sup>6</sup> Differences in power, and conflicting interests, are appropriately core notions in employment relations (Kochan 1998), and the expression of conflict is *expected* rather than seen as the ‘pathological symptom’ it is seen as in the school of human resources management (Heery et al: 15).

<sup>7</sup> I recognize that an alternative approach exists in the academy around the ‘badness of work’ in the approach of human resources management (HRM) which positions work as needing management, and not essentially a place of conflict. However, HR is essentially the velvet glove of IR. It discursively denies power differences between employers and employees, but expends mammoth effort to manage work relationships, showing that, at heart, workers need to be managed – through softer or harder approaches, and more or less sophisticated technologies, surveillance and systems, including systems made internal to the worker.

## 'Work' for me

I think it is necessary to lay some personal cards on the table here.

I grew up in a farming family that was the archetypical, non-religious embodiment of the protestant work ethic. I was destined to become a workaholic - and I have mobilized every resource at my disposal to avoid that destiny. I have only partially succeeded. My perspective on work is that of a recovering (perhaps former) addict. So listening to me talk about work as 'a good' should perhaps be taken about as seriously as listening to an alcoholic reflect on the virtues of beer.

I know this is more personal information than you bargained for tonight, but chances are that if you are out at a lecture on the meaning of work at 5pm on a Wednesday night in metropolitan Melbourne, you might recognize just a little of yourselves, or someone close to you, in this account.

Personally, I feel a deep ambivalence about work. I love my job, I am very well paid and I find meaning in work. I have enormous autonomy in my work, probably enjoying very good working conditions, high pay and I work with wonderful colleagues. But when I hear a fellow academic say 'I am planning to work until I die', my heart sinks. I think we *should* retire. I think there is more to life than a job. I wonder about the long tail of the protestant work ethic - and the addictive power of work and its power to crowd out other values and activity which leads so many of us to fall for the 'dangerous allure' of 'extreme jobs' (Hewett et al 2006). This wonder leads me to this topic tonight.

## Working more

The meaning and practice of work has changed a great deal in the past three decades. The classical worker in the Australian social imaginary was - and sometimes still is - a particular kind of waged worker. He laboured physically and sweated, whether in a manufacturing plant, on wharves, ships, or down a mine, and he was in the union (McMullin, 1991: 1-14). His labour fits the neoclassical economic conception of work as a necessary, negative choice between labour and leisure. An essential road to livelihood, his work offered few pleasures and many hazards - to health, safety, security and the welfare of his loved ones.

Australia still has many such workers and they are far from immune from injury and death<sup>8</sup>. However, we have seen very rapid growth in the share of service-sector jobs and in professional and managerial employment. Hard physical labour is still with us, but in nothing like the proportion of work that it made up just 30 years ago.

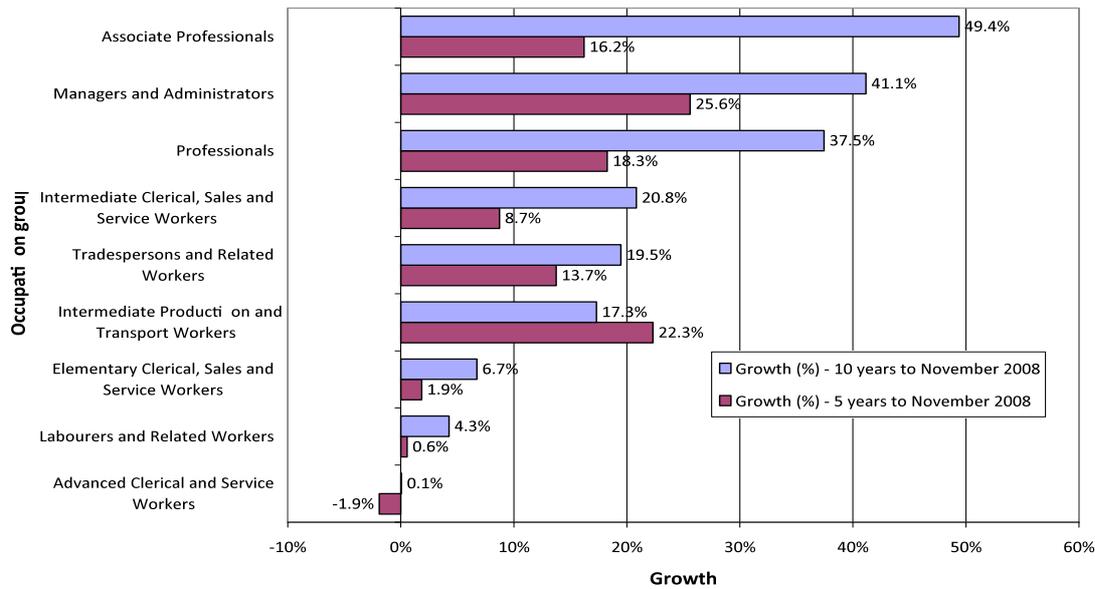
Figure 1 shows how great the growth in associate professional, management and administrator and professional employment has been in the past ten years: employment in associate professional jobs grew by 49.4 per cent in the ten years to November 2008, by 41.1 per cent amongst managers and administrators and 37.5 per cent amongst professionals. In contrast, jobs for labourers grew by only 4.3 per cent and elementary clerical, sales and service workers by 6.7 per cent.

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<sup>8</sup> More than 236 workers' compensation claims for the death of an employee due to work-related causes were accepted in 2006/07. The actual number is higher given that this does not include self-employed or those who did not have dependents.

<http://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/swa/AboutUs/Publications/CompendiumofWorkersCompensationStatistics.htm> (accessed 20 October 2009)

**Figure 1 Growth in jobs by occupation, five and ten years to 2008**

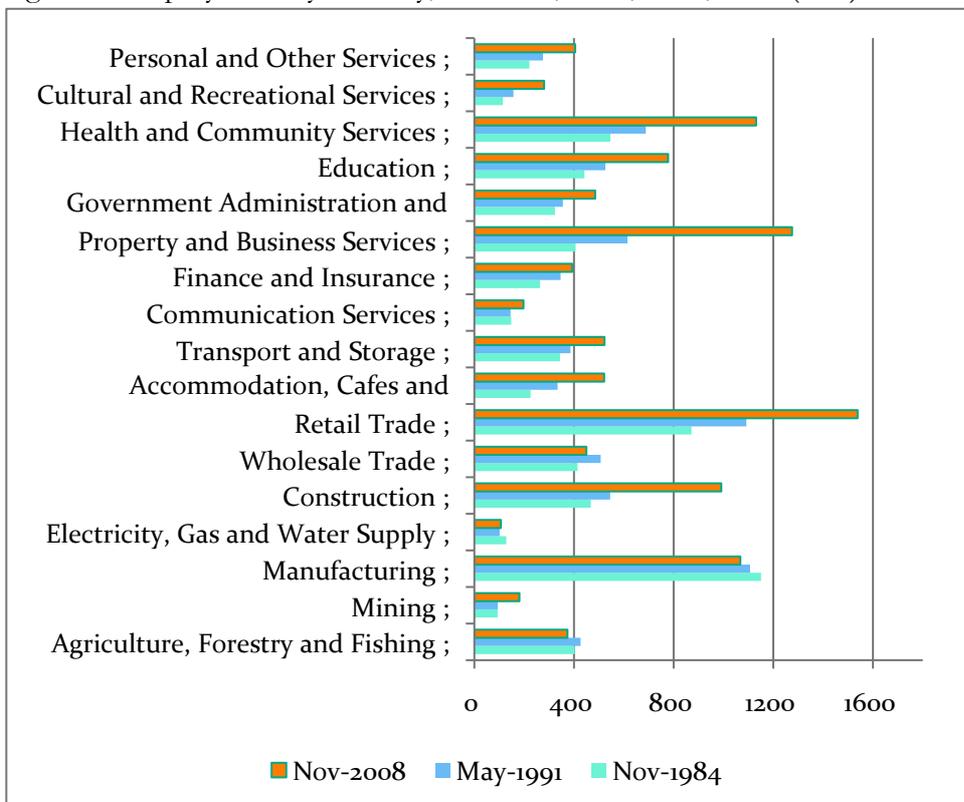


Source: DEEWR (2008) New Jobs: Employment trends and prospects for Australian industries

Figure 2 shows how the number of jobs in manufacturing, agriculture, and electricity, gas and water have declined in the past 25 years, while jobs in the services sector, in health, education, government, property and business and retail have grown significantly.

There are still large numbers of workers who earn their living through hard physical labour - around a million in construction, for example – but as a proportion of workers, they are a shrinking proportion.

**Figure 2: Employment by industry, Australia, 2008, 1991, 1984 ('000)**



Source: DEEWR (2008) New Jobs: Employment trends and prospects for Australian industries

And the future will see more of these trends. Services sector jobs are set to continue to outpace other industries over the next five years: only construction is expected to continue strong growth. Health and community jobs are expected to grow by 158,600 in the five years to 2012/13, property and

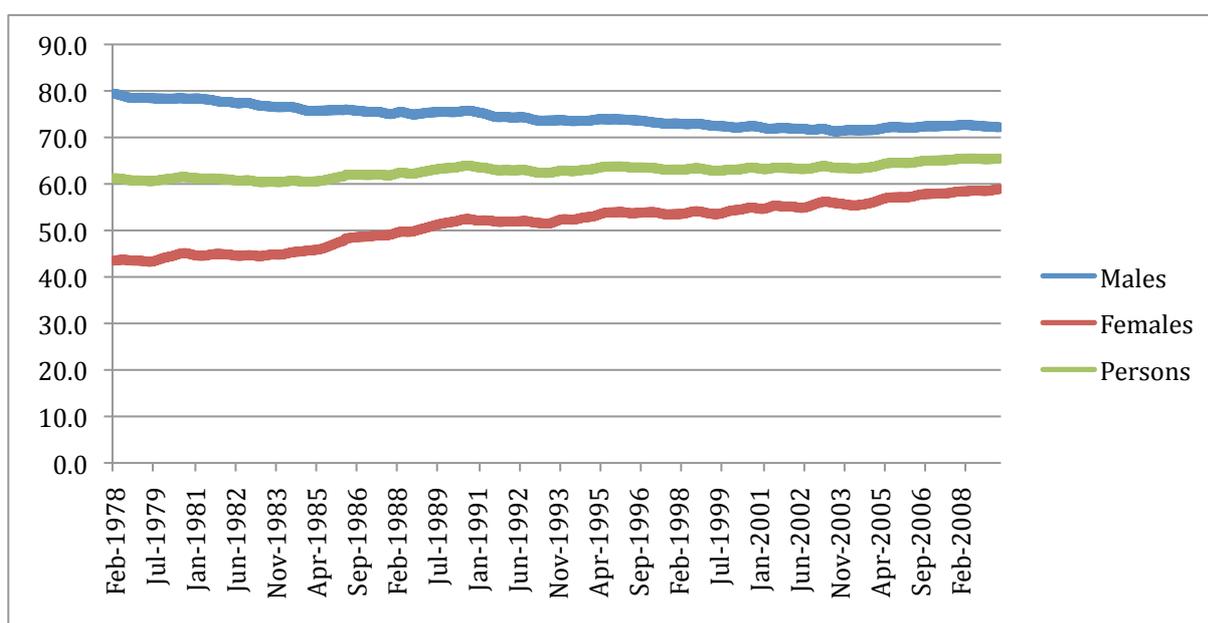
business services by 157,000, retail trade by 133,500, while mining will grow by only 21,400, agriculture by 19,700 and manufacturing is expected to decline by around 29,000 (DEEWR 2008).

Of course, much of this jobs' growth is in part-time and in casual jobs, so changes in the form of employment contract, and the quality of work, also accompany these compositional shifts. Almost a quarter of employees are now casual workers in Australia. There is usually a significant difference in overall job quality and the pleasure that people take from their jobs when we compare the average casual worker with the average permanent worker: job security is an important modifier of job satisfaction.

While the nature of jobs is changing by industry and occupation, our overall engagement in paid work is persistent. Paid work<sup>9</sup> plays a growing role in our lives. Women's employment in particular is increasing, while men's declines (Figure 3).

Young Australians start work early – increasingly in their teens, and in much larger proportions than in other similar countries (and the commercialization of teen communication and the construction of youthful identity through consumption, is likely to drive even more of this into the future).

Figure 3: Male and female participation in paid work, 1978-2008



Source; ABS Labour Force, Australia, spread sheets, table 01. Labour force status by sex, trend, cat. No 6202.0

At the other end of the spectrum, we expect to work longer into our old age, with governments keen to support or require more of this. Raising the eligibility age for the pension is under discussion in several countries as the prospect of supporting the baby boomer bulge into frail, prolonged old age frightens treasuries. Many Australians are keen to work well into their seventies: they cannot imagine not working or cannot afford to stop. Others, especially those who labour more with their bodies, are looking forward to laying down their tools and heading for the back verandah.

Between youth and old age, we spend a lot of time at work. Men are less engaged than they were in the 1960s, but women are participating much more while nearly half of Australian women work part-time, they are increasingly in paid work for many of their prime years.

And, once again, both governments and employers are keen on more of this. Our government requires single parents who need welfare support - most of them mothers – to hitch themselves to at least part-time work once their youngest child is seven years old. Some of this policy impulse is about minimizing state expenditure on welfare. But some of it is about social inclusion, with work seen as the best, surest way to proper citizenship.

<sup>9</sup> Throughout this talk when I refer to 'work' I mean paid work. There are of course other forms of labour including the unpaid labour of care, household reproduction and voluntary labour.

## What are we getting from work?

What do we get from work? Money, most obviously. And our need for money through work is in turn fed by the growing cost of living and our compliance in expansive work-spend cycles (more work drives more spending which drives more work...).

But robust surveys tell us that 60 per cent of Australians would go to work even if they didn't need the money (Pocock 2006). In 2001, almost 60 per cent of respondents to the HILDA survey agreed that they would enjoy having a job even if they didn't need the money. Only a quarter disagreed with this proposition and the remainder were indifferent. Factors like control over when you work, lower stress, and learning new skills – amongst others – were associated with more positive levels of agreement.

Not surprisingly, professional and managerial workers were more likely to hold these kinds of views. However, the pleasures of work were not confined to white-collar workers in more senior positions. Over half of cleaners and labourers and elementary clerical, sales and service workers agreed that they would enjoy having a job even if they didn't need the money. Just over a quarter would not. Paid work is about a pay packet – but it is more than this for most.

What else are we getting? I want to discuss four things: a sense of efficacy, identity, contribution and/or vocation; social connection; the opportunity to learn; and positive spillover from work into the home.

### A sense of contribution, vocation, efficacy and identity

A great number of workers draw a sense of contribution and enjoyment from paid work. For some this is a feeling of realized 'vocation': a deep feeling of response to a 'calling', to a type of work, accompanied by a commitment to what they are doing. For others, it is a sense of feeling good about making a contribution or doing what they do well – whether it is painting a wall, pleasing a customer, caring for a child, growing a crop, making a bed or teaching a student. Others enjoy just parts of their jobs. Psychologists define these kinds of motivations as intrinsic<sup>10</sup>: the rewards we get that are not associated with any kind of external recognition or reward.

### Work as vocation

For some, work is a calling. Portia is a midwife in a birthing centre. Her husband is a caretaker. They immigrated to Australia from the UK a few years ago, have two young children and recently took on a mortgage for their first home. Portia has been working shift work for 27 years – a condition that is generally associated with significantly worse job satisfaction and health outcomes. She would like to have more time at home but works full-time and is the main breadwinner:

I love what I'm doing at work and I'm really fortunate to be able to do something that I'm pretty passionate about...I couldn't wish for a better job...The actual type of work I do is fantastic...It's just such an amazing profession...I think that it's precious to be able to form the relationships that you do [and] to be able to be a professional in your own right.

She rides her bike the short commute to work and this bolsters her fitness which is 'incredibly' important to her. She has job security and believes she is paid well for what she does. She values her professional autonomy. She knows her shifts well in advance and can plan around them. She has learned to value good managers very highly: they are good communicators, have an even demeanour, support learning, encourage and 'are present'. On the down side, she would like more clinical professional support, and more resources: 'everybody is being stretched in the health system'.

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<sup>10</sup> They relate to the higher level needs in Maslow's five-level hierarchy of needs – but it seems that many workers are having their 'higher order' needs for identity and self-actualisation, met through the activities that also bring them, via a wage, sustenance to meet their base physiological needs. Ryan and Deci (2000: 56) define intrinsic motivation as the 'doing of an activity for its inherent satisfaction rather than for some separable consequences. When intrinsically motivated, a person is moved to act for the fun or challenge entailed rather than because of external products, pressures or reward'. In contrast, extrinsic motivation is evident when something is done for a separate or instrumental outcome – like pay, promotion or external admiration.

Portia has a true vocation, a calling. She home schools her children and is religious. She meets Catherine Hakim's definition of a 'home-centred' woman (Hakim, 2004), but like so many women, categorization like this is not so simple. Portia firmly sees herself as a worker with a vocation - as well as a devoted mother. She sometimes feels torn, but predictable shifts, a short bike commute, her supportive colleagues, good management and enough resources – when she can get all these – underpin her attachment to a job she loves. She would not give up her job – though she might go permanent part-time if they can get the mortgage under control: she wants to work in a job that she loves and which extends her.

### Loving learning through work

Like so many other workers we have interviewed, Portia loves learning: 'I'm really into education, right across the board': for herself, medical and midwifery students, school children, and her own family. She loves working:

in an area I was trained to be in, that I have a love for, and that I can actually practice all my skills in. As a midwife you have so many basic skills, but then as an experienced midwife you get extended skills. If you can use that scope of extended skills as an experienced practitioner, then you are lucky.

She values case reviews and reflective exchanges with other midwives about their practice to increase her skills and competence.

However, enjoyment of learning is not confined to professional workers. Kelly is 18 and works in a large hardware store. After three years she is about to be made permanent in the timber section of the store as a trade specialist and she is very happy to finally have stability in a job where – after working in a range of low paid service jobs – she 'felt like family straight away' because of the way she was treated. Job security is very important to her.

Sandy works with Kelly in the hardware store handling special orders which require a lot of product knowledge. She is in her late 30s and a sole parent of two. She previously resigned from her job as a school assistant because she felt 'I wasn't actually smart enough for that'. She says of her workplace:

They make you feel like you can do anything. You rise above a certain level, you've got constant training. You've got so many opportunities...All day I'm learning. It's virtually all day I'm learning. It's never boring. I need to be constantly learning because once I stop, I get bored.

Being in a workplace with formal in-house training makes work very attractive to these workers. Kelly has done all the on-line courses in the firm:

I'm not sure if I'm supposed to but... [when] I've cleaned everything I'll just sit down and I'll just get my product knowledge up there and I've done [every possible on-line course]: forklift driving, gardens, barbeques, special orders, tiles, roofing, everything that's there'.

Learning gives Kelly product knowledge and the capacity to assist customers – plus power that she enjoys:

I had a gentleman the other day, wanting some timber cut and I'd only just recently learned how to use the docking saw. And he goes 'Isn't there enough males here to do that?' And I go 'Well, that's why I learn, so I can do it'. He goes 'Oh well, it's usually the males'. I'm like 'Well, I'm here. Do you want me to do it or not?' And I did it and finished it, and it was all done. Sometimes I like getting those customers just so I can stick it to them. (Kelly, 18, timber specialist)

Kelly is empowered and made confident through her skill development. These workers enjoy helping customers. They find it very satisfying. And they appreciate the fact that in this company, as one put it, 'family comes before work. Work is work and family is family'. This does not stop Sandy from doing work after hours, dropping off merchandise to disabled or old customers who can't get to the shop for example. They also appreciate that the workplace takes account of their lives beyond work in its rostering. Sandy's daughter was being bullied at school so now she starts a bit later so she can walk her to a new school.

Other workplaces are not so flexible. Vince works in the tool shop in the same hardware store,

earning half what he did previously as a machine operator. He is full-time but no longer has to work 12 hour shifts. He prefers the shorter hours. However he would like to use his IT degree and has recently been rejected for a much better paying IT job because 'I couldn't work on Sundays [once a month] because I have to go to church and they couldn't take me for just that reason'.

Many workers value flexibility as well as what they learn at work. They prize learning and – whether high or low paid - 'good jobs' allow them to keep learning – from each other, from experts, from experience and from formal training.

### Social life

As in so many other workplaces, these workers enjoy the social aspects of their working lives. As Kelly puts it 'If you don't feel that you're part of a group, even though it is only work, you will not want to go to work. It's a huge part of it'. She and her colleagues stress the importance of 'relationships that work' – and more, including friendship:

For me, I have a lot of friends here and they're friends outside of work [as well]. Most of my friends are probably from here...I have made some really close friends here and I'll probably be friends for life.

Turning to another occupation, Wendy has worked as a school assistant for 11 years in a school for children with disabilities. Her social relationships are firmly rooted in her working life - much more than for most people:

The people I work with are my family. I got married two and a half weeks ago, and most of my work came to my wedding over my family. Not that I have a poor relationship with my family by any means, but they're the people that are there. I'm there with them every day. Sometimes I work with these people more than I'm home with my husband. So they are the people that get you through your good times and the bad times, and they're the people I want to celebrate with.

Other school assistants we interviewed do not socialize much at all with their colleagues, but they all agreed that it was important 'that you're happy with your co-workers' and several had left jobs where relationships were not good.

Catherine has raised four children and now works as a finance officer in a school; she speaks in similar terms about the social side of a good workplace – as well as illustrating the importance of enjoyment of work, and pleasure in exercising her skill:

I work with a great group of people...they're very family friendly where I work...I also actually enjoy the work that I do. I've got a head for it, and I enjoy it...I can get completely lost for hours creating an excel spreadsheet.

Her description is reminiscent of the 'flow' or complete absorption that positive psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990, 2003) has described in his concept of 'flow'.

Catherine contrasts her experience working for a major bank where she was not supposed to talk to people at the counter 'which I found impossible' and 'it was very 'them and us' in the hierarchy...especially as a female...it was just boss and slave'. Catherine is studying for a degree, eager to increase her skills and their formal recognition. She expects to have her degree by the time she is 50.

Many workers value highly the social relations they make in workplaces. Given that we spend so much of our lives at work it is of no surprise that many our social relations and deep human connections – both our friends and our enemies – are made at work. For many, the workplace supplants or at least *complements* the nuclear family, or extended family, the neighbourhood, the church or club.

Time is a critical element of this relationship building and human exchange with patients, school children, customers, or co-workers.

### The complex pleasures of caring for the aged - against the clock, for low pay

Time is also critical to learning. And it strongly shapes workers overall views of their jobs. This is

very evident in a group of workers who are likely to grow strongly in number in coming decades: community-based aged care workers.

Arthur, Beatrice and Martha (not their real names) work in a large not-for-profit aged care organisation. They care for old people in their homes, showering them, checking medicine, sometimes taking them to the doctor or shopping. They love their jobs: seeing old or disabled people respond to a home visit, seeing them physically improve, and helping them feel less lonely. They enjoy the autonomy of being out in their own car and talk about the 'personal pleasure of watching people's faces' when they visit.

Until 18 months ago Arthur, who is 57, was a safety officer in a mine, earning four times the \$16.80 an hour he now earns as an aged care worker. He finds this job 'more rewarding... especially at my age'.

While there is much enjoyment to be found in these jobs, they are not without significant downsides. Arthur, Beatrice and Martha feel that they are paying a price in lower pay for the fact that they like their jobs. Beatrice says, while she works for a church organization: 'I'm not a charity...we're suffering, as are our clients'. Arthur, Beatrice and Martha's enjoyment of their job is marred by two things: poor pay and low time autonomy.

We never have enough time... I hate that time factor. I saw a lady this morning. She lost her husband a few weeks ago, and we really connected...I had to say 'Listen, I've got to go', and kept looking at my watch. I was empathizing with her, you know, and I felt upset that I had to be forced to [go]. I'm not blaming anyone; that's the way it is. (Arthur)

They talk of having a clock 'ticking inside', one that is wound 'tighter and tighter' as every minute is accounted for on detailed time sheets. 'You are forever trying to catch up' says Arthur, always managing time, calculating it, adding up the minutes and trying to get out and away from clients 'without seeming to hurry'.

You're showering someone, they're slow and in the back of your mind, you're sort of, okay this time clock thing, but outwardly you're calm with them and you're going with them. It's a pretty hard trick to do. Then they have a bad day when they are slow and you can't just make them hurry, you know so you fall behind. You've got to catch that up and and its with you the rest of the day...you have to juggle'. (Arthur)

Arthur is describing classical emotional labour (Hochschild 1979, 2003): the cognitive work one does to seem one way, when one feels another.

It takes the pleasure off why we're here doesn't it? Because we've all said, we're here because we care for people and we want to help them and we want to get rewarded at the end of the day. We do get that. But there is this other side. (Martha)

These workers have internalized a clock, set by their employer and a funding system as they care by the clock. This is classic time control, overlaid with the additional demands of emotional labour.

While Arthur, Beatrice and Martha are doing training in Certificate III, they feel that the constraint on the quality of the service they offer – which is the critical element of their job satisfaction – is not their skills but the time they have available to do the job well: 'Your skill improves but you are pushing against the tide – the time to deliver the quality service' (Martha) which is 'held back' by the level of funding (Arthur) who say s'We do our best, but we're not allowed to do our best. I think that is the biggest problem.'

### Para-legals and plumbers

Enjoyment of the job is not confined to midwives, retail workers, school assistants and care workers. However, enjoyment of a job is not enough to ensure it as a desirable occupation: its *terms* also matter. This is illustrated by the case of Geoff who has worked as a para-legal for many years. He is a plumber by trade because his father felt he should have a trade 'to fall back on'. He is now 63 and a few years off retirement. He 'loves the law', but he had to go back to plumbing a few years ago because loving the law meant he had to work long hours: 'It's a 100 hour a week job'. This led to life threatening health problems and a triple bypass. He 'wouldn't have survived' if he had stuck with the

job he loved. So he is back to plumbing and, while he is working 60-65 hours a week, there is less stress. Geoff is one of many para-professional workers who are caught in a vice where love of their job conspires with its greedy terms to result in long hours, poor health and in the end ‘no life’ – perhaps literally.

The contest between enjoyment of the job and the struggle for time is obvious. While para-professional workers like para-legals can enjoy higher wages as a reward for their long hours and vocational devotion, others find their commitment is met by low pay in a kind of ‘discount for enjoyment’. Low pay for childcare workers is often explained in similar terms: after all, they love their jobs and are uniquely suited for care work because of their gender.

Beyond identity and enjoyment of their jobs, education and social relations workers also talk of the positive things they take home from their jobs to their households: that is, positive spillover.

### Positive spillover from work

Some people take home many good things from work beyond money – which are shared by household members and the larger community. A sense of achievement, of making a contribution and accomplishment, of growing skill and knowledge, and happy social relations at work all send home workers who are happier than those who have none of these things. Children, young people and partners readily recognize these positive dividends (Pocock 2006).

The above accounts point to the things that create that positive spillover:

1. enough resources (especially staffing) to get the job done;
2. flexible working conditions that allow workers to influence their working hours; predictable hours;
3. enough hours to support a living;
4. reasonable – rather than excessive – working hours;
5. supportive management and leadership;
6. opportunity for personal development and skill acquisition and use;
7. time to transfer knowledge;
8. decent pay; and
9. job security.

The significance of each of these factors is validated in large Australian surveys of workers (Pocock, Skinner and Williams 2007, Skinner and Pocock 2008 and Pocock, Skinner and Ichii 2009).

Unfortunately this positive spillover is far from always present: when work is bad, people take home many bad things and there is a large literature about negative job spillover and its consequences for health, well-being and personal and social welfare (Pocock, Williams and Skinner 2009; Voydanoff 2007; Geurts and Demerouti 2003).

The positives that workers draw from their jobs constitute a challenge for employers and unions: to increase the positive and reduce the negative. Questions of ‘time’ are critical to this effort.

### Time

Each of the workers I have talked about is engaged in a struggle for time: school assistants say they ‘are expected to do more in less time’; retail sales people have to work hard to find time to train each other and themselves and to offer quality customer service that they enjoy; midwives need time to improve their professional practice; para-legals and plumbers need reasonable hours so they stay alive, and aged care workers struggle with an internalised clock that constrains care and job enjoyment.

The time poverty in all these kinds of situations has three common consequences: it affects the quality of service and outcomes, it restricts learning, and it undermines job satisfaction. *Enough time* is critical to each of these. Where enough time is available to workers, quality outcomes, skill development and job satisfaction flower; where it is not, they atrophy. That is to say nothing of the consequences for social relations beyond the workplace and to the strength of community fabric. However, we know that these are not inconsequential. In the 2009 Australian Work and Life Index (AWALI) survey, for example, a quarter of employees felt that their jobs often or almost always

interfered with activities outside work and interfered with having enough time with family and friends. Just over half felt often or always rushed and pressed for time (62 per cent of women). What is this doing to social connections beyond work?

### How can we get more of the good out of work?

These workers like learning, they like many aspects of their jobs, and they know what makes a good and bad job.

How should unions and employers respond to midwife Portia, aged care workers Martha, Beatrice and Arthur, plumber Geoff, retail workers Kelly, Sandy and Vince, and school assistants Wendy and Catherine?

Pay and job/hours security must be a significant part of this conversation, but they are very far from the whole story. Issues of respect at work, relationships with bosses and colleagues, workload, the management of time, and skill development, all figure prominently in their commentary about work. They know what a good boss or workplace is, and some can find one.

Many have positive views of their work, and unions need to speak to this positive experience, rather than framing work as 'a bad' that requires union protection. The changes in the composition of the workforce by gender, industry, occupation and tenure require a new language that develops and recognizes the positive side of work, as well as guarding against its negative side. While many workers love autonomy and being skilled and self-reliant, these attributes also make them different employees, unionists - and create new workplace hazards.

There are many challenges for managers. Good management makes a big difference. It is an uncanny experience to interview workers who work in the same organization almost in adjacent offices or wards - in a common policy and profit context - and find what a difference better, or worse, first-line management makes.

Conflicts between the interests of employers and employees are not negated, of course, by the fact that many workers find pleasure in their jobs. How unions and employers, in their different ways can speak to, and build upon, the good in work is the challenge here. But old systems of worker 'voice' don't work well in many of these contexts. Unions already struggle to engage with para-professional, professional and managerial workers and a discourse of disadvantage, opposition and dischord is not attractive to them. It may work to speak more to the pleasure, skill, learning and relational aspects of their work.

This calls for new language, structures and systems of collectivity, including around skill, flexibility, fairness, good relationships, recognition of vocation and commitment to work, and a continuing emphasis upon the management of time at work.

### The dark side of good jobs: Work is a jealous god

I have talked so far about changes in the nature of work, and the fact that many draw positives from work – positives that we perhaps under-attend and which we can better build upon. However, before I finish I want to consider the dark shadow side of this love for work.

More of us give more to paid work, and see good things through work. In the comments of these workers we can see that they are *realising themselves* through their work, their skills and their relationships. However, what are the consequences of this expansive sense of self through paid work, for the social state of 'not working'? Are we starving the selves we make when we are not working?

Ulrich Beck argues that work powerfully constructs identity in the 21st century where 'Everything is work, or else it is nothing', suggesting that we have replaced god with work:

..to provide everything sacred: prosperity, social position, personality, meaning in life, democracy, politically cohesion. Just name any value of modernity, and I will show that it assumes the very thing about which it is silent: participation in paid work. (Beck, 2002: 63).

Some workers agree that we are over-doing work. When we launched the results of our 2009 survey of workers in July this year, they showed that despite the fact that 44 per cent of Australian women work part-time at present (much more than in most comparable countries), a third of all full-time

women would like to work join them and work less (taking into account what this would do their incomes). This desire is very strong amongst full-time women who are mothers: 39 per cent of these would like to cut their hours and cop the cut in wages. (This compares to only 9 per cent of full-time fathers.) This is not surprising when we look at how many full-time women feel rushed and pressed for time *always*.

When we released the research, Stephen Lunn of *The Australian* talked to a professional worker and single-mother of two boys, nine and seven, to illustrate his story (Lunn, 2009). He wrote how she admitted she was 'seduced by the fast-paced, high-level work in her large professional services firm'. However she decided to 'regain control of her life and reset her priorities, not least of which was to be able to meet her two sons, aged nine and seven, at the school gate'. She described the addictive nature of her job:

The appeal of these places is that the work is great, it's exciting, it's challenging. I would love being out on a (consultation), doing the work, being part of a team, working with other fabulous women. Part of the guilt I had was sitting there in my office thinking: 'God, this is great.'

Like so many in her professional life, she worked long hours, and was on call at other times. She employed a live-in nanny who drove the boys to school, made meals, and helped with homework. But it was not easy 'I was outsourcing all that and it caused me great anxiety'. Eventually, with her health suffering, she decided to quit her job and take the pay cut so she no longer missed out on her two boys - except to 'crack the whip over homework'.

Lunn's article bore the heading, 'The struggle to juggle'. I spoke with Pauline a week after the story was published. She told me how her older boy quoted the title back at her with a laugh as she walked them to the park 'No more "struggle to juggle" mummy!' She also told me about her friend who rang to say how 'brave' she was in telling her story publicly and 'admitting that she had failed'.

In this 'masters of the universe' world, one fails if one steps away from paid work to care. When work means so much, 'not working' is to fail.

Loving your job is one thing; but it is a jealous love that admits no other, not even the love of your boys.

This is not to beg the question of the unsuitable terms of the work in jobs like these: they are literally built for 'masters of the universe': unencumbered men. They could in many cases be redesigned to accommodate time out of paid work, and different hours' configurations.

## Conclusion

Is the increasing construction of ourselves through work, and the alignment of the pleasures of work with its hungry demands, in a regulatory environment where the constraints on working time are weak – 'porous' at best, without limit for many in fact – eating away at our social well-being?

Social norms are an important part of any system of labour regulation. They are one of the reasons that *WorkChoices* came to such an inglorious end: the low standards set in that law simply did not accord with Australian social norms around fairness at work. When it comes to working time, social norms and weak regulation are a weak counter to hungry – and rewarding – jobs. The pleasures of work, in a situation of poor regulation of working time, press up against weak regulation of working time and the door swings open to over-work. This sets a new bar for the 'good' worker.

I think the implications of this are especially important for carers – and thus for women: if the best way to 'be someone' is through paid work - and the terms of that work increasingly involve over-work – and this form of identity-making is growing stronger, is it becoming harder to be a carer, to be retired, to be out of the workforce on parental leave? What do we do about the imperviousness of jobs to design to meet the nature of 'different' workers – carers, women, someone who wants time away from work? Do we really want women on maternity leave to, when asked what they 'do', feel they have to describe themselves as 'on leave' rather than as mothers or carers? Do we want men to hide away the parts of their CVs when they worked part-time? Some workers find it necessary to do this.

And what does this mean for a population of baby boomers, who are going to be looking for care

from the next generation, who are work-centred – built through work – and socialized to discount caring time. Will they care?

Or will they be like a wonderful scene in that 1983 movie *The Ploughman's Lunch* where the high powered journalist tries not to look too obviously at his watch as his father is lowered into his grave: after all he might miss a deadline.

Of course, to 'not work' should not require full occupation as a carer: we also need to enable the greater capacity for other honourable human activities: rest, recuperation, contemplation, art, companionship, gardening and the making of community. To enable more of this we may need to reconsider the love we have for paid work, and make sure that in loving our jobs we do not stop loving other ways of being, and starve the social meaning we make in life beyond work - not to mention enabling people to come and go from paid work.

This issue is especially important to women, as we increasingly enter men's world of paid work, on terms men created in their care-less, if brief, bread-winner stage. While the feminist project always contested the male terms of paid work and the reallocation of unpaid work, the failure to achieve either makes liberation through paid work a wicked result: guaranteeing merely the right to perpetual exhaustion and a diminished sense of self – unless one is a care-less, be-suited professional or a full-time worker who joins the 'masters of the universe'.

The eleven workers I have talked about here were all, when working, permanent. Some did not have enough hours, but their stories do not reveal adequately the cost associated with being insecure at work. Enough hours, security of hours, decent pay and a safe job are all vital accompaniments to good work. We need to guard against poor quality jobs – of which we have a great number – and improve their conditions through regulation especially where bargaining power is weak; this includes many casual workers, women, young people and low skilled workers.

To return to workers at *The Advertiser*, love of the job will only get you so far. There is a convincing case for strong regulation of work, so that we can contain our addiction and the worst aspects of lean management, which create extreme jobs and prey upon the commitment of workers whether they be good journalists, aged carers, plumbers, retail workers, school assistants, or professional services workers. And there is a good case for being – for at least slabs of your life – not at work!

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