

GREAT IDEAS FOR BUILDING YOUR EMPLOYER BRAND

The problem with work

"The daily routine of most adults is so heavy and artificial that we are closed off to much of the world."

Ursula Le Guin, 1929 - 2018

Work – the thing we spend much of our time doing – is having a bad time of it these days. As research suggests a growing disillusionment with jobs as well as employers is emerging. But what's gone wrong? Why has the nature of work become such a contentious issue? And how can companies attract and retain talent or re-engage and re-energise employees, and make them love their jobs again? From Boreout to Burnout, in this paper, we look at some of the criticisms of working life and consider how companies are changing to meet the needs of the modern workforce.

With employment figures surging across Europe, you could argue we're living through a golden age of work. In the developed world there are more people than ever with jobs. Education is now wholly focused on training employability, regardless of the subject being studied. And being employed is widely considered a 'moral duty' as it means contributing to the expansion of the free market, the worthiest of causes since economists pronounced the 'End of History' some 26 years ago.

Losing purpose

But in researching modern working life, it doesn't take long to stumble upon an ever-growing list of discrepancies between the promise of employment and the actual experience of it. For many, work lacks meaning and for some, the activities of employers appear ethically spurious. Its benefits are not distributed fairly either, and it's also bad for your health. In 2015, a YouGov poll found 37% of British workers consider their job meaningless, with a further 13% saying they weren't sure if it was or not – that's basically half of the UK workforce with no sense of purpose in what they do for a living. Deloitte's 2017 'global ethics' survey revealed only 40% of North American executives believe their



company is ethically 'strong', while the UK's Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA) found 50% of British workers are unconvinced their employer is committed to ethical behaviours.

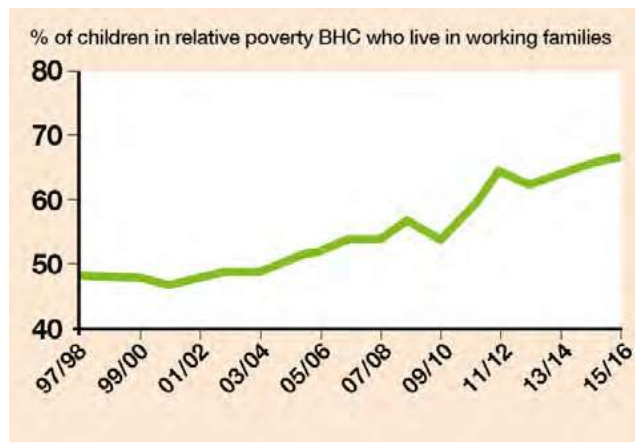
Pay gap

Regarding benefits, the gender pay gap is widely publicised and an increasing scourge for employers wanting to appear committed to fairness and equality. But perhaps the most outlandish inconsistencies reported today are the chasms that exist between executive and workers' pay. In the 2017 Bloomberg Global CEO Index, for example, CEOs in the USA were shown to earn 265 times more than the average American worker, while the UK (201), the Netherlands (171), Spain (143), and Germany (136) also featured in the top ten worst offending countries.

Rank	Economy	Pay Ratio	CEO Pay, \$ Million	GDP p.c. PPP 2017/2016
1	United States	265	\$14.25	\$53,820
2	India	229	1.46	6,372
3	U.K.	201	7.95	39,545
4	South Africa	180	2.21	12,270
5	Netherlands	171	8.24	48,177
6	Switzerland	152	8.5	55,952
7	Canada	149	6.49	43,469
8	Spain	143	4.89	34,245
9	Germany	136	6.17	45,341
10	China	127	1.87	14,713

Source: Bloomberg, International Monetary Fund.
Note: Reflects companies' most recent disclosures of pay as of December 2017.

Furthermore, the rise of the gig economy and zero-hour contracts, comprising over five million people in Europe, while making overall employment statistics appear strong, isolates a large swath of the workforce from basic rights such as sick pay, minimum wage and unfair dismissal enjoyed by those with secure jobs and permanent contracts. And another discouraging statistic which undermines the role of work is that having a job no longer guarantees a life free from poverty. In the UK, for example, 67% of children living in poverty are from 'working homes.'



State of mind

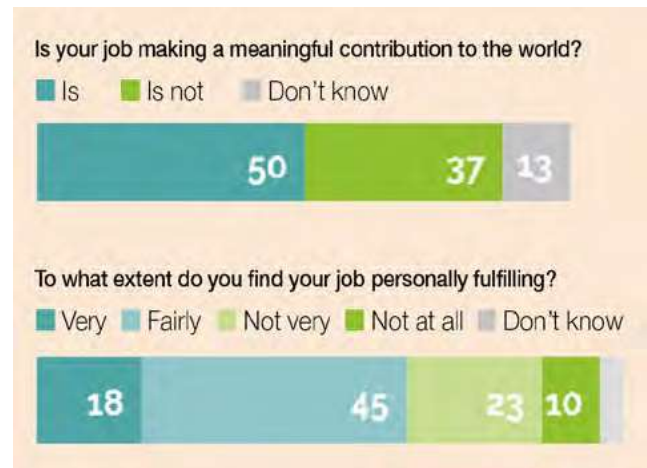
The most prominent gripe against modern working life, though, is that work is bad for your health. Mental health, in particular, is a major concern for employers. The World Health Organisation (WHO) says one in four people are affected by mental illness, and in the UK 15% of workers experience mental health issues at work, while 13% of all sick days are now attributed to mental health related problems.

While ongoing socio-economic, geopolitical, demographic, environmental and technological factors undoubtedly exasperate individual anxieties, the issues outlined above concerning pay, precarity, lack of meaning and distrust at work surely augment personal health problems.

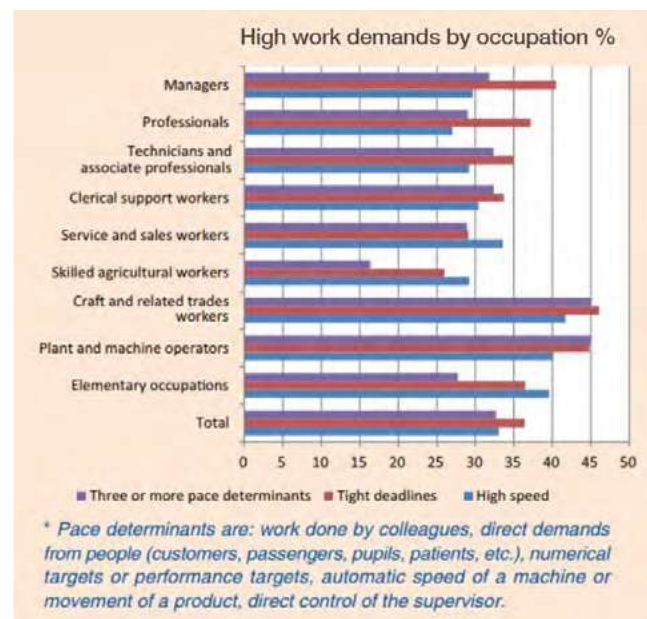
It's easy to link low income and insecurity to poor mental health. The Royal College of Paediatrics recently confirmed higher rates of stress of those living in 'poor' working households. In recent years, though, researchers have made curious observations about how working life negatively impacts even educated and comparatively affluent workers who are secure in their jobs.

In their 2008 book *Boreout!* Peter Werder and Philippe Rothlin described a condition they say is found in most modern office environments, where bored employees perceive there is no meaning in their jobs, develop work-avoidance strategies that simultaneously give the impression

they are busy and in demand. These include taking longer to complete tasks and faking enthusiasm and effort by staying late and skipping lunch. This is far from fun, though, as Boreout sufferers claim extreme anxiety and stress through fear of being found out.



Burnout is another stigma associated with working life today. In the European Working Conditions Survey, 33% of EU based workers say working at high speed to meet tight deadlines is normal. The same percentage also claim frequent interruptions prevent them from getting work done. The report confirms that intensive and disruptive working styles have negative consequences on mental health, with 14% saying work is a constant worry, while over 25% report psychological strain through trying to hide or suppress the fact they're struggling.



Switched on

Even for those that don't suffer (or don't believe they suffer) from health problems associated with modern working life – the European Working Conditions Survey confirms some people find intensive work rewarding or interesting – there is still a private cost to choosing or engaging in this 'always on' lifestyle.

In the UK, for example, 75% of workers admit they can't help responding to work emails at home because technology enables them to, with 37% in another study claiming it makes them more productive. However, according to clinical psychologist Professor Vicki Culpin, this behaviour of staying connected to our technologies throughout the night causes people to sleep poorly because it limits the brain's ability to fully 'switch off.' High levels of sleeplessness and 'poor sleep' she says exposes people to greater risks of catching colds, as well as suffering (in extreme cases) depression, dementia, strokes and heart attacks.

While social media, news and entertainment are part of the problem, Culpin, in her forthcoming book, *The Business of Sleep*, argues that presenteeism and long-hour working cultures are the biggest culprits. Unawareness of the health implications of poor sleep, she adds, is rife and Culpin labels our era the 'age of foolishness' where one-upmanship at work, despite its promise of short term financial gains, has no long-term benefits on individual well-being.

What else? The European Working Conditions Survey further reveals workers are usually too tired do household jobs (21%), can't commit enough time to their families or adequately look after children (11%), or undertake care responsibilities for sick or elderly relatives (3%). Commuting times are increasing across Europe and long commutes are a direct cause of unhappiness amongst workers. And, certainly, for younger generations, work is seemingly never-ending too, with average retirement ages slowing creeping up throughout the continent.

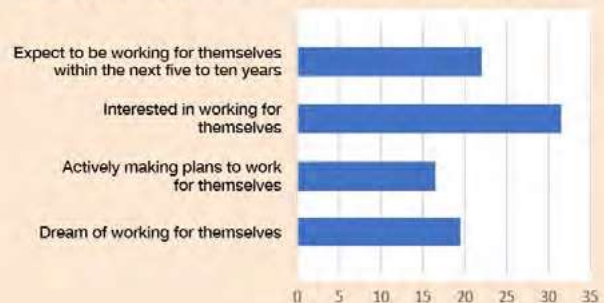
Alternative approaches

So, yes, work is up against it. And mounting dissatisfaction caused by the reasons discussed above is taking its toll on employers. As referenced at the start of this article, talent is dropping out of the workforce at a high rate, as more people are lured away from the trappings of a traditional career and towards the perceived dignity of self-employment – better health and well-being, greater autonomy, the opportunity to do meaningful or ethical work, or where the fruits of their efforts are fairly rewarded.

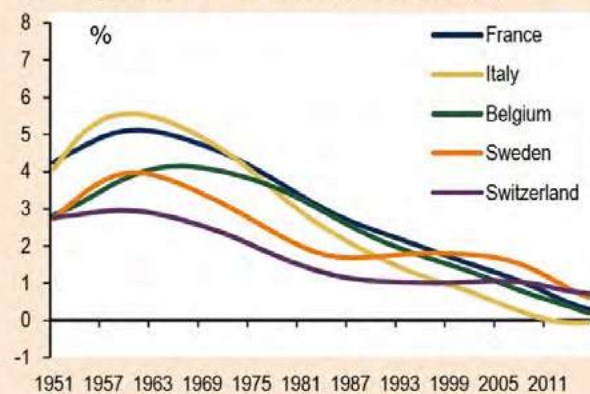
Perhaps more alarming, however, is the ongoing decline in productivity across the developed world. It seems despite efforts to normalise intensive working patterns, overall

output per worker remains comparatively poor to what it has been in the past, with no indication it will recover.

Employment plans of 18-54 year-olds in UK (%)

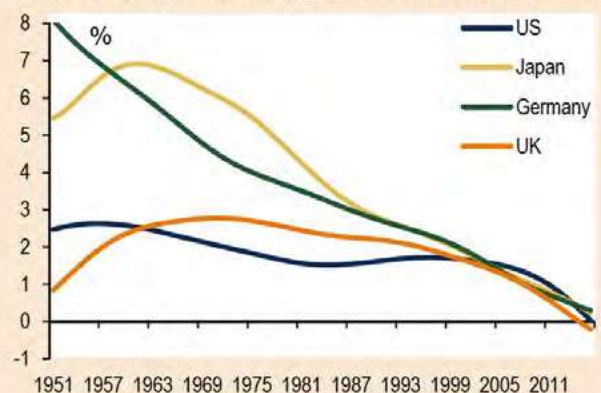


...through much of the developed world (%)



Source: BofA Merrill Lynch Global Research, Conference Board

Trend labour productivity growth has slowed markedly



Source: BofA Merrill Lynch Global Research, Conference Board

To meet these challenges head on, things clearly need to change. And in some instances, they already are, with

companies reporting favourable results for retention and productivity after acknowledging these issues and finding ways to make working life more meaningful, ethical, fair and healthier for their people.

What good practices look like

Companies suffer if employees have little pride in their work, or where they believe their job lacks meaning or that it somehow makes them complicit in unethical behaviours. If the rewards are unfair or if it has a negative impact on their health – whether they realise it or not – their productivity and morale, too, will decline over time. Employers must, therefore, work hard to instil a sense of pride in their personnel through embedding a workplace culture that promotes purpose, personal growth, health and well-being.

The first stage in achieving this is to define exactly what the company stands for, as well as what it means to work there. Otherwise known as ‘the brand’ and ‘employment brand,’ these two factors should always match up through clear consistencies in how they’re marketed and implemented.

Messages and initiatives play critical roles in engaging and uniting current employees behind the brand and its vision, as well as in attracting new people into the business through raising awareness of a company’s employment brand in the market. The aim should always be to try to emphasise how your brand is different and encapsulate the type of people you want the business to be associated with – what does good look like? Which qualities from your current employees do you seek to emphasise above others?

Employee engagement surveys and conducting audits of the talent attraction, engagement and retention processes can help tease out what these things are. Cross functional involvement in establishing brand and employer brand messages is essential, as is appointing designated employee advocacy leaders to facilitate the process and embed cultural change.

Valuing everybody and giving direction and purpose through learning and development programmes is usually an easy win. Conceiving benefits and rewards that match the brand’s ethos, linking brand building strategies with other processes – e.g. customer service – as well as aligning the organisation with perceived ‘positive impact’ causes, such as charitable or environmental activities, will also ensure success.

Being open to and creative around flexible working helps people meet personal obligations and responsibilities, avoid stressful commutes, provides empowerment by giving them greater control over their working lives, and ultimately, reduces stress.

In terms of the proactive elements involved in attracting talent, refining recruitment systems so that all candidates – whether successful in their job application or not – enjoy positive recruitment experiences, is a must. And many companies now participate in talent community building, utilising ongoing networking and other marketing touch points to ensure their brand remains ‘top-of-mind’ for prospective candidates. So when the company is ready to launch a recruitment campaign, it’s already one step ahead of its competition, in a tight talent market.

Positive and in-depth onboarding processes, too, help retain the momentum of recruitment campaigns and ensure no inconsistencies between perception and reality emerge.

If employees are engaged, then they’ll want to help and it’s wise for companies to enlist the support of staff in brand and employer brand building activities. We’ve already mentioned using employee advocacy leaders to roll out internal initiatives and spread positive messages, but in the digital age, providing access to and training people to leverage digital channels is equally significant. Whether it’s promoting products and services, raising brand awareness or highlighting how much they enjoy their jobs, giving employees the freedom and tools to participate in brand building online is a smart move.

Sending regular company updates and content sharing suggestions, utilising videos and infographics and testing employees’ knowledge to ensure consistent and accurate messages, can maximise results. And the more channels collectively utilised, the greater exposure and impact gained.

To see what some of our clients have been doing to meet the needs of the modern workforce, please visit <https://try.nigelwright.com/great-ideas-for-building-your-employer-brand/> and download the full report, where you can access several case studies from various industry perspectives.

