

INTRODUCTION – WHAT IS WORK?

What do you do?

How many times have you, in completing a form, come to the field marked ‘occupation’?

Whether you want to travel overseas, buy insurance, get medical treatment, rent property or apply for a loan – apply for anything, for that matter – what you do for a living is apparently an indicator of the risk you pose to a creditor, landlord, corporation or country.

We live in a job-centric world. What we do doesn’t just sustain us, it defines us. After your name, your profession is often the most important thing to know about you. Known, you are less a stranger. Unknown, your very personhood is up for question. The vocation that attaches to your name can change laws: the law of attraction, the law of motion (if you’ve seen how quickly people move to respond to ‘important’ people, you’ll know what I mean), even laws of lands can apply differently depending on the status conferred by your job title.

Job titles tell us where we fit in society, taught this as young children. We were asked “What do you want to be when you grow up?” (Note: *be* not do.) We envisaged our future selves through the lens of a job, as teachers, doctors, veterinarians, scientists, astronauts, artists, and so on. That job would represent our projected future best self; a worthwhile purpose to be pursued, the key to a fulfilled life.

It is hard to escape the conditioning that your job equals who you are. When you disclose your job title to someone and it isn’t exactly the image you want to project, you might hasten to add something like, “But, it’s only temporary until I...”. Everyone understands. The explanation matters.

If you don’t have current employment, your identity still needs a job title. You can call yourself a homemaker, job seeker, retired and so on, as long as it’s something. On a popular reality television program, a contestant’s description labelled her a ‘retired teacher’.

Apparently, whatever you currently do with your life is less important than whatever you once did for an employer.

Young people are told they can do anything, but how to get there is less definite. Their impossible task is to choose the right study path as though they can predict the ups and downs of life and know who they will be in the future. The pressure to get it right is a significant and unfair burden that contributes to youth depression and anxiety.

*My Year 12 Life*³ is an Australian documentary in which 14 teenagers record their thoughts in a video diary during their last year of high school. They tell of education that is not just homework pressure dogging their everyday lives, but the making of their futures, even though in all likelihood they may be studying for a job they will do for no more than a few years, if at all. Make the wrong decision, and their potential will be wasted, or so they think. They don't know that the subjects they choose – or fail to choose – are not a life sentence.

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Why do you work?

If asked, most people reply along the lines of, “To pay the bills.” “If I won the lottery,” they say, “I’d quit working.” Our actions suggest otherwise. We work at many things that have nothing to do with earning an income. Volunteering, coaching our kids’ sports, practising music, playing golf, gardening, crossword puzzles – it’s all work, and we do it even though it doesn’t pay the bills.

Our desire is not to escape work; it’s the job that enslaves us, our lives dictated to by someone else’s agenda. How much we earn, how much time we have for ourselves when we

can have that time, where we live, and the opportunities for our children all depend on the job we find ourselves in.

Imagine there is a world where you somehow have one winning number for an upcoming jackpot lottery. When you see an advertisement offering positions for people who have winning lottery numbers, of course you apply. In exchange for a regular wage, you are required to turn up to work and, day after day, process your number following a set procedure. Through a series of machinations, your winning number will be matched with those of others who, like you, hold a winning number to an indefinite future winning entry. Your job is not just dull, it's mind-numbing. Despite you asking for more responsibility, your supervisor has shown little interest in training you for other parts of the number combination process, or in the suggestions for improvement you have offered. You're tempted to resign from this job, but what else would you do? There aren't a lot of opportunities for people with numbers. And you have a regular income you don't want to lose.

One day you hear your number has been correctly matched and the company has won millions in the jackpot. Your usefulness to your employer is over, and sure enough, you are told your services are no longer required. You receive a small payout and a finishing date without even being allowed to see if you can be useful elsewhere. It seems so unfair – it was your contribution that helped to win the money. You get a measly payment, they get the millions, and you are on your own.

This story is, of course, made up, but the situation is real for millions of workers. You can follow all the rules: study hard, go to college, start at the bottom and be prepared to earn your rewards, but these don't guarantee you will not end up in a dead-end or insecure job, one that barely pays enough to survive, or do a job you love for an employer you don't. After a time, your world starts shrinking. Life becomes what's left after work. The sameness of

commuting, clocking on, clocking off, commuting, recovering from work, getting ready for work and doing it all over again feels little like the life journey we anguished over at school.

Before industrialisation, meaningful pursuits were open only to those born to privilege and means. Those not so fortunate eked out a living by supporting the lifestyles of their social superiors: running their households, making their goods, teaching their children, farming their lands and paying them taxes for the privilege. With modern offices and factories came jobs, which meant anyone could establish their independent means and afford the sort of goods once reserved for the wealthy.

Noble titles were replaced with job titles. The old class system revolved around divisions of wealth, status and power, and was replaced by one of equals where universal access to education potentially opened the opportunity to pursue any job a person desired. Except no one observing the world today could describe our society as classless or equal. The once overtly classed society is now the more nuanced society of class structure based on your job. Once we could tell someone's class by their dress and their speech. Today we ask, "What do you do?"

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Jobs are so enmeshed in our concept of living it is hard to believe they are a relatively new phenomenon. Three decades ago, management consultant and author William Bridges wrote:

The job is a social artifact, though it is so deeply embedded in our consciousness that most of us have forgotten its artificiality or the fact that most societies since the beginning of time have done just fine without jobs. ... Before people had jobs, they worked just as hard but on shifting clusters of tasks, in a variety of locations, on a

schedule set by the sun and the weather and the needs of the day. The modern job was a startling new idea – and to many, an unpleasant and perhaps socially dangerous one. Critics claimed it was an unnatural and even inhuman way to work. They believed most people wouldn't be able to live with its demands. It is ironic that what started as a controversial concept ended up becoming the ultimate orthodoxy – and that we're hooked on jobs.⁴

Once those who governed realised the benefits to their own careers of taking care of those who owned the machines, they set out to enable a new social order to keep the wheels of industry turning. Employers were elevated in status to somewhere between god and the church and were granted access, not just to the nation's citizens, but all of nature's bounties so they could create more jobs. Before long, the only worthy economy was the one fuelled by jobs.

There was no limit to the number and types of jobs employers created to keep their economy turning. No sooner than one job was established than another was created to serve it. Jobs that had no purpose other than to support another job proliferated. Anthropologist David Graeber called them “bullshit jobs”:

...up to and including the creation of whole new industries like financial services or telemarketing, or the unprecedented expansion of sectors like corporate law, academic and health administration, human resources, and public relations. And these numbers do not even reflect on all those people whose job is to provide administrative, technical, or security support for these industries, or for that matter the whole host of ancillary industries (dog-washers, all-night pizza delivery) that only exist because everyone else is spending so much of their time working in all the other ones.

Worse, says Graeber, is the perversion that society values them above the jobs that provide essential services:

...there seems a general rule that the more obviously one's work benefits other people, the less one is likely to be paid for it. ... A world without teachers or dock-workers would soon be in trouble, and even one without science fiction writers or ska musicians would clearly be a lesser place. It's not entirely clear how humanity would suffer were all private equity CEOs, lobbyists, PR researchers, actuaries, telemarketers, bailiffs or legal consultants to similarly vanish. (Many suspect it might markedly improve.)

A world filled with bullshit jobs leaves everyone resentful. Co-workers resent the unfairness that the real work isn't shared equitably. Workers who nurse, teach, collect garbage and otherwise keep our communities going resent being underpaid and undervalued. As for the bullshit workers, says Graeber, there is no "dignity in labour when one secretly feels one's job should not exist. How can such profound psychological violence ... not create a deep sense of rage and resentment?"⁵

You landed that right job, the one that matched your abilities, personality, interests and ambitions, only to find it isn't making you happy. It's not you; it's them. Jobs are purposefully designed to limit personal contiguity (the degree of connection between the work and your interests, preferences, personal circumstances). Your job was never intended for your satisfaction.

"It's as if someone were out there making up pointless jobs just for the sake of keeping us all working," puzzled Graeber. Which, of course, is the point. The primary

purpose of a job is not your fulfilment, happiness or potential. It is a mechanism to deliver a continuous supply of labour to keep factories churning out products – products that you will buy because your job provides you with the income to do so. Your job fuels the corporate profit cycle. The measure of national health is not how many people live safely or comfortably or with adequate food or human company, but jobs and GDP: how many people worked to make things to buy and sell. History contrived to turn the industrialists, we once called robber barons, into society's ultimate benefactors.

That the economic system cares about jobs, not jobholders, was illustrated by (one of Graeber's bullshit sectors) financial analysts' responses to American Airlines' decision in 2017 to lift the wages of their flight attendants and pilots.⁶ The raise made good business sense. It was a proactive move to stop American losing its staff to its higher-paying rival airlines, Delta and United. The stock market did not see it that way.

JP Morgan's airline industry analyst, Jamie Baker, downgraded American's stocks, describing the decision as "troubling ... a worrying precedent"⁷. On CNBC, he said: "Unfortunately the American move today has emboldened unions' and 'led them to believe you can ... ask for whatever you want.'" Citi analyst, Kevin Crissey, was equally scathing: "This is frustrating. Labor is being paid first again. Shareholders get leftovers."⁸ The shares of American Airlines fell but so did other airline stocks as analysts anticipated they might follow suit and increase wages.

A world where the interests of employers have been placed above those who make those profits possible, adds to workers' feelings of futility. Futurist Glen Hiemstra writes of the crumbling viability of jobs for sustaining the global community:

In the past three decades the social and economic fabric that created this employment system has frayed and now is rending before our eyes. Around the world floods of

young people face economies in which there may never be a sufficient number of jobs by the standard definition. In older industrialised nations the ability of employers to pay both good wages and benefits is increasingly challenged.⁹

It wasn't supposed to be this way. Economist John Maynard Keynes¹⁰ famously predicted in 1930 that within a hundred years, the need for anyone to struggle for a living would be over. He used the rate of productivity enabled by technical inventions – “In the United States factory output per head was 40 per cent greater in 1925 than in 1919” – to calculate that continued growth would lead to people having less work to do. He reasoned that a century later, each person working 15 hours – around three hours a day, five days a week – would be enough to complete the physical work needed by society. Keynes even suggested that we would have to share the work around so that everyone could experience the sense of contentment that comes from productive effort.

He proposed that, although it was still a considerable time away, “there will be no harm in making mild preparations for our destiny, in encouraging, and experimenting in, the arts of life as well as the activities of purpose”. Living idly like the wealthy would be “very depressing”, wrote Keynes:

For they have most of them failed disastrously, so it seems to me – those who have an independent income but no associations or duties or ties – to solve the problem which has been set them. I feel sure that with a little more experience we shall use the new-found bounty of nature quite differently from the way in which the rich use it today, and will map out for ourselves a plan of life quite otherwise than theirs.

Almost 80 years later, an analysis by a group of scientists gives Keynes' theory a new perspective. A reduction of work, equitably distributed amongst the population, was not just a destiny offered by technological advances. The 2014 study¹¹ modelled the rise and fall of every civilisation throughout history using a predator-prey model called human and nature dynamics (HANDY), and found that “despite the common impression that societal collapse is rare, or even largely fictional, the picture that emerges is of a process recurrent in history, and global in its distribution.” In every case of societal collapse, they found a common cause: the depletion of resources beyond a point the society could remain sustained.

On the question of whether modern civilization is similarly susceptible. It may seem reasonable to believe that modern civilization, armed with its greater technological capacity, scientific knowledge, and energy resources, will be able to survive and endure whatever crises historical societies succumbed to.

The answer, according to the researchers' modelling, shows we, as an advanced society, are *more*, not less, susceptible to collapse. By comparing our world today with the most closely matched scenarios in history, the researchers warn that an impending collapse will be “*due to an inequality-induced famine that causes a loss of workers, rather than a collapse of Nature*” (their italics, not mine).

Keynes predicted that, given a choice, people would desire less labour so they could replace that work with endeavours that fulfilled, pursuits in the “arts of life” and “activities of purpose”. He was right. People, led by the Millennial generation whose experience of work has been student debt, job insecurity, wage stagnation and labour inequality, have grown disillusioned with jobs.¹² As jobs prove incapable of delivering the promises made, a new attitude to work is emerging. We are increasingly seeking whole-person endeavours, not a

diminished version of ourselves working what has long been only a theoretical 9 to 5. We don't want to have to choose between making a living and making a life.

At this point, we should make the distinction between 'jobs' and 'work': jobs are a function of an employer's activities; work is an extension of the person performing it. Work is something in which you are a primary beneficiary, whether it be emotional, financial, intellectual or social. With a job, the employer is the primary beneficiary, the fruits of your sweat purchased at the cost of your wages. To illustrate, two people stand side-by-side, pulling a lever to manufacture widgets. They must pull the lever 100 times from 9 in the morning to 5 at night with a half-hour break at midday. Person A has no stake in the effort other than the wage earned. That's a job. Person B is learning how to use a machine as she has plans to buy her own one day. She cares about the work, not the job. She thinks about ways to achieve better results, treating the job as a guideline to achieve outcomes, not a stricture. The massive demand placed on emotional labour from jobs that give back nothing but a wage, prevent satisfaction and motivation from developing. (The term 'emotional labour' was coined by sociologist Arlie Hochschild in her 1983 book, *The Managed Heart*.¹³ It refers to the feelings and expressions required to perform a job, or the need for workers to repress how they feel about their job or their employer.)

By all accounts we are perfectly positioned for a shift from productivity-based activity to work that adds value to communities: we have technological capabilities that require less human labour; personal desire for reduced toil and more fulfilling activities; and future survival that depends on reducing the total hours worked and distributing them evenly across the population. What prevents us from achieving what we want and what, according to the HANDY study, we must?

This question requires a complex answer, one that addresses at a minimum the role of governments that promote the need for more jobs because that is how their economic models

make them look good, and the role of enterprises that manipulate continuous consumption to drive greater profits. If anything, our current system of jobs is geared not to spreading less work to more people but to concentrating work, and thus wealth, to as few and as select a group of people as possible.

No wonder it is so hard to find satisfaction from our jobs. In the recesses of our minds, we know there is much that is wrong or futile about them. Despite our desire to serve our greater needs, like our long-term well-being, there is little to guide or support how to do this – everything in the current system takes us back to the same path: work more, work harder, please the employer.

Digitally savvy consumers are not content to passively accept the old ways of business. Fickle and outspoken, they are forcing enterprises to re-think how they operate. In their scramble to stay one step ahead of the competition, enterprises must turn to new digital technologies and adaptive workforces.¹⁴ This change has opened an organisational mismatch that employers have generally been slow to act upon. The result is the current state of the global workforce, where half of job seekers are unemployed or underemployed, while employers can find only enough trained workers to fill half the available jobs. And of the people who have a job, most – 85 per cent – of workers dislike or hate their job.¹⁵

People are saying they want to do work that feels meaningful. Employers tell us they can't find enough workers with the skills necessary for the digital era of business. Educators tell workers they need qualifications, but don't have any stake in whether those so qualified ever find work. Politicians tell us the answer to our future is more jobs because it makes them popular. Science tells us that more jobs might not allow us much future at all. These conflicting interests make for compelling reasons to re-evaluate our priorities and approach to jobs.

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To the person who has a life to gain from satisfying and sustainable work, this book is for you. It is for you, also, who questions the sense of a system that isn't making us universally prosperous, happy or healthy.

This is actually three books compiled as one. Book I is our history of jobs. If we want our future to be different from our past, it helps to understand our industrial past and how legacy practices drag down our ability to realise a better world of work. Book II tells of the transition of business from its industrial past into the digital century. Book III explores the notion of career success in our present and still evolving digital world. It suggests the needs of employers and a career that meets your personal goals don't have to be mutually exclusive.

Dividing the material into three books allows you to choose how you wish to read it. You can pick through the chapters in any order to suit your interests and situation.

So, why *The Michelangelo Project*?

The artist Michelangelo needs little introduction. His work survives as a legacy of his extraordinary talent. While you and I might never achieve his type of success, there are more similarities than you would imagine. Despite the differences in the ages, Michelangelo offers us a model of a mastered career. He entered his career during a period of social, political and economic change. During the preceding Medieval period, painters and sculptors were craftsmen rather than artists, producing devotional objects to support the church teachings rather than creating works of art.

Like his notable contemporaries, Raphael and Leonardo Da Vinci, as the increased secularisation of daily life afforded greater freedom for individual expression, Michelangelo followed his career path on his own terms, often defying those in positions of authority and

the established norms to do so. He resented being limited by labels and closed mindsets, so he would divine his own approach and decide how to achieve the expectations he set for himself.

His life is a lesson in the importance of self-learning, self-reliance, a resistance to titles and categories, an openness to possibilities, and the importance of practical skills when facing the new or unknown. Michelangelo worked hard, not just to perfect his skills, but to apply them as he saw fit. He once said, “If people knew how hard I worked to get my mastery, it wouldn't seem so wonderful at all.”

The *Michelangelo Project* is an envisioning of a world where we all, Michelangelo-like, have the skills for a self-determined career so that, like him, we can embody and apply our talents and be defined by our abilities, not the jobs we may happen to occupy.

Before we move on, however, just a couple of points of clarification.

I use *enterprise* to cover any business endeavour from small to large business, but also the not-for-profit and public sectors engaged in doing business. By *organisation*, I mean the internal infrastructure of people, systems and processes that come together to implement the will of the enterprise.

Finally, I know from my experiences with organisations that the status quo is sticky. People like the familiar, and when they stake their means to their success on it, they don't want to see it taken away. Any criticisms of this book may well be justified, however, in a world that is full of opinions but short on meaningful action, if it opens debate on how to achieve a better future of work, the book will have achieved its aim. In the meantime, I hope this book gives you another view of work, so you can re-evaluate your approach to doing the work you want.

We begin by meeting Mari, a member of the Millennial generation who represents the changing face of work as we proceed into the digital century.

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- ³ “My Year 12 Life,” *Australian Broadcasting Company* (2017).
- ⁴ William Bridges, “The end of the job,” *Fortune Magazine* (September 1994).
- ⁵ David Graeber, “On the phenomenon of bullshit jobs: a work rant,” *Strike Magazine* (August 2013).
- ⁶ Mitchell Schnurman, “American Airlines pays workers more than it has to, and it pays the price on Wall Street,” *Dallas News* (September 14, 2018).
- ⁷ Mary Schlangenstein, “Airlines Plunge After American’s ‘Worrying Precedent’ on Pay,” *Bloomberg Quint* (April 28, 2017).
- ⁸ Tae Kim, “Airline shares decline as Wall Street worries the stocks will become a poor investment again,” *CNBC* (April 27, 2017).
- ⁹ Glen Hiemstra, “Daddy, what’s a job?” *HR Leader Newsletter* (May 2011).
- ¹⁰ John Maynard Keynes, *Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren*, Talk given in Madrid (1930).
- ¹¹ Safa Motesharrei, Jorge Rivas and Eugenia Kalnay, “Human and nature dynamics (HANDY): Modeling inequality and use of resources in the collapse or sustainability of societies,” *ScienceDirect, Ecological Economics*, vol. 101 (2014): 90-102.
- ¹² Noah Smith, “Burned-Out Millennials Need Careers, Not Just Jobs,” *Bloomberg* (January 9, 2019).
- ¹³ Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: The commercialization of human feelings*. (California: University of California Press, 1983).
- ¹⁴ Timo Elliott, “Digital Transformation Is About How, Not What,” *SAP News Center* (October 3, 2017), <https://news.sap.com/2017/10/digital-transformation-is-about-how-not-what/>.
- ¹⁵ There have been multiple studies in all the advanced economies that provide relatively consistent figures for and causes of the levels of employee disengagement. This statistic comes from the 155-country survey conducted by management research firm Gallup for its 2017 *State of the Global Workplace* report.

Chapter One – Through the Looking Glass