

HEALTH AND SAFETY

The balance of work and leisure in industry

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'Balance' has been a powerful and beguiling myth, used to sustain the economy and society during the industrial period. Now, as the UK enters a post-industrial phase, it is time to challenge such easy assumptions. Less work overall may not mean more leisure for all.

The nature of work is changing radically, with globalisation, the transformation of technology and changes in work organisation. The balance requires recalibration, at the very least. It is not enough to leave matters to the 'hidden hand' of the market. The philosopher Adam Smith, who is often blamed for many of the defects of capitalism, argued that economic activities had to be situated in the cultural context of moral concern, such as prevailed in the Scottish Enlightenment. He believed in capitalism with a human face.

As the 2001 Nobel Laureate in Economics, Joseph Stiglitz, argued, discussions of employment need to be in terms of social justice and societal well-being. As chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers to the American President, and then as Chief Economist at the World Bank, he was well placed to witness the intellectual and moral bankruptcy of free market fundamentalism, as preached by the International Monetary Fund. In his *Globalisation and its discontents*, he has been outspoken in his criticisms.

Marking time on working time

Work has long been a topic of interest. In *Three Men in a Boat*, Jerome K. Jerome observed that he liked work: 'I like work; it fascinates me. I can sit and look at it for hours. I love to keep it by me: the idea of getting rid of it nearly breaks my heart.'

It has been fashionable in the UK in recent years to express concern about 'work life balance', while at the same time flagrantly disregarding those European Union Directives whose purpose was to provide that balance. In the context of occupational health, the UK system is now being compared with European counterparts, weighed in the balance, and found

It is assumed that 'balance' can be achieved between work and leisure in industry. Balance and equilibrium have been common themes in science since Newton, deriving from astronomy, and underpinning first physics and then economics. The philosopher Stephen Toulmin argues, in *Return to Reason*, that this comfortable assumption has been based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the approach to the three body problem adopted by Newton, which was interpreted as providing a view of astronomy based on equilibrium. This paradigm was then applied to physics and used as the model for other sciences. In Europe at the end of the seventeenth century, after thirty years of war, there was a yearning for peace and stability, and the idea that a model for this could be found in the heavens proved hard to resist. A closer examination, whether of astronomy or of economics, however, reveals that chaos has always been inherent, and that cosy equilibrium relied for its foundations on a 'science that never was'.

In the balance

Chaos and uncertainty are as uncomfortable today, in the post-industrial world, as four hundred years ago, in the pre-industrial world. It suited those in authority, during the industrial period, to argue for 'balance', rather than revolutionary change. There are again, at the start of the new millennium, good reasons why authority figures in the UK present issues of work and leisure in industry in terms of balance, but the reasoning may be flawed. There are alternatives.

In the European Union, we talk of social partnership and social dialogue, with a 'balanced' relationship, which enables the development and agreement of Directives concerning improvement in working conditions. In France, as well as enforcing the 48 hour maximum working week, as set out in the EU Working Time Directive, the working week has been redefined as 35 hours, with any additional working time treated as overtime. As a result, workers and their families are finding more time for leisure, while income from work is not reduced.

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In the UK, the rhetoric of employers' organisations and government is in terms of deregulation and voluntarism, in the quest for improved productivity and competitiveness. Directives on working conditions are dismissed as 'red tape', and employers claim the right to undercut international competitors by reducing social costs. As a result, the UK continues to have the longest working hours in Europe, combined with a level of productivity which falls well below that of international competitors. This is not sustainable. It will change as a result of the European Commission review of the Working Time Directive in 2003, but the resulting situation is hard to predict.

Experience of working life impacts on the work and leisure of individuals. In a society such as the UK, where social class continues to influence the lives of workers and their families in a manner not matched elsewhere in Europe, we are not all in the same situation. For example, although working hours may be of similar duration, the level of autonomy in work is greater among managers than workers. In a culture which emphasises the right of managers to manage, rather than the right of workers to participate in the improvement of working conditions, as laid down in European Directives, the quality of working life suffers. Furthermore, it makes little sense to talk of leisure in the context of unemployment. Jerome K. Jerome observed, in *Idle Thoughts of an Idle Fellow*: 'It is impossible to enjoy idling thoroughly unless one has plenty of work to do.'

It is increasingly understood that in the modern economy, where contracts of employment are often short-term, and where workers must expect to experience many changes of job, that employability is crucial. This means that periods of unemployment are not periods of leisure since there is a requirement to develop and maintain employability. Short-term unemployment is now discussed as a transitional labour market, while long term unemployment is recognised as being damaging to health.

Framework

The underlying imbalance in the UK is profound and systemic, even in occupational health. In the UK, the core legislation on occupational health, the Health and Safety at Work Act, fails to meet the requirements set

transposed into the national legislation of all member states, sets out the responsibility of employers to undertake workplace risk assessments, and the responsibility of governments to provide access to occupational health services to all in the country concerned.

In the UK, when dealing with risk assessment, the proviso is added 'in so far as is reasonably practicable', thus imposing precisely the kind of economically derived conditions which are explicitly precluded under the Framework Directive. With regard to occupational health services, the government has chosen to fall back on the existence of the National Health Service, which does not incorporate a national occupational health service. When a patient seeks advice from a GP, it is likely that the medical examination will be of the individual, with little account taken of possible links with the workplace, or of the medical condition of other workers. Indeed, the GP has no means of making such connections.

The dividing lines between employment and health are not static and immutable. The days of control by medical experts have passed, posing interesting challenges.

The European Commission, in their 2002 Communication *Adapting to Change in Work and Society*, invited the European social partners (the employers' organisations and representatives of the workforce) to consider the issue of stress at work as part of the agenda for the European social dialogue. This is in recognition that:

- research has now demonstrated links between stress at work and the whole range of occupational illnesses, including musculoskeletal disorders and coronary heart disease
- work organisation has been shown to play an important role
- employers have legal responsibilities, as laid down in the Framework Directive
- a series of high profile compensation cases have demonstrated that the courts are beginning to take a serious view of the impact of stress at work
- occupational health and safety, or healthy work, is an integral part of the European Employment

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From cradle to grave

The National Health Service was founded as a cornerstone of the Welfare State, envisaged as providing coverage from cradle to grave. Occupational health was not incorporated into the NHS on foundation, and the NHS still lacks the professional, institutional and legal structures for occupational health which are found elsewhere in Europe, in diverse forms. Nevertheless, the workplace is an arena for public health, which affects us all, from cradle to grave. The Health Development Agency now dismisses this argument, saying of workplace health promotion: 'Been there, done that'.

Perhaps the starkest example of the linkage between the workplace and public health is found in Southern Africa, where work organisation and the living arrangements of migrant workers served to fan the flames of the pandemic of HIV/AIDS, and where economic and social life is now being devastated as a result. A generation is being decimated, without the issue of leisure arising. Few employers are unaffected. Public service professionals are dying faster than they can be trained.

It is fashionable to invest in 'national missile defence', providing elaborate protection against unlikely high technology attacks. Somehow 'workplace health defence', protecting the health of the working population, has been given less priority. This may change, as it is recognised that there are new threats. Occupational anthrax, encountered by post room workers in the United States, apparently as an outcome of terrorist activity by American defence scientists, affects people by virtue of their employment, and spreads by using the public postal service. The answer will not be provided by new levels of technological protection, but through a healthier approach to politics and society.

The long term

The case of asbestos reminds us of the importance of taking a long-term view. Workers are reaching retirement age today, after looking forward to increased leisure, realising that they have contracted asbestosis or mesothelioma as a consequence of workplace exposures decades earlier. The resulting compensation claims have brought down many

Leisured executives sought to argue that compensation claims for mesothelioma should not be accepted from workers who had worked for more than one employer in the industry, as the precise origin of 'the fatal fibre' which caused the illness could not be proved. The House of Lords rejected this argument in forthright terms.

The recent falls in the stock market, and the uncovering of creative accounting malpractices by senior corporate executives, have exposed the assumption during our working lives that we would be provided for in our old age. The years of North Sea oil revenue in the UK were used to finance tax cuts and then fuel the process of privatisation, not to lay the foundations for a secure period of leisure, which should follow hard work in industry. It is instructive to compare how similar income streams have been used in Norway.

In light of all the medical research which has been conducted and published, in the UK and internationally, ignorance is not an acceptable defence. Legal, financial, technical or medical expertise can be outsourced, but moral responsibility remains.

The way forward

In the post-industrial world, it can be harder to distinguish between work and leisure. I am writing this at home. Am I at work?

We identified the traditional exposures involved with industry, and, through closures of factories and mines, have reduced the levels of traditional accidents and illnesses. There are new potential threats.

- Do we know that it is safe for young people to use mobile phones?
- Do we understand the health consequences of prolonged work with computer terminals?
- Is research being undertaken on conditions in 'the new Satanic mills' of call centres?
- Have we learned to keep our eyes, ears and mouths shut, when deregulation is invoked as the justification for outsourcing, limited inspection of health and safety conditions, and the use of child labour?

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Nobody knows all the answers. There is unlikely to be one best way. Government is unlikely to know best, though we must expect a continued flow of top-down initiatives, one stop shops, league tables, auditing and modernisation.

We have identified flaws in the assumptions on which our economy and society have been depending and recognise that there could be benefits to be derived from more active engagement in Europe, in the context of European Employment Strategy and European Public Health Strategy. A 'balanced' and

sustainable approach would be to work with others at the level of organisations, communities and regions, sharing experience and learning from differences. This is in fact the European approach, under the European Employment Strategy. The European Commission provides open co-ordination, calling on member states to develop national employment action plans, commenting on them with reference to the 'pillars' of entrepreneurship, employability, adaptability and equal opportunities. They highlight good practice and a process of social benchmarking', and facilitate a process of continuous improvement known as 'soft law'.