

# Working Futures

Martin Morgan looks at work and well-being in the 21st century, the rising stress levels at work and for the unemployed.

## Changes in the Work Place

I think we are all aware of the difficult times that we are living in, the austerity based around the economic collapse, high unemployment and conversely, we've got people who are over-employed. People in work get more and more piled on them in very stressful circumstances and this leads to people feeling very over-loaded and often unable to cope. Some of the difficulties with work in our contemporary society are caused by rapid advances in telecommunications, technology generally. There is a rapid transition of what was essentially an industrial society into a technological society. So this has made it quite difficult for people to keep up. People generally don't like change and they particularly don't like rapid change. It's very interesting that a few decades ago there was always the idea that technology would make our lives easier, that we'd have much more leisure time. Now we have ended up in a very stressful situation in which technology is actually making us work harder. That's one of the fundamental reasons why stress levels are going through the roof.

Then on the back of the telecommunications issue there is globalisation. Because telecommunications are so advanced now, that's made the world so much smaller. Even though there are significant benefits to it, there's also more of a dark side. What we are seeing is that people are having to interact with lots of people from different cultures, different races, different values and belief systems, some of which they are not familiar with. This is changing work culture in a way we haven't thought through. When you have rapid changes, the way business has to operate changes with that. It has to have new products, it has to have new ways of working and when you are in a work-place that has to do all that, it's really hard for people to manage.

The other problem we've got is that the pace and tempo of work are increasing. Again this is linked into technology but also into the fact that people have got much more to do. Everything's

speeding up. People are doing more work, they are working longer hours and there is an expectation that they will execute tasks quicker than ever before. Not everyone can do this happily or easily and again this can be a real problem. There's also the problem of the economic downturn and the difficulties people have with finding and keeping work at the moment. There is pressure on job roles, merging three people's jobs into one and just the general principle that everyone's having to do more with less.

When we look at how these changes are experienced by employees within organisations – statutory agencies, private sector or charities – what we find is that there are much less stable patterns of work. Whereas before, my mum used to tell me: 'In my day people used to be able to walk out of one job in the morning and be in another job by the afternoon', those days are long gone. There is no way that that would happen in contemporary society. People don't have the fluidity or the opportunity now to pick and choose their work. Some of the more pernicious elements of this are things like short term contracts, part time work, the changing business models that people aren't always familiar with. There are things like hot-desking, where you don't actually have a personal space any longer. People have a real problem with that; you feel like an itinerant, you don't know where to put yourself. Then there's the ideal of working from home. People feel really good about that, but actually it also has a down side. People tend to work much longer hours, a lot harder, when they work from home, as well as juggling commitments that kept them there in the first place.

## Workers' Rights

Rights at work are being eroded. As well as short term contracts there are attacks on employees' rights. Because it is a highly competitive environment, it's very easy for companies to cut things like wages, holidays, and other benefits. And since the Thatcher government in the 1980s,

there has been a constant dilution of union powers. I know that people have different ideas about whether this is good or not, but it does have an impact on how work is structured in our society.

Technology allows the scrutiny of work as never before. With things like CCTV, you are monitored at work. Or if you think about a call centre, people can log every activity you make. It is not uncommon for someone to come and bash you round the head in a call centre because you are not doing enough. This constant scrutiny is very different from anything we have had to deal with previously. Then because we are in a period of tumultuous change, people go into change fatigue, they get to the stage when they have had enough and they just cease to function. Or they literally go into a state of paralysis where they can't take on board any more changes in a positive way.

### Work Life Balance

There's a term called work-life balance, which most of you will be familiar with. The general idea is that work should not be the over-encompassing element of your life. Things like family life and leisure pursuits must be factored into a balanced timetable of activities. We have talked about people working longer – they are spending much more time at work so it's getting skewed much more towards work. Then with the mobile phone, you can be always at work. And that's not good for you. For those of us who work in mental health there's a thing called type A behaviours, which are characterised by perfectionism and being very driven. Then they go off and have a heart attack at 40 and die. So it is not a good thing, and the whole system is gearing people much more towards those types of behaviours.

Older workers are very seriously disadvantaged in terms of modern employment structures. Half the difficulties they have is that they haven't grown up with this technology and it's often

much more difficult to keep abreast of it. And it changes so rapidly. Once you've learnt one thing, that is not the end. It keeps going on and on. It never stops. There is a requirement to continually upskill. But if that is reduced to just learning technology after technology after technology, people don't want it. They'd rather do pottery or something nice.

There are unprecedented levels of work-place stress. We know that over £25bn per year are lost to mental health issues in the work-place and that's primarily based on people's experience of stress. There is a need for people to develop a more resilient self.

### Work-Place Stress

I just want to quickly run through what we mean by work-place stress. What we are talking about is what we call a stressor, which is a demand that is made upon a person. When you have got a whole heap of stressors, that is our experience of stress. Stressors in the working environment can be physical, mental, social or organisational. A social stress could be falling out with your work colleague, an emotional stress could be working in a very stressful job like the health professions or police. Organisational stress could be things like too much

work, really horrible work patterns and so on. There can be acute and chronic stressors. An acute stress could be a sudden incident or change that happens in the work-place. A chronic one can be ongoing conditions which are really detrimental to people's health, such as a poor environment. We know that some people are more vulnerable than others and this goes back to the idea of resilience.

Stress can manifest in a number of ways. It can be physical, for example, you often get people who complain of things like a bad back, which could be caused by stress rather than anything else. Or mysterious ailments, emotional things like irritability, bursting into tears, being very



angry, mental ones where you develop a diagnosable mental health problem. You have problems, concentrating, thinking, paying attention. Then there are behavioural ones which are often linked into things like not coming into work, or not doing your work well, or just slinking off two hours before you're due to go home. There are quite specific signs of organisational stress and these are things like high levels of sickness absence. Most commonly people are signed off for stress, anxiety, depression or with muscular skeletal difficulties often, as we saw, a bad back.

### Presenteeism

Obviously there is going to be decreased productivity, poor industrial relations. There is a fairly recent term which has been coined called *presenteeism*. This refers to when people don't actually go off sick, despite being unfit for work. They will come in and be completely unproductive. They are present but they are not actually doing anything. People are in a very fearful culture and if they are off sick, they worry that they are somehow seen as aberrant, they'll be sacked. So you end up with this very perverse behaviour where people come in when they are not well. They should not really be there, and of course, that also has a really detrimental effect on everyone around them. Obviously, when you have got a very stressful work-place you are going to see a very high turnover of staff.

### Well-being at Work

I just want to talk about the well-being at work agenda. There are a number of government policies that have been designed to address the issue of work-place stress and ill health. Probably the one that people know about is called *Working for a Healthier Tomorrow* and this is specifically to do with things like how do we support people within these environments to stay at work. From

this particular policy we've got things like 'Fit Notes'. I'm sure some of you are aware that if you go to your GP, you don't get a Sick Note any more, you get a Fit Note, which says you are well enough to go to work or you can stay off for a couple of weeks. There are also Fit for Work Schemes, to enable people with the most common complaints to gain support in certain services that are dotted around. Interestingly enough, the Coalition government has continued with policies that were instituted by the former Labour Administration, which is unusual.

### Workfare

You can't really talk about health and well-being at work unless you talk about people who are not at work. I'm sure people are very much aware of the *Welfare to Work Programmes*, that are geared towards getting people who are off sick back into work. This is causing a whole heap of disastrous anxiety. It really is being very poorly managed. I've seen people in absolute floods of tears, practically suicidal, on the basis of what they are being forced to do. That is partly to do with the mechanics of it, very poorly designed assessment which does not look in any shape or form at the complexities of what people have to do when they go into a work-place.



Work-place stress. Illustration by Henry Holiday of Lewis Carroll's *The Hunting of the Snark*

Next year we are going to have what's called the universal credit, which comes out, I believe, in April 2013. The idea behind the universal credit is that it puts all the benefits together. It tries to ensure that if people do part time work they will be better off than if they were just on benefits alone. So even if you do just a couple of hours, you should be better off, and you won't be penalised in the way the benefits system does to you now. Unfortunately as things have developed, this scheme has taken a less than supportive turn in the last year or so. This is particularly the case with the thing called the *Work Capability Assessment*. What used to be

Incapacity Benefit is now going to be what's called a 'Migration', where people's eligibility for benefit is being reassessed. Then they will either go on to what is called Employment Support Allowance, or if they are deemed fit for work, they will go on to Job Seekers' Allowance. This is what has caused most of the problems, particularly with the client group I work with, people with mental health problems, but also for anyone with any form of disability.

One of the strangest things for me is that we are hearing all this stuff about how it is really positive for people with disability to go back to work. I believe it is, but some of the statistics that have been bandied around are quite erroneous, because over the last decade at least, employment for people with all disabilities has actually risen steadily. The one exception is mental health. That has continued to go down.

That's my whistle stop tour of the current status of work. Over the last couple of years the rhetoric around work has been changing. There is a lot more about 'the morality of work'. Work is linked into the notion of being a good citizen,

making a contribution to society and so on. In Prime Minister's Question Time David Cameron made the following statement: 'We back the workers; they back the shirkers.' (That was directed towards the Labour Party, based around the benefit reforms.) Personally that sort of talk makes me wince when I hear it.

If, as well as this 'moral' rhetoric, we've got such an aberrant working culture, I would say that it is very tricky for lots of people at the current time, and lots of people are falling foul of it. Should we really push our most vulnerable in that very unthinking way? We have to step back and think about some of the things that we do. Can we actually stop this? We know it is not going to do us any good, and we know that it is possibly going to do us a lot of harm, so what power do we have?

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## Hall House

It was the finest in the village, all the archetypal features on display: close-studded walls more oak than plaster, tall hipped roof of Kentish peg-tiles, middle bay set back from jettied wings with dragon beams. So it was big. No cosy cottage this. Inside, we stood becalmed in wide, low rooms – a disappointment. Could we see upstairs?

And there it was, above the late-built floor, a mighty frame like some great butchered bone, its crown-post unmistakably a cross. It seemed to breathe and speak, this work of more than carpentry, and urge us to atone for vain improvidence else rue our loss.

Colin Davies



Headcorn Manor, a Wealden hall house

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Colin Davies is an architect and writer.