



Crossing Channels

Interdisciplinary answers to today's challenging questions

A Podcast series hosted by
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Season 2 - Episode 2

WELLBEING AT WORK: WHOSE JOB IS IT TO FIX IT?

With

Gordon Harold (University of Cambridge)

Laura Nurski (Bruegel)

Zoe Purcell (IAST)



Wellbeing at work - whose job is it to fix it?

SPEAKERS

Gordon Harold (University of Cambridge), Laura Nurski (Bruegel), Zoe Purcell (Institute For Advanced Study in Toulouse)

HOST

Rory Cellan-Jones

Rory Cellan-Jones 00:05

Hello and welcome to Crossing Channels. Wellbeing at work - just whose job is it to fix it? That's the subject of this latest episode in our podcast collaboration between Cambridge University's Bennett Institute for Public Policy, and the Institute for Advanced Study in Toulouse. I'm Rory Cellan-Jones and as ever, we're going to use the interdisciplinary strengths of both institutions to explore a complex challenge. We're looking at how the world of work is changing, how job quality and the effect of new technologies impact on wellbeing, and whether it's the job of businesses or governments to make employees happier at work. To explore these issues today, we have Zoe Purcell from the IAST. Zoe, remind us of your main research interests.

Zoe Purcell 00:58

Hi, Rory, thank you for having me. I'm a cognitive psychologist. So what I'm interested in is human reasoning. So the processes involved in things like learning, complex problem solving and critical thinking. And recently, I've become interested in the way that we reason in an environment increasingly dominated by artificial intelligence.

Rory Cellan-Jones 01:19

From the University of Cambridge, we've got Gordon Harold. Gordon, what are your main research interests?

Gordon Harold 01:25

Hello, everybody. My main research interests focus on examining family relationship dynamics, and links with young people's mental health and future life chances, including their education and employment-related outcomes.

Rory Cellan-Jones 01:36

You plunge into the world of work with your research from time to time.

Gordon Harold 01:40

Absolutely.

Rory Cellan-Jones 01:41

Excellent. And from the Brussels-based economic think tank Bruegel we have Laura Nurski. Laura, what does your research focus on?

Laura Nurski 01:49

Hello, Rory, thank you for having me, it's a pleasure to be here. My research, like Zoe's, focuses on the impact of new technologies on the nature and quality of work, but not from a psychological perspective, but from an organisational and economic perspective. So lately, I've also studied the impact of AI on the design of jobs, and how that impacts job quality and wellbeing at work.

Rory Cellan-Jones 02:12

Well, we've got some great expertise here to discuss this question of wellbeing at work and whose job is it to make us feel better. It's a huge topic, let's start with an understanding of what the future of work looks like. Gordon, what trends are shaping it? And what are the associated challenges for the future workforce?

Gordon Harold 02:30

Well, my expertise in the area of young people's mental health, I would start by saying that young people are of course the future of work. It's important to start with some scene-setting statistics, if you like, particularly in relation to the area of wellbeing. I want to clarify that while a lot of interest is in the area of

wellbeing, particularly wellbeing at work, increasingly, the language around wellbeing is moving towards understanding and promoting mental health in the context of wellbeing. Currently, mental health disorders are the single largest cause of disability in the UK. One in four adults experienced serious mental health problems, costing the UK about £110 billion annually, and \$16 trillion globally. Those estimates were generated pre-pandemics are unlikely, exponentially greater. And interestingly, 75% of serious psychiatric illness in adulthood is in place before the age of 18 years. So if we think about the workplace as we presently know it - at least I certainly as I know it and knew it in my early years and when I first entered into the workplace - the workplace is an entirely different world. Hybrid learning, AI, climate change and associated impacts and the area of mental health. According to the World Health Organization, by the year 2030, depression will be the leading cause of disability-adjusted life years (DALYs) time lost to illness in the workplace. So in order for the workplace of the future, to adapt and work with the workforce of the future, it has to substantively reconstruct itself such that it's informed, adaptive, and responsive to the mental health needs of future generations.

Rory Cellan-Jones 04:04

Zoe Purcell, just how radical are the changes to the workplace right now? Obviously, we've been through this huge upheaval during the pandemic when we've all, we're doing it right now as we speak, disappeared from the office for large amounts of time. Now, people are coming back. It is a moment of great upheaval, isn't it?

Zoe Purcell 04:22

Absolutely. I'd certainly agree with that. And to come back to one of the points that Gordon made, it is a moment of upheaval now that's continuing, and we need to be preparing people for that continuing change. So we've seen these kinds of automation of the workplace. We're quite familiar with this idea. We've been dealing with that. Now we're dealing with the automation of different technologies, social technologies, and that's going to just continue.

Rory Cellan-Jones 04:47

Laura, what's your take on this extraordinary transformation we're seeing, it's a huge change for workers, for employees but also for the organisations employing them.

Laura Nurski 04:56

Indeed, we also see a lot of changes in the organisations when we talk about the future of work. As we highlighted, things like automation, there's also algorithmic management, we see the rise of platform work - people working through platforms instead of through traditional employment contracts - and then of course, there is the huge change in the uptake of telework across the economy. And then I could add to that, challenges like the green transition and the digital transition, sometimes referred to the Twin Transitions. Now there's an energy crisis. So lots of changes that are impacting organisations.

Rory Cellan-Jones 05:32

So changes, not just in the environment in which we work, whether we're in an office or whether we're at home, but in the nature of our employment, the fragility of our employment, is that right?

Laura Nurski 05:43

That's right. Both in the nature of the employment relationship - like I said, are we working through traditional employment contracts or through platforms - but also in the nature, the type of work that we're doing. So we do see changes. And we will talk about that, I guess, when we talk about AI of technologies taking over some tasks and workers specialising in other tasks.

Rory Cellan-Jones 06:04

Gordon, why does wellbeing at the workplace matter?

Gordon Harold 06:09

Well all areas of wellbeing are significant and enhance workplace-related outcomes. Perhaps the area that's least understood is the area of mental health and mental health in relation to wellbeing workplace strategies. So really important to clarify, when I'm asked to give presentations on the topic of mental health, I start by asking if the audience therefore would like me to focus on doing well, mental health? And of course, often the response will be no, we actually want to understand not doing well. I say, well, it's really important to distinguish mental health from mental ill health, particularly from a workplace standpoint. Mental health is the promotion of doing well. Mental ill health is support for those who are not doing well. So right from the outset, it's really important to make that distinction. Particularly we talk about workplace strategies around mental health, how we promote mental health and how we support mental ill health. If we think of the area of wellbeing and productivity, wellbeing is fundamental to productivity, we know that evidence supports that. Mental health is fundamental to wellbeing. And yet, if we review evidence around mental health focused strategies in the workplace, the evidence base will be described as light. If we are to enhance the workplace of the future, we have to recognise the importance of supporting mental health, promoting mental health and supporting mental ill health for the workforce of the future. And that's an area that I think has huge potential in terms of progressing knowledge, and ultimately enhancing the wellbeing, mental health and wellbeing of future workforce.

Rory Cellan-Jones 07:35

Well, let's drill down now into the impact of job quality, job design on wellbeing and mental health. Laura, you've, you've done a recent paper on this, examining the link between job characteristics and wellbeing. What does a good job actually entail?

Laura Nurski 07:52

First, I would like to get two misconceptions out of the way about job quality. So first of all, sometimes you hear well, it's all about individual preferences and difference between a specific person and a specific

job. And therefore some people think that you cannot say anything general about job quality. But this is not true. So there are some things that are true across people and across jobs. For example, extremely high workloads are bad for everyone, especially when they're accompanied with little control over the work or conflicting expectations coming at you from different directions, from managers, from clients, from co-workers, those contradicting priorities, they're bad for everyone.

Rory Cellan-Jones 08:31

So all those cliches about people who get to the office at 7 and leave at 10 and that's great, they're 80s cliches, we should abandon them?

Laura Nurski 08:41

Exactly. We know from research that long working hours lead to heart problems and bad physical health in general. So that's the first misconception. The second misconception is that, well, people, why would they stay in a bad job? They would just leave a bad job and therefore companies that provide bad jobs will go bankrupt, and they cannot hire workers and in the end, only companies that provide good jobs will survive. But this is also not true. There's very little mobility in the labour market. The average tenure in OECD countries ranges between 7 and 10 years. Many people don't have good outside options when it comes to finding another job. So where they live with their level of education or expertise, there might not be very many good jobs available to switch to. So now that these two misconceptions are out of the way, I want to answer your question. So what does a good job entail? So job quality has four dimensions. The first is the job content, so the tasks and decisions that you execute on a daily basis. It includes both job demands and job resources. So job demands are expectations that workers are expected to meet at work, and it places a certain burden on them. It includes measures like workload volume, but also complexity of the work or this presence of these conflicting priorities that I mentioned before. Job resources are the aspects of jobs that help workers meet these expectations from work, such as control over the work. It's also called autonomy, support, instrumental support from colleagues and managers or feedback about the quality of your work. So a good job is balance between these demands and these resources. And it's a delicate balance: you have to, on the one hand, provide enough challenge to people without overloading them, but also without under-utilising them. So when this balance is found, a good job lets people use their full potential and support their growth. The second dimension is the social environment of the workplace. So here we're talking about emotional support, also the presence or absence of bullying and harassment. And finally, the third, and the fourth dimensions are the physical and contractual working conditions. So these include, on the one hand, a physical environment of work, like safety and ergonomics, and on the other hand, contractual characteristics like wages, work schedules, and job security.

Rory Cellan-Jones 11:04

Zoe Purcell, what's your impression of job quality changes at the moment? Are we producing better quality jobs that promote wellbeing that are less likely to lead to problems? Or is it going in the other direction?

Zoe Purcell 11:18

As the technologies change as the jobs change, we can think about the psychology of change, the psychology of learning and how we can support that. So for example, if we're introducing technologies with AI, immediately, you're going to see differences in how comfortable different people are in the workplace with that, and we need to support people going through that change. So for example, we know that confidence is linked to deliberation and ethical thinking, which is key to learning. So if people aren't confident with these technologies, and you're not building them up to be confident with these technologies, then you're going to see that impact how that uptake evolves. So to hop back to one of the points that Laura made about people reaching their full potential and their growth, I think there's a big opportunity as those changes happen, to actually improve people's experience at work, because you can see these technological changes as opportunities for people to grow and to change. But of course, they need to be supported. And people need to be made to feel competent in those tasks.

Rory Cellan-Jones 12:21

Gordon, I grew up in a world of work where the workplace was often secure, in terms of, you know, a job for life, but rigid and boring. It's a much more flexible, and also insecure world these days, in many ways. Is that affecting the way we experience work and our wellbeing and indeed mental health?

Gordon Harold 12:41

I'm going to pick up on two points by Zoe and Laura, if I may. I mean, it's interesting, the language being used. I mean we are defaulting into referring to being *at* work. And I'm really struck by that. I think increasingly, we engage *with* work. I'm the first to put my hand up, as they would say, to say that in offering advice about the workplace presently and the future, I come, Rory, from generation you've just described. The world of work that we engage with currently is absolutely unrecognisable from any previous generation. We are interfacing with work through family life. Our children interfacing with our work, those of us who are living with children or are engaged in children's lives, are engaging with our work world in ways that no previous generation has had to contend with.

Rory Cellan-Jones 12:24

We're always on, we're always connected.

Gordon Harold 13:26

100% absolutely right. We talk about digital detoxing, and various things, language, completely new terms that are brought into the context of our daily life. I regularly sit with my 15-year-old son, who asked me questions, what did you do at work today, which is the loft upstairs as compared to the university that I would normally go off and work at. It's completely and absolutely changed. And I think the really important, I make this point about myself, is I'm having to entirely learn again, the issues that are at play in relation to workplace engagement, particularly for young people. And also to highlight the actually the most informed generation around opportunities, not just challenges around engaging with the future of

work, are young people themselves. Knowledge around mental health and wellbeing, knowledge around the digital world, knowledge around things such as AI and all of the climate change migration. Probably the most informed generation in relation to contextual factors to do with the world of work than any previous generation. And it's really important. Learning has been mentioned several times throughout our discussion. We know that mental health, feeling well, doing well is fundamental to learning. So at a time of radical change, with respect to workplace implications, promoting capability, aptitude through mental health support to facilitate learning is absolutely fundamental. And that requires quite a radical overhaul of the workplace context if we're going to be effective.

Rory Cellan-Jones 14:52

Laura, I think you've done a recent paper, in your recent paper you argued that we need to improve employment policy to address those kinds of job quality concerns. Take us through that.

Laura Nurski 15:03

So there's a complex relationship between all these different elements of job quality that we described, and all these different elements of wellbeing that have surfaced in the conversation. So it's not unsurprising that it's hard for policy to address this. So traditionally, policymakers have focused on those areas of job quality that are easiest to measure, and that are within the realm of accepted public policy action. So in our market economies, job content and the internal organisation of the work, they are the prerogative of the firm, while governments and social dialogue have focused on regulating the employment relationship and the physical safety of workers. So there are many regulations on things like minimum wages, working time, quality, occupational health and safety. However, when it comes to job design, or job content, and the social environment of work, policy has stayed pretty silent. These are harder to measure, it's not impossible. Academic research has produced many scales for surveying workers and international organisations, like Eurofound, regularly conduct large-scale surveys that collect data on job quality across tens of thousands of European workers. The problem is that the current data collection efforts do not allow us to learn about which interventions in job design and organisation design - by that I mean also interventions in the structure and culture of organisations - which of these interventions lead to better job content and better social environments at work? So we don't actually know if target setting is effective, and if so at which level of intervention, or which subsidy programmes, or training programmes, or measurement instruments are effective in supporting these interventions in organisations. So in my opinion, policy should focus on learning more about effective policymaking in the area of job quality, and which organisational interventions it should support.

Rory Cellan-Jones 16:57

So we're in the middle of a giant experiment on what works and what doesn't in terms of job quality in a rapidly changing world. Now, one of those radical changes, which Zoe's already mentioned, is the arrival of artificial intelligence in the workplace. And, Zoe, you work on the human side of human AI interaction. What is your research show about this revolution, hitting so many jobs?

Zoe Purcell 17:22

Yeah, so AI is clearly going to have a big impact on our lives, inside and outside the workplace. And we can think about that in a couple of ways. So we can think about the technologies that are coming in potentially to replace traditionally, roles that have recently taken by people, but also technology that's coming into the workplace in ways that are more subtle, so softer technologies that talk about it. So things that may be influencing the way we interact with each other in the workplace. So not just things like Zoom, but when you place AI in the middle of that new say, our text, or our voice, or our video is actually being augmented by algorithms. And so that is going to impact the social landscape that is developing, or the communicative landscape in the workplace, and that is clearly going to have effects on our psychology. This research is obviously in its infancy due to the technology being in its infancy. But what we know so far is that often when we think about the uptake of AI-based technology, we need to consider the existing biases and cognitive biases that we have. So for example, when you consider someone may be using an AI-based communication tool, are they going to be trusted as much as someone who is not using an AI-based communication tool? When we ask people this question, they say, yeah, I'm kind of fine with it. But then when we dig in a little bit deeper, it turns out that people have expectations about other people using this technology. They think other people are going to use this technology much more than they will themselves. And they think that it actually reflects on that person's character. So we need to be doing this research in a way that doesn't just ask the simple yes or no question: is it okay to introduce this technology? But also, the follow-on effects of that use.

Rory Cellan-Jones 19:01

Is part of a continuum, though, isn't it? AI is just one technology, which has changed the way we communicate, not just in the workplace, but at home. For instance, we're all communicating via a video channel right now. We've seen an awful lot of that happening at work over the last two years, that must have changed relationships in the workplace, hasn't it? As compared to face-to-face relationships?

Zoe Purcell 19:24

Yeah, certainly. So there's always an argument that just increasing the capacity for people to communicate will increase the capacity for communication, and therefore that will improve social relationships. But obviously, it feels like something is different here. And that's going to have follow-on effects. This is just taking something that existed before and a traditional face-to-face form, and we're putting it online. I think it gets even more interesting when you say we're not just taking something that existed before and putting it online, we're taking something that's online and when we're twisting that as well. So the future of this technology is not just about taking something traditional and pushing that into a workplace at home situation. But saying, okay, where does that technology go next? And how do we deal with that, again, in the workplace and outside of it?

Rory Cellan-Jones 20:11

Gordon, you obviously look at young people, and young people, you might think they were better placed there, the people who've been part of the digital generation entering the workplace used to using these tools. But I presume it can be quite difficult. For instance, what happens if, if you join a team that is all remote or virtual, you've not had the chance to establish those face-to-face communications, there must be implications for mental health there?

Gordon Harold 20:38

I think you said earlier already that we're in the midst of a grand experiment, we are in the context of a so-called natural experiment. The change over the past two years induced by a pandemic to all aspects of life has been unprecedented, since global manipulation of our daily life, family life, workplace life, school life, other aspects of daily life, that might sound a bit scary. Of course, it's also an opportunity to think about how we effectively measure what we need to measure to answer the types of questions we're discussing here. The truth is, we don't know, in terms of AI engagement, in terms of workplace change, in terms of hybrid workplace engagement, we don't know. And the reason we don't know, I think it was Laura said earlier, the evidence base that we have to work with respect to effective workplace interventions is very, very limited. So we have a significant opportunity to look at what we need to measure, how we need to measure what we're measuring, and what decisions we can make on the basis of more reliable data. So AI, a lot of people respond with a degree of concern and anxiety.

Rory Cellan-Jones 21:42

They think it is a threat to their jobs often, don't they?

Gordon Harold 21:45

With respect to the age reference here, it's typically older generations who respond with concern and anxiety around AI engagement. Now, that doesn't take away from the fact that with the younger ages, we also need an education strategy to harness the strengths of AI or other changes. To enhance workplace engagement, workforce experience. The fundamentals of human interaction haven't changed. What makes us feel good, respond well, and perform accordingly, are pretty much the same. Mental health is fundamental. Enhancing mental health, absolutely essential. Educational experience, not just educational attainment, aspects of our interpersonal relationships, we know that interpersonal relationships are a core pillar of mental health wellbeing, workplace engagement, productivity. We know the workplace can enhance or challenge interpersonal relationships. So it's taking the science, robust science, as to what works for the individual to enhance workplace-related outcomes and to engage that science in the modern world that we know we interact with, including all things digital, to figure out, how do we maximise, how do we build on strengths and protect against risks? It's an entirely new evidence need landscape.

Rory Cellan-Jones 22:58

Laura, I think your research has also looked at the different ways AI is entering the workplace. How do you see it impacting job quality? Is it a threat? Or is it actually as it's sometimes sold, a way of augmenting jobs, taking away the boring work, repetitive work and making people's lives more interesting?

Laura Nurski 23:15

So AI is often hailed as this new technology that will relieve us all from the dirty, dull and dangerous work, right? So robots will take over the dangerous and dirty work. And algorithms will take over the dull and boring work. And humans can focus on the creative and social tasks that they're really good at. But yeah, this is a bit of a myth, in my opinion. In theory, there's no reason why AI applications might not move in that direction, of this holy grail as you call it. In practice, however, we see many real-life applications that turn out quite differently. The reason is that many applications don't just focus on automating production work or frontline work. And when we typically imagine when we talk about automation, automating things at the assembly line or service work in hospitality or retail. But in fact, many applications automate the management tasks of work, we call this algorithmic management. So, this includes things like selection and hiring. But in the applications that I studied, we looked at scheduling of shifts and tasks, algorithms that give work method instructions or algorithms that survey workers and evaluate them and discipline them.

Rory Cellan-Jones 24:32

And is there a lack of trust there from workers that the managers need to worry about? For instance, automated job interviews or triaging I suppose of applications, automated reviews of people's annual work, is there a lack of trust there?

Laura Nurski 24:48

A lack of trust from the workers to the management or from the management...

Rory Cellan-Jones 24:52

... both.

Laura Nurski 24:53

I would say there's a lack of trust from the management to the workers, which is yes, which is why they feel like they need more control over the workers to make sure that they perform the work in the ways that they expect them to do it and that they don't shirk on the job, that they don't take too many breaks. And a lot of these applications are meant to do that to take away some of the autonomy that workers have in the workplace to make sure their tasks are scheduled in a certain way and the data is collected on their performance, etc.

Rory Cellan-Jones 25:21

Let's move on to sort of policy responses to these issues and whose responsibility it is, is it business, is it government and so on. Gordon, what really works, as far as you've seen, when it comes to supporting employees' mental wellbeing?

Gordon Harold 25:37

In a word education, where a workplace context is informed around mental health and wellbeing issues, you see much more effective at workplace engagement, workplace-related outcomes, recruitment and retention. So there are multiple examples of interventions targeting mental health and wellbeing. The evaluation evidence around some of those interventions is very variable, very sketchy. We have very, very limited robust data in this space. And it's one of the areas that I'm very keen to remedy in terms of taking on some of the core issues. As I said at the outset, recognising that mental illness, mental illness is currently the single leading cause of disability in the UK. One in four adults experienced serious mental health problems. The first step to addressing that is to recognise that as real. Mental health and mental illness is as real as physical ill health, physical injury in terms of impacts. And where we can move to a conversation, where we can move to policy implementation that recognises or engages parity around illness, physical and/or mental, we're in a much more informed space with respect to addressing causes and remediating or remedying adverse consequences with respect to mental health and wellbeing impacts in the workplace. And we are a long, long, long way away from getting to that place.

Rory Cellan-Jones 27:00

At a time of great pressure on the global economy, when we may well be going into a global recession, is it going to be harder to get both governments and employers to care about that, with so much else to worry about?

Gordon Harold 27:14

I actually think we're in a better place. With respect to engaging evidence, there was a quotation from a senior UK politician not so long ago who said that he was tired of experts. That was right before the pandemic. Thank goodness for experts in terms of responding to the demands of the pandemic. Look at the areas of change that have been globally introduced, through science led initiatives throughout the pandemic, from vaccines to general behaviour, mask wearing, etc. So if we can take on global change by way of need and necessity and if we consider mental health and mental illness, as quite genuinely pandemic, and its global impacts, climate change, migration, other global changes, we have to act. And I think actually, the opportunity to act on the back of the lessons learned over the past two and a half years, probably gives us better opportunity than any previous occasion in the past decade plus.

Rory Cellan-Jones 28:03

Zoe, what's your take on this whose job it is, frankly, whether it is government, whether government can actually lay down the law on this, or whether it's in the interest of businesses to do something about it without being told to?

Zoe Purcell 28:17

I mean, frankly, I think it's in the interest of everybody to do something about this, where governments can help they should, where workplaces can help, they should. And they will clearly benefit from that. As Gordon said earlier, we're really at the start of this journey of research and finding the right evidence to help businesses and organisations and to help governments wanting to mediate this change. And so we need to go and get as much evidence as we can, and do that in the best way that we can do it.

Rory Cellan-Jones 29:03

Laura, corporations right now have got an awful lot on their plates, companies under huge pressure with rising energy prices, and difficulties with supply chain and so on, how far up their agenda will employee wellbeing be in that context?

Laura Nurski 29:00

Alright, so one lesson I learned from this podcast is that we all - Zoe, Gordon and I - looked at wellbeing or mental health from our own very particular perspectives. And this sometimes creates a bit of communication difficulty, I guess, also in policy spheres. I think what we really need to do is distinguish between the mental health concerns in society in general, that people bring to the workplace and how workplaces need to respond to that. And separate that, from what I mainly talked about, the mental health effects of work itself that people then take home with them. So I think distinguishing between these two will be very important for policy. And then when it comes to companies, and to answer your question, whose business is it to make people happy? I don't think it's the business of business to make people happy. I think it's the responsibility of business to provide jobs and work that is decent, that is workable, and that is sustainable in the long run, when people will have to have longer careers. Jobs that support our workforce in the long run. And this is important for businesses for sure, because they need their workforces to last a long time. I do think it's the responsibility of business to provide these decent jobs.

Rory Cellan-Jones 30:21

Well, I think that's a pretty good note on which to end. Thanks to our expert panel, Gordon Harold from the University of Cambridge, Zoe Purcell from the IAST and Lauren Nurski from the Bruegel institute. Let us know what you think of the second episode of season two of Crossing Channels. You can contact us via Twitter - the Bennett Institute is @bennettinst - the Institute for Advanced Study is @IASToulouse and I am @ruskin147. If you enjoyed this programme then do listen to our other Crossing Channels episodes, notably our recent edition on why digital technology hasn't improved productivity. And please join us next month for the next edition where we'll be looking at how local identity shapes today's politics.