‘THEOS’

Report

Working Five to Nine

How we can deliver work-life integration

Paul Bickley

Theos is the UK's leading religion and society think tank. It has a broad Christian basis and exists to enrich the conversation about the role of faith in society through research, events, and media commentary.

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This is a report about work. Few projects, even modest projects, are completed without cooperation and collective effort. I am grateful to colleagues Madeleine Pennington, Chine McDonald, and Hannah Rich for helping me refine the argument herein. Thanks also to George Lapshynov for ensuring the footnotes conformed to house-style. As ever, we are collectively grateful to Polly Parrott for her work in designing these reports.

Foreword

In 1942 the novelist Dorothy Sayers delivered a lecture 'Why Work?' This lecture, later essay, is a classic in Christian economic thought.

She was answering a question, however, that for the better part of the last 80 years, most people haven't been asking. Work was necessary and dignifying. Being in work meant that you had a chance of providing a home, giving children a decent life, taking a slice of growing national prosperity. It should come as no surprise that, as these promises have become mirages, people have started to ask again, "why work?"

The question is at least partly rhetorical. Why work... if I'm fake self-employed in the platform economy and earning less than the minimum wage? Why work... if a huge slice (or even all) of my salary immediately evaporates in childcare costs? Why work... if my notional working hours hide many more in unpaid overtime? Why work... if my wage stagnates while the price of virtually everything rises? Very many people in the UK feel that they are being asked, to use a biblical allegory, to make bricks without straw. While work in the UK has changed in some positive ways, it is not satisfying the needs of many.

Of course, Sayers would answer that work is a good in itself. It is a human thing that we shouldn't think to merely escape from if at all possible: "Work is not, primarily, a thing one does to live, but the thing one lives to do. It is, or it should be, the full expression of the worker's faculties, the thing in which he [or she] finds spiritual, mental and bodily satisfaction, and the medium in which he [or she] offers himself [or herself] to God." If she was right, then work should not be rejected but reclaimed. Work should 'work better' for ordinary people, precisely because it is so important – more important than the money we make from it.

There is a growing appetite not just for more work but for more good work; for work that feeds the body but also satisfies our needs for community and meaning. Our three-part series, *Work Shift: How Love Could Change Work*, is aimed at speaking into this debate. Readers will find it differs from much existing commentary on work. While the reports and essays in this series don't ignore the economic dynamic, they go beyond it. Each adopts a relational lens. In other words, they show how thinking about work from the point of view of the relationships it forms and sustains can help us see what good work might be.

In the first report of the series, *The Ties That Bind*, Tim Thorlby focuse on the rise of lone and insecure work and argued for a new covenant for work – one which balances the interests of employers and employees in a renewed a sense of mutuality. In this second report, *Working Five to Nine,* Paul Bickley argues that there is a value problem around work: we no longer see it as a significant priority in our lives. Part of the answer is to shape employment practices for better integration with the rest of life, which according to Christian thinking should not be divorced from, and certainly not have less status than, employment. A broader definition for 'work' itself might embolden new and better approaches to paid employment, and release us to give proper time to other forms of 'work' that society equally needs, whether caring responsibilities, homebuilding, or civic engagement.

Even as work changes rapidly around us we always have the opportunity to form workplaces that value people and operate justly. This series will contribute to that conversation.

Chine McDonald
Director, Theos
March 2024

This report in sixty seconds

We have fallen out of love with work. Rates of economic inactivity remain stubbornly high, while in other countries they have reverted to pre-pandemic downward trends. While this is being driven by ill health, our values around work have also shifted. Recent World Values Survey data show that the UK public are the *least likely* of 24 countries to say that work is very/rather important in their life (73% in the UK, compared to 96% in Italy, 94% in France, or 80% in the United States). Millennials in particular have shifted in their attitudes: in 2009, 41% felt that work should always come first. By 2022, this had fallen to 14%.

To address this, we need to pay attention to what Catholic Social Teaching calls "the subjective dimension" of work – that whatever else we say about it, we're always talking about something people do. Work should contribute to human flourishing and development at the individual and corporate levels. We also need to recognise a growing appetite for greater freedom to fulfil what, from a Christian perspective, are also kinds of work, albeit unpaid. These can be as varied as caring responsibilities, civil and political action, and personal development and education.

This is not a call for less employment, but to think about how we can ease the conflict between the goods of employment and the goods of all the unpaid work we do. In our public conversation, policy, and practice, we prioritise the former – but how can we give more space to the latter? We argue for the expansion and enforcement of basic worker rights, further use of four-day weeks, and maintaining and extending the use of thoughtful hybrid working.

1 Falling out of love with work

In 2021 Anthony Klotz, an academic at Texas A&M University, gave an interview to Bloomberg News. Klotz, a Professor of Business Administration with a particular interest in how and when employees resign from their positions, had noted emerging trends in the labour market: a 'backlog' of resignations from the pandemic, growing burnout, a reluctance to return to the office, and a re-evaluation of priorities and values among workers. In the second quarter of 2022, job-to-job resignations (employees leaving one job to go to another) reached a record high of 442,000. By comparison, in the second quarter of 2019, the figure was 232,000. Klotz had coined a term that fit the moment perfectly: we were witnessing the "Great Resignation".

In the UK this morphed into something different. Rates of labour force participation have dropped, and conversely rates of economic inactivity have risen. In contrast, rates of economic inactivity have resumed their pre-pandemic downward trend in France, Germany and the US.[1] At the time of writing, more than a fifth of UK adults of working age (21.8%) are not actively looking for work. The key drivers have been much debated: among them are shifts into early retirement in the over-50s and high rates of people reporting that they are long-term sick, many of them young. The Resolution Foundation have argued that "getting more people from inactivity into employment is Britain's biggest labour market challenge of the 2020s".[2]

To a large extent, this is a bad poor-health hangover from the pandemic: a staggering 1.9 million people are self-reporting long Covid symptoms in the UK. However, there is a parallel phenomenon, more cultural than economic, that few commentators have paid attention to. International

The UK public are the least likely of 24 countries to say that work is very/rather important in their life.

comparisons in a recent World Values Survey release show that the UK public are the *least likely* of 24 countries to say that work is very/rather important in their life (73% in the UK, compared to 96% in Italy, 94% in France, or 80% in the United States). They are also amongst the least likely to say that work should always come first (22% in the UK, compared to 55% in Italy, 39% in France and 28% in the United States – or 92% in Egypt). Between 1999 and 2022, the proportion of the British public who agreed that work should always come first declined from 26% to 22%, although agreement rose as high as 35% in 2009. Millennials in particular have shifted in their thinking: in 2009, 41% felt that work should always come first. By 2022, this had fallen to 14%.[3]

We do not compare unfavourably with similar nations in terms of working hours (though, note the notorious productivity puzzle). Every day, people in the UK look for jobs, build careers, gain qualifications, and work hard. But when Covid-19 detached us in new ways from our workplaces and our work (a companion report in this series, *The Ties That Bind*, notes the massive shift toward lone working) it seems we were more primed than most to see the pandemic as an off-ramp from the labour market.

Is this values gap just a curious fact, or a problem which we need to understand and address? It might be argued that our values around work are in fact more balanced than those overseas. But the shift in the labour market, which is unfolding in a different way in the UK compared to similar countries, implies that this difference at the level of the cultural priority of work might be having a tangible effect on our economy. As so often with hard economic questions, moral and political conundrums lie beneath, unexplored. Is work 'a good thing' – a human good, rather than a source of economic

growth? Is it morally preferable for people to work or do other things? As AI and similar technologies promise (or threaten) radical change in the economy, now is the time to bring these questions out of the shadows and into the open.

Arguably, something fairly unique is happening in the UK. *We do not see work as the primary driver of a good life*. Indeed, 43% of people in the UK say it would be a good thing if *less* importance were placed on work (up from 26% in 1999). We have fallen out of love with work. Meanwhile, the government has expressed a desire to 'get Britain back to work'; achieving that goal may require more than more carrots and more sticks. We need to understand why our values around work are shifting.

> **We have fallen out of love with work.**

This connects to two theological observations about the nature of work. Neither is unique to Christian theology – they might even be accused of being obvious, apart from the fact that they are mostly ignored in practice and policy.

First, there is a vital and ineradicable human dimension to work. Published to coincide with the 90th anniversary of the first papal encyclical addressing "the social question", the papal encyclical *Laborem Exercens* is a reflection on both the nature of work and its contemporary curses. Its central argument is that work has a dual quality: the objective (the products and services which we can get paid for) and the subjective: "As a person, a human being works; they perform various actions belonging to the work process; independently of their objective content, these actions must all serve to realise their humanity…".[4] In other words, work is not just what humans do to make money and pay bills. It is as much about our souls as it is about our bodies and minds. If this offers any kind of insight, then growing indifference to work should trouble us.

If the UK public does not see work as particularly attractive, perhaps it is not successfully delivering on the subjective goals of work.

Second, the encyclical – alongside other traditions of Christian thought on work – balances this idea that work is a vital part of our human identity with the idea that it is toilsome. In many instances that are obvious in everyday life, work is burdensome, difficult, sometimes dangerous, and vulnerable to injustice and inequity. It doesn't always deliver on our need for achievement within our vocation. Work is both necessary and open to transcendence, but meaning, purpose, and transcendence will always be mixed with "painful toil". Any high view of work has to be accompanied by an analysis of how and why it often falls so short of ideals and what can realistically be done to ensure that it creates a dividend in human development. If the UK public does not see work as particularly attractive, perhaps it is not successfully delivering on the subjective goals of work.

Our collective psychological response has been to de-prioritise work: work is necessary, but we don't want it to eat up so much of our lives. It could be said that we have a greater appetite for work-life balance. But there's a problem with conceptualising the problem in this way. In this phrase, we think we know what 'work' means: hours spent in paid employment. But we don't really address the question of what 'life' means. For most people, it's not a few more rounds of golf, or reading a few extra novels a year. Rather, more 'balance' in favour of 'life' often means creating flexibility in paid forms of work *for the sake of unpaid forms of work* – for instance, creating more space for caring responsibilities such as childcare or looking after elderly relatives.

How will we get Britain working again? Governments (and employers) should not ignore the possibility that many of those who are economically inactive may be doing things while 'out of work' that contribute richly to the common

good and are vitally important. Part of our response should be to shape work so it maximises the opportunity for people to engage and flourish in what, according to the Christian understanding, are also forms of work, though they are unpaid. This report looks at the interplay between different forms of human work, some of which are being severely underrated and undervalued in our public conversation.

For most people, work life balance means creating flexibility in paid forms of work for the sake of unpaid forms of work.

1 For an overview and illustrative international comparison, see: House of Lords Economic Affairs Committee, *Where Have All the Workers Gone? 2nd Report of Session 2022-23: HL Paper 115* (20 December 2022). Available at: *publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld5803/ldselect/ldeconaf/115/11506.htm*

2 *Resolution Foundation*, 'UK labour market is returning to normal, but its workforce is sicker – and youth inactivity is highest on record', 12 March 2024, *www.resolutionfoundation.org/press-releases/uk-labour-market-is-returning-to-normal-but-its-workforce-is-sicker-and-youth-inactivity-is-highest-on-record/*

3 The Policy Institute, *What the World Thinks About Work* (London: Policy Institute, 2023), p. 9. Available at: *www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/assets/what-the-world-thinks-about-work.pdf*

4 Pope John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens* (Vatican: Vatican Publishing House, 1981), §6. Original text: "Ut persona opus facit, varias exsequitur actiones ad laboris cursum pertinentes, quae omnes, separatim a vi sua obiectiva, humanitati eius efficiendae et implendae vocationi". The translation from Latin is our own. Available at: *www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/la/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091981_laborem-exercens.html*

2 The breakup

There is an irony in the way we have fallen out of love with work. Many of the big structural problems in the labour market have been addressed, at least in part.

40 years ago, rates of unemployment were nearly four times what they are now. The Thatcher government's attempts to control high levels of inflation through supply-side reforms – privatisation, deregulation, etc. – meant that a recession in 1980/81 gave way to a jobless recovery in the 1980s and early 1990s. After the brief 'Lawson boom' in the late 1980s, unemployment rates were hovering around 9% at the end of the Thatcher premiership. Britain's exit from the European Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM) in 1992 heralded a steady decline in unemployment and, after a significant bump following the 2008 recession and a smaller bump during the Covid-19 pandemic, it now sits at around 3.9%.[1]

Correspondingly, rates of economic inactivity are relatively low in historical terms (notwithstanding the post-pandemic shift). What this means is that large parts of the population have been drawn into the workforce who were not previously part of it. There is, for instance, a much higher labour market participation rate amongst women (discussed further below).

Additionally, the introduction of the national minimum wage has reduced the number of relatively low income jobs in the economy. The proportion of low income jobs (by hourly pay) is now the lowest it has ever been (8.9% rather than 21.8% in 1997).[2] Coupled with this, earners at the lower end of the income scale have tended to improve their position relative to other earners, especially after the faster uprating of the 'National Living Wage' since 2015. The Resolution Foundation has shown that the United Kingdom's wage

floor is now amongst the highest in the world. They note that this has benefitted women and young people, who are disproportionately employed in low income roles.[3]

However, new problems have emerged.

New labour market problems

First, and most obviously, is wage stagnation across the economy. Even before the recent run of high inflation, there had been no real wage growth in over a decade. After accounting for inflation, wages are at 2005 levels. Commentators have noted that the recession from 2009 onwards was not accompanied by a significant rise in unemployment, unlike previous recessions. Instead, real pay stopped rising. It has taken some years for this to result in significant industrial action, though this has now clearly returned to the national stage with significant labour disputes in the public sector in particular.

Second, the proportion of low income jobs by weekly pay is somewhat higher (23.5%, down from 28.4% in 1997) than the proportion of low income jobs by hourly pay. So, while progress has been made in tackling low income this smaller decline suggests that many low income/minimum wage workers are not able to secure an appropriate number of hours. They are not unemployed, but underemployed.

Third, and partly as a result of the above, there has been a rise in in-work poverty. According to recent statistics from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 61% of working-age adults in poverty lived in a household where at least one adult was in work, and 11% of all workers lived in a household in poverty. Some causes are merely statistical – for example, pensioners' incomes have risen with higher state and private pensions, so

the proportion of pensioners in relative poverty is smaller. But more of the households newly in work are those that would tend to earn less (for example, single parent households). For families like this, issues around quality of work, number of hours, and childcare provision mean that a move into employment does not necessarily mean improved income or living standards. Meanwhile, cost pressures have tended to affect lower income households more over time (for example, rents have risen relative to mortgages).

Cost pressures have tended to affect low income households more over time.

In other words, there are persistent problems at the bottom end of the labour market. The Living Wage Foundation estimates that nearly one in five workers – 6.1 million people – are in insecure work. Over half of these (3.4 million, 11% of all workers) are in work that is both insecure and low paid. A companion report in this series, *The Ties that Bind*, looks in greater depth at this phenomenon and calls for a new commitment to good work built on relationships of mutual dependence between worker and employer.

Not by pay alone: work hours, intensity and satisfaction

In 1930, JM Keynes famously predicted that by 2030, people would work only 15 hours per week. The prediction is often mocked as naïve and utopian, yet working hours seem to have declined significantly over the last century. In 1913, full-time workers were working around 51 hours per week.[4] As of June 2023, the average actual working week for full-time workers in the UK was 36.4 hours. And even over the last three decades, this figure has declined by a surprisingly large amount: as recently as the 1990s we were, on average, still working around two hours more per week.[5] We might

think that Keynes was right about the direction of the trend, if wrong about the scale of it.

If the average UK worker works less, and in less dangerous and physically demanding roles than ever before, why do they still *feel* overworked? The headline figure for average working hours may be hiding as much as it reveals. Obviously, a general decline in working hours does not mean that every single worker is working less. Low income workers in the so-called platform economy may be working unregistered long hours. For others, there may be a considerable degree of hidden/unpaid/factored-in overtime (TUC data suggests that teaching is the worst affected profession)[6]. For others, technology may have blurred the boundaries between employment and leisure time; flexibility can be to the benefit of workers, but can also create extra pressures.

The headline figure for average working hours may be hiding as much as it reveals.

We suggest, however, that still other factors are at play. Most workers arrange their employment in relation to household and other responsibilities. Over decades, there has been steady and ongoing shift towards dual income households – i.e., both members of a couple working. In fact, since 2020 the most common working arrangement in coupled homes is for both parents to be working full-time (latest figures from April-June 2021 show 50.4% with both parents working full time, while 44.1% have a male working full-time and a partner part-time).[7] Trend data are hard to come by, but we know that the number of single income households will have decreased over time (the tax system arguably disadvantages single income homes). If a 'typical' couple household 30 or 40 years ago had one adult working full-time, but now has two adults working full-time, the time demands on the household have risen dramatically, in spite of a decline in the average hours of full-time workers. There is a mismatch

therefore between the statistical picture and the experiences of households overall. We are working harder – or more to the point, longer – that the statistics imply.

Again, we need to think of work in person centred ways. For our 2021 report, *Just Work: Humanising the Labour Market in a Changing World*, we conducted polling with YouGov on perceptions around work. This data picked up something of a sense of frustration/disengagement with work: 33% agreed that "work is just a way of earning to provide for life's necessities", compared to 16% who agreed that "I feel that in work I'm doing things that are really meaningful". *Only 10%* agreed that "I believe my current work is part of my calling and vocation" (ABC1s are more likely to agree – still low at 13%, but C2DEs are at 5%). A significant number – 45% – said that they would train for a different career if they had the opportunity. ABC1s are somewhat more likely to think their work is meaningful (21% of ABC1s think it's meaningful, compared to 10% of C2DEs). Youth is closely related to feelings of work intensity: 34% of 18-24s agree that "you have to work harder these days", compared with 19% of 45-54s.

The Resolution Foundation have offered robust longitudinal data to show that our subjective experience of work is changing over time, and in many ways not positively. They note that levels of job satisfaction have declined, particularly for the least well-paid (who used to be more satisfied with their work). Greater numbers of people report stress at work. A higher proportion of people report working under a great deal of tension, and a growing number of people (particularly women) report feeling "used up at the end of the working day".[8]

There are exceptions, with positive trends in career prospects, job security, usefulness to society, and work independence. There is also a significant difference between the employed and the five million self-employed workers, with the self-employed reporting markedly higher levels of job satisfaction and control over work (particularly interesting given that the self-employed earn less on average than employees).

It is misleading to talk about the experience of workers in the UK as a whole, but we can begin to see how "the subjective dimension" of work is lagging. If, as one recent author claimed, "work won't love you back", it is not surprising that people have ceased to regard work as a good thing.[9] The next section suggests that we can see this developing into an anti-work politics, and argues that we should expand our thinking about work beyond the dimensions of paid employment.

1 *ONS Labour Market Team*, 'Unemployment rate (aged 16 and over, seasonally adjusted): %', 12 March 2024. *www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peoplenotinwork/unemployment/timeseries/mgsx/lms*

2 The technical definition for low income here is earning less than 60% of the national median pay.

3 Nye Cominetti et al., *Low Pay Britain 2023: Improving low-paid work through higher minimum standards* (London: Resolution Foundation, 2023), p.10. Available at : *economy2030.resolutionfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/LPB-2023.pdf*

4 Charlie Giattino, Esteban Ortiz-Ospina and Max Roser, 'Working Hours', *Our World in Data* (2020). Their analysis uses Huberman & Minns (2007) and the Penn World Table 9.1 (2019), "Average annual working hours per worker". *ourworldindata.org/working-hours*

5 *ONS*, 'Average actual weekly hours for full-time workers (seasonally adjusted): Labour market statistics time series', 12 December 2023. *www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/timeseries/ybuy/lms*

6 *TUC*, 'UK workers put in £26 billion worth of unpaid overtime during the last year - TUC analysis', 23 Feb 2024. *www.tuc.org.uk/news/uk-workers-put-26-billion-worth-unpaid-overtime-during-last-year-tuc-analysis*

7 *ONS*, 'Families and the labour market, UK: 2021', 22 July 2022. https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/familiesandthelabourmarketengland/2021#employment-activity-of-mothers-and-fathers-in-a-family

8 Krishnan Shah & Daniel Tomlinson, *Work experiences: Changes in the subjective experience of work* (London: Resolution Foundation, 2021), p. 5. *economy2030.resolutionfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Work-experiences.pdf*

9 Sarah Jaffe, *Work Won't Love You Back: How Devotion to Our Jobs Keeps Us Exploited, Exhausted, and Alone* (London: Hurst, 2021).

3 The anti-work future

As a society we have directed a lot of energy and attention towards getting people into employment. We recognise that it is often a bad thing for those who can work to be out of work – bad for them, bad for the wider community, and bad for the economy. To get people into work, governments, civil society, and businesses facilitate education, training and broker access to employment. More controversial are the disciplinary regimes adopted by governments to give a strong push towards employment. There is a spectrum of opinion on whether more supportive or more disciplinary approaches are appropriate, but most don't question the proposition that getting as many people into employment as possible is the best thing. In recent years, however, this has been challenged by both progressive and conservative voices.

David Graeber's book *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory* proposed that if many jobs don't really serve economic interests, then their purpose is either existential (grafting away in pointless work justifies the rewards of the consumerist economy, and vice versa) or political (the political right wants to push the lazy into work, and the political left idolises full employment).[1] This critique of contemporary work seems to have resonance in popular culture, where life satisfaction outside of the workplace is increasingly celebrated over career progression. More deeply, the notion that work and working is a basic good, beyond material provision, is being deconstructed by the 'anti-work movement'.

Conservative voices argue that paid employment is not necessarily the most desirable role for all. In particular, childbearing and childrearing should be given greater social esteem and public support, particularly given declining birth rates in many countries. They highlight the importance of

nurture and care given by mothers and that the prevailing policy framework encourages both parents into the workplace, while the state assists with childcare support. They suggest that care and nurturing is best delivered by the immediate family and that young children who are cared for primarily in institutional settings tend to do less well over time. These conservative voices suggest that we have pushed too hard to get both parents into the workplace.

There is something in both of these critiques. Companies 'purpose-wash' their business and ask employees not just to *do*, but also to *believe in*, their jobs, even as wages have largely been stagnant. People do not generally feel that their jobs are "bullshit", but they probably do feel that they have got a poor deal in the workplace and that they could do work more connected to their sense of vocation. Additionally, some data suggests that the UK performs poorly on other things which may help both employees and employers alike – workplace training, for example. Even aside from wages, the social contract around work – the overall deal being struck between employees and employers – is not as good as it could be for workers.

Even aside from wages, the social contract around work - the overall deal being struck between employees and employers - in not as good as it could be for workers.

The conservative critique is more controversial, given the liberative role that paid work has had for women. Objectively, employment participation rates amongst women are historically high. In the last quarter of 2023, 72.1% of women aged 16-64 were employed. In 1971 (Jan-March), the figure was 52.7%. Only a decade ago, the figure hovered around 67%. In addition to this, over 1.5 million women are registered as self-employed.

Economic independence and the freedom to build careers have been important building blocks of greater equality for

women and, to state the obvious, not all women are mothers. However, the employment rate for mothers is now higher than for either women or men without dependent children. As we have argued above, we do not tend to factor in the possibility that drawing significant numbers of mothers of working age into the workplace increased the burden on households and individuals overall. According to a Civitas analysis of the Department for Education *Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents*, a clear majority of working mothers of children aged 0 to 4 would prefer to reduce their hours than increase them (67% vs. 29%).[2] Meanwhile, it is widely recognised that our childcare system is working poorly for all stakeholders: costs are high for families, places are increasingly inaccessible, and real-terms funding for providers is dropping in spite of the announcement of extra funding in the 2023 budget.

Employment versus work

> **Participation in the labour market is almost seen as the first duty of the citizen in a capitalist economy.**

In our previous report, *Just Work: Humanising the Labour Market in a Changing World*, we argued that *employment* should be understood as different from *work*.[3] Work is the human response to the gift of creation, which includes, but is far more than, material wealth. Work is not just the way we are connected to common prosperity, but also to other people and to the wider environment. Work is the activity we do to meet our needs and create the context where we and others can live full lives. When we understand work merely as services rendered in exchange for pay, we've made a mistake. We ought to be thinking about work as a broader range of activities that achieve all the goals set out above – not just material prosperity, but also meaning and community.

This is not a pointless argument around definition. As things stand, participation in the labour market is almost

seen as the first duty of the citizen in a capitalist economy – governments want to increase it, because doing so will grow the economy. Growing the economy is a good thing, but it's not the only thing. There are other public goods which ought to be supported.

Even when we're working for money, most of us want to do good for others. We can of course include in this the huge number of people that work in public service roles, but also all sorts of jobs that don't have an explicit social purpose. That desire to help is driven by the same instinct that leads us to other kinds of tasks and goals. For historical reasons, we treat these as secondary, incidental and a matter of private choice. They are not purely private things, but 'public' roles: parenting and household management, caring for the elderly, community action and even 'self-care' are all moral responsibilities and practical necessities. They even have an economic impact: poor health and poor mental health keep people out of paid employment and in need of extra support from others or the state.

Some of these things are in fact forms of work, though not forms of employment. They could be delivered alternatively by people in paid employment. They deliver things which a society should act collectively to support. We identify three forms of work that are not usually forms of employment below.

Civic work – Our social purpose

Civic work could be described as the work that is required to maintain a decent common life. Unlike the relationships of private life, civic bonds are not usually with people with whom we share a natural affinity. However, those who share civic space have common interests and common goals. Those

goals might be to do with the quality of life in an immediate locality. They may have common national goals (like affordable healthcare, or national security). Even if people differ politically, at a minimum they will feel that they benefit from shared institutions, democratic accountability, and community spirit.

Very few people have a professional role in government or politics, but a healthy democracy needs people power. Democracies work best when citizens are well informed and involved at as many levels as possible. There is an onus on every citizen to take an interest in what is happening around them, exercising their rights of influence, association, and election for the good of the wider community. We know that there are many opportunities, from joining the neighbourhood watch, to a residents' association, or a school governing board. Many participate in unions in the workplace. We may support and volunteer for charities, recognising that we contribute to public goods in so doing. Sometimes, people use the same skills in a voluntary capacity that they use in paid employment.

Public institutions often want more public engagement than they can generate. While some forms of civic engagement have increased (e.g., participation in public debate via social media), most indicators of democratic life suggest that people are less and less likely to get involved. The older mechanisms for collective political representation – political parties and trade unions – have generally suffered in recent years, notwithstanding temporary bubbles that seem to form around individual leaders or policy issues.[4] With lower levels of citizen engagement, the United Kingdom could be putting itself at risk of 'democratic backsliding'.

What of indicators of civic engagement beyond the political? In 2021/22, the Community Life Survey found that 27% of respondents reported taking part in formal volunteering at least once in the last year (approximately 12 million people in England). This is lower than 2020/21 (30%, or approximately 14 million people) and lower than rates between 2013/14 and 2019/20 (between 36% to 45%). This is a steep decline, with this latter participation rate amounting to the lowest recorded by the Community Life Survey.[5] The Covid-19 pandemic may have had the effect of temporarily boosting informal volunteering, though there were problems in translating the large number of 'hands in the air' into large-scale action. The overall effect has been the withdrawal of older volunteers, many of whom are medically vulnerable, and now the absence of those that came on during furlough. Future prospects for volunteering look bleak.[6]

In any case, there are significant time-related barriers to volunteering. Those who spend most of their time in paid employment will have less time for unpaid work – formal volunteering (at least once a month) was higher for those economically inactive (21%) compared to employed respondents (15%). According to NCVO's Time Well Spent report, reasons for not volunteering included, "I don't want to make an ongoing commitment", "I have work or study commitments", and "I do other things with my spare time".[7] Those considering volunteering identified flexibility as key to their decision, implying a desire that community action should fit around obligations. If those obligations (for example, employment) expand, volunteering time is likely to be trimmed, as we have seen in the post-pandemic lull in volunteering.

There are significant time related barriers to volunteering.

These are the marks of declining democratic and civic health. We should be asking whether there are ways to actively promote civic engagement, not least through connecting the workplace to opportunities in civil society.

We already recognise the principle that there are public duties that an employer should facilitate. The most obvious is jury service. An employer must allow an employee to take time off if they're called up on jury service and can only ask for a delay by providing evidence that time off would seriously harm the business. The self-employed can claim expenses to cover loss of earnings and the cost of any care (though at £64.95 per day anyone who is self-employed and doesn't manage to avoid jury duty will be losing money).

Many employers already offer work flexibility for volunteering. "Corporate volunteering" or "employer-supported volunteering" allows employees paid time to participate in community activities. Typically, this offers an employee a handful of days off per year. However, there is little available data on take-up. Anecdotally, these types of arrangements do support charities, not least through specific skill-based volunteering opportunities. It stands to reason, however, that this type of arrangement is far more common for employees in stable working arrangements.

One of the single biggest changes to the UK workforce in the last half a century has been the increase in paid employment by women.

Home work – Our family and caring responsibilities

The question of housework has become a vexed one in recent years, driven by the lingering gap between the amount done by women and men. It is worth remembering that one of the single biggest changes to the UK workforce in the last half a century has been the increase in paid employment by women. The number of women in work now is 1.7 million higher than it was a decade ago, and the gap between the

employment rate for men and for women is down to around 6%.

There has been some corresponding redistribution of home tasks. Latest ONS data shows that women spent an average of 3 hours and 37 minutes per day doing unpaid work activities including housework, caring for others and volunteering between 23 September and 1 October 2023. Meanwhile, men spent 2 hours and 43 minutes doing unpaid domestic work. The gap has narrowed in recent years.

Whether done by women or men, it is notable that the amount of work in the home is not inconsiderable. An unfortunate by-product of efforts to draw attention to the gender equity issue has been to denigrate its importance. These tasks are tasks that have to be done by whoever is left holding the proverbial baby. They don't carry any social esteem, in spite of the fact that large numbers of people find household management and tasks worthwhile and meaningful. Nor are they seen as socially essential, though they are. As the author Louise Perry notes: "With no one to do all this domestic work, we would very soon become a smelly, sick and hungry nation."[8]

More seriously, 5.7 million people in the UK provide some form of unpaid care: 1.9% of the population provide between 20 and 49 hours of unpaid care per week, and 1.5% provide more than 50 hours per week.[9] Carers UK have calculated that the economic value of unpaid care is equal to a second NHS. There might be an argument for a massive new public investment to take all that unpaid social care out of the domestic sphere and into the public sector (and onto the national balance sheet!) but as the third report in this *Work Shift* series will explore, this is neither desirable nor plausible.

This is all beyond the time and tasks related to child-rearing. A recent paper in the *Journal of Time Use Research* paints a fascinating picture. Although it is difficult to measure the different components of childcare consistently, overlapping as it does with general household tasks such as cooking and cleaning, the research finds that the overall amount of time spent in childcare has increased significantly: in 1961, mothers spent an average of 96 minutes per day on childcare, which increased to 162 minutes per day in 2015, while fathers did 18 minutes of childcare per day in 1961, which increased to 71 minutes per day in 2015. Researchers noted that university-educated mothers spent an average of 20 minutes more per day on childcare. The author observes that there will be a socially stratified impact in terms of child development and calls for more attention to be paid to the question of why working class parents spend less time with their children (time availability is not a determining factor).[10]

The tension between economy and household is felt by parents and carers every day.

There is a clear tension between different public goods – the economic goods of more people in work and GDP growth, and the management and maintenance of households, including the care of children. This tension between economy and the household is felt by parents and carers every day. As a matter of public policy, we increasingly prioritise the former – getting people into work – over the latter – caring responsibilities. A growing workforce generally leads to a growing economy. We all benefit from a growing economy, but it's important to see that while there might be substantial benefits in the *ends*, there might be disbenefits in the *means*.

At 1.3 million, the number of women saying they are out of the jobs market due to looking after families or households is now at the lowest on record. Often in debates around this, we are presented with a false choice of two unattractive

alternatives: either revert to more traditional gender roles with women staying out of the labour market, and therefore suffer a loss of economic freedom; or hollow out of the home as a child-rearing environment, with the state stepping in to stimulate and support the childcare provision required to make it a viable option for early-years parents. The first option is neither desirable nor realistic, so we assume that we have to accept the second. These bad alternatives are disguised by the language of 'choice', when we know that most families have little freedom of manoeuvre.

Self-ish work – Loving ourselves as our neighbour

What we have called 'civic work' and 'home work' relate to the joys and obligations of social roles – human beings as citizens, members of a wider community, and members of families: "ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country" (or neighbourhood, or family). However, it's also important that people flourish as individuals. It is a public good that individuals increase in wellbeing, health, levels of education, and skills – and this has important implications for the workplace and beyond.

We have already mentioned the concept of the "subjective nature" of work found in Catholic Social Teaching. It is important to note that in this framework, the *primary value* of work is that of human actualisation. The papal encyclical, *Laborem Excercens*, states that:

> *...the basis for determining the value of human work is not primarily the kind of work being done but the fact that the one who is doing it is a person... the primary basis of the value of work is the human being, who is its subject. This leads immediately to a very important conclusion of an ethical nature: however true it may be that he or she is destined for work and*

called to it, in the first place work is 'for humanity' and not humanity 'for work'.[11]

This is true of any kind of work, including work that is menial or routine in nature. However, it is more true of work which is secure, contributes to wider society, and where there are opportunities to learn, train, or develop new skills. We ought to be asking how the work that we ask people to do develops their lives – in other words, what work can do for them.

Beyond the workplace, we want people to take responsibility for their own physical and mental wellbeing, health, and development, as far as circumstances are within their control (though it will always be easier if someone is part of healthy and supportive social networks). It is notable that the single most common health condition among those economically inactive because of long-term sickness is now "depression, bad nerves or anxiety". In January-March 2023, 1.4 million of the economically inactive reported these kinds of conditions (this does not necessarily mean that they were the primary cause of being out of work). Ensuring people – especially young people – can access support will be important for the development of a confident, resilient future workforce.

In terms of the wider development of skills, the IFS reports that there has been a fall over time in public and private investment in training and adult education.[12] While there were nearly 5.5 million adult qualifications in the early 2000s, there were only 1.5 million by 2020. The average number of days of workplace training received each year has fallen by 19% per employee in England since 2011. This is another respect in which the deal for workers is getting worse over time. This puts a greater onus on individuals to self-fund

skills or career development. If people can't see a path to more satisfying, skilled and well-paid work within the workforce, is it any wonder that they leave it?

Work-life balance vs. work-life integration

Although work – in the sense of employment – is crucial, we seem to be enjoying it less than ever. Voices from the left and right are becoming more circumspect around the good of work itself, and indeed are beginning to draw an ethical critique – that work as we know it is not particularly good for human flourishing, and that an exclusive focus on work has been damaging to individuals and society. We don't need to fully agree with these critiques to recognise that they have some substance.

Above, we have argued that a large part of the problem is how we understand work, and that it exists on a continuum of human endeavour aimed at a good society in which people can flourish to a greater extent. Some things on this continuum are things we get paid to do. Many of them aren't, and nor should we get paid for them. Nevertheless, they contribute as much, if not more, to the public good than paid employment. Meanwhile, the time demands on households have likely grown dramatically.

> **The things we don't get paid to do contribute as much, if not more, to the public good than paid employment.**

Here, there are philosophical and value-related questions about how we value different kinds of 'work'. Employment contributes to the national balance sheets. While it would be untrue to say that these other kinds of work – our obligations as citizens and family members – are not recognised at all, they are certainly not recognised in the same way. The inevitable result is that they are under-supported by public policy.

If work is to win back the British public, then there are some essential issues of justice and equity that need to be met. As *The Ties That Bind* argued, supporting relationality in the workplace is often reflected in decent working conditions. In this report, we've argued that greater space needs to be created for other goods. We turn to these questions in conclusion.

1 David Graeber, *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018).

2 Daniel Lilley, 'Mothers' preferences over childcare and work. Why won't anyone listen to the 3 million mums?', *Civitas*, 10 May 2023 (update September 2023). *www.civitas.org.uk/2023/05/10/mothers-preferences-over-childcare-and-work/*

3 Paul Bickley, *Just Work: Humanising the Labour Market in a Changing World* (London: Theos, 2021). Available at: *www.theosthinktank.co.uk/cmsfiles/Just-work-v6-combined.pdf*

4 In the last 15 years, Conservative Party membership has declined from around 300,000 to 170,000. This compares poorly with historical estimates in the millions in the middle of the last century. See Membership of the Political Parties, House of Commons Library *researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN05125/SN05125.pdf*

5 Department for Culture, Media & Sport, *Community Life Survey 2021/22. www.gov.uk/government/statistics/community-life-survey-202122/community-life-survey-202122-volunteering-and-charitable-giving*

6 See: Hannah Rich, *Torn Safety Net* (London: Theos, 2022); or Hannah Rich and George Lapshynov, *Volunteering After the Pandemic: Lessons from the Homelessness Sector* (London: Theos, 2023).

7 NCVO, *Time Well Spent 2023. www.ncvo.org.uk/news-and-insights/news-index/key-findings-from-time-well-spent-2023/*

8 Louise Perry, 'The dignity of domestic labour', *The Critic*, July/August (2020) *thecritic.co.uk/issues/july-august-2020/the-dignity-of-domestic-labour/*

9 "Do you look after, or give any help or support to, anyone because they have long-term physical or mental health conditions or illnesses, or problems related to old age?" 2021 Census. *www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/healthandwellbeing/bulletins/unpaidcareenglandandwales/census2021#:~:text=In%20England%20and%20Wales%20an,2011%20to%204.4%25%20in%202021.*

10 Giacomo Vagni, 'Bringing It All Back Home. Social Class and Educational Stratification of Childcare in Britain, 1961-2015', *Journal of Time Use Research* 18:1 (2023), pp. 37-57.

11 Pope John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, §6. Gendered language appears in the original language of the Vatican English translation, which we have adjusted for clarity.

12 Imran Tahir, *Investment in training and skills* (London: Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2023) *ifs.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-10/IFS-Green-Budget-2023-Investment-in-training-and-skills.pdf*

4 Rekindling the romance

These are the pieces of the puzzle: data that seem to show that the public values work less than we used to; rising levels of economic inactivity; the reality that, though on average we work shorter and easier hours than we ever have, households face rising demands on their time; and political critiques that suggest that we have allowed work (or employment) to take priority. At the heart of this there is a policy paradox: the government wants us to work more and wants those who have left the labour market to return to it, while we are falling out of love with work.

The central argument of this report is not for less work, but that if we did less *employed* work, we would have greater space for the other kinds of work. We need to recognise that there are other forms of work which, although not economically driven, are just as serious and 'public'. These are absolutely necessary and should be understood not as lifestyle choices or leisure pursuits but as contributions to the common good. Parenting is the obvious example, but also vitally important are care for the elderly, community and political participation, ongoing education, and so on. In the same way that we used to have formal policy facilitating national military service, we should find concrete ways of ensuring that people do these things.

We need to recognise that there are other forms of work which, although not economically driven, are just as serious and 'public'.

While economic goals for individuals and society should not be ignored, they should be set alongside other freedoms and obligations that come from being a citizen – and indeed a human being. But what does this 'setting alongside' mean? This begs concrete proposals about changes in policy and culture which will move society toward a more balanced approach where people can achieve goals in different fields of life. Better work-life balance could be taken as implying more leisure and less work – but balance (the amount of one as

> **Better work-life balance could be taken as implying more leisure and less work – but balance (the amount of one as against the other) may not be the problem. The problem is one of integration.**

against the other) may not be the problem. The problem is one of integration.

In the balancing of interests between employees and employers, we must now incorporate questions around control over place and time of work. We know that there are large wins in terms of giving workers greater control where appropriate. The self-employed, despite being less well paid and, by definition, less secure, report greater levels of satisfaction because they have more control over how, when, and on what they work. The self-employed worker can sensibly negotiate work around other life commitments.

For employed workers, a similar principle is already in place – most obviously reflected in maternity and paternity leave, foster and adoption leave, and carer flexibility. Society already recognises that these moments represent priorities not only for the worker in question but also society as a whole. But parental responsibilities don't end after the window of maternity/paternity leave. Indeed, parents continue to need flexibility after that window. Currently, we generally trust that this is best negotiated between employee and employer on a case-by-case basis, but we could be doing more to help people integrate multiple priorities. We suggest expanding and enforcing basic rights, greater use of four-day weeks, and extending the hybrid premium.

Expanding and enforcing basic rights

All employees in the UK have some basic rights – for example, the right to holiday or, for most, statutory sick pay. These rights afford some limited flexibility to most workers. The Resolution Foundation has noted that a lack of enforcement means that there are many breaches where workers, particularly low paid and insecure workers, are

not able to access these basic rights. This affects a small as a proportion of the workforce, but the actual numbers are significant. For instance, they estimate that 3% of workers are not given paid holiday – but this would affect 900,000 people. A better enforcement regime around pay, holiday, contract, and similar minimum standards could improve the experience of millions of workers.

Other rights could be strengthened, improving the offer for workers. For instance, parents with children under the age of 18 have the legal right to take up to 18 weeks' unpaid parental leave per child. Parents might use it to look after and sick child or settle them into new childcare. However, it is a very weak right. Like the similar *Time Off for Dependents* entitlement, it is unpaid. The employee will have to have worked for their employer for one year and is required to give 21 days' notice. An employer cannot refuse time off but could delay the time off for six months. In its favour, we can say that such a right provides for extensive leave and for the worker to have a job at the end of it. However, a shorter entitlement of leave with statutory pay would be a far more realistic and compassionate response.

The fifth day?

In the last few years, many companies have been trialling four-day weeks, or similar adjusted schemes which shorten hours without reducing pay. At heart, a four-day week recognises that there is an indirect relationship between time and work, a least in some sectors. If shortening hours improves employee wellbeing, a company can be as productive and profitable, and potentially gain other advantaged such as reduced staff turnover.

Studies of four-day weeks certainly seem to support the claim that they improve worker wellbeing. An impact study by the think tank Autonomy demonstrated that "while nearly 13% of employees did experience an increase in stress, three times as many (39%) were less stressed, with the remainder (48%) recording no change in stress levels." Employees also found it easier to balance their work with both family and social commitments – for 54%, it was easier to balance work with household jobs.[1] Many of the companies involved in the trial have extended the experiment or have permanently committed to a shorter week.

It should be acknowledged that a short week can't work for every company, or indeed every team. Different work processes have different implicit relationships between time and productivity, with industrial and customer-face tasks more likely to require a constant level of 'human resource'. Some companies, for example, have introduced unlimited holidays. It's not hard to see that this would be extremely hard to operate in any sector or business which required minimum levels of staffing at any one time.

There should, however, be a presumption in favour of greater time flexibility where possible. Where employers do this, they should encourage staff to use the fifth day in particular ways – for family, leisure, education, or volunteering, rather than to earn extra income.

Maintaining the hybrid premium

Many employees find that hybrid working adds flexibility to a working week. It removes the waste of time and money on unnecessary commuting, creates opportunities for focussed working, and maintains opportunities for office interaction.

In spite of the time efficiencies of hybrid work, generally to the benefit of those most under time pressure, a growing number of companies are mandating full back-to-office working (for example, Boots has announced that administrative staff will be brought back into the office for five days a week from September). While it is true that all workers benefit from a decent desk and face-to-face interaction with colleagues (particularly new joiners), back-to-office mandates tend to be based on somewhat vague claims about the quality of the office experience. As we get further away from the pandemic, it is unfortunate that opportunities for hybrid working seem to be narrowing rather than expanding.

We also know – see our report *The Ties that Bind* – that there is a strong correlation between income and working at home. For workers earning £50,000 or more per year, some 90% had the option to work at home at least part of the week, and 80% chose to do so at least one day per week. By contrast, workers at the other end of the income scale earning £10,000 per year or less were rarely able to work from home (only 25% reported this as a possibility) and only half of these ever did so (13%). This reflects the different kinds of jobs people undertake; managers and professionals are far more likely to work at home than hospitality workers or carers.[2]

This is a new pandemic and post-pandemic division of the workforce. Those who already have higher rates of pay are also far more likely to benefit from location flexibility, a further premium or benefit. We must resist this divergence where possible. In the same way that there will be industries or sectors where shorter working weeks are not viable, there will be industries and sectors where hybrid working is not an option. Preventing those who can work at least some of their time from home from doing so is unnecessary and unhelpful,

This is a new post-pandemic divide in the workforce. Those who already have higher rates of pay are also far more likely to benefit from workplace flexibility.

and particularly likely to adversely effect workers with caring responsibilities.

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Some things about the labour market have got better over the last couple of decades, but many things have not. There are good reasons to be frustrated with the state of work in this country, even leaving aside widely acknowledged issues like stagnant wage rates. When considering the shifting composition of the labour market, it seems that the time demands at a household level might be considerably higher than they were in the past. This makes it all the more difficult to the wider goods of life – individual, familial, and social – to flourish as they should.

We can't turn the clock back or ignore the importance of growing the workforce. Again, the underlying approach of this report is that work is good, and more than economically good. It is itself a source of human flourishing. A hopeful and pragmatic way forward is to give workers as much flexibility as is realistic as possible. People want to work, and in a better future would not have to compromise between a good job and good life.

1 Autonomy, *The Results Are In: The UK's Four-Day Week Pilot* (February 2023) *autonomy.work/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/The-results-are-in-The-UKs-four-day-week-pilot.pdf*

2 ONS, *Characteristics of homeworkers*, cited in *The Ties that Bind*.

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Working Five to Nine:
How we can deliver work-life integration

Working Five to Nine: How we can deliver work-life integration is the second report in *Theos' Work Shift* series, exploring how a renewed focus on relationships could help deliver good work. This report explores how employment interacts, or fails to interact, with forms of unpaid work. It argues that stubbornly high levels of economic inactivity in the UK are not just down to ill health. Our values around work have shifted: data shows that the UK public are the least likely of 24 countries to say that work is very/rather important in their life.

To address this, we will have to pay attention to the *'subjective dimension'* of work. Work should contribute to human flourishing and development and do so by making space for obligations that, from a Christian perspective, are as important as employment. Caring responsibilities, civil and political action, and personal development and education, serve the common good just as much as paid employment. We argue that the expansion and enforcement of basic worker rights, further use of four-day weeks, and maintaining and extending the use of thoughtful hybrid working, will help people integrate paid employment and other crucial responsibilities.

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