



How you can feel more fulfilled, and less anxious, on the job.

By Bruce Daisley, 26 January 2019



Why does modern work feel so dissatisfying? Are we making the mistake of searching for the 'why' of modern work when we're desperately in need of answering 'how'?

If we were inventing jobs today, we'd struggle to come up with something engineered to be as dissatisfying as employment in the early 21st Century. Endless meetings and emails, all done against the drone of vast open-plan offices.

I've spent the last two years researching and writing a book about improving the modern workplace culture – and what I observed was a shocking reminder of what needs fixing.

The challenges with modern workplaces go beyond distraction into something more substantial. The Mental Health Foundation says that 74% of Brits felt overwhelmed by stress at some point last year, with work being the biggest cause.

It's no wonder. Since we all started taking emails on our mobile phones **the average working day has lengthened by two hours**. By some estimates, workers who are expected to stay connected to their colleagues are clocking up **over 70 hours plugged into the office** each week. **Half the people who add a couple of extra hours to the working day clock up the highest recordable levels of stress.**

That's why the exhortations of self-declared visionaries like Simon Sinek seem to be increasingly hitting a bum note with those in the workplace.

When 'why' isn't enough

Sinek achieved fame and recognition from his insistence that millennials needed to **understand the 'why' of work before they could commit themselves to the endeavours involved**. "Great companies don't hire skilled people and motivate them, they hire already motivated people and inspire them," Sinek declared.

Inspiration took the form of telling them 'why' they were doing the job. But it's becoming clear that this singular focus on a north star of 'purpose' is creating dissonance and dissatisfaction on the shop floor.

Workers of all ages are faced with reconciling the ultimate **'first world problem'**: "How can I be working at this noble, purpose-driven organisation and still not feel happy?"

An increasing number of employers are seeing their workers take them to task on the disparities between what was promised to them as candidates and the realities of their jobs. The Google walkout in 2018 followed Susan Fowler's Uber blog post as another high-profile milestone on a long road of workplace discontent despite lofty answers to the 'why' question.

It's becoming obvious that while focusing on the 'why' of work might create a compelling vision for a warrior CEO to stand behind, that doesn't help the workers feeling crushed with fatigue at their desks. Increasingly, it's feeling like it's time for us to move from the adrenalised bravado of 'why' to the comparatively mundane discussion of 'how': **'How can I feel more fulfilled and less anxious in my job?'**

The power of small changes

What does the 'how' of improved work culture look like? It's becoming clear that we can personally make changes to the design of our day that can help make work less awful.

Once workers accept that 'how' is important, many of us feel energised by the realisation that we have the autonomy to initiate change. The biggest burden of work for most of us is that cursed time spent in meetings. The simple act of halving the number of people present can be an act of mercy.

Investment bankers Bridgewater Associates realised that having fewer people in meetings seemed to be highly effective at improving the quality of discussions. The challenge, of course, was that **we're convinced that the meeting we're not in is the one where all the good stuff is happening**. To prove that this FOMO was misplaced, they started recording all their meetings – with the end result that no one complained when they were stood down from the attendee list.

There are other things: workers are increasingly aware that **taking a proper lunchbreak three or four times a week is proven by research to improve decision making and reduce the Friday fatigue** that plagues so many of us.

Going further, borrowing the **Swedish tradition of fika** by **taking a walk with a colleague as part of a routine** to get our daily dose of caffeine appears to have positive effects. It makes us less email weary and refreshes our minds as we close out the working day.

In fact, the science of walking can even be extended to **switching meetings from sedentary to mobile occasions**. Stafford scholar Marily Oprezzo found that **walking improved creative thinking** for 81% of those she tested.

Introducing a new meeting to the calendar might seem heretical when we're trying to declutter the working week, but **the power of social meetings is gaining currency** – perhaps replacing the human synchronisation that many British workplaces used to derive from an adjournment to a local pub.

Five-time CEO Margaret Heffernan described her introduction of a weekly social meeting at one of her US-based firms as “absolutely transformational” for the working culture. Heffernan observed that **encouraging workers to spend time socialising with each other in the working day made them more likely to collaborate** during the rest of the week.

Workplaces are beset with the **hurry sickness** that is a consequence of the relentless demands of modern work – and the impact of that burn-out can be hard, especially on the most junior workers. When work is unrelenting, a focus on the lofty goal of ‘why’ we work won’t help, maybe right now we need to take care of ‘how’.

Bruce Daisley is Vice President - EMEA at Twitter. His book The Joy of Work - 30 Ways To Reinvent Your Work Culture and Fall in Love With Your Job Again is out now.

<http://www.bbc.com/capital/story/20190125-focus-on-how-you-work-not-why>