

‘I had to guard an empty room’

The rise of the pointless job

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One day, the wall shelves in my office collapsed. This left books scattered all over the floor and a jagged, half-dislocated metal frame that once held the shelves in place dangling over my desk. I'm a professor of anthropology at a university. A carpenter appeared an hour later to inspect the damage, and announced gravely that, as there were books all over the floor, safety rules prevented him from entering the room or taking further action. I would have to stack the books and not touch anything else, whereupon he would return at the earliest available opportunity.

The carpenter never reappeared. Each day, someone in the anthropology department would call, often multiple times, to ask about the fate of the carpenter, who always turned out to have something extremely pressing to do. By the time a week was out, it had become apparent that there was one man employed by buildings and grounds whose entire job it was to apologise for the fact that the carpenter hadn't come. He seemed a nice man. Still, it's hard to imagine he was particularly happy with his work life.

Everyone is familiar with the sort of jobs that don't seem, to the outsider, really to do much of anything: HR consultants, communications coordinators, PR researchers, financial strategists, corporate lawyers or the sort of people who spend their time staffing committees that discuss the problem of unnecessary committees. What if these jobs really are useless, and those who hold them are actually aware of it? Could there be anything more demoralising than having to wake up in the morning five out of seven days of one's adult life to perform a task that one believes does not need to be performed, is simply a waste of time or resources, or even makes the world worse? There are plenty of surveys about whether people are happy at work, but what about whether people feel their jobs have any good reason to exist? I decided to investigate this phenomenon by drawing on more than 250 testimonies from people around the world who felt they once had, or now have, what I call a bullshit job.

What is a bullshit job?

The defining feature is this: one so completely pointless that even the person who has to perform it every day cannot convince themselves there's a good reason for them to be doing it. They may not be able to admit this to their co-workers – often, there are very good reasons not to do so – but they are convinced the job is pointless nonetheless.

Bullshit jobs are not just jobs that are useless; typically, there has to be some degree of pretence and fraud involved as well. The employee must feel obliged to pretend that there is, in fact, a good reason their job exists, even if, privately, they find such claims ridiculous.

When people speak of bullshit jobs, they are generally referring to employment that involves being paid to work for someone else, either on a waged or salaried basis (most would include paid consultancies). Obviously, there are many self-employed people who manage to get money from others by means of falsely pretending to provide them with some benefit or service (normally we call them grifters, scam artists, charlatans or frauds), just as there are self-employed people who get money off others by doing or threatening to do them harm (normally we refer to them as muggers, burglars, extortionists or thieves). In the first case, at least, we can definitely speak of bullshit, but not of bullshit jobs, because these aren't "jobs", properly speaking. A con job is an act, not a profession. People do sometimes speak of professional burglars, but this is just a way of saying that theft is the burglar's primary source of income.

These considerations allow us to formulate what I think can serve as a final working definition of a bullshit job: a form of paid employment that is so completely pointless, unnecessary, or pernicious that even the employee cannot justify its existence, even though, as part of the conditions of employment, the employee feels obliged to pretend that this is not the case.

The five types of bullshit job

Flunkies

They are given some minor task to justify their existence, but this is really just a pretext: in reality, flunky jobs are those that exist only or primarily to make someone else look or feel important. A classic flunky is someone like Steve, who told me, “I just graduated, and my new ‘job’ basically consists of my boss forwarding emails to me with the message: ‘Steve refer to the below’, and I reply that the email is inconsequential or spam.”

Doormen are the most obvious example. They perform the same function in the houses of the very rich that electronic intercoms have performed for everyone else since at least the 1950s. In some countries, such as Brazil, some buildings still have uniformed elevator operators whose entire job is to push the button for you. Further examples are receptionists and front-desk personnel at places that obviously don’t need them. Other flunkies provide a badge of importance. These include cold callers, who make contact with potential clients on the understanding that the broker for whom they work is so busy making money that they need an assistant to make this call.

Goons

These are people whose jobs have an aggressive element but, crucially, who exist only because other people also employ people in these roles. The most obvious example of this are national armed forces. Countries need armies only because other countries have armies; if no one had an army, armies would not be needed. But the same can be said of most lobbyists, PR specialists, telemarketers and corporate lawyers.

Goons find their jobs objectionable not just because they feel they lack positive value, but also because they see them as essentially manipulative and aggressive. These include a lot of call-centre employees: “You’re making an active negative contribution to people’s day,” explained one anonymous testimony. “I called people up to hock them useless shit: specifically, access to their ‘credit score’ that they could obtain for free elsewhere, but that we were offering, with some mindless add-ons, for £6.99 a month.”

Duct-tapers

These employees’ jobs exist only because of a glitch or fault in the organisation; they are there to solve a problem that ought not to exist. The most obvious examples of duct-tapers are those whose job it is to undo the damage done by sloppy or incompetent superiors.

Many duct-taper jobs are the result of a glitch in the system that no one has bothered to correct – tasks that could easily be automated, for instance, but haven’t been either because no one has

got around to it, or because the manager wants to maintain as many subordinates as possible, or because of some structural confusion.

Magda's job required her to proofread research reports written by her company's star researcher-statistician. "The man didn't know the first thing about statistics, and he struggled to produce grammatically correct sentences. I'd reward myself with a cake if I found a coherent paragraph. I lost 12lb working in that company. My job was to convince him to undertake a major reworking of every report he produced. Of course, he would never agree to correct anything, so I would then have to take the report to the company directors. They were statistically illiterate, too, but, being the directors, they could drag things out even more."

Box-tickers

These employees exist only or primarily to allow an organisation to be able to claim it is doing something that, in fact, it is not doing. The most miserable thing about box-ticking jobs is that the employee is usually aware that not only does the box-ticking exercise do nothing towards accomplishing its ostensible purpose, but also it undermines it, because it diverts time and resources away from the purpose itself.

We're all familiar with box-ticking as a form of government. If a government's employees are caught doing something very bad – taking bribes, for instance, or shooting citizens at traffic lights – the first reaction is invariably to create a "fact-finding commission" to get to the bottom of things. This serves two functions. First of all, it's a way of insisting that, aside from a small group of miscreants, no one had any idea that any of this was happening (this, of course, is rarely true); second, it's a way of implying that once all the facts are in, someone will definitely do something about it (this usually isn't true, either).

Local government has been described as little more than an endless sequence of box-ticking rituals revolving around monthly "target figures". There are all sorts of ways that private companies employ people to be able to tell themselves they are doing something that they aren't really doing. Many large corporations, for instance, maintain their own in-house magazines or even television channels, the ostensible purpose of which is to keep employees up to date on interesting news and developments, but which, in fact, exist for almost no reason other than to allow executives to experience that warm and pleasant feeling that comes when you see a favourable story about yourself in the media.

Taskmasters

These fall into two groups. Type one comprises those whose role consists entirely of assigning work to others. This job can be considered bullshit if the taskmaster believes there is no need for their intervention, and that if they were not there, underlings would be perfectly capable of carrying on by themselves.

Whereas the first variety of taskmaster is merely useless, the second variety does actual harm. These are taskmasters whose primary role is to create bullshit tasks for others to do, to supervise bullshit, or even to create entirely new bullshit jobs.

A taskmaster may spend at least 75% of their time allocating tasks and monitoring if the underling is doing them, even though they have absolutely no reason to believe the underlings in question would behave any differently if they weren't there.

“Strategic mission statements” (or, even worse, “strategic vision documents”) instil a particular terror in academics. These are the primary means by which corporate management techniques – setting up quantifiable methods for assessing performance, forcing teachers and scholars to spend more and more of their time assessing and justifying what they do, and less and less time actually doing it – are insinuated into academic life.

I should add that there is really only one class of people who not only deny their jobs are pointless, but also express outright hostility to the very idea that our economy is rife with bullshit jobs. These are – predictably enough – business owners and others in charge of hiring and firing. No one, they insist, would ever spend company money on an employee who wasn’t needed. All the people who are convinced their jobs are worthless must be deluded, or self-important, or simply don’t understand their real function, which is fully visible only to those above. One might be tempted to conclude from this response that this is one class of people who genuinely don’t realise their own jobs are bullshit.

Do you have a bullshit job?

These holders of bullshit jobs testify to the misery that can ensue when the only challenge you can overcome in your work is the challenge of coming to terms with the fact that you are not, in fact, presented with any challenges; when the only way you can exercise your powers is in coming up with creative ways to cover up the fact that you cannot exercise your powers; of managing the fact that you have, completely against your choosing, been turned into a parasite and a fraud. All wanted to remain anonymous:

Guarding an empty room

“I worked as a museum guard for a global security company in a museum where one exhibition room was left unused. My job was to guard that empty room, ensuring no museum guests touched the, well, nothing in the room and ensure nobody set any fires. To keep my mind sharp and attention undivided, I was forbidden any form of mental stimulation, like books, phones, etc. As nobody was ever there, I sat still and twiddled my thumbs for seven and a half hours, waiting for the fire alarm to sound. If it did, I was to calmly stand up and walk out. That was it.”

Copying and pasting

“I was given one responsibility: watching an inbox that received emails in a certain form from employees asking for tech help, and copy and paste it into a different form. Not only was this a textbook example of an automatable job, it actually used to be automated. There was some disagreement between managers that led to a standardisation that nullified the automation.”

Looking busy

“I was hired as a temp but not assigned any duties. I was told it was very important that I stay busy, but I wasn’t to play games or surf the web. My primary function seemed to be occupying a chair and contributing to the decorum of the office. At first, this seemed pretty easy, but I quickly

discovered that looking busy when you aren't is one of the least pleasant office activities imaginable. In fact, after two days, it was clear that this was going to be the worst job I had ever had. I installed Lynx, a text-only web browser that basically looks like a DOS [disk-operating system] window. No images, just monospaced text on an endless black background. My absentminded browsing of the internet now appeared to be the work of a skilled technician, the web browser a terminal into which diligently typed commands signalled my endless productivity.”

Sitting in the right place

“I work in a college dormitory during the summer. I have worked at this job for three years, and at this point it is still unclear to me what my actual duties are. Primarily, it seems that my job consists of physically occupying space at the front desk. While engaged in this, I am free to ‘pursue my own projects’, which I take to mean mainly creating rubber band balls out of rubber bands I find in the cabinets. When I am not busy with this, I might be checking the office email account (I have basically no training or administrative power, of course, so all I can do is forward these emails to my boss), moving packages from the door, where they get dropped off, to the package room, answering phone calls (again, I know nothing and rarely answer a question to the caller’s satisfaction), or finding ketchup packets from 2005 in the desk drawers. For these duties, I am paid \$14 an hour.”

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