Getting back to work

How can we reshape work to benefit everyone?

Authors

Professor Tony LaMontagne - Institute for Health Transformation, Deakin University

Professor Maureen Dollard - Centre for Workplace Excellence, University of South Australia

vichealth.vic.gov.au

Summary - how can we reshape work to benefit everyone?

Equity prioritised

- The pandemic has pointed out some stark inequities that can and should be addressed now including, but not limited to, sick leave, job security, workloads and other job demands.

Safe and healthy workplaces

- Work needs to be safe and healthy, both physically and psychologically. Pre-COVID-19 only 52% of Australian workers reported that their workplace was psychologically healthy, work pressure was increasing, and bullying rates were high. Organisations need to better align the future of work with a human-centred agenda and this seems more urgent post-COVID. Developing a strong psychosocial safety climate means building a system to identify, prevent and manage risks.

Sustainable work

- We need to see work in the context of the current reality, and its interconnections with other domains of life. Work needs to be sustainable - the demands and rewards of work need to be fairly balanced, and we need to able to balance work with other aspects of life.

Environmental and social sustainability

- We need to be thinking about jobs and employment that are at a minimum compatible with environmental sustainability. This means rethinking work in light of shared social, health, and environmental benefits - not just GDP, competition and profits.

Introduction

There's been an earthquake in the world of work. The COVID-19 pandemic has affected our livelihoods profoundly. The shape and intensity of aftershocks to come are as yet unknown, but could dwarf what we have seen already.

In its wake, COVID-19 has led to unemployment at levels we haven't seen since the Great Depression nearly a century ago, and may well go higher. For those remaining in work, many have experienced a drop in their job security, particularly those who've had to watch their co-workers get retrenched.

In some segments of the labour force, work has intensified.

Consider our healthcare workers, for example, or home delivery drivers and other newly appreciated 'essential' workers. And for those who were seeking work before COVID-19 hit, finding a job has become much harder—consider the stark rate of unemployment among our youngest workers.

While this extraordinary circumstance was unwelcome, it is an opportunity to seize the moment to re-examine and re-think work in Australia. The pandemic has highlighted various inequalities and inequities that could be addressed. Let's have a 'look back' over a 'snap back.' The issues brought to the fore in the midst of COVID-19, however, are also symptoms of larger, fundamental challenges in the world of work.

We propose a high level review of what the pandemic has taught us about work in Australia, followed by the participatory development—through robust public debate—of a national action plan to optimise Australian working lives for the new world in which we now live, work and play. At a minimum, this should be a plank of our national economic recovery plan.

But what lens should we use for such a review; what principles would we apply? The first is to prioritise the greater good, equity. What is fair? This is not an easy debate—fair in what ways, fair for or to whom? Nevertheless, the pandemic has pointed out some stark inequities that can and should be addressed now (with a salient example presented below).

Second, work needs to be safe and healthy, both physically and psychologically. Pre-COVID-19 only 52% of Australian workers reported that their workplace was psychologically healthy, work pressure was increasing, and bullying rates were high. The International Labour Organization is imploring corporations to better align the future of work with a human-centred agenda; this seems all the more urgent post-COVID-19. Developing a strong corporate psychosocial safety climate means building a system to identify and manage or prevent risks. [1, 2]

When senior management value and prioritise worker psychological health and safety, work can be designed that is meaningful, manageable, amply resourced and free from preventable psychosocial risks. [2, 3]

Third, we need to see work in the context of the current reality, and its interconnections with other domains of life. Work needs to be sustainable—the demands and rewards of work need to be fairly balanced, and we need to able to balance work with other aspects of life.

Finally—in light of the current climate emergency—we need to be thinking about jobs and employment that are at a minimum compatible with environmental sustainability. This means rethinking work in light of shared social, health, and environmental benefits—not just GDP, competition and profits.

Equity prioritised

First, a system flaw thrown into stark relief by the pandemic: we need provision for workers who get sick, however they are employed—in the interests of fairness and the public's health.

Everyone needs sick leave at some point in their working life, and roughly one in three working Australians don't have it. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the conflicts and inequity of this. In the current pandemic context—it conflicts with public health imperatives. "If you have COVID-19 symptoms, don't go to work…" because you could spread the illness to co-workers, clients, patients.

But what if you have to sacrifice pay to do so? And what if calling in sick also means you'll lose hours or lose your job down the track? This is neither fair for those workers, sustainable, nor compatible with protecting the public's health. It's true that many workers faced with such a choice will sacrifice pay, based on related findings from the 2009 H1N1 pandemic.[4]

Workers without sick leave are also disproportionately lower-skilled, lower-income, female, young, and recent migrants. In short, this potential loss of income or employment falls disproportionately on those least able to afford it. Fair go?

Working out a solution won't be easy—and has to balance the needs of employers and workers, but the COVID-19 pandemic has clearly demonstrated the urgency as well as inequity of this situation.

We must anticipate a rise in work-related impacts on mental health. Job security is a powerful positive influence on health and wellbeing, particularly mental health, but the reverse is also true.[5]

Job security tends to fall sharply in response to economic shocks, such as we have seen in Australia during the Global Financial Crisis.[6]

Other working conditions can also be adversely affected, such as workloads and other job demands, job control, and various forms of workplace harassment. This could be compounded for some by having to work from home.

The good news is that improving job security, job control and other working conditions can improve mental health and wellbeing.[5,7] All efforts should be made to protect working conditions, and at a minimum to restore working conditions to pre-COVID-19 levels during the economic recovery period.

Safe and healthy workplaces

The COVID-19-associated steep and rapid rise in unemployment will also adversely affect health, particularly mental health, with foreseeable increases in mental disorders, suicidal thoughts and behaviours, and suicide deaths.[8-12]

Government and other unemployment supports will mitigate these impacts to the extent that they are quickly, equitably, and transparently provided. Psychological and other healthcare providers should be alert to patients' employment status, and how work or the lack thereof may be affecting their health.

Some on-line support is available such as beyondblue materials that acknowledge the profound impacts, but also provide practical advice on coping emotionally, financially and otherwise. For all parties—decision-makers, workers facing redundancy, and workers remaining on the job — the pain will be minimised by making the decision-making process equitable and transparent.

Some novel ideas for sharing the burden of job and work loss at a societal level are worth considering. New Zealand, for example, has floated the notion of a 4-day work week to simultaneously reduce job losses while promoting domestic tourism to boost the hard-hit tourism and hospitality industries. From a bigger picture view independent of the pandemic, reducing the working week could help to address the persistent problem of there being too much work for some, and too little for others (the current underemployment rate is 14%).

The Australian Government, to its credit, has responded quickly with initiatives to support closed businesses and displaced workers, and now looks towards job creation programs to address the rising tide of unemployment—6.2% nationally in April 2020. We will focus on job creation aspects here, acknowledging there is more that could be said about Job Keeper, Job Seeker, and related programs.

Sustainable work

Stimulation of the economy through government spending for job creation is welcome. But not just any jobs. We know that some jobs in Australia are worse for your health than unemployment.[13,14]

Further effort is needed to develop the concept of sustainable work—defined by Eurofound as "achieving living and working conditions that support people in engaging and remaining in work throughout an extended working life". Further guidance on job design is being developed for the public through the National Workplace Initiative being run by the National Mental Health Commission.

We as a nation can both adapt from and contribute to ongoing international efforts to shape the jobs of the future for the greater good.

Government support should be linked to minimum requirements for the creation or redesign of good quality jobs that are safe, secure, and fairly paid. In this way, government would be investing in workers as much as business; and this would be investment in a better, fairer society.

Environmental and social sustainability

Government support for job creation can simultaneously address priorities in areas of social, environmental or other needs: renewable energy sources and technologies, land management for the prevention of catastrophic bushfires, bushfire response capacity, social housing, public health infrastructure, and more.

We can invest in jobs, projects, and industries to help narrow inequalities. For example, we can anticipate where the impacts of automation might be particularly severe, such as among people who drive for living—and plan for those displaced worker. Take our affordable-housing crisis, another 'wiked' problem.

The Master Builders' Association and the Construction, Forestry, Mining & Energy Union (CFMEU) set aside their differences and recently proposed a government-financed social housing initiative.

Such investment would assist those in need of housing, provide employment for building industry workers, and could be structured to incentivise apprenticeship and other employment opportunities for young workers who have been bearing the highest unemployment levels even before COVID-19.

Our tax dollars can and should be invested in creating quality jobs for our collective future. Economic recovery planning—in general—can and should prioritise the greater good by requiring societal benefits in more than one domain: improving employment; reducing social, economic or health inequalities; protecting the environment; fighting racism; addressing climate change and its impacts, and more.

Let's make some changes for the greater good

To close this wide-ranging exploration of how to both anticipate and direct changes in the world of work post-COVID-19, we would call for a reinvigoration of the social contract of work.

Inequality is rising in Australia, in part because the social contact of work is failing. Workers are giving too much and getting too little in return, with the difference flowing upward to further enrich those at the top. Even though GDP has steadily increased for several decades, workers' share of the GDP paid as income (wages, salary and superannuation contributions) has declined by 11 percentage points since 1975. And the widening inequalities are stark indeed—the Qantas CEO earned around $24 million in 2018, 270 times the national average wage.

With inequality comes discontent and unrest, and ultimately societal breakdown—we don't want or need to follow the USA's lead in this regard. Even the titans of global capitalism are talking about the need to reduce income inequality and invest in the common good—before the system breaks down [15].

At its essence, this would be about societally, as well as environmentally sustainable business, enabling sustainable jobs and work, encouraging social ownership of enterprise, emphasising cooperation rather than competition, reconsidering production for societal needs over wants, and reinventing the social contract of work.

How much should we have to give to work, and what is fair reward? How can the risks and profits of business be more equitably shared? How can we balance economic, social and environmental sustainability? We owe it to future generations to be engaging with these questions now.

We're all eager to see the back of COVID-19, but we can't snap back to where we were. The world has changed in ways we're still working out. And there are some aspects of work we should not snap back to. Let's make some changes for the greater good, and plan for a better, fairer future for all working Australians.

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