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Work, Workplaces and Workers: The Contemporary Experience

Sharon C. Bolton and
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This book has a very simple ambition: to explore the matter of work and why work matters from the perspective of a range of workers engaged in different forms of work in a wide variety of workplaces. These accounts link their telling from the workplace to the globalised economy, with disconnected capitalism firmly in their sight. The many authors of this collection introduce us to voices from the supermarket floor, the factory floor, school rooms, taxi cabs, hotels, restaurants, care homes, public sector blogs, junior doctors on their rounds, and more. They are voices that tell of how we work today. They tell us of the systems and procedures and rules and regulations and bureaucratic structures. They tell us of the persistent growth of work routinisation. And yet they tell of flexibilisation – most particularly of the employment relationship – and of the personal consequences of casualisation. They tell us of intensifying management regimes, new technologies and changing, and often unmet, expectations and at the same time they tell of passion for and joy in work. They tell us of the story of the individual – and as structure rears its head – of choices and lack of choices, of a desire to work as a means to an end, and for a whole host of other reasons too. These are accounts that determinedly bring forth the voice and humanity of people in relation to their work experiences. The threads that tie these diverse narratives together present a picture of commonality across all sorts of regimes around one central point – the increasing pressure of the workplace under vigorous capitalism.

Why work matters

Whilst we write about work matters the irony is not lost that as we study we are also our own subjects. Sat in an airport lounge, laptops balanced on

knees, working in the short hour between clearing Immigration and flying to an American conference, we find ourselves in the unlikely position, given we are editing a book entitled *work matters*, of looking at each other and wondering if, and why, work matters to the extent it appears to do. Questions borne of fatigue and frustration summed up in the challenge ‘whose idea was this book anyway?’ Lacking immediate inspiration we sit and stare around us and observe the actions and interactions of passengers and airport workers. The shuffling cleaner who with stooped shoulders drags her bucket along the floor. The officious, and somewhat overenthusiastic, immigration officer. The ‘suit’ sat opposite shouting orders into his mobile phone and another suit nearby also balancing a laptop on his knee.

The results of our musings are not very profound: we work and our work matters to us and it matters for others too. At its most basic work matters because in a market-based economy we need to sell our capacity to labour as a means to survival (even though, as many of the chapters to follow remind us, sometimes it barely fulfils that function). But casting our fatigue aside for a moment, there is more: work matters because it is rarely only that; it is about esteem and disrespect, status and subordination, opportunity and cost, commitment and alienation. If we listen to people talk about their work we are reminded that work and workplaces are fields of struggle where interests can both coincide and clash, and personhood is both attacked and maintained (Sayer, 2005: 41). And, perhaps most importantly, that work is a fundamental requirement of humanity but the capacity for its achievement essentially relies on factors external to the individual. Do they receive adequate pay? Are they involved in interesting work? Do they experience reasonable conditions? Have they security of tenure? Are they offered equality of opportunity? Thinking in terms of work matters recognises that work has both material and subjective dimensions rooted as it is in a moral economy (Sayer, 2005); a world where the *social* and the economic are immutably symbiotic and interdependent. Thus the experience of work relies on the material conditions of ‘decent work’ *and* the support of the human ties that generate respect and dignity (Bolton and Houlihan, 2007; Bolton, 2007). The economic world depends on social abilities to oil its wheels. This is very different than simply making the best of a bad job and generating a positive attitude to work, as some commentators would see it (Reeves, 2001; Knell, 2000). Rather, the economy depends on the full spectrum of social life – in all its messiness. In recognising that work matters, work becomes a political issue; a means of analysing the wellbeing of society through a telling lens.

So back to the question ‘whose idea was this book?’. Actually we cannot lay claim to the idea at all. It is an idea generated by all of us who work, and the stories that we tell about it. Listening to these stories restores a sense of clarity. We believe in good work. Work that brings connection and fulfilment.

Work that fulfils potential. And we believe in people's capacity to derive joy from work. And yet also we are concerned that work can be miserable, toxic, soul destroying, inadequately rewarded, and at times dangerous. Examining closely these accounts of contemporary work, workplaces, and workers reveals a rich and varied picture of the ways in which these aspirations – these rights – are afforded, and the concerning degree to which they are under pressure.

As we settle into a new millennium, the question of whether work is getting better, or indeed, worse; whether we are improving in the act of organising work; and whether our needs and expectations as workers are changing, has never been more pertinent. Time perhaps to reflect on the evidence, as we turn now to each: *work*, *workplaces* and *workers*.

Work

If some things have changed but much has stayed the same then this is reflected in critiques of contemporary work that highlight the inequalities in access to well-paid work and safe and secure working conditions. Polly Toynbee's study of the working poor spans 30 years (1971, 2003) and highlights how structural inequalities have changed little over that period with vast numbers of people working for barely, if not less, than the minimum wage whilst carrying out work that should be socially valued but is not. Similarly Fran Abrams' (2002) account of living 'below the breadline' in the UK and Barbara Ehrenreich's experiences of low pay work in the US points out that often it is only the non-material rewards that make work bearable (2001). These accounts reflect ever present concerns about the general availability of 'good work' (Coats, 2007; Green, 2006; Moynagh and Worsley, 2005; Powell and Snellman, 2004; Sennett, 1998, 2003; Thompson, 2005). Concerns that are echoed worldwide with common themes emerging from all advanced and developing economies as people are feeling under pressure in today's world of work and reporting that work has grown more stressful for all categories of employees from senior managers to manual workers and most people saying that they are working more intensely and clocking in for more hours than in the recent past (Eurofound, 2007; Coats, 2007; Green, 2006; OECD, 2007).

And yet policy-makers continue to propose a unitarist vision of equality of opportunity in a high skill, high reward economy where there is a general conception of a radical break from the past with the introduction of new types of creative, technology and knowledge led work – work that is ideally presented as 'infomated': virtual, clean and value-adding. The upbeat theme is represented by the focus on the 'high road' of management which includes the development and utilisation of new skills and the increasing availability of 'good' work along with the move towards the utilisation of

soft, tacit knowledge and even its long overdue recognition as a quantifiable skill (DTI, 2004; Coats, 2007; Westwood, 2002). While indeed higher skilled work is increasing in advanced economies (Ghose *et al.*, 2008), there appears to be little recognition that whilst some jobs – notably manufacturing and information processing – have moved from advanced to developing economies (thus triggering the notion of only high skill jobs remaining), a vast majority of ‘routine’ jobs remain, particularly those at the human interface: shelves still need stacking, noses wiping, tables clearing and wounds dressing. And flexibilisation is hitting these workers hard, most particularly lower-skilled workers, assigned to the margins with non-standard work arrangements, and less and less security (Ghose *et al.*, 2008). The continual pressure to push costs down an ever lengthening supply chain is wreaking its work, with large companies squeezing smaller companies into agreeing impossible contract terms which are then reflected in the pay and conditions of workers. And this is not simply a reality for the private sector, as the public sector too adopts the business model, creating its own internal markets. Healthcare, education, and state services each one by one have become marketised, in the process creating an army of contracts and agency workers, these institutions divorcing themselves ever more blindly from their embeddedness in moral economy.

Meanwhile, the jobs flowing from shifts towards services and ‘new’ forms of work are proving just as gruelling, monotonous, tightly controlled and poorly rewarded (Thompson, 2005). Empirical studies highlight the poor conditions of work in call centres, retail and hospitality; the emotional pressures front-line service workers face and the health risks involved in the new ‘clean jobs’ (Bolton and Houlihan, 2005; Boyd, 2003; Callaghan and Thompson, 2002; Houlihan, 2002; Taylor *et al.*, 2002, 2003). Nor can we say that ‘dirty work’ has disappeared. On the contrary, the growth in ‘personnel services’¹ partially represents a new ‘upstairs and downstairs’ (GMB quoted in *Guardian*, 2005) where the cash rich but time poor contract out domestic work – cleaning, gardening, childcare – and a 21st century servant class emerges who regularly earn less than the minimum wage and have no employment rights or protection (Greg and Wandsworth, 2000; Philpot, 2000; The Work Foundation, 2005). This is also spawning a very much understated informal economy, and here too the most vulnerable members of society are to be found – particularly home workers and migrant workers employed on the fringes of legality.

Contemporary critical accounts of work offer a balance to the hyperbole of the Knowledge Economy rhetoric and question what the realities of work are for the majority of people (Ackroyd *et al.*, 2005; Baldry *et al.*, 2007). Whilst recognising that ‘bad’ work is unlikely to disappear (Coats, 2007; Philpot, 2000; Taylor, 2002) there is a call to ensure that policy makers and com-

panies worldwide recognise what the ingredients of good work might be – a recipe that clearly reflects the ILO’s definition of ‘decent work’ in its emphasis on equality of access, employee voice and just reward: (Coats, 2007; ILO, 2006; Moynagh and Worsley, 2005; Taylor, 2002; Westwood, 2002).

Whatever the approach, there is a growing consensus that at the present time ‘good’ work appears to be the preserve of those clearly defined as ‘knowledge workers’; a privileged band involved in the professional, high tech and creative industries who fare well in the new economy, at least on the face of it enjoying continual opportunities for growth and development and increasing levels of pay, whilst the largest majority of the global workforce are subjected to lesser terms and conditions at the sharp end of the economy, in mundane, yet demanding, support and service occupations. While many of the occupations explored in this book bear the flat characterisation ‘low-skilled’, as the chapters amplify, this captures little of the level of dexterity, emotion work and not least, toleration, that is involved. Boxing off work as low skilled has persisted for too long because of the voicelessness of certain groups, and part of the work of meaningful research is to create a vocabulary and understanding that can tangibly change this.

And of course it is vital to put all this in context: Ghose *et al.*’s latest report (2008) *The Global Employment Challenge*, reminds us that 73 percent of the world’s workers live in developing economies, coping with underemployment and mere survival, that the world’s labour force is growing rapidly, and mainly in developing economies, and that there is a serious world crisis of insufficient productive jobs. So while our concentration here is on issues pertaining to advanced economies where the vast majority of the world’s capital and ‘skills’ are located, it is shameful to note that here, as worldwide, the first challenge remains providing economically sustaining work with the promise of decent work remaining lower down the agenda.

The conclusions? While the distribution, technologies and locations of work may be changing, the nature of work that is to be done in our world, remains largely unchanged. There is a deficit of decent work, and fundamentally this revolves around core issues of pay, equity, security and dignity. Critical sectors such as education, health and care work are vastly undervalued, and while the volume of high skilled or knowledge work is increasing, it too may be driving a schism whereby lower skilled work is yet further marginalised.

Workplaces

So are we getting better at organising work and the way in which we manage it? For some 30 years or more the debate on changing organisational forms has been dominated by the argument of whether we have moved into a

post-bureaucratic, post-Fordist world as new forms of creative and service-orientated labour takes over from routinised manufacturing type jobs. At the most basic, post-bureaucratic organisational forms are defined in opposition to modernism which is identified as resting on a rationalistic, positivistic, technocratic knowledge base that seeks efficiency through standardisation, order and control. If organisations are the form of our modern condition, one cannot help but note that this is frequently represented less as an opportunity or benevolent phenomenon but more as something which is constraining and repressive. Organisations 'do' (define) us, rather than we 'doing' (defining) organisation.

On the other hand it is proposed that we now have networked, non-hierarchical, flexible and learning organisations, something celebrated as offering cleaner, safer and more supportive, even liberating working environments (Reeves, 2001; Bickham, 1995). All of which entails new management practices often presented as high commitment human resource management, involving mechanisms of employee empowerment and offering opportunity and development within a learning environment. The basic message being that employees are to be treated as valuable resources rather than merely commodities – as assets, as human capital. This is clearly demonstrated with the advent of so called exemplary organisations such as Google, Microsoft, Starbucks, Goldman Sacks and the many more that top the world wide 'Best Places to Work' lists (Great Places to Work Institute, 2008).

However, what ample empirical studies tell us is that the radical change envisaged (from old to new, from control to liberated, from modern to post, from structured to flexible) has not actually materialised: organisations are still rule bound and demanding, and most usually rely on a fundamental division of labour and spoils. Forms of control may be more subtle, bound up in psychological contracts and modes of comportment, but they are control nevertheless. Despite some changes, there is not a lot of evidence to support the image of the 'new' workplace. Where are the 'winning teams', the managers as coach, the empowered workplaces, where is the work-life balance?

Instead, when some employers talk about flexibility and new forms of work organisation they mean the freedom to hire and fire workers, employ them on a variety of contractual terms and require them to work antisocial hours (Moynagh and Worsley, 2005). Rather than working less, employees report working longer and longer hours with intensified work routines resulting in over 25 percent of men and women across Europe reporting that their job left them feeling exhausted most or all of the time (Eurofound, 2007). In effect, claims of empowerment, learning and development, teamwork and flexibility are slotted into workplaces where little has changed: jobs are not redesigned, work is not reorganised, and attempts to work flexibly

are more about organisational efficiency than personal benefit or opportunity. And most fundamentally, as this volume attests, there is strong evidence that too many businesses are competing on the basis of the low road: low pay, low skills, yet a continual drive for greater productivity and flexibility, with the burden borne by employees.

This is a formula for increasingly desperate measures of control rather than empowerment, as companies struggle to harness and direct their efforts to compete, and face few real choices. As a result workplaces more generally are experiencing a decline in voice mechanisms (for both participation and protection) and trade union influence with an associated sharp increase in pay inequalities, work intensity and insecurity (Kelly, 2005). The individualisation of employment relations continues apace, notwithstanding variation in collective bargaining and partnership strategies cross-nationally. The absence of strong employee side control mechanisms leaves workers increasingly vulnerable to flexibilisation and work intensification, and all the tariffs they pay to support the new economy. And yet, in some sense, new voice forums are emerging, with the democratisation of information and access presented by technology and networks, as Ellis and Richards will describe later in this book.

And what of community, and the notion of the workplace as the site of such a significant portion of our life and experience? The workplace is still structured in traditional ways, though greater numbers are working flexibly in the form of agency, off site, and off shore work. New technologies have both enabled and constrained occupational community. Long hours and the requirement for dual income has put pressure on home life, and most fundamentally, communities, creating an unprecedented level of fragmentation of social life. The impact of work is shown, throughout the chapters that follow, to bear consequences not only for the individuals who work, but for those they care for, drive, heal, feed and more. Quality of work and workplace, has implications for itself, for those that do it, and for the society we live in. It inscribes the quality of our care, our goods and services, our livelihood.

Workers

What does all this mean for workers in this brave new world of work? A range of available survey data that asks people about their experiences of work (BHPS, 2004; Eurofound, 2004, 2007; OECD, 2007; Ghose *et al.*, 2008) endorses existing accounts of growing divisions in the global economy (Taylor, 2002; Thompson, 2005). For instance there appear to be two extremes in the experiences of different occupational groups – those clearly thriving at the top end of the labour market and those merely existing at the

bottom. Data from the UK British Household Panel Survey (BHPS, 2004) tells us that 'personal service' occupations (very often relegated to the informal economy) are least likely to experience security in work, promotion opportunities, flexible work practices and trade union membership; 'sales and customer service' occupations are least likely to feel that a fulfilling job is more important than money or to be a member of a trade union; and 'elementary occupations' are least likely to enjoy promotion or training opportunities, autonomy over working hours, feel secure about work, be employed on a permanent contract and earn adequate pay. On the other hand, 'professional occupations' are the most likely to receive adequate pay, company pension, trade union membership, promotion opportunities, work-related training and feel that a fulfilling job is more important than money, but least likely to have a permanent contract and more likely to work unpaid overtime; and 'managers and senior officials' are most likely to have a permanent contract, be satisfied with job security, enjoy promotion opportunities and autonomy over working hours (BHPS, 2004). This last group are also likely to attract typical FTSE company CEO salaries of around £2.5m, representing the huge gap between those at the top of the labour market and those at the bottom.

Less surprising, amongst claims from Trade Unions that employees in UK supermarkets would have to work 94 hours a week to earn the national average wage, is that 'elementary occupations' and 'sales and customer services' are the least satisfied with their work (Haurant, 2004). However, as we suspect, economic reward is not the only reason work matters. Work involved in personnel services, which is mostly made up of different types of 'care work', offers opportunities for meaning that are clearly missing from the mainly 'dirty work' done by cleaners (Cottell, 2005; The Work Foundation, 2005; Tomlin, 2005; Toynbee, 2003), cold call telephone sales (Ronson, 2006) and front-line 'McJobs' (Lindsay and McQuaid, 2004), where the biggest complaint from workers, other than low pay and unsociable hours, is the lack of respect from either employers or the public despite feelings of pride in the work itself (BHPS, 2004).

Similar polar messages emerge from European data. Notably, gender emerges as a key dimension shaping very different experiences of men and women (BHPS, 2004; Eurofound, 2004, 2007): men are least likely to feel satisfied with work, or job security and least likely to work reasonable hours but enjoy adequate pay, promotion opportunities, trade union membership and be a member of a company pension; whilst women are most likely to feel satisfied with work and job security and work reasonable hours but least likely to enjoy promotion opportunities, earn adequate pay, be a member of a company pension or be a member of a trade union.

Interestingly, despite the many bleak accounts of work it is extraordinary that, when asked to take a global perspective of their working lives, respon-

dents express a high level of satisfaction (BHPS, 2004; Eurofound, 2004, 2007). It is especially striking that women, so clearly disadvantaged with regard to pay, benefits and opportunities for development, report significantly higher levels of satisfaction than men. Women's still recent ascendance to full participation in the labour market would seem to be influencing job satisfaction figures. Some commentators (Edwards and Burkitt, 2001) claim that high rates of job satisfaction are related to low rates of expectation. Highly paid workers (and men who dominate these positions) fully expect an array of benefits including interesting and meaningful work, whilst those who are lesser paid (substantially women) would like all of these things but rarely expect to receive them – and therefore report that they are satisfied with what they already have. A sad indictment of the divided labour market that is further supported by BHPS data which shows that 'personal services' workers, which we might also read as 'women' as they constitute 86.2 percent of this occupational group, are significantly more satisfied with their work than other groups. Despite low pay and poor working conditions this occupational group is continually reported as deriving meaning from their work via caring labour (Bolton, 2001, 2005; Rainbird, 2007; Stacey, 2005). It would seem that the will to care carries a price. It is no accident that it is those who are prepared to sacrifice material expectation, or those who have little choice in the work they do, are the ones paying it. This volume pays particular attention to women at work, women's work and where they are working, and from housekeeping to deft factory work, and from classroom assistance to the supermarket floor; the presence of an army of middle aged women with families, earning less than a fully viable economic wage, and yet keeping the wheels of industry going, is apparent. What is just as relevant is how men are working, and where they are not.

Survey data captures the experiences of those in formal employment but what of those who work on the margins of the employment system, and in fact society? Apart from sensationalist reports of migrant workers draining national resources and tragic accounts of the deaths of migrant workers such as the UK's Morecambe Bay Cackle Pickers, we are only beginning to track the experiences of this group of workers who are paid less than the minimum wage and are afforded no employment rights. A group of workers referred to as the Cinderella of the labour market due to their invisibility (Cooper and May, 2007) and the difficulties in capturing their experiences of work. Too little is known about these, and all workers, trapped in the informal economy. The experience of migrant workers, and the realities of increasingly multicultural workplaces unsurprisingly emerges several times in this volume. We hear from migrants speaking pragmatically about their hopes and intentions. And we hear from workplaces defined by their multiculturalism. Sometimes such accounts are littered with the ugly image of 'us and them',

mapping racial division as workers struggle to claim some form of control over the increasingly tight spaces they occupy.

Workers today are also experiencing significantly the effects of casualisation. Statistics on contingent work are fragmented, making it notoriously difficult to paint a definitive picture. However it is clear that the use of agency, contract and temporary employment is widespread in Europe (EIRO, 2005) and the United States (Kalleberg, 2000; Smith, 2001) and affects a significant proportion of the working population. The latest figures for Europe indicate that approximately 23 percent of employees have some type of non-standard employment contract (primarily a fixed-term contract), and that for the most recent entrants to the labour market (those who have spent less than four years in paid employment), the proportion of non-standard contracts reaches almost 50 percent (Eurofound, 2007). The implications speak for themselves, with many younger workers facing an unprecedented level of insecurity, urged simply to grasp the opportunities and self-realise (Peters, 1999; Crainer and Dearlove, 2000; Knell, 2000), notwithstanding the potentially detrimental effects of precarious and low-quality contingent work (McGovern *et al.*, 2004; Kalleberg, 2000) and the challenges contingent workers face in attempts to navigate 'the great divide' of risk and opportunity (Smith, 2001). Many of the chapters to follow in this book give voice to the lived reality of non-standard work.

In summary, the picture for today's workers is one of divisions: gender, occupational skill levels, race and migrant status, full time and contingent workers. The complex findings emerging around job satisfaction reveal, it would seem, only part of the story. The movement of labour worldwide adds another dimension to that story, with tensions among all workers heightened by individualisation.

Work matters: making sense of contemporary work

What this brief review of contemporary work, workplaces and workers tells us is that work does indeed matter but the reasons why and for whom are complex. Survey data reveals patterns nationally and internationally with many recurring themes and many dilemmas not addressed by the rhetoric of overwhelming opportunities under global capitalism. It tells us of patterns of supply chains that contract out work to armies of women and migrant labour who are among the lowest-paid and most exploited members of the workforce. It tells us of growing disparities in income and continued inequalities in access to decent work. It tells us people feel both insecure and yet imprisoned by their work resulting in high levels of stress and normlessness. And, yet, paradoxically it also tells us that people, on the whole, express high levels of satisfaction with their work, revealing that survey data

can only tell us so much. What is missing are nuanced accounts of why work matters. What are the experiences of the people who work at the bottom of the supply chain, who provide support and care to others, who wait tables relying on customers' benevolence to make up meagre wages, who work alone driven by new technology, who leave their home countries in the hope of a better life only to take work far below their skill levels? The chapters in this book provide many missing pieces of this picture. They present contextual data but also insightful accounts of what it is to work in these settings, what are the experiences and consequences. They put work firmly in its place – as a social as well as economic reality. They air voices usually too little heard. They open our eyes wide to work matters.

Moving from the macro to the micro, each of the chapters of this volume has something to say about the nature of contemporary work, and the sense that is to be made of it. In Chapter 2, David Coats offers a landscape account of today's workplaces, drawing on UK and European datasets to ask is today's work getting better? – and articulates a refreshingly frank account of why we should care. While the chapter reflects on the competing portraits of sunlit uplands (skilled, knowledgeable workers with all boats rising in a market economy bridged by good practice HRM), and the 'bleak house' view of a race to the bottom, David is not prepared to let us wallow in such schismic metaphors and instead takes us through the evidence: questioning assumptions and interpretations to arrive at a picture of significant variation in job quality across Europe, and a level of informed optimism regarding future prospects; concluding that we need a more subtle understanding of the implications of liberal, corporatist or inclusive national employment regimes, and a stronger engagement with the political, social and economic choices we are making.

For Chapter 3, Marcia Bok and Louise Simmons take us across the Atlantic, and in their review of the experiences of low wage workers in the US – the very poor, the working poor, the near poor, and those in medium-level skill jobs, quickly becoming 'disposable', it is clear that very little is getting better about this particular world of work. Their account is a compelling confrontation of the realities of life under vigorous capitalism, reinforcing how economic polarisation, the result of three decades of neoliberal policy, robs so many of the chance of decent work and a realistic livelihood. Marcia and Louise weave an account of current US labour statistics with the individual voices of a cross-section of American citizens struggling at the margins. Their chapter sets out the impetus for much needed strategies for change that involve putting the needs of the individual, and most particularly the vulnerable worker, at their heart. However, the vulnerable worker retains, at least, a right to act. In Chapter 4, Anna Pollert takes up this story by reporting on a particular category of vulnerable worker in the UK – the non-unionised

employee experiencing problems at work. Anna's account details the playing out of employment problems such as being unpaid, victimised or unfairly dismissed, and how such incidences cut across workplaces from small to large MNCs, where in many cases, Human Resource departments collude against the individual. The study shines particular light on a selection of workers who sought to address such problems utilising the help of Citizen Advice Centres (which, significantly, they were more likely to do than to go to a union). Here the positive story turns bleak, with almost half of respondents finding no resolution to their problem, in many cases due to insufficient CAB resources. The insights from this research are, however, heartening in one sense, reflected by the majority who have sought to address their situations and, indeed, the surprising proportion who took joint action with other employees. Anna's research raises questions about the adequacy of formal (internal) grievance procedures and the impartiality that is possible regarding them.

Introducing a strong theme of the volume, James Wickham, Elaine Moriarty, Alicja Bobek and Justyna Salamońska turn to the issue of migrant workers in Chapter 5, where they investigate the choices and motivations informing young Polish workers who have moved to Ireland and work in the hospitality sector. Their research displays how many respondents had well articulated, conscious and principally financial reasons for making this move; although the point is not lost that such reasoning is fundamentally driven by lack of equivalent earning opportunities at home, and is demonstrably associated with underemployment relative to skill level. James and colleagues' account also fleshes out some less than best practice behaviours of employers in a 'gold rush' economy, including rampant casualisation, 'on call' hours and low pay. While lending partial credence to a mutual choice view their accounts of the realities of casualised work suggests that for many, these conditions are less a matter of advantage than of toleration and, their analysis suggests that after the 'gold rush' ends much will change.

The casualisation of the hospitality sector is explored in a different light by Christine Guégnard and Sylvie-Anne Mériot in Chapter 6, through their discussion of the experiences of hotel housekeepers in France. Although implicitly acknowledging the elements of quality employment regime in France mapped by David Coats, the authors draw our line of sight to a definite secondary labour market: hotels and housekeeping. The low-paid and (not for the last time in this volume) female characterisation of this sector is epitomised in the job of housekeeper or room attendant, and the voices of several in this chapter articulate with compelling acuity, the challenges of their work. Christine and Sylvie-Anne chart the effect of hotel ownership structure and strategy on employment practices, and observe islands of high-road practice that in some ways provide avenues of change, which more

paradoxically perhaps, further isolate those working for the low-road majority. And so the account makes clear how structural characteristics and industry conditions set in train the continued evidence of precarious employment contracts and low wages which combined, it would seem, leave housekeepers very little traction to 'escape their professional destiny'. Staying in the hospitality sector, but this time in the USA, for Chapter 7, Mary Gatta takes us through the 'ubiquitous and invisible' daily grind of life as a restaurant server. Wait staff are a growing workforce worldwide, and as Mary reminds us, represent one occupation that can never be outsourced. In the American context in particular, low-wages and tipping are key dimensions of this story, but through this ethnographic account of life on the restaurant floor, we also learn more about the physicality of the job, its emotional content, and its multidimensionality. This narrative account of working a shift in the tightly controlled and routinised environment of a managed chain of restaurants draws the reader into the world of those who serve us our food and speaks volumes about agency and pride in work, and the ways in which restaurant servers, though under pressure, shape their world, all the while skilfully 'balancing trays and smiles'.

Chapter 8 turns to a rather different but equally traditional workplace, as Benjamin Hopkins takes us on a tour of the contemporary English chocolate factory. What he finds there is an indication of little advance from Taylorist assembly line organisation and deskilled work. And yet what has changed is employment relations, with heightened levels of multiethnicity, and multiple employment forms (agency, contract, temporary and part-time) co-existing in a state of unsurprising antipathy. The case of ChocCo is an important, if uncomfortable, opportunity to witness the reality of this experience through the eyes of its participants: the relationships, and relationship breakdowns between routinised workers from home and abroad, and tellingly, to find this road no easier for their supervisors and managers. This field story points to deepening fragmentation and distrust not only between employers and employees, but among and within employees.

In Chapter 9, Kirsty Newsome, Paul Thompson and Johanna Commander take us to an old yet new realm of factory work: food processing companies at the end of supermarket supply chains. Though little thought might be given to the work behind those shiny bags of lettuce, neatly prepared vegetable trays and ready meals that now populate our shopping bags, reading this chapter brings the reality of that hidden, forgotten world firmly into consciousness. Their account captures employee perceptions of and responses to working within varied but, ultimately, tightly controlled factory regimes. However, this account begs a question of who is in control, as the 'seemingly insatiable customer', the supermarkets that drive production targets (revised on a daily basis) and set the performance standards and sanctions,

leave the managers and owners, and most particularly the workers, of these factories substantially powerless in setting the agenda. Moving on from well-established accounts, Kirsty and her colleagues ask if resistance is an insufficient framework for analysing the possibilities for engagement in such contexts and explore the concept of dignity at work as an alternative path. While the denial of dignity is, to paraphrase the authors, unlikely to be a major strategic goal of management, it is undoubtedly an operational framework which enables distinction of good work from bad. It is the external determination of employee 'hyper-flexibility' that leads the authors to conclude that ensuring dignity at work is substantially beyond management control. Kate Mulholland steps to the other side of the supermarket supply chain in Chapter 10, in her tale of working life as a shelf stacker or 'replenishment assistant'. Here we find that the pressures experienced at the production end of supermarket supply are mirrored on the retail floor, with employees at both ends paying the price. Kate's account is shaped by the introduction of one of many management efficiency tools: just-in-time systems, and the chapter bears testament to the fallibility of such systems and indeed to employees' avenues of resistance. It is a strong account of the frustrations unleashed on the journey to a net result of increased individualisation and direct control.

Moving to the realm of public sector social and community work for Chapter 11, Chris Warhurst, Scott Hurrell, Kay Gilbert, Dennis Nickson, Johanna Commander and Isobel Calder explore the role of classroom assistants working in Scottish primary schools. Their account reveals that in many senses, classroom assistants (who are mainly female, and mothers) are now doing many duties previously held by teachers, yet without due recognition or reward. Interviews with the classroom assistants display how they are attached to their role and to the children they support but are acutely aware of the under-valuation of what they do and they themselves link this to their life role as being 'just mothers really'. The authors compellingly explore the nature of classroom assistants' and wider society's acceptance of the role as commanding a 'second salary' and as offering convenient working hours as though this is sufficient reward, despite the upskilling and role stretch so firmly illustrated. Chris and colleagues question this acceptance bemoaning the lack of priority given to key social roles and displaying how such important work is patently undervalued as 'women's work'. Staying with care-related work, in Chapter 12, Anne Junor, Ian Hampson and Kaye Robyn Ogle take us to another 'unseen but everywhere' occupation in their examination of care and support work in New Zealand and Australia. Their recently completed sector spanning study confronts the poorly valued nature of care and support skills head on and has led them to attempt to create a vocabulary and taxonomy around care and support related skills. In this chapter, the authors concentrate on one group from within their larger study; taking us

right to the heart of eight care assistants' daily lives with vivid accounts that not only give a deep insight into the nature and challenge of this unseen work, but also show just how clearly care and support workers themselves articulate what it is that they do. The ensuing taxonomy seeks to move beyond loose or 'tick-box' understandings, and firmly questions the reductionism of 'soft skills'. Continuing the healthcare theme, Chapter 13 explores what it is like to 'become' a doctor? Carol Boyd-Quinn shares this experience with us in a vivid and merciless ethnographic account of life as a junior doctor. The demanding physical and intellectual challenges and the relentless work intensity resonating from this account will come as little surprise to readers (and yet, our seeming acceptance of this must also be questioned). In addition, however, the chapter imparts frank and moving insights to the underwritten emotional burden of this work, and what Carol tellingly describes as the 'emotional debt' involved. The author conceptualises an emotional bank account, that may or may not have the credit needed from broader life experiences, personal traits and social and structural context; and shows how these resources are drawn by the exacting nature of emotional spending encountered in medical work. Carol goes on to draw out the implications of emotional debt both organisationally and personally through a series of compelling personal and researched accounts.

Chapter 14 changes context substantially, as Carolin Grampp, Maeve Houlihan and Paul McGrath introduce us to the culture, relationships and changing contexts of taxi work, with a case study of the introduction of GPS technology to an Irish taxi firm. Their account charts the individualistic and isolated character of taxi work, and despite this, the formal and informal means by which drivers forge and navigate an occupational community. The authors explore the paradox of these drivers' sole trader status, and yet their dependence on taxi companies, and how in this case, the dual locational and control properties of GPS technologies have subtly transformed relationships between drivers and the firm. The story of these developments illustrates much about the nature of taxi work, but also, about technology and control. What is interesting about this account is the relative lack of resistance these changes have met among drivers, and what this may say about relationships between agents and contractors, and about the dynamics of power and powerlessness.

But lest we fear it, employees are not silent on any of the issues raised in these accounts. With technology as a continuing theme, our final chapter explores the emerging phenomenon of work blogging, what it means and what it does. The interactive capacity of the internet has created a stunningly accessible medium for individuals to directly voice their realities, not least in relation to their work. Vaughan Ellis and James Richards offer a compelling snapshot of just how dynamically this medium is used to make

hidden worlds of work publicly visible and understood, in their exploration of the motivations and practices of work bloggers within the UK public sector. Through their eyes, we learn the ways in which many workers are choosing to voice their experiences of work: at times to create, at times to connect, and indeed, at times to correct. Vaughan and James, through in-depth (and online) dialogue with nine active bloggers, get under the skin of this activity and push past easy assumptions about blogs as 'mere' forums for venting, complaining, exposing or resisting corporate ideology, under the canvas of anonymity. The authors build a nuanced understanding of its uses, behind which, we get a telling glimpse of the degree to which, echoing one theme of this volume, work matters in peoples' lives. From a research methods perspective, Vaughan and James also usefully examine the opportunities and issues relating to work blogging as a means of accessing direct workplace accounts, and discuss online methods of research more generally. In doing so, they signpost emergent dimensions of research practice as yet not well appreciated, and assuredly set to expand.

All in all, we hope you will find that these chapters tell a diverse but thought provoking set of stories from the contemporary workplace and signpost perennial and emerging issues that *matter*, not just as research practice or an expanding base of understanding the world of work, but matter to individuals, to workers all across the world, as their lived reality.

Work really does matter

The assembled stories from the field give us an opportunity to consider what work means to people, how it is experienced, the key trends that are shaping the experience of work, and the relationship between work and society. They make it possible to dialogue with management practice and contemporary rhetoric, to probe the degree to which rhetoric is meeting reality.

The stories seem to point, yet again, to the urgent need for better management. And yet, they also highlight the ways in which managers in so many ways are constrained, not free to act in the interests of employees as they might wish to. And when and where they do act, their actions are so often inadequate. As Sennett (2006) has argued; it is not so much the effects of globalisation *per se*, but their consequences for daily life. For instance, the ways in which the constant movement of managers and organisational forms leads to the disablement of human relating in the workplace leaving so many workers without a sense of *witness* in their work, creating a systemic sense of perceived lack of fair play.

This being true, there remains a series of choices, personal, organisational, social and political. Many of these accounts cross all four boundaries, as we see the palpable links between personal choice and social consequences,

between social organising and organisational practice, between organisational choice and social dynamics, and between political choice and organisational actions – to take but some examples. What is also clear is the direct link between our choice as consumer and our experience as worker and one is forced to reflect whether in the future it is consumer power rather than voting power which has the greatest prospect of affecting change. That is however, not to let any of the institutions off the hook. As David Coats puts it in Chapter 2, the job is both making the cake bigger, *and* ensuring a fair distribution. Work matters enough for this to be our most vital organisational, social and political policy objective and our personal practice.

Notes

- 1 According to National Statistics-Standard Occupational Classification (NSOC) 'Care work', i.e. childcare and healthcare assistant are categorised as 'personnel services' and cleaning as 'elementary occupations'. http://www.statistics.gov.uk/methods_quality/soc/structure.asp.

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