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THE 9-TO-5 *shake-up*

Could a 15-hour work week make us more productive?
Dutch visionary and author Rutger Bregman certainly thinks so.

WORDS · RITA LOBO

British economist John Maynard Keynes famously predicted that the working week would be reduced to 15 hours within a century. That was in 1930. He foretold that living conditions would be much higher in developed countries, and that technology would mean people would be free to enjoy life. Today, almost 90 years later, we are far from being on track to meet Keynes' prophecy. In fact, we are typically working the same hours as when he made his forecast – and there are no signs of slowing down.

"If you go back to the 50s, 60s and 70s, economists, sociologists and anthropologists were predicting that the robots would come and take our jobs. But it hasn't happened yet," says Rutger Bregman, a 28-year-old Dutch thinker, currently making waves with his book *Utopia for Realists*. "I think it's amazing that capitalism has been able to come up with new, even more meaningless jobs. That's the reason we need to redefine what work actually is."

What Bregman implies is that the system will always create a plethora of meaningless jobs to occupy our time – and generate income and taxes – but that the system is not necessarily working well. A job and an income are not the only things that matter if that job is pointless. Productivity, the amount of output per hour worked, in the UK rose steadily at a pace of around 2.2 per cent a year for decades, until the GFC. Since then, productivity has slumped to 0.5 per cent, and the trend appears to be global. So not only are these jobs pointless; we are also doing them more slowly than before.

"There was a poll conducted in 2014 in the UK, the first of its kind," says Bregman. "It found that over 37 per cent of all British workers have a job that they don't think needs to exist – a completely pointless job. That's quite a thing. It's one of the biggest taboos of our time."

THE DEFINITION OF WORK

The issue for Bregman is not that we are slowing down and being less productive. It's that work itself needs to be redefined. He isn't only talking of factory workers or the sub-employed echelons of society. He is actively referring to professional workers with university degrees and important-sounding job titles. He is not, however, talking about doctors, nurses,

teachers, and all the scores of workers who make our lives possible. He is talking about the "growing armies of consultants, bankers, tax advisers, managers, and others who earn their money in strategic trans-sector peer-to-peer meetings to brainstorm the value-add on co-creation in the network society," as he describes them.

"We have a very narrow definition of what work is now. We only think that work is about earning money that you pay taxes on, and have a hierarchical relationship with an employer," Bregman explains. "There's so much more work being done, such as volunteering, caring for our children and the elderly, working in our communities. This labour is maybe even more important, but doesn't add to the GDP." Bregman argues that a 15-hour working week would in fact solve the productivity problem.

Bregman is an idealist, for sure. "I believe in something called intrinsic motivation. Most of us have dreams, or want to do something with our lives," he says. "Nowadays we rely too much on the carrot and the stick – the idea that we need to incentivise people with money or push them to jobs that aren't very useful. The funny thing is that this is something that the communists and the capitalists have always agreed upon: that you must push people into doing things. What I believe is that people are capable of pushing themselves."

Bregman argues that key to allowing people the opportunity to 'push themselves' is the 15-hour working week and universal basic income – something that's increasingly supported by the likes of Mark Zuckerberg and Elon Musk. In theory, if we have some sort of income guaranteed, then we can make the most of our time. "The evidence shows that when people receive a basic income, they do not stop working; they may quit their meaningless job to do something more useful, but they continue doing something," says Bregman.

THE 15-HOUR WORK-WEEK GOAL

He is not alone in pushing for a less demanding work week. Sweden has recently wound up a large two-year study in which workers in the Svartedalens retirement homes in Gothenburg worked six-hour days on an eight-hour salary. The experiment was funded by the Swedish government to see if a shorter workday could increase productivity. The goal was to boost employee wellbeing and therefore make workers happier and more productive.

And it appears to have worked. People on the trial requested less sick leave, felt healthier, and were more engaged in their jobs. Toyota in Sweden famously cut the workday in its factory to six hours over a decade ago and has never looked back.

While the Swedish study was reportedly a success in terms of health and wellbeing, it also cost a lot of money and therefore faced opposition. For Bregman, the issue is not that it costs a lot to cut our hours; it's that we are approaching it badly.

"The problem is not in the realm of technology. We could already cut our hours down to 15 a week; we are already rich enough for that," he says. "The problem is in the realm of ideas. We are stuck with nineteenth-century definitions of work and wealth, and I think that's where change needs to come from."

Bregman believes that only by redefining what we think about labour can we free ourselves from its shackles and become more productive, creative, and build a more meaningful future. "Is that impossible? No. Is it hard? Yes. As I like to say in my book, every milestone of progress was once a utopian fantasy." ■

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