

SECTION ONE

ANALYSIS

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ONE

OUR GENERATION AND THE WAY WE LIVE TODAY

The idea of time travel appeals to us all; it opens up possibilities of a fantasy world where we could be whoever we wanted in the past, or live a different existence in the future. Such a fantastic flight of fancy attracted the attention of H.G. Wells when he wrote *The Time Machine*, and persists right through to today with *Doctor Who*.

But fantasy it is. We're stuck with the time when we're born. With luck, we get the average of about 75 years, then it's all handed over to the next generation, with whom we lost any faith a long time ago. That 'three score and ten and a bit extra' time slot sets the context for our lives; it's the backdrop against which we exist and it is highly significant in our pursuit of happiness and fulfilment, because we judge our ability to achieve our ideals within our own generation. Success is a relative term, according to our own era. To get a sense of perspective, we're going to use the next section to compare the present to the past, both in terms of work and life in general.

What would it have been like a couple of generations ago? For most of us, even trying to imagine how our grandparents lived is really hard.

Certainly, there wasn't nearly as much material wealth. Only the privileged few drove cars, work was hard and long (okay some things haven't changed!), poverty was rife, hygiene standards were poor, life expectancy was much shorter and rates of infant mortality were much higher. For men, most of the time was spent working to provide shelter and enough food for the family; women, too, toiled tirelessly, giving birth to and bringing up the next generation, without the assistance of automatic washing machines, effective detergents, fridges, microwaves or a thousand other things we take for granted. Frankly, they must have been knackered most of the time.

So, when it was all such a struggle, literally just to stay alive (side-stepping malnutrition or starvation, avoiding disease, cheating the grim reaper), how much time do you think they spent deciding between whether to install another en-suite or have decking put down in the back garden?

This isn't to criticize our generation's level of aspiration or desire for material wealth; it's just an attempt to show how increased prosperity releases us from the concerns our ancestors had; we seem to have replaced this with our own problems.

The future is a mystery, but we can *look back* and learn some lessons. When life was much harder, there was considerably less time to worry about our modern obsessions, the greatest of which seems to be ourselves. How likely is it that you'd have heard your granddad in the Working Men's Club confessing to his pals, 'I can't quite put my finger on it, but I just don't feel

“centred” at the moment’, or his wife confiding in a friend that she sometimes found it hard to cope with the burden of guilt around balancing her kids and her career (especially when she quite often, secretly preferred her career)?

Self obsession is the burden of our generation, just as rickets and impetigo (a couple of long-gone ailments) were in theirs. Rather than lament what we’ve become, we should be more inclined to celebrate the fact that the difficulties we face are much less than those of past generations. Which of them wouldn’t have swapped their ‘tin bath’ for a whirlpool Jacuzzi-action hot tub? Or for that matter, our worries about long working hours versus theirs on the possibility of *no* working hours.

If we have become collectively more egocentric, we shouldn’t be ashamed; it’s simply about facing up to the norms of the time we’re living in, and in exactly the same way that our ancestors ‘got on and made the best of it’, so should we. Nor should we think that selflessness is a thing of the past, or that mankind as a whole can’t be redeemed from itself and act according to the benefit of all its citizens. To do that though, the journey has to start with us. Start small, focus on what’s going on here at home, and change ourselves and our lifestyles in a positive and enduring way, right now, for a better version of us than we’ve been used to in the past, and who knows what impact that might have on people around us? Really, that is what this detox is about.

But does it work? So far everyone who has tried it has reported positive, long-lasting benefits with no apparent negative side effects! The results show an increase in efficiency with the benefit of freeing up more time; when this is used productively, through making conscious choices, levels of satisfaction have risen; we’ve

even had reports of people indulging in ‘a long leisurely stroll’ or ‘a couple of hours with the Sunday papers’.

Every generation has its own set of adversities to cope with. Who knows what’ll happen to the next lot, with their huge advances in technology, but with their social problems and conflicts? One fact remains, which is humanity’s ability to adapt and survive.

No amount of wishing for a time machine will make it appear. Instead we should just accept the hand that has been dealt to us and make the very best of it. We can’t change our time, but we can change ourselves; doing it through detox can mean we have the best of times.

GETTING THE BALANCE RIGHT

Because of the way work was a few generations ago, the vast majority of people regarded it as a necessary evil.

There must have been those who enjoyed their jobs; craftsmen surely got satisfaction from a productive day’s work; so too in the professions you’d imagine that carrying out your duties to the best of your ability resulted in you feeling like it had been worth turning up.

The overwhelming sense, though, is that there was a very clear division between what happened in the workplace and what happened at home. The factory hooter, signalling the end of the working day, was a reality for many, and it would seem that the spirit of it (i.e. a sense that work was finished), was a part of all jobs.

The division is not nearly so clear now. By looking at what has changed, we can get a real sense of the challenges that face us today; understanding ‘what we’re up against’ is the first step to finding some modern solutions, which is what detoxing your desk aims to help with.

A BRIEF MODERN HISTORY OF WORK

Around the time of the industrial revolution, when mass production started to signal mass employment, the balance of power in the workplace sat firmly with the entrepreneurs who ran the businesses. There were few binding contracts of employment and workers had little or nothing in the way of rights. Much of the manual labour that was employed came on a casual basis, sometimes daily.

There’s an expression on Merseyside that has survived until today, but has its roots in these working practices and goes a long way to summing up the conditions at the time.

If you want to insult someone on Merseyside (and be sure to think carefully about whether or not you do) you’d say ‘der’s nothin’ downf’yer’, translated as ‘there’s nothing down for you’. This implies that someone is a waster, a useless layabout (as we said, choose carefully!). In the days when the Liverpool docks were thriving, workers turned up each morning and went to see the charge-hand, who had a master list of everyone’s name and skills; this early ‘database’ matched tasks to individual men, so the work could be allocated in as efficient a way as possible.

If you turned up one morning to find that there was nothing allocated against your name, the boss would say ‘there’s noth-

ing down for you' and you'd simply have to go home and not be paid. If this was repeated again and again, you can see how your reputation in the community would soon be one of a good-for-nothing.

In the first swing of power away from the bosses, the trade unions formed to give workers a collective voice to negotiate better pay and conditions for the good of all their members. In many ways, this helped to redress what had been a very unfair system, but, as with many such initiatives, at some point the pendulum swings too far, as this story illustrates.



TRAVELLING SIDEWAYS

In the broadcast industry in the Seventies, the unions were all-powerful and negotiated allowances for every conceivable change in working patterns or conditions for their members. When travelling to outside broadcasts, some engineers sat in the back of vehicles, working at the mixing desk, which faced the direction of travel. In a technological leap forward, one manufacturer developed a new desk, with many advances and one disadvantage: it was too wide to fit across the vehicles, so had to be installed front to back along the side of the vehicle.

It's said that the union successfully negotiated on behalf of their members, as sitting transverse to the direction of travel gave them motion sickness, so they were compensated with a 'travelling sideways allowance'.

As with all these things, the balance eventually swung back the other way, as Britain under Margaret Thatcher became a difficult place for the trade unions to hang on to power.

When recession resulted in redundancy, the bosses were once again in control as the veiled threat of job losses loomed large over the remaining workers. This still remains the case today amongst many members of the generation that lived through those times.

It's hard to find a worker in their forties who hasn't been made redundant, seen it happen to their colleagues or lived in fear of it; and, not surprisingly, this has proven to be a great motivator, even though it's a rather blunt instrument.

In all the changes in the balance of power at work, there has usually been no malice in the actions of one party (the one in the ascendancy); they've simply been looking after their own interests. However, the way that they have started to behave has often been copied by others in their peer groups, resulting in the emergence of a culture. So, if you see your colleagues in another union negotiating a 'travelling sideways' allowance, it's not long before you're thinking about something similar for you and your co-workers; similarly, if 'threat of redundancy' in one sector is helping to suppress pay increases ('you're lucky to have a job, so don't be asking for any more money'), other business owners will create a similar atmosphere at their workplace.

The result in either case is that the working environment, conditions and expectations coalesce into a culture, with common norms across industry sectors and job types.

Now we seem to have reached a stage where no matter how damaged the work/life balance becomes, we accept it; in fact it has become the case in many circles that a lack of home life is some kind of badge of honour. Have you ever witnessed this with colleagues who attempt a kind of perverse one-upmanship by claiming that no matter how long your working day is, they've done more? They started earlier, finished later, received more emails, attended more meetings, covered more miles, drank more coffee and missed more meals than you? These persecuted peacocks are even worse when they meet new people socially, and show off by comparing how terrible their life is to everyone else's. Why do they do that? Martyrdom, perhaps?

SOME KEY FACTS ABOUT WORK AND JOB SECURITY

The truth is that we live in an era where we're all prepared to trash our work/life balance. Many factors can affect this, but the spectre of redundancy is certainly a key motivator for many people. How scared we are of this depends on many factors, and often the relationship between them makes the situation worse.

Age

It's a fact that the older we get, the harder it becomes to find work, especially at the same level. For most of us, if we really were a high-flyer in our current organization, there would be a queue of head-hunters trying to woo us away to a competitor. If that's not happening then it's unlikely to begin when we are carrying the 'black spot' of redundancy around with us.

It's also true that, for most people, their careers progress over time, so the older we get, the higher up the organization we're likely to be and the more we'll be earning; so as the saying goes, 'the bigger they are, the harder they fall'.

Many people find that change gets tougher the older they get, and our fear of it seems to increase accordingly. We just don't seem to bounce back as well as we once did.

Dependency

The times in our lives when we are most independent are also the ones where we're likely to take the biggest risks; after all if it all goes horribly wrong, what's the worst that can happen? However, when we pair up, and perhaps have children, the weight of responsibility becomes much greater. Now there are people who are literally depending upon you to work, but not in any old job: in a job that has brought them all a level of luxury they've become accustomed to (and a level of aspiration that demands you work harder, longer and more lucratively). Opting out of this rat race voluntarily is tough, having it 'done' to you, can be devastating.

Materialism

Linked to this dependency is the collection of worldly goods that surrounds us all today. Our core base level of expectancy is now way beyond 'a roof over our heads', 'food in our bellies', 'tin bath in front of t'fire'. Naturally, the kids don't want to give up their games consoles, just like we, as parents, don't want to

have the indignity of sending back the BMW and changing it for a second-hand runabout.

If you or the kids have never had these goodies in your life, then you might envy others who have, but at least there's a sense that you 'don't know what you're missing', so your ignorance is bliss; however, once you've had it all, you don't want to lose a single little bit of it.

Self-worth

Finally, some – not all – of this materialism is linked to our self-worth. No matter what anyone says, we're defined not by who we are, but what we own. A further factor that governs our self image is *what* we do for a living. In cases where people have dysfunctional home lives, work provides an escape where they 'can really be someone'. Imagine how scary it is to face the prospect of having all this taken away from you. No wonder long working hours seem so appealing.

So 'security', or the lack of it, is a prime motivator in making us work the way we do, and as with many things in life, a strongly held perception by a big enough majority of people can soon result in reality. For the post-downsizing generation, the memory of the experience is enough to create a kind of redundancy bogeyman who lurks at the door of every business, making sure you don't arrive late or leave early.

A further contributor to a long working hours culture in the UK is a factor we alluded to earlier: our national propensity to martyrdom. Why leave early and go for a walk in the woods with

your nearest and dearest, when you can find a million reasons to stay at work and then moan about it afterwards? If you don't think it's a cast iron certainty that your co-workers behave this way, then try looking them in the eye tomorrow morning and asking them in a genuine tone of voice, 'How are you today?' People generally say this kind of thing:

- ◆ 'Oh, mustn't grumble'
- ◆ 'Okay, I suppose'
- ◆ 'Not bad, I guess'
- ◆ 'Fair to middling'

If any of them replies with enthusiastic fervour, 'Actually, I've never been better; it's great to be alive!', have them stuffed and mounted.

The result of the changes that have happened and the underlying insecurity which makes most of us work longer and longer hours isn't the only factor affecting us; the nature of the work we do has altered too. Many manual roles have been replaced by 'knowledge' jobs, and at the heart of this change are advances in technology. It's not just the length of the working day that is significant; it's what we do during it, and the quality of many jobs today seems to be diminishing. No wonder we're stressed.

THE TECHNOLOGY TRAP

The Sixties saw a period of excitement over emerging technologies and we were told that, in the future, in our lifetimes, we would no longer have to work such long hours; many of the mundane jobs we were doing would be helped or replaced by emerging inventions, leaving us the luxury of leisure, ha-bloody-ha!

Even in the Eighties, the prospect of new technologies changing the way we worked seemed appealing. Imagine being a 20-something sales rep and having your car upgraded by the fitting of a compact disc player. The male members of the sales force always seemed to be more prone to gadget-addiction and you could almost get one to explode if you offered him a mobile phone, even if he did need three friends to help him carry it. Now we can't get away from the damn things, and if you're a rep with a tendency to slope off early for a round of golf on a Friday afternoon, you're pretty much stuffed these days: they can track you down anywhere.

The PC, followed by email, and then broadband, are three further significant developments that have robbed us of our freedom. Add in these stupid hand-held devices that every second person on a London tube train seems to be using, and there literally is no escape.

So, we're a product of our working generation, facing different, but no less difficult, challenges than our ancestors. The balance of power between worker and employer may continue to sway to and fro, but it looks like 'insecurity' is here to stay. Fears over our financial future are commonplace and, if working hours weren't extended enough already, technology – billed as the great ena-

bler – has facilitated a 24/7 working culture. Part of this detox is about taming the beast and restoring a sensible balance.



PERTINENT POST-IT

- ◆ Learn from the past, but live in your own time
- ◆ Start small, aim to build big
- ◆ Commit to detox
- ◆ The nature of work has changed from 'manual' to 'knowledge'
- ◆ Many workers feel insecure in their jobs
- ◆ A long working hours culture now exists
- ◆ Advances in technology have helped in some areas, but often they increase stress

