

Leeds University Business School – Research and Innovation Blog

What do we mean by “decent work” and “good jobs”?

Speakers: Professor Jonathan Winterton and Professor Peter Boxall

[00:00:05] **Jonathan:** Hello, and welcome to the Research and Innovation Podcast. I'm Jonathan Winterton, professor of work and employment at Leeds University Business School. And I'm joined by Professor Peter Boxall, who is an international visiting professor with us, and who has a Chair in the University of Auckland. The topic we're going to try and address today is decent work, and the reason is because the 7th of October is Global Decent Work Day, and that begs the question, what is decent work?

[00:00:45] Now, the International Labour Organisation introduced the Decent Work Agenda in 1999, adopted the current version in 2008, which emphasizes job creation, rights at work, social protection, social dialogue. The United Nations brought its 17 sustainable development goals into force on the 1st of January 2016, with a target completion date of the end of December 2030.

[00:01:18] SDG 8, decent work and economic growth, directly incorporates the ILO Decent Work Agenda and sets targets for eight major sub-themes, including economic growth and job creation, full employment, and decent work.

[00:01:36] Now, the United Nations Academic Impact Initiative was launched towards the end of 2010 to promote intellectual social responsibility, and they established hubs for each of the 17 SDGs in 2018 to leverage on the power of academia.

[00:01:56] The University of Leeds signed the UN SDG accord the same year, and in 2020 was ranked 11th worldwide, third in the UK, for commitment to sustainability. Now, the current cohort of UNAI SDG hubs will actively contribute to implementing the 2030 agenda by utilizing academic research, teaching, and outreach activities. Each hub has a chair and three vice chairs, one for teaching and education, one for research, one for outreach and partnership.

[00:02:37] In 2026, the University of Leeds joined the Academic Impact Network, and I was appointed Vice Chair for Outreach and Partnership for SDG 8, the hub for which is based at the University of Auckland.

[00:02:53] The Auckland team's coordinated by Hub Chair Drew Franklin and includes Peter Boxall, who's with me here today, and Peter and I have worked together for many years, particularly on issues like high-involvement work, which is why I want to get his views on what decent work really means. So, this podcast is where we explore the meaning of decent work and good jobs.

[00:03:22] I would group the ILO definition and the SDG targets within SDG 8 into two categories. On the one hand, there's compliance with minimum terms and conditions like respecting the national minimum wage, like labor standards, health and safety regulations. I

argue those should be taken for granted because they're legal requirements. It's not something companies can choose not to respect.

[00:03:52] Fair pay, effective employee voice, and good jobs are more complicated, but similarly, there are standards like the real living wage and measures of the effectiveness of employee voice mechanisms. By far the most complicated area is in relation to what good jobs look like, and this is where Peter Boxall can provide some valuable insights. In order of priority, Peter, what elements of good work would you view as critical for an organisation going beyond compliance and showcasing good practice?

[00:04:32] **Peter:** Well, thanks, Jonathan, and it's nice to be here. I would say let's think about three big sets of factors that affect the quality of a job. Some of these are intrinsic, and I'll explain that. Some of them are extrinsic, and I'll explain that. And underpinning those is the quality of the voice that people have at work.

[00:04:57] So beginning with the intrinsic things, what are the good things, that matter so that we can say a job is intrinsically good? And this is really to do with how the work feels to individuals as they do the job. You know, is it actually a meaningful use of their time? Do they find the work interesting and stimulating? Can they use the skills they've got?

[00:05:20] And what we find from research over the years is that people are happier in their work, they feel it's more of a good job when they can use more of their skills. The skills they value, the skills they prefer, the skills they want to develop over time as they grow their human capital, which is a strong theme of Jonathan's research. You know, that's the kind of job they want, where there's greater skill utilization, as we say in the technical terminology. They can reach more of their potential at work. They can grow there as a human being. And of course, that implies that as they develop from that first initial job into a career, it implies that they will have increasing control or autonomy over how they do their work and how it's judged and assessed. And, you know, that basically meets a fundamental need of human beings for autonomy or control in their own lives, which is a universal human drive, you might say.

[00:06:25] Another respect is, how good are the relationships with other people around you in work? Do you get on with the supervisor? Are they good to you? Do they listen to you? Do they help you perform? Do they care about your career? And your workmates, are your workmates friendly, take notice of you?

[00:06:45] You're one- become one of the team that you're the kind of person they're interested in, and they may well socialise with you outside the workplace as well and become great friends. So how good are the human relationships in the organisation that you're in? So those are the sort of intrinsic factors that matter a lot to people, and they're the first thing that people feel and experience when they go into a job.

[00:07:10] Go into your first job as a primary school teacher or a secondary school teacher, it's how the work feels. You go into your first job in chartered accountancy, for example. How does it feel to be in this audit team doing that kind of work? All sorts of jobs. You go to your first job as a young person in retail, as a retail assistant. How does it feel? You go into a chain retail store. You know, what's the quality of the work that you experience? Do you enjoy it? Do you like the customer contact? Are you growing there over time? So those are the sort of intrinsic factors.

[00:07:45] And then there are a set of extrinsic factors. And as Jonathan says, there's a baseline here of minimum standards, minimum rights, which are so totally important. Fundamental human rights and humane conditions at work. That should be a given. There's no choice in there, really. There shouldn't be in a good society. In a good society, these things are taken for granted, and they're enforced. They're not simply in the law, they're actually practiced in reality.

[00:08:16] Now, on top of that, yes, we have three particular aspects of the rewards that come to people, the extrinsic benefits of doing a job, and one is the level of job security. Now, what we find in survey after survey is that people rank job security as their number one concern about a job.

[00:08:41] Now, we live in an age of uncertainty, and I think that's not going to change. I think we can be certain about uncertainty. So, okay, so it matters an awful lot to people. Why do people need job security? Well, you need it to participate in society. You need it to take on a mortgage. You need it to help raise a child. You need it to contribute to family life. You need it to explore your leisure, your social world in a meaningful kind of way. So it, it's a number one factor time after time. And after that, of course, is fair pay, as Jonathan has mentioned.

[00:09:17] And what is fair pay? Well, obviously it's going to be above legal minimum, and really it's going to reflect three key aspects.

[00:09:26] One is what kind of pay could you get if you left your current employer to go and work somewhere else in the same kind of job? Would you get a lot more money doing that? Okay, if you feel you'd get a lot more money by going somewhere else, you've got an issue with fair pay, shall we say. And then inside the organisation you're in, there's a hierarchy of jobs. Even a small organisation has a hierarchy of jobs. Are you being paid fairly for the responsibility you're carrying in that organisation, for the level of skill you're deploying, for the contribution you're making, you know? How well do you feel treated on that level?

[00:10:05] And then thirdly, and this is very common in the surveys that we see in Anglophone societies, how good is your performance? And what we find typically is that higher performers say they expect a higher level of pay to reflect their performance. Why is that? Well, all jobs can be shaped and molded by individuals' performances. Okay, some jobs are very highly routinised and under pressure, and you're just trying to carry on. But in jobs with greater complexity, we see a greater variation of human performances, and people generally like to be rewarded for the quality of that performance.

[00:10:46] So fair pay, as Jonathan says, a complex area, a subjective area. You might say a political area, you might say. But there are some interesting principles in there. And then there's the whole issue of do you have prospects of advancement? Now, some jobs are dead ends, you might say. There's no way of progressing in the organisation to a higher level of work, to a more complex level of work, to a level of work that would use more of your talents as they grow over time.

[00:11:18] And so that's a primary reason why young people, particularly people in their 20s and 30s ... Of course, everybody is young to us now, eh, Jonathan? But, you know, I mean, you know, people in their 20s and 30s, a primary reason, if not the major reason why they'll turn over from a job and go somewhere else is they feel blocked in their career. It may have been good to begin

with. It's been a good place to start and grow somewhat, but now there's a blockage there, and so they seek to go somewhere else.

[00:11:48] And underpinning that, we have the whole issue of employee voice. Okay? Because how do you get change in these intrinsic and extrinsic factors? How do you progress your interests? How do you enforce your rights? Well, you need voice, and traditionally that's been through trade unions as the independent representatives of workers in organisations. Nowadays, the situation is somewhat more complex and we have unionised environments and we have non-unionised environments and we have many which are a mixture of the two.

[00:12:25] And so the fundamental principle in there is does the worker have access to the voice they want? Can they exercise the voice they want? That could be through a union, through freedom of association and collective bargaining, or it could be through some other vehicle, a consultation process, a town hall, a team brief, an annual appraisal, whatever it might be.

[00:12:50] There's various forms of the voice that can come into play and can you experience those? Can you feel that they are genuine, that your managers are listening to you and they're responding in a rational way, in a trustworthy and competent way? You know, can you feel that?

[00:13:06] A big problem we have in here, of course, and I'll close with this point, is that there are workers and many workers in our society who feel there's a representation gap. You know, they haven't got access to the representation they want and by the way, that feeling is strongest amongst young people, who very often don't yet know what their rights are or don't feel confident expressing their views, who are worried about backlash perhaps. And, so trying to reduce the number of people who feel they can't get adequate representation, that's an important thing in our drive for good quality jobs.

[00:13:48] **Jonathan:** Thank you very much, Peter. That was excellent. Can I just follow up with two quick questions? What role do you think opportunities for training and development play in this? You've talked about opportunities for career progression, access to training and development, that comes up in some context. I'd like to hear your views on that. And secondly, you stress the importance of human relationships. How are those altered with AI and the kind of machine-human interface?

[00:14:26] **Peter:** Yes. Yes. Well, thanks, Jonathan, for those two questions. Training and development. Okay. Now, there's no doubt that particularly in the first job or the first few jobs, training and development are enormously important.

[00:14:41] So you go from university, or you go from a polytechnic or a college, or you're in an apprenticeship, and it's critical that you actually get the training you need to understand the technical dimensions of the job, the social dimensions of your job. And of course, in a large realm of the service sector, a lot of that's going to be social skills that one needs to develop.

[00:15:06] And employers are constantly telling us, all the surveys say this, they want young people with better communication skills who can make an oral presentation, who can engage in a conversation, who don't just rely on the technology to communicate with others, but are good face-to-face- in person, as well as online, of course, and so on.

[00:15:27] So, you know, training for those sorts of technical and social skills, very important. But a higher order need and more important thing is the prospects for learning. Now, training and development is an input to the learning process. But learning goes on in everyday life. We don't know we're doing it, but it's natural to us. Day by day, in our lives we are learning in some way. It's wired into us as human beings.

[00:15:54] And it's helpful if people are in jobs where the content of the work, the nature of the work, the challenges in the work are bringing out their learning, are encouraging them to extend themselves, to step into the uncertainty and the unknown, and grow in confidence by taking on new challenges.

[00:16:15] So a strong learning environment is the most critical thing, and that is obviously assisted by good training and development. Of course, there's also bad training and development which is a waste of time and money. But, you know, obviously professionals in training and development and human resources and management, of course, are keen to get a better alignment between training and development and learning. And so, but the big factor in there is can we create expansive learning environments that are good for people over their lifetimes? That's number one there.

[00:16:49] And the second question was about artificial intelligence, wasn't it? And of course, the big debate in the academic literature is, is this going to supplant what I do, or is this going to augment what I do and enable me to do more?

[00:17:05] Well, the jury is out. The play is running. We're all on the stage right there now. So, you know, obviously what we're looking for really is a human-centric kind of approach to this. And Jonathan's work, for example, over the years he's talked about anthropocentric approaches to work design, things that are good for humankind, all right, that bring out the best in us.

[00:17:36] And so as with previous industrial revolutions - it's going to be the same story here. It's going to be the same fundamental issue. Are we in control of this? Is it helping us grow as human beings? And this is a huge issue in the world at the moment. Yeah. A big part of Global Decent Work Day, I think, Jonathan.

[00:17:53] **Jonathan:** Absolutely. Thank you again, Peter. And thank you all for listening. We hope you found it useful, interesting. And just a call out, if you would like to be involved in the activities, our outreach and partnership activities of the SDG8 Hub, please get in touch. Our contact details are in the episode show notes.

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