

Wasting Time at Work

A Review of Bullshit Jobs

Many of us have passed by an office building and wondered what goes on inside. Sometimes we hear a job title and aren't quite sure what it means. Reading or description or simply asking someone what the job entails can sometimes result in more obfuscation. It could be that the complexity of modern economies, the size of some organizations or the diversity of skill sets present even on a single team has created a need for people who relay messages from one party to another via email or who copy and paste between slightly different forms. They may not fully see or understand the value that they create, but their employers are paying them for a reason. David Graeber has a different explanation. In his book, *Bullshit Job*, Graeber provides offers a compelling definition of a bullshit job, evidence that they are indeed bullshit, estimates for their prevalence, accounts from people who do them, explorations of the social conditions and mindsets that give rise to and sustain their existence and considerations of the psychological effects of working a bullshit job. One may not agree with the vaguely Marxist implications of his work, but to deny the reality of bullshit jobs with retorts to business jargon or free market economic theory requires heroic defiance of the obvious.

Graeber bases his definition of a bullshit job not on the opinion of any researcher or manager, but rather the opinions of the workers who themselves acknowledge the bullshit nature of their own work. To be specific, he says a job is bullshit if it is “so completely pointless, unnecessary, or pernicious that even the employee cannot justify its existence even though, as part of the conditions of employment, the employee feels obliged to pretend that this is not the case.” It is important to distinguish this from a shit job, which may be dangerous or difficult or have low pay. By contrast, bullshit jobs are sometimes prestigious, high paying and comfortable.

Rather than pointing a finger and insulting people by telling them that their work is bullshit, Graeber's definition requires someone to take the time to listen, and listen he did. The impetus for this book was a blog post where he solicited emails from readers asking if they believed their jobs

to be bullshit. Notably, he cites also many surveys that estimate the percentage of the population who admit to having such a job. Estimates are remarkably consistent across first world countries and at the time of the book's publication were as high as forty percent.

Based on these testimonials, Graeber groups bullshit jobs into a few distinct categories and explains why each of them is bullshit. These clusters are goon, duct tapers, flunkies, box tickers and task masters. Goons are people whose job it is to harass competitors or even customers, or simply to defend the organization from other goons. Examples include corporate lawyers, telemarketers and lobbyists. Duct tapers "temporarily fix problems that could be solved permanently." Flunkies take on a subservient role to somebody else just for the sake of boosting that person's status or ego. Box tickers are there to make it look like work is being done in compliance with rules created by task masters. At first, it may be hard to see that these patterns describe what is being done at work. Once it has been pointed out, one begins to see it everywhere.