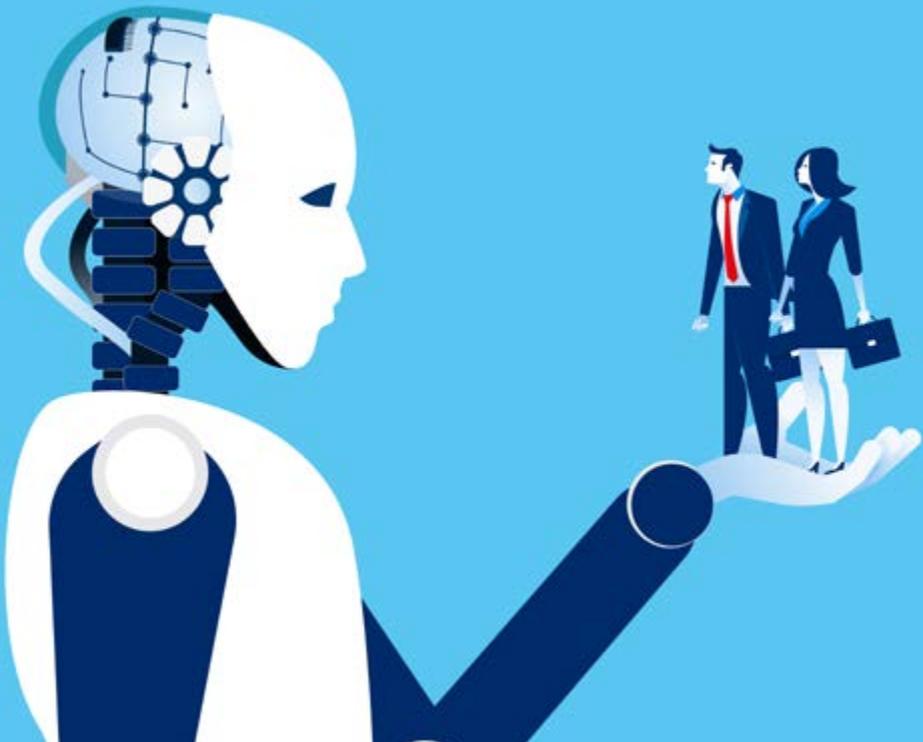


Report

Working Identities

Eva Selenko



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Working Identities

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Foreword



This Cumberland Lodge Report marks the culmination of a 12-month project to explore how work-based identities are being transformed in an age characterised by precarity, digitalisation, frequent job changes and meaningless labour.

It draws on the wisdom and experience of trade union representatives, working rights campaigners, academics, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), policymakers and community practitioners, to discuss developments that are changing the role and significance of work in people's lives and in wider society.

Working Identities offers a unique, cross-sector insight into the changing world of work in the United Kingdom (UK), and the wide-ranging impacts of those transformations on individuals and wider society. Part I provides an independent, interdisciplinary briefing on working identities in the UK today, in relation to individual and collective identities and feelings of belonging. Part II summarises the key themes and best-practice recommendations that emerged from our Cumberland Lodge conference held in March 2019. These ideas were reviewed and refined at an expert consultation that we convened with conference representatives and further specialists in July 2019.

'Working Identities' is one of four key issues that Cumberland Lodge addressed in its 2018-19 series on 'Identities & Belonging'. We look forward to seeing how it inspires policymakers and practitioners to reflect upon – and take positive action to improve – peoples' working lives, both now and in the future.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Edmund Newell". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Canon Dr Edmund Newell

Chief Executive
Cumberland Lodge

About the author



This report is written by Dr Eva Selenko, who was commissioned by Cumberland Lodge to support its 2018-19 'Working Identities' project as a freelance Research Associate.

A social psychologist by background, Eva is a Senior Lecturer in Work Psychology at Loughborough University. She also acts as Associate Editor for the work psychology journal *Applied Psychology: An International Review*. Her research focuses on understanding precarious, insecure work situations. It has been published in numerous top-tier international journals.

Eva is particularly interested in the interplay between work (in its most general sense) and peoples' identities, and how this affects individuals' well-being, behaviour and attitudes – at work and beyond.

This report is an original attempt to apply current work-psychological thinking to understanding the identity consequences of work-related issues in wider society.

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Executive summary

Work is an important part of who we are: it plays a central role for both our private and social life, and, consequently, working identities can be expected to occupy a significant part of our overall view of ourselves. In this report, working identity is understood as a person's self-understanding in relation to their work. The following areas of working life are analysed in relation to working identity: the working classes, 'precarious' work and young people, digital revolutions, meaningless ('bullshit') jobs, youth unemployment and worklessness, and the impacts of structural discrimination.

This report is structured in two parts. Part I provides an analysis of each of these key areas. It is informed, throughout, by current research and theory from psychology in particular. This analysis served as a briefing for participants, ahead of the Cumberland Lodge conference on 'Working Identities' in 2019. Part II offers a summary of key findings and recommendations from the discussions at Cumberland Lodge. It captures insights and recommendations from the conference and the subsequent consultation convened by Cumberland Lodge in July 2019. It incorporates feedback and input from a wide range of stakeholders, and ends with specific recommendations.

A central set of themes emerges from the initial analysis and the discussions held at Cumberland Lodge. One important finding is that identity is responsive to the work context, but can also influence that context in return. When conditions of work change, working identities are affected in multiple ways. Meanwhile, working identities are not simply a product of employment circumstances; rather, they can be consciously crafted and strategically deployed, in order to produce a sense of belonging to particular social groups, or to signal a particular kind of belonging to others. This analysis mostly approaches questions of working identities from a psychological point of view, and goes on to explore their wider social and societal consequences.

Another theme that emerged from this project was the extent to which peoples' personal understandings of their working identities reflect objective circumstances. Class-based identities are an example of this disconnect. Sociological definitions of 'class' are informed by objective indicators, such as occupation, education and income (amongst others), whilst popular understandings of class, including self-ascribed class-membership, are often only loosely aligned to objective or academic indicators. Identification with a social class often serves the psychological purpose of creating a meaningful group identity. This can be psychologically beneficial to the individual (by bestowing meaning and a sense of belonging), but it can also trigger potentially dangerous stereotyping, over-simplification and processes of exclusion. In addition, whilst everyone might objectively be understood to belong to a certain social class, class as a category of identity does not always resonate with individuals' sense of self. Class-based identity narratives can therefore lead some people to feel socially excluded, whilst evoking feelings of greater solidarity in others.

A third theme that has been highlighted regards the way in which ongoing changes in the world of work offer new opportunities for working-identity development, as well as fresh challenges for understandings of the self, and require adaptation. The importance of work contexts for identity formation is particularly noticeable in relation to the digitalisation and automatisisation of jobs. Taking 'gig-work' (i.e., income-earning activities outside of traditional, long-term employer-employee relationships, often involving successive temporary contracts), remote working, and increased automatisisation as examples, the analysis identifies new opportunities for working-identity development through, for instance, easier access to the labour market, more flexible working arrangements, and greater opportunities for subsidising income. At the same time, the analysis identifies potential risks stemming from such new forms of work, including social isolation, algorithmic insecurity and precarity. Digitalisation needs to be managed and regulated to ensure that workers' rights to healthy, meaningful and prosperous employment are protected. Rigid

and inflexible types of work-based identities can stand in the way of a successful adaptation to technological changes. At the same time, underdeveloped or unstable working identities are not only confusing to the person concerned, but can also stand in the way of setting clear career goals and imagining a realistic future career path.

Finally, without access to the right work contexts, people can be obstructed from developing beneficial working identities. If work disappears as a result of technological change, this will entail dramatic consequences for work-based identities. Unemployed people are not only deprived of a regular income, but they also lack the self-validating social interactions that work enables. This is especially problematic for young people or those with fewer clearly-developed, work-related identities.

Looking to the future, digitalisation and automatisisation entail both social and individual risks (job loss, precarity, algorithmic insecurity, reduced meaningfulness) and opportunities (new jobs, easier access to labour for some, reduced commuting). Any such changes need to be managed carefully, to both protect the quality of work and to assist with work-related identity transformations.

People who are hindered in their access to the labour market have limited opportunities to develop positive working identities and self-concepts, which are necessary for future career planning. Discriminatory practices, as well as structural barriers at work, need to be removed, and communal structures that can foster working-identity development need to be promoted instead.

Discrimination not only undermines people's chances of getting hired and promoted, but it also, more subtly, influences the type of expectations that people can develop about themselves and others. Belonging to, and identifying with, a minority group at work – be that in terms of gender, race, nationality, sexuality, socio-economic status, or religion – can entail challenges with regard to finding similar people to serve as role models in the workplace.

This report proposes that people's working identities are informed by the contexts in which they work and live. Without the right access to work and the opportunity to exert skills and receive feedback and social validation for them, people's working-identity development will be affected. Working identities serve important psychological functions for the individual, and shape peoples' expectations, attitudes and behaviour. People identify with multiple groups in the work context, and social class membership can be one of them. Social class is, hence, not only a sociological descriptor, but also an emotionally-charged psychological identity category (for some). Resulting identities can easily be threatened, and class-based thinking in everyday life can lead to stereotyping.

Part II concludes with practical suggestions for policymakers and practitioners that emerged from the discussions convened by Cumberland Lodge. These highlight a need to strike the right balance between supporting people through working-identity challenges, and challenging rigid forms of working identity, which run the risk of failing in the face of rapid transformations.

These recommendations include:

- Moving away from evoking class-based identities in public discourse, in order to reduce ostracism, division and stereotyping. Instead, shift the focus towards more inclusive and broader aspects of working identities.
- Developing employment protection legislation for digital workers, and strengthen local communities, with a view to ensuring that digital work remains humane and that workers can develop positive work-related identities.
- Carefully managing digital change in the workplace, and ensuring that people have the opportunity to adapt and expand their working identities alongside such changes.
- Creating work opportunities and mentorships, as well as supportive communal structures for young unemployed people, so that they can develop positive work-related understandings of themselves, even during difficult transition periods.

- Ensuring inclusivity at work through legislation and quotas, and by removing structural barriers (e.g., prohibitive childcare costs).
- Rethinking public procurement, digital ownership and taxation in a way that allows profits generated through modern work to stay within the local community, and to develop social spaces and other support structures.

In summary, a key enabler for positive work-based identities is the secure access to prosperous, meaningful work contexts, which, in turn, enable people to develop competent and forward-looking understandings of themselves and of one another.



1.

Working identities in the UK today

1

Introduction

Identity lies at the heart of the way we face the world. It shapes our emotional responses to other people, influences our goals and behaviours, and has been found to affect our health.¹ It is not fixed, but rather it is informed by our social environment and situational circumstances.

Identity is the subject of many disciplines, but this analysis focuses on the way in which people understand themselves. Rather than discussing different types of identities or the components thereof, it centres on perceived identity. Within this context, identity can be summed up as the answer to the question, ‘Who are you?’ This self-referential element of identity is crucial. By knowing whom we aspire to be, we identify our motivations and ambitions, shape our understanding of events, and learn how to orient ourselves in a new environment.² Our sense of identity, within a social psychology framework, offers guidance and orientation whenever we are faced with an unknown environment or change. Identities indicate what we can do, how we should behave, what we can expect from the world, where we have come from, and where our potential lies.

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In industrialised societies, anticipated answers to the question ‘Who are you?’ often relate to an individual’s work. Answers often indicate an occupation (‘I am a psychologist’), an organisational role (‘I am a key account manager’), an organisation (‘I work for a large corporation’), or, indeed, anything relating to the past (‘I was a steelworker’) or future (‘I am training to become a researcher’). In this sense, work is

i.
We are, of course, also 'more' than just our work. We might be parents, children, carers, people with certain interests, locals, nationals, Europeans, and many other categories besides. Given that we spend most of our adult waking time at work or working, however, work-related identities are a particularly important component of our identity.

something that helps to identify us; it locates us in relation to others. This is a commonplace tool that signals the level of our education, our socio-economic background and our reputation.¹ Identity, in other words, emerges dynamically in relation to the physical and social environment, of which the workplace is a key factor.

Defining oneself through work is more challenging when purposeful employment is hard to come by. It becomes increasingly difficult in times of precarious employment, and in relation to 'meaningless' work, or digital-platform work. This raises a question: if work is under threat from digitalisation, unemployment or mechanisation, does that translate automatically into a threat to our identities? If jobs are difficult to secure and require a high degree of flexibility, and workers lack stimulation, how can we develop positive identities around employment?

Defining oneself through work is more challenging when purposeful employment is hard to come by. It becomes increasingly difficult in times of precarious employment, and in relation to 'meaningless' work, or digital-platform work.

The following review focuses on five key areas in relation to working identities:

- The working classes
- 'Precarious' work and young people
- Digital revolutions
- Meaningless ('bullshit') jobs
- Unemployment and worklessness.

On each of these topics, there is an outline of the relevant social environment of work, followed by a discussion of how this environment might affect identity.

Changing work environments can affect our identities as working people in multiple ways. For example, they can:

- Disrupt our identities and undermine the way in which we understand ourselves
- Induce uncertainty, which can motivate the re-crafting of our identities and the pursuance of security
- Modify social contexts and change our sense of belonging
- Affect our sense of meaning and limit our feelings of self-control, thereby motivating us to rethink who we are and what we value.

The identity challenges posed by today's working environments raise two important questions:

1. What can we do about them?
2. Should we be concerned?

2

The working classes

Working life has changed fundamentally over the course of the 20th Century. After a long period of economic growth and public wealth accumulation, working-class people (and indeed all working people) have experienced a shift in employment since the 1970s, accompanied by a change in political understanding and public thinking around work.

During this period, manual labour, production, and agricultural jobs declined in most Western countries (and grew elsewhere), alongside an expansion of service-oriented, managerial, clerical, and sales jobs.³ Thus, a significant shift in sectoral employment took place. However, whilst coal mines and steelworks closed, for example, those jobs were not necessarily replaced by service-based employment in the same locations. Where replacement did occur, it did not necessarily result in higher-quality, more stable, secure, and meaningful employment. Instead, the 20th Century saw the rise of a new class of workers, often referred to as the 'precariat'.⁴

This sectoral shift took place alongside changes in policymaking and public thinking about the world of work, working-class life and individual skills in general.⁵ For example, whilst the older world of work valued qualities such as durability and a long-term orientation, the jobs resulting from sectoral change favoured qualities such as flexibility, adaptability, and a short-term orientation.⁶ In more liberal market economies, unions saw their political influence decline, and many public services were privatised. Workplaces and organisations also became more international – not only in their production and supply chains, but also in their management systems.⁷ In Britain, this took place across communities and cities that used to rely on jobs in production. These interconnected developments and trends—social, political, cultural, and technological—form the backdrop against which the identities and types of self-understanding of working people develop and transform.

To highlight the pertinent impacts on identity, this analysis focuses on changes affecting the working classes in three key areas:

- The nature of work
- Systems of worker participation
- Social contexts or community life.

Working identity is informed by enactment – performing one’s identity – as well as by social context. When work and social contexts change, then identity is also affected.

Changes in the nature of work and employment

The nature of jobs has changed. Semi-skilled manual labour jobs in the early and mid-20th Century, such as those of steelworkers or miners, often entailed serious health risks. Risk is connected to the development of a more robust sense of shared or group identity, as it creates a strong bond with work colleagues. Not only do these workers have a mutual understanding of their ‘shared toil’, but they often literally depend on each other for survival. This continues to be the case in some ‘hero’ professions today (e.g., fire fighter or soldier). In addition, situations that bear risks, that challenge an individual, or that hold a high potential for failure, have strong effects on learning and identity.⁸ These two elements – co-dependency within the job environment and risk awareness – are robust predictors of strong collective work identities.

Aside from the nature of jobs, employment contracts also changed during the late 20th Century. There was a move towards more precarious, less secure and more flexible work, leading to the growth of the working poor and an increase in the number of people in need of multiple jobs.⁹ Such uncertain and highly flexible employment situations are not conducive to a strong sense of community and identity. People simply have too few opportunities to develop a shared identity with others, and to

get recognition and social validation from their colleagues in such a rapidly changing and competitive workplace.

The disappearance of industry sectors that used to provide a positively regarded social identity (e.g., steelworker or coal miner) has reduced the availability of meaningful employment and the shared identities that connected colleagues in a socially distinct group, rooted in sameness and solidarity. Insecure service-sector jobs and other precarious forms of work fail to provide these kinds of positively evaluated, work-based identities.

Professional identities, roles, and work arrangements from previous decades no longer offer viable identities in the present context. From a psychological perspective, this can generate a situation of 'identity discontinuity' and status loss – of finding oneself in a more precarious position.

Professional identities, roles and work arrangements from previous decades no longer offer viable identities in the present context. From a psychological perspective, this can generate a situation of 'identity discontinuity' and status loss – of finding oneself in a more precarious position. This has been found to have harmful physiological effects, as well as a negative impact on wellbeing.^{10,11}

Changes in worker participation

Identity does not simply refer to self-definition; it also requires enactment. Opportunities for worker participation have been transformed over the course of the 20th Century. Service jobs tend to be less unionised than the manual-labour employment that went before, and this affects the avenues available for individual and collective worker participation.

Under Margaret Thatcher's Government in the 1980s, legislation was passed to curb the influence of trade unions. Public

discourse around worker participation also changed during this period, towards workers having more of an individual voice, with an emphasis on personalised, employer-employee partnerships.¹² The previous monopoly of unions as the main channel of influence was undermined. This process, in turn, also eroded the political power and social relevance of the unions.

Furthermore, management trends, such as quality circles or Japanese styles of management (which includes, for example, decision-making by consensus), introduced alternative models for worker participation, which further challenged the traditional, unionised model of work in Britain.¹³

Changes in communities

Social identification takes place when people interact with one another, and especially where they share socio-economic backgrounds, professions or living spaces. Local communities in the UK are, traditionally, closely aligned with the industry sectors that drove the development of specific towns or cities. Today, certain places are still known for the particular products they once produced, even though the industry that originally shaped their reputations is long gone. For example, Sheffield is still referred to as the 'steel city'.¹⁴

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With industrial decline, many such towns and cities lost a core part of their employment base, as well as a community-defining element. At the same time, publicly funded, working community institutions – such as the high-quality social housing, educational facilities or cultural organisations that all contributed to the development of collective identities – were also dismantled. What remains of intensive manual work is now increasingly being

carried out by foreign labourers, leading to more diversified local populations.

Local council spending cuts over the years – an estimated 30% between 2010 and 2019, inflation-adjusted¹⁵ have particularly affected those who are most reliant on social support.

Community-building programmes have declined, and this has increased precarity and poverty, and undermined opportunities for people to create and validate a sense of shared identity. This can affect people's sense of belonging – another important reason why they seek out a common identity in the first place, since, in order to experience belonging, they strive to identify with coherent social groups.¹⁶ In a context in which working identities are already disrupted, a loss of other community-building institutions can exacerbate a sense of identity loss or of being under threat.

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Nostalgia as a method of dealing with identity loss?

In attempting to cope with the effects of identity discontinuity or identity loss as the result of changing work conditions or unemployment, nostalgic reflections on the past can appear to be a promising avenue. Nostalgia is commonly defined as 'sentimental longing or wistful affection for a period in the past'.¹⁷ It not only creates an emotionally warm or cosy sensation, based on positively-enhanced memories, but also fulfils important identity functions.

Nostalgia enables an understanding of present identity against the backdrop of who we used to be. For example, some

people in the North-East of England still refer to themselves and their towns as 'mining communities', despite mines having been closed for many years. Nostalgia creates a connection between contemporary identity and the past, by eliciting positive emotions as well as memories of belonging and connectedness. These emotional experiences can be invoked to contrast an experience of loneliness or a lack of solidarity with a more positive recollection of past experience.¹⁸

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However, nostalgia is risky. It can refocus the mind solely on things that have been lost. Nostalgic notions of identity continuity can also undermine willingness to embrace new opportunities. Romantically enhanced ideas of the past can also create barriers between people with different histories, such as long-term residents and recent immigrants to a town or region. The fixed identity that is maintained by nostalgia often does not allow for divergent histories or more inclusive types of belonging.¹⁹

Another way of coping with identity loss and discontinuity is to shift the focus of one's identity. This might include focusing on a broader identity category. For example, whilst some people no longer refer to themselves as 'miners', they may still identify themselves as 'working class' – even if they have changed profession. That self-identification as 'working class' can provide a kind of identity continuity that is required for a healthy and happy community life.

Finally, a loss of belonging might motivate people either to seek out new sources of social identity and forms of collective belonging, or to strengthen bonds with existing groups. The main obstacle to finding new groups for positive identification is that it

takes time. In a community context, in which social opportunities (e.g., cultural activities, shared housing, free educational facilities, social centres, youth clubs) are being diminished by cuts in public spending, this can be increasingly difficult. In such a scenario, nostalgia may indeed resurface as the most viable route for identity preservation.

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The disappearance of strong working-class identities?

So, have traditional sources of working-class identity disappeared? It is true that entire industry sectors and job families have gone. The circumstances of work, within which identities and a sense of self are formed, have changed. There are fewer institutional, social and work-related anchors for shared community life. As a consequence, there are fewer social contexts that enable a positive self-validation amongst people in 'working-class' jobs today.

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At the very least, the meaning of what it means to be 'working class' has changed. It includes a broader demographic of people, as there are more women, age groups, religious backgrounds and ethnic or racial identities in the workplace today. The working classes also include more types of jobs across a wider range of sectors. To the degree that these new labour realities enable a shared sense of belonging and allow for self-enhancement

– and as long as identifying with working colleagues in these new contexts helps individuals to cope with uncertainty, whilst providing meaning and control in their lives – then new forms of labour can nevertheless promote relevant and meaningful forms of identity.

Self-identification as being 'working class' is still popular. It has a political connotation; it signals a particular social stance and awareness of social contexts. For example, when prompted, 60% of Britons self-identify as 'working class', even if they are university-educated and financially well-off.²⁰ The extent to which this reflects either nostalgia or an attempt to signal belonging to the wider community is unclear.

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3

‘Precarious’ work and young people

If stable careers provide individuals with the continuity and predictability needed to self-reflexively understand who they are, how can individuals form a meaningful identity in a tumultuous world characterised by constant change and ambiguous, risky, boundaryless careers? (Budd, 2011)²¹

Starting out in a career has never been easy, but it seems particularly difficult today. Precarious work is commonly defined as ‘employment that is uncertain, unpredictable, and risky from the point of view of the worker’.²² According to recent statistics, young people (aged 18–24) in the UK are generally more likely to have zero-hours contracts and temporary or part-time jobs than any other age group.²³ They are not alone in that. Young people throughout the European Union (EU) are disproportionately employed in temporary and uncertain jobs.²⁴ Some pundits suggest that this should be considered a normal experience when joining the labour market, due to probationary periods, training or other early-career factors.

[Y]oung people (aged 18–24) in the UK are generally more likely to have zero-hours contracts and temporary or part-time jobs than any other age group.

It appears, however, as if the situation in the UK is gradually deteriorating. The proportion of young people on zero-hours contracts and in part-time or badly-paid jobs is also rising – and rising more quickly than in other age groups. For example, whilst the number of all people in zero-hours jobs rose between 2013 and 2017 (from 1.9% to 2.8% in the general working population – a 68% increase), the number of young people in such forms of employment rose even more steeply (from 5.7% of young people to 7.8% – a 73% increase).²⁵ A similar trend can be observed for

young people in part-time and temporary jobs. Temporary, part-time and zero-hours jobs entail low wages. The proportion of young people earning at, or below, the minimum wage level rose between 2008 and 2018.²⁶

This increase in precarity cannot be explained by simply having more young people in that age-band who are in work: the number of young people in employment has either been stable or decreased during that period, whilst the percentage of young people in higher education has been increasing.²⁷ Neither can the increase be explained by a change of preferences or choices: when asked, young people mostly indicated that they ended up in their temporary jobs involuntarily.²⁸

Even amongst recent graduates, the percentage of people working in non-graduate-level jobs (i.e., jobs that do not require a university degree) is on the rise.²⁹ Some 27% of graduates take up unpaid internships,³⁰ often driven by an awareness that prior work experience is looked upon favourably by potential employers.³¹

In short, the data strongly suggest that if someone is aged between 18 and 24 and working in the UK, the chances of them finding themselves in a precarious, badly paid or temporary job are greater than they were ten years ago. If that person is a graduate, they are more likely to find themselves in unpaid internships or non-graduate job roles. This trend is a cause for concern.

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Impacts on identity

Working in precarious, temporary, unstable and badly paid jobs will always have a negative impact on one's professional identity. However, this can be particularly disconcerting for those with less well-established professional identities, who perhaps lack

a clear understanding of who they are professionally and of the work opportunities or career paths – and thus work futures – to which they can aspire.

Young people just entering the labour market are at a transition point in their lives.³² They are encountering new contexts and new demands, and need to learn new behaviours quickly. These newly-acquired skills, forms of knowledge and experiences must be integrated into a meaningful structure, a 'self-narrative', in order to be remembered and drawn upon as a resource and reference point for future behaviour. Thus, entering the labour market often involves a fundamental change in how young people view the world and their place in it, and in how they reflect on their behaviours and relationships with others.

[E]ntering the labour market often involves a fundamental change in how young people view the world and their place in it, and in how they reflect on their behaviours and relationships with others.

New job incumbents often encounter mismatches between their sense of self and their day-to-day work experience.³³ This can include a sense of failure, which impacts on identity construction through experiences of 'sense breaking' and learning.³⁴ A longitudinal study amongst junior doctors revealed that this mismatch between everyday job experiences and a professional self-image entailed a process of identity customisation. During this process, junior doctors either learned to creatively combine different identities to enable a positive overall view of themselves, or developed a more nuanced understanding of their profession that also allowed for the possibility of failure.³⁵

These processes of identity customisation are also likely to be experienced in other professions where there is often a mismatch between professional self-image and initial job experience.

There are certain contextual factors that influence the subsequent identity-adaptation process:

1. The learning situation needs to contain a certain level of predictability for adaptation to be successful. Without some degree of predictability, a worker will have difficulties in drawing inferences or learning general rules of behaviour.
2. Regular feedback and the opportunity to learn about one's own identity are important. This can take the form of simply knowing the results of one's actions, in order to understand cause and effect.
3. The learning situation has to provide an opportunity to perform or enact one's identity in a social context. Without social validation, there is little chance of a newly-learned identity taking root.
4. Workers need a psychologically 'safe' space and resources that enable them to reflect on the sense breaking experience and learn from it.³⁶

[P]recarious, underpaid or temporary jobs offer fewer opportunities for identity learning and formation.

It is easy to see why precarious, underpaid or temporary jobs offer fewer opportunities for identity learning and formation. Working in an unstable environment (e.g., a zero-hours job), will offer fewer chances for repeat-learning, for the building of social relationships that could recognise and verify new forms identity, and for learning from role models. Similarly, underemployment will not offer the opportunity to apply and test learned knowledge in order to broaden experience. Precarious work also disconfirms the occupational identity that a person might have acquired whilst in training or education.

The issue of not getting paid, or getting paid too little, might further augment these effects, particularly in circumstances of financial difficulty. Salary is a salient measure of status in

our society: *not* getting paid for professional work signals a devaluation of skills in the eyes of one's peers, and this can trigger feelings of worthlessness.

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Over time, people are likely to adapt their identities to a precarious job situation. Research on individuals engaged in so-called 'dirty work' (e.g., gravedigging) shows that, through selective social comparisons and reframing, they generally manage to achieve a positive working identity.³⁷ This raises the question of whether precarious, unstable and low-paid employment can allow for similar positive outcomes.

Taken together, it is very likely that precarious work will undermine and hinder professional identity development amongst new job incumbents. This is not only an uncomfortable situation for a young person's self-understanding, but it will also affect the chances of developing a satisfying working identity in the future.

Challenges of identity development

There is growing evidence about the impacts of positive work-based identities on proactive career behaviours³⁸ and the pursuit of career goals.³⁹ For instance, having certainty about one's identity has been found to affect future careers choices. Somebody with an insufficiently-developed occupational or work-related identity will not only find it more difficult to draw meaning from work-related events than others, but will also have greater difficulty in directing future career behaviours.

Without knowing who one is, or where one belongs professionally, it is more difficult to develop clear aspirations, to plan for the future and to select between different career

paths.⁴⁰ Furthermore, the experience of setbacks can affect the aspirational future self. For example, failing to get a graduate-level job might trigger a possible future self of ‘professional failure’,⁴¹ whilst working multiple (zero-hours) jobs might lead to the activation of an identity as a ‘jack of all trades’. These setbacks might contribute to painting a bleak future identity.

This negative picture of a future self can undermine career goal-setting, which is essential for a successful career. Effective goal-setting requires a combination of self-knowledge about strengths and skills preferences, on the one hand, and specific and realistic knowledge about aspirations and goals, on the other.⁴² Young people in precarious jobs are less likely to develop realistic goal-setting capacities, if their understanding of who they are – and who they could be – is underdeveloped.

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As a result of insufficient professional identity development, young people in precarious employment find it more difficult to leave those jobs and develop satisfying careers. Without the support and backing of a strong social network, which could offer alternative contexts for self-validating a positive professional identity, young people not only have fewer resources to take risks and encounter useful career opportunities, but they might also fail to develop a satisfying and positive career-based identity. Indeed, there is evidence that young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds are encouraged by their parents to aim lower, both educationally and occupationally.⁴³ They internalise expectations and resign themselves to the fact that they do not have the ability, resources or motivation to achieve occupational success.⁴⁴ They place less importance on, and express less interest in, work, have fewer mature career identities, are less adaptable, have fewer clear career goals, engage in fewer career

goal-pursuit activities, and expect more barriers to career-goal achievement.^{45,46}

If the number of young people in precarious jobs is indeed growing, then this is an area of concern. Not only is it dissatisfying for the people involved, but society as a whole is affected by the waste of their potential and abilities. Ideally, young people would not end up in precarious employment in the first place. However, when they do, it is important that social structures offer them exit opportunities.

There might be a 'silver lining' to this misery, as revealed in research on multiple-job holders. The few who eventually accommodate their (often) contrasting professional selves within one coherent narrative can benefit from an enriched and more complex sense of identity than their peers. Instead of turning into a 'jack of all trades', people working in different jobs at the same time become 'multi potentialities'.⁴⁷ Knowing who one is, and being able to draw on multiple selves and identities, can be helpful in the fast-paced and fast-changing work environment of today, and in the training of the adaptive leaders of tomorrow.

Instead of turning into a 'jack of all trades', people working in different jobs at the same time become 'multi potentialities'. Knowing who one is, and being able to draw on multiple selves and identities, can be helpful in the fast-paced and fast-changing work environment of today, and in the training of the adaptive leaders of tomorrow.

4

Digital revolutions

There is no doubt that the ‘Fourth Industrial Revolution’⁴⁸ will bring substantive changes to how, where and when we work – and what this work will look like. This has already been happening, as the rise of digital-platform work testifies.

We are witnessing exciting times: according to the World Economic Forum, 65% of today’s primary school children will work in jobs that do not yet even exist and that we cannot even anticipate.⁴⁹ Not only will there be entirely new jobs, but existing ones will be replaced and changed as well. If the cost of computing continues to diminish, as the calculating powers of computers rise, there will be an increasingly strong economic incentive for employers to replace workers with digital processing.⁵⁰

[A]ccording to the World Economic Forum, 65% of today’s primary school children will work in jobs that do not yet even exist and that we cannot even anticipate.

Current efforts in machine learning are explicitly dedicated to finding ways of replacing cognitive tasks with algorithms and artificial intelligence (AI). Similarly, developments in mobile robotics are allowing for a progressive replacement of manual tasks. In particular, routine cognitive and manual work seems to be prone to replacement, since explicit rules can generally be specified for them; but non-routine tasks are also slowly being affected, as seen in the rapid developments in self-driving car technology.⁵¹

There are manifold examples of ways in which AI processes are starting to reshape cognitive jobs, and in healthcare, diagnostic tasks are rapidly being computerised. For example:

- Oncologists at the Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center are using IBM’s Watson computer to mine the medical reports of

over a million patients, in addition to scientific data and clinical trials, in order to reach an individualised diagnosis that takes into account patients' individual symptoms and medical histories.⁵²

- At the Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust, text recognition software is being used to scan thousands of patient comments from various channels, every month.⁵³
- In legal and financial service industries, algorithms are increasingly being used for text analysis and to sort large numbers of documents in a short time. Fraud detection is now almost completely computerised, as it relies on the ability to detect trends in big data.⁵⁴

It is now generally agreed that algorithms are superior to human brainpower, when it comes to combining large quantities of information, rendering AI decision-making superior to human workers, at least in that regard.

Impacts on workplaces

As fascinating as these examples are, they also indicate that, in many cases, human workers will become increasingly replaceable, as scope for them to be substituted by more efficient machines grows. This, in turn, will impact on the nature of work and the wider employment context.

In order to get a better understanding of the number of occupations that could be at risk of being replaced by automated and computer-controlled processes, researchers evaluated 702 existing occupations (based on generic job descriptions generated by the global occupational database, O*Net) with the use of parameters, such as required levels of perception, manipulation, creativity and social intelligence.⁵⁵ According to their estimates, up to 47% of all existing jobs are under threat of replacement by computerisation in the coming years. This particularly concerns jobs with limited social intelligence and creativity requirements, as well as jobs that are conducted in highly-structured environments. A 2018 report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

(OECD) came to less dramatic, but still concerning, conclusions. It found that 14% of all existing jobs are at high risk of automatisisation, and a further 32% are already at risk of undergoing substantial change.⁵⁶

These examples illustrate that the nature of many jobs will change quite dramatically, as AI and machine learning, as well as robots, become regular partners in our working lives. The nature of employment will also change, as jobs are increasingly done outside of traditional organisational structures; for example, on digital platforms. Each of these factors will affect workers, their workplace environments and their identities, in different ways.

Replacing human beings and changing work tasks

In the simplest scenario, there will be fewer people producing the same kinds of services. Regardless of the speed at which worker displacement occurs (through sudden restructuring or a slower process of transformation), this will result in feelings of insecurity amongst the remaining workers – insecurity about future employment and the nature of their jobs and tasks. Job insecurity has been found to have a profound effect on people's working identities, since the anticipation of unemployment undermines the confident self-definition that comes from being a member of a profession or an occupation, or simply from being employed.⁵⁷

Job insecurity has been found to have a profound effect on people's working identities, since the anticipation of unemployment undermines the confident self-definition that comes from being a member of a profession or an occupation, or simply from being employed.

If fewer people are needed to carry out the same tasks, then certain workplaces could become lonely spaces to work.

Workers remaining in organisations that make extensive use of computerisation will be required, predominantly, for tasks requiring creativity or social intelligence (i.e., human-to-human interaction), or for recovering failures and correcting errors when robots and automated processes fail. If experts are reduced to overseeing and correcting robots, rather than carrying out tasks themselves, then occupational identities will need to be re-crafted.

For workers who witness these changes within their working lives, similar processes of identity-discontinuity might be observed to those experienced by industrial labourers of the past. More generally, jobs and occupations will change as they are stripped of their more routine, computerisable elements. For example, in an office job there will be less time required for crafting well-worded texts or well-designed communications, as AI will be able to do these tasks. Both of these scenarios have specific effects on, and consequences for, identity.

Computerised processes exceed the capacity of human decision-making in routine tasks. Nevertheless, routine tasks fulfil important functions to the human worker: they allow for a verification of skills and identity, and offer a sense of stability and continuity. In an environment without organisational routines, workers need to continuously redevelop habits, formulate new strategies, and undertake behavioural and psychological adaptations. Without the establishment of routine processes that are embedded in structured environments, expertise will be more difficult to achieve.⁵⁸ It will become more challenging to attain a positive occupational self-understanding in this environment.⁵⁹

Computerised processes exceed the capacity of human decision-making in routine tasks. Nevertheless, routine tasks fulfil important functions to the human worker: they allow for a verification of skills and identity; and offer a sense of stability and continuity.

Robots as colleagues?

The experience of working alongside robots will also affect identity. There is evidence to suggest that robots actually *can* be perceived as colleagues in a working group – as in-group members.⁶⁰ When robots share certain characteristics with human members of the working group, such as a local group name or a shared work location, they are rated more favourably and perceived as being more humanoid than robots that lack these familiar characteristics. This indicates that workgroup identities could be widened to include non-humanoids, under certain circumstances.

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Other research shows that the look of a robot (machine-like or humanoid) plays a role in the acceptance of robots in the workplace, in terms of whether they are a subordinate or a superior, and whether they are perceived as an obstacle or a source of support.⁶¹ In general, the extent to which human workers perceive their robot colleagues to be useful helpers, or a nuisance, influences the acceptance of robots as colleagues.

How people cope with technological change

In predicting how increased computerisation will affect identities, it is helpful to learn from professions that have already undergone significant technological and related occupational changes. Research shows that experiencing technological change can lead to identity disruption and a sense of having one's skills and competence challenged.⁶² Occupational identity influences how technology is interpreted: if it is seen to be replacing a core aspect of that identity, then technological change is likely

to be perceived as threatening. With time and more successful interactions with technology, this is likely to change.

Once people manage to integrate new technologies into the concept of their employment, they will start to rethink the notion of their professional self, including their skillset and strengths. Identity tends to be shaped by what we do repeatedly; hence, occupational identity will change in response to repeated interaction with new technology.⁶³

The success of occupational identity change in response to technological transformations seems to hinge on three conditions:

- The type of task being replaced
- The extent to which the technological change involves a change in understanding of how a task should be carried out
- The strength of occupational identity that existed in the first place.

Identity tends to be shaped by what we do repeatedly; hence, occupational identity will change in response to repeated interaction with new technology.

If technology is to replace a function that has been central to a person's occupational identity, then it is likely that it will be met with resistance. For example, if a medical general practitioner thinks of diagnosis as one of her key strengths, and her occupational identity hinges on her ability to carry out diagnoses, then the process of accepting AI as a tool for diagnosing illness may probably be challenging her professional identity and sense of self-worth. However, if workers can be encouraged to view technological change as an opportunity to extend – or even enhance – their occupational identity, rather than as a threat that replaces core parts of that identity, then resistance is less likely to occur.

Another factor that seems to be important in predicting the impact of technological change is whether or not the change conflicts with a person's understanding of how a task *should* be carried out. If a new technology fails to yield the correct results, in the opinion of professionals or experts in the field, then it is less likely to be embraced, because it will conflict with values that matter to their core identities.

Finally, the strength of existing occupational identity also plays an important role. People with a particularly strong occupational identity appear to experience greater difficulty in adapting to technological change. This may be because identity discontinuity is more easily experienced under such conditions.

Digital-platform work: changes in identity

Digital-platform jobs have already changed the ways in which certain work is organised, carried out and rewarded. New forms of work bring with them increased levels of flexibility, in terms of the employment relationship, the scheduling of work and the place of work. This has created new opportunities for some highly-skilled workers, whilst putting pressure on lower-skilled workers.⁶⁴ Although little is yet known about the professional identities of these skilled digital-platform workers, one symptom of highly-flexible work is that people have fewer opportunities to identify with their employer or their role.⁶⁵

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Traditional work arrangements typically come with structures of supervision and feedback, which provide external cues and a frame of reference for organisation-related identity behaviour.⁶⁶ Digital-platform work often lacks that human supervision, and feedback is often given in a more quantitative, automated way. Furthermore, there tends to be less space for input from employees, which limits opportunities for organisational

participation. In this scenario, there is a greater risk that organisational initiatives will be perceived as unjust, and it can be harder to develop positive work-related identities.⁶⁷

Digital-platform work often requires people to handle multiple jobs in order to make ends meet and pay the bills. Working in multiple jobs comes with particular challenges for identity. One qualitative study that followed multiple-job holders over a period of time found that the process of developing a coherent self-narrative was initially perceived as being difficult and stressful.⁶⁸ However, over time, successful identity integration led to a recognition that multiple jobs can actually constitute the development of a useful 'patchwork identity'.

It is clear that digitalisation and computerisation both alter the social contexts in which work is carried out. These changes are likely to affect the work-based identities of employees in a range of ways, creating challenges at first, and inducing identity change later. Failure to master these identity challenges seems to be the greatest risk. If people manage to conceptualise new developments as a process of identity enrichment, rather than as an experience of loss, it is more likely that they will embrace positive and inclusive identity narratives as well.

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5

‘Bullshit jobs’

Hell is a collection of individuals who are spending the bulk of their time working on a task they don't like and are not especially good at (Graeber, 2018).⁶⁹

Imagine the following scenario: you are a well-educated young person in a reputable job, with an appealing title, earning a comfortable salary in a large, well-known organisation. There is only one catch: you secretly realise that your job is utterly and completely pointless, that it is actually a scam.

This describes the heart of what David Graeber referred to, rather crudely, as ‘bullshit jobs’: ‘a form of paid employment that 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’.⁷⁰

Examples of people working in so-called ‘bullshit jobs’ are, according to Graeber: receptionists who are only there to staff a front desk that no one ever visits; IT workers whose only task is to create ‘work-arounds’ to cover for other people’s programming mistakes; or strategic managers who oversee a team of other, highly independent, and self-sufficient managers.

How widespread is this phenomenon? According to a poll conducted by YouGov in 2015,⁷¹ 37% of all surveyed Britons felt that their job failed to make a meaningful contribution to the world. Meaningfulness is a very strong motivator at work. A 2018 survey amongst American professionals found that nine out of ten employees would be willing to give up part of their salary in return for more meaningful employment.⁷²

According to a poll conducted by YouGov in 2015, 37% of all surveyed Britons felt that their job failed to make a meaningful contribution to the world.

Whether jobs are objectively more ‘bullshit’ now than they were a few decades ago is difficult to say. Graeber argues that one reason for employment becoming less meaningful is that, according to work surveys, the majority of work time has increasingly shifted away from primary work duties, towards dealing with emails, ‘wasteful’ meetings and administrative tasks. At the same time, the number of administrators and managers has risen – in US universities, for example, by 135% between 1975 and 2005.⁷³

Being trapped in a meaningless job comes with serious psychological consequences:

1. The experience of meaninglessness and boredom questions the fundamental conception that life should be purposeful.
2. People in ‘bullshit jobs’ also report an element of ‘falseness’: they know that what they are doing is irrelevant and even deceitful, but that they are, at the same time, required to convince others that the opposite is true.
3. There is a sense of entrapment – of not being able to change a situation or to escape from it.

The end of this section (pages 39-41) outlines the possible long-term impacts of these scenarios.

Meaninglessness and boredom

Meaning is relational:⁷⁴ it connects experiences, people, places and objects with one another, in predictable ways; and it creates a coherent narrative that can turn chaos into order.

Eudemonics – the theory or art of happiness – approaches the realisation of wellbeing or happiness from a meaning and self-realisation perspective (rather than the hedonic approach, which focuses on pleasure attainment and pain avoidance). Meaningful activities lie at the heart of the eudemonic experience of happiness or psychological wellbeing.⁷⁵ Eudemonic happiness has often been described as the ultimate goal – the most desirable outcome of human agency. Engaging in virtuous activity that

is in line with one's true potential can induce such a state.⁷⁶ 'Good' work – that is, work that creates a sense of purpose, self-realisation and growth; or work that enables positive relations with others and a positive experience of self-mastery – has been found to enable eudemonic happiness. In short, meaningful work can help us to achieve this kind of happiness, connectedness and a sense of belonging, whilst 'meaningless' work risks the opposite (feelings of isolation and a lack of general purpose in life).

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Identities and the experience of meaningfulness are closely related. Identities can give meaning to the wider environment and to one's very existence: by knowing who one is, it is easier to understand the immediate environment, to know how to feel, how to behave, and what to value.⁷⁷ Discovering a meaningful layer in everyday existence enables individuals to deal with uncertainty. Meaning can help to explain the circumstances of the social environment, can make everyday life predictable, and can thereby reduce stress.^{78,79} Identities create a sense of order and structure, reducing ambiguity and uncertainty, and thereby providing meaning.

In contrast, doing something meaningless is often associated with boredom. The psychologist Erich Fromm defines boredom as anxiety about the absence of meaning in a person's activities and circumstances.⁸⁰ The experience of meaninglessness disconfirms and undermines a person's identity. If identity can signal meaning, then the converse is also true: meaninglessness signals that a present identity is not 'right' or fit for the situation.

The experience of meaninglessness disconfirms and undermines a person's identity.

Graeber gives an example of a young graduate, Eric, who used to work in a meaningless job. Eric described his frustrations with the fact that he could not see any way of construing meaning in his work; his job felt utterly purposeless. This feeling eventually led him to quit the role, as he felt 'it was not for him'.⁸¹ Meanwhile, Eric's former colleagues had managed to find a sense of purpose in their (objectively meaningless) job situations. For example, they had managed to view their work as a stepping-stone towards professional advancement, which still fitted with their current and aspired identity. As a result, they were less affected than Eric was by the inherently meaningless nature of their work.

Falseness

Aside from purposelessness, the experience of falseness also characterises 'bullshit jobs'. People are aware that their jobs ought not to exist in the first place, that the products they are selling have no use for their clients or customers, or that the services they are providing are not actually necessary. However, their employer often has a different opinion, or at least expects employees to pretend otherwise.

The enforced falseness and pretence generate a number of psychological conflicts, including cognitive dissonance. The workers think that what they are doing is a scam, which conflicts with their self-understanding as a professional and ethical person. For example, a requirement to sell faulty products can undermine a person's professional self-understanding. The scam is not the result of the employee's action, but stems from the organisational set-up and the job structure. People in 'bullshit jobs' do not subscribe to scamming others – it is the employer, the organisation or the system that does that. It is usually incorrect to assume that these employees are 'living their own lie', because most of them experience an immense conflict between what they are required to do and what they think would be the right thing to do.⁸¹

People in jobs that feel meaningless and false find it particularly challenging to develop positively self-validating identities around

their employment. Perceiving that their work lacks purpose – and is actually deceitful – can oppose their professional values, but can also make it difficult for them to explain and justify their work to others. In other words, the kind of social interaction that is crucial for identity verification is thus rendered more complicated, or even impossible. An example might be someone who works as a risk analyst in a highly-reputable financial company, but whose responsibility is limited to dragging numbers from one spreadsheet to another. Justifying a high salary to people who potentially earn less for doing more is difficult, and it challenges the sense of self that is connected to employment.

People in jobs that feel meaningless and false find it particularly challenging to develop positively self-validating identities around their employment.

There are very few cultural scripts available to help make sense of this situation, or to craft a meaningful narrative out of a meaningless situation. Under such circumstances, it is more difficult to share one's work experiences with others. This is reflected in the often-secretive element of 'bullshit' professions; people might admit to themselves (or others, in private) that their job is meaningless, but they would struggle do so in front of their supervisor or others working in the same organisation.

Entrapment, tension and powerlessness

The third element inherent in purposeless, false jobs is the experience of entrapment. There is often very little, and sometimes nothing, that an affected individual can do to render their employment more meaningful. Even quitting might not be a viable option, thanks to comfortable salaries and financial obligations. This leaves people trapped, forced to continue a game of make-believe, as if controlled by forces beyond their control and subject to circumstances that are not of their own making.⁸²

Lack of control over one's environment is a key stress factor.⁸³ Indeed, stress was an often-reported experience in Graeber's original study. This creates the paradoxical situation that 'bullshit jobs', despite being purposeless and often utterly boring, are still not without stress or tension. A sense of control is also linked to self-identity:⁸⁴ identity-crafting can serve the purpose of establishing control over a chaotic environment. If one is unable to develop self-knowledge around a meaningless and false job, it becomes more difficult, if not impossible, to create a connection between oneself and the social world.

A sense of control is also linked to self-identity: identity-crafting can serve the purpose of establishing control over a chaotic environment.

Being entrapped in a situation can also frustrate employees' attempts to achieve their personal goals. If the aspiration is to deliver meaningful, responsible projects, but the organisation constrains this through 'bullshit' procedures and tasks, or by limiting their ability to push back against deceitful and purposeless roles, then negative emotions such as frustration and powerlessness will ensue.⁸⁵

According to the classic frustration-aggression hypothesis,⁸⁶ people who experience frustration tend to react with aggression. Since there is an interpersonal element to 'bullshit jobs' – the perception that others are 'in the know' but not helping – it is likely that aggression will be targeted at other people. Interpersonal anger, cruelty and psychological warfare are key experiences that employees in 'bullshit jobs' identify in the workplace.⁸⁷

Consequences and potential remedies

In summary, meaningless and false employment entail psychological and behavioural risks – which have consequences for the wider social environment. One outcome of boredom,

for example, is that people exhibit more in-group favouritism and intergroup discrimination. Since boredom and a sense of meaninglessness can both undermine identity, people tend to compensate by taking up a more extreme position in regard to others (at least in laboratory experiments).⁸⁸ This could mean that employees in 'bullshit jobs' might try to find a positive experience in their situation, by overplaying differences between themselves and people who are without employment, for example.

One outcome of boredom... is that people exhibit more in-group favouritism and intergroup discrimination. Given that boredom and meaninglessness both undermine identity, people tend to compensate by taking up a more extreme position in regard to others (at least in laboratory experiments).

Another impact of boredom is nostalgia.⁸⁹ It appears that dwelling on the past can facilitate identity continuity. In other words, someone who finds themselves in a meaningless and false job might become nostalgic about previous occupations they held, in order to cope with the present situation. Given the risks of nostalgia (including resistance to change or reduced acceptance of minorities), this can have serious implications for the development of more inclusive and collective identities.

Finally, 'bullshit jobs' can induce aggression towards the organisation and other colleagues, thanks to the frustration and anger that they provoke. This can also have a detrimental impact on the development of community cohesion and stable social relationships, both in the workplace and beyond.

In light of this, what might potential remedies look like? Entrapment is difficult to change. Meaning, however, can be found in many places, including in other activities. Graeber (2018) describes how some workers used the internet at work to create a side business that brought them a greater sense of meaning and purpose. In these cases, no one had noticed that they were spending less time on their normal 'work'. Others in Graeber's

study opted for part-time work, so that they spent at least part of their working time in a lower-paid but more meaningful job.⁹⁰

There are certainly opportunities for tackling meaninglessness and the proliferation of 'bullshit jobs', but they require a level of enterprise and ambition that not everyone trapped in purposeless work might be able to muster.

6

Unemployment and worklessness

The extraordinary prevalence of unemployment and worklessness is perhaps the single most important contributor to the persistence of social exclusion in a large and momentous scale (Sen, 2000).⁹¹

Work is core to people's identity and essential to their understanding of themselves and the world around them. What happens when work is lost? Does this entail the loss, or partial loss, of someone's identity as well? How can people cope with the loss of an important component of identity? How can workless people find a positive, self-verifying definition of themselves in a social environment that so strongly values achievement through work? This section aims to address these questions.

Experiences of unemployment and worklessness

According to data from the UK's 2018 Labour Force Survey,⁹² around 13.9% of all households in Britain are 'workless'. This category of 'worklessness' includes unemployed people, as well as economically-inactive people, for example students, retirees, carers or people who are incapable of working for health reasons. The term 'workless' can hence be misleading, since some people who are out of the labour force (i.e., not gainfully employed) are, in fact, still working, for instance, towards their own education or as carers.

According to data from the UK's 2018 Labour Force Survey, around 13.9% of all households in Britain are 'workless'.

Being unemployed is challenging and detrimental to individuals, as meta-analyses of available research indicate. One such

study,⁹³ which summarised the findings of 324 published studies on 458,820 participants, conducted between 1963 and 2004 in 26 countries, revealed a clear causal association between unemployment and health. In comparison to employed people, unemployed people reported lower levels of subjective wellbeing, lower self-esteem, higher rates of depression and greater anxiety. Several factors seemed to enlarge this effect, such as long-term unemployment, having to leave blue-collar occupations for unemployment, or being male. The year of data collection appeared to have no influence on the scale of the impacts; in other words, there had been no normalisation of unemployment over time. Being unemployed in the 2000s was just as challenging as being unemployed in the 1960s. The longitudinal evidence in this meta-analysis further confirmed that, whilst there was some evidence that people with impaired mental health had a higher chance of becoming unemployed, the causal effect of unemployment on health was clear.

In comparison to employed people, unemployed people reported lower levels of subjective wellbeing, lower self-esteem, higher rates of depression and greater anxiety.

Whilst the impacts of unemployment on health outcomes appear to be indisputable, there are many different explanations. Most of these focus on the experience of deprivation and loss, but there is also evidence for the experience of incongruence and injustice playing a part (see page 45 below for an illustration of how the mechanisms of unemployment affect identity and self-understanding).

Unless they are otherwise provided for, both unemployment and worklessness deprive people of regular work income. Financial deprivation and poverty entail a host of negative repercussions, mostly concerning a loss of agency.⁹⁴ In more extreme situations, being unable to afford a bus ticket, a coffee or a meal with a friend limits an individual's ability to participate in day-to-day

social life or to engage with, and get the support of, friends and acquaintances.

Aside from financial implications, both unemployment and worklessness deprive people of experiences that are unique to employed work and essential for wellbeing.^{95,96} For example, workless people have fewer opportunities to engage in purposeful and meaningful activities that contribute to the common good or to social purpose. Whilst employment does not automatically guarantee such opportunities (see Section 5 above, pages 34-41), it does, at least, increase the likelihood of them arising.

Similarly, unemployed people have fewer opportunities to meet new social contacts and to engage in positive and rewarding social interaction. Unemployment also entails a loss of day-to-day routine activity and time structure; there is no weekend from being unemployed and no free time either. In addition, there is no relevant employment structure that activates individuals regularly, by requiring them to get up and engage in activity. This loss of less obvious, and perhaps latent, functions of employment contributes to the negative experience of unemployment, as numerous studies have shown.⁹⁷

Being unemployed also carries social stigma. Unemployed people often report feeling looked down upon or having a sense of 'being on the scrapheap'. Employed people often seek out reasons to blame unemployed people for their situation – by devaluing their skills, knowledge and abilities, or by implying that they are somehow responsible for their own unfortunate circumstances, due to a lack of determination or 'grit'.⁹⁸ Unemployed people also often perceive their status as highly unjust, and out of kilter with their own values and expectations for their lives.

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Impacts on identity

All of these experiences – financial deprivation, loss of breadth of experience, stigma and perceived injustice – have a negative impact on an unemployed individual’s understanding of themselves as a competent and professional working person. Exclusion, due to stigma and financial deprivation, means fewer opportunities for positive interaction, and reduced scope for developing a positive sense of self. Unemployed people cease to belong to the social group of ordinary employees, who are considered to live in accordance with a desired social norm. As a result, they can struggle to participate in some of the key institutions of society.

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Financial deprivation also reduces opportunities for meaningful social interaction and has an impact on consumerism, which is generally considered to be a desirable, routine activity. Furthermore, stigma undermines opportunities for self-validation, and thereby affects identity and self-esteem. As a consequence, meaningful and self-validating encounters with others become less likely. Research shows that this is, indeed, reflected in the self-definition of unemployed people: as a result of experiencing exclusion from the working population, they tend to report feelings of greater social isolation.⁹⁹

Loss of opportunities to engage in experiences, as a result of unemployment, can lead to identity disruption and experiences of discontinuity. As we see in the case of people whose jobs suddenly change, the more essential the lost job was to somebody’s occupational self-understanding, the more affected their sense of self and identity will be. For example, newly unemployed individuals, who primarily defined themselves in terms of work via an organisation or organisational membership,

tend to experience a higher degree of identity disruption. In contrast, individuals who primarily defined themselves in work-related categories that were independent of their job are likely to be less affected. For example, even if an employing institution let an individual go, that person could continue to hold their occupation and maintain their occupational identity.

Identity is informed by enactment: the more someone enacts a certain role, the more they 'become' that particular role, and the more that role becomes a part of them.¹⁰⁰ Worklessness means that people are hindered in enacting their occupation. The less frequently they can perform the tasks, responsibilities, and core elements of their occupation, the less likely they are to define themselves in terms of that occupation. In the long run, this can potentially undermine future career-goal setting, because making plans for the future depends on one's present self-image.¹⁰¹

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The longer people are unemployed or workless, the more this experience will become part of their self-understanding. There are positive aspects to this: research shows that a shared negative experience can also foster group identification. An unemployed individual could identify with other unemployed or workless people, and thereby gain social and emotional support, as well as understanding. However, identifying with a stigmatised group does not necessarily lead to a positive self-image. For example, research amongst unemployed people in Belgium¹⁰² showed that, whenever unemployed people identified strongly with the negatively-evaluated group of unemployed people, they reported a higher number of health complaints. This indicates that people do not 'choose' to identify with the unemployed, as such identification brings with it more negative consequences.

ii.

'Sense-breaking experiences' are experiences that fundamentally question who one is, and challenge current understandings of oneself. An example would be the experience of suddenly becoming unemployed, which challenges one's self-understanding as a valued, employed person. Sense-breaking experiences can also be positive (e.g. the exposure to novel work-experience that challenge and expand one's understanding of ones' skills, ability and knowledge).

Ironically, the fact that unemployment is likely to be perceived as a form of identity disruption will make identity particularly salient to an individual. Whereas, under normal circumstances, people rarely reflect on who they are, a dramatic 'sense-breaking experience'ⁱⁱ is likely to trigger a degree of self-awareness that previously was not there. This kind of self-awareness is generally not a positive experience though, as unemployment is not a positive identity category.

Drawing on previous research into identity-crafting,¹⁰³ several predictions can be made:

- Feeling excluded from 'normal' working life is likely to trigger a need to belong, which can make a person more aware of their identity.
- People who experience a weaker sense of belonging are likely to be motivated to either reaffirm their membership to valued groups or to join alternative groups.
- The disruption of meaning that accompanies the loss of employment may trigger a search for new ways of seeing oneself positively.
- The cues that unemployed people receive from their surroundings with regard to their social status, values and competencies are unlikely to foster a process of positive self-validation.

What can be done?

Perhaps societies will always have some degree of unemployment. Given the importance of work in people's understanding of the world and their place in it, the question nonetheless arises of how we might enable people who are 'workless' to develop positive working identities.

Identity-crafting is not fully within an individual's control; it is also heavily influenced by the social context. One key factor seems to be the opportunity to experience positive interactions with esteemed others. Positive identities develop

through enactment and social validation, and through recognition and esteem in the eyes of other people.¹⁰⁴ It is in this sense that the perceptions of others become a part of self-perception. Social validation of an aspired working identity depends on the degree to which someone can exhibit that identity. For example, a 'workless' individual who is appreciated for contributing work-specific expertise, skills and knowledge will feel reinforced in that part of his or her working identity.

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This kind of validation can happen intentionally, or it can be subtle and implicit. In addition, experiences from the past can play a role: social validation of previously held, positive working identities can allow for identity continuity. By giving unemployed and workless people the opportunity to enact their aspirational, positively-evaluated working identities, these parts of their overall identity can be fostered, and contribute towards a more positive understanding of self. This kind of social participation and enactment, however, hinge on the right financial circumstances.

Perhaps in the long run, by changing the social narrative around unemployment and by creating more positive opportunities, we could allow people to understand themselves as more able, knowledgeable, worthwhile beings, regardless of their current employment status.

7

Conclusion

Part I of this report has outlined how working identity is informed by both social context and social encounters in the workplace. The five key aspects of working life discussed above – the working classes; ‘precarious’ work and young people; digital revolutions; ‘bullshit jobs’; and unemployment and worklessness – are the result of macro-economic, cultural and technological changes. However, it is through their effect on self-understanding that they will impact on individual behaviours, emotions, and attitudes.

All five areas entail experiences of identity discontinuity and identity change. Whether it is the steelworker who has to retrain after losing an industrial job, or office employees who have to redefine their work to include new technology, or the person who has just lost his or her job, such transformations impact on people’s self-concept as working people and on their sense of belonging to social groups. Furthermore, all five bear the risk of undermining people’s sense of stability with regard to the future. A person whose job is at risk of being replaced, or who works in irregular, precarious employment, or who believes that their job is totally pointless, will experience estrangement from both the local community and from wider society – especially since work is an important aspect of how they evaluate their sense of self and their ability to contribute to society. Under such circumstances, people are more likely to seek refuge in a more robust sense of identity for control and guidance.

Negative or fractured identities can have serious impacts on health and career planning.

This bears risks, especially if someone’s self-concept is destabilised and they struggle to redefine themselves positively. Negative or fractured identities can have a serious impact on health and career planning. Frustration in the enactment of

positive work-based identities can lead to aggression, something that is well documented amongst holders of 'bullshit jobs'. Furthermore, nostalgia can undermine efforts to develop a positive, contemporary sense of self, and sometimes entails stereotyping of other social groups or refusing to engage with the real-life challenges that result from fast-paced, economic and social transformations.

On a more positive note, human beings have shown innovation and resilience in dealing with sense-breaking experiences and identity disruption. We can customise our identity, for example, by broadening our self-concept or by developing a more nuanced understanding of our work situation. By continuously enacting newly-customised identities, and by receiving positive validation for them, people can change their understanding of themselves.

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We need to pay attention to the identity challenges that new work conditions entail. People are more likely to look for support (i.e., orientation and guidance) in sense-breaking situations than in routine, everyday working environments. A robust and reliable identity can help them to develop effective ways of engaging with challenges and addressing transformations successfully. It is during these moments in life that a psychologically safe and supportive social environment is particularly valuable, in helping people to maintain, redesign or even re-establish their sense of identity, in a positive way.

8

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2.

**Recommendations
for policymakers
and practitioners**

9

Introduction

The Cumberland Lodge conference in March 2019 explored the impact of changes in work context on working identity, defined as peoples' personal understandings of who they are in relation to work. The focus of discussions was on exchanging ideas and developing new best-practice approaches, in the key areas of working life explored above, in Part I of this report. The key cross-sector findings from this conference were reviewed and refined at the subsequent consultation, convened by Cumberland Lodge in July 2019, involving conference representatives and further specialists. They are presented below, along with highlighted risks for individual and collective identities. The report concludes with a series of practical recommendations for positive change, for policymakers and practitioners.

10

Key themes

Working identity has a core influence on people's goals, values, attitudes and behaviours, and impacts on general wellbeing. Work is an essential part of our lives; not just for economic reasons, but also in order to lead a purposeful, social, structured, active and healthy life. It provides an important source of identity, since it permits individuals to discover abilities and to strengthen skills, and at the same time to achieve positive affirmation by others for who they are, or seek to be. Changing this central significance of work for people's social lives and personal wellbeing is unrealistic over the short term.

Class-based identity: an emotionally contentious issue for (some) people

Whilst working life changed over the course of the 20th Century, class-based thinking (as reflected in the (self-)categorisation into working-class and middle-class) has not necessarily kept pace with these developments.

There is a 'disconnect' between objective and subjective class positions. Whilst sociological definitions of class are informed by objective indicators – including occupation, education, and income – popular understandings of class, including self-ascribed class-membership, are often only loosely aligned to objective or academic indicators. There are more people who self-identify as working-class (when prompted in surveys) than would be objectively classified as 'working class' by social scientists.¹⁰⁵ This suggests that 'class' has a psychological quality. It functions as a convenient cognitive categorisation system, to simplify complex societal realities.

Education, career-prospects, income and life expectancy are unevenly distributed across society, and understandings of class are partly intertwined with these factors. Through awareness of class status, it is possible to understand opportunities for social

progress. Through class terms, one can envision one's social position relative to others, shaping a sense of belonging as well as common interests, values and behaviours. Class awareness can also provide a sense of future direction and the embedding in a larger (historical) collective.

There is, however, a downside to class-based categorisations: they simplify the reality of working lives. First, most public debate on class tends to focus on working-class versus middle-class categories, whilst ignoring other significant groups (i.e., the 'precariat'¹⁰⁶). Furthermore, psychological categories consist of simplified, prototypical images. Popular ideas of class hence do not reflect the variety of working realities. For example, the concept of the 'working classes' often excludes Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) employees, even though their life and work circumstances fit the description. Indeed, people of BAME background, women, immigrants or young people reportedly use social class less frequently as self-descriptors. This also applies to workers in precarious, insecure, short-term jobs, who do not align with prototypical ideas of class.

Categorising society into classes not only simplifies reality, it can also entail identity threat. The more important class becomes as an identity category, the more this process increases the risk that people will report frustration when they are categorised into the 'wrong' class, or when their idea of class position is questioned, or when their class is associated with unexpected or undesirable attributes.

Finally, the concept of class can easily be captured by populists, to create division and to serve a particular political agenda. For example, class identity can be connected with national identity (e.g., 'We, the *British* working class', which is often imagined to be exclusively white), or with the distribution of entitlements (e.g., the view that 'the British working class deserves better healthcare'). Thus, the emotional importance of class as a category – and of collective political identities – can easily be connected. This is a tactic employed by populists across Europe,

aimed at nurturing a sense of supposed violation of well-earned entitlements and injustice.

In summary, class-based thinking serves important psychological functions, which might partly explain why class identities remain important to many people. However, perceiving or conceptualising society through categories of social class may trigger problematic stereotyping, the experience of exclusion and identity threat.

Digitalisation: risks and opportunities for working identities

Digitalisation continues to bring significant changes to modern workplaces: whilst it eliminates certain jobs, it also creates new ones and alters existing occupations. This means that the context within which work-related identities are enacted and can develop is changing, as the following key points illustrate.

Fewer hours of work per week, but a longer working life?

Theoretically, digitalisation and automatisisation could shorten working hours, by taking work off people's hands. Research indicates that, on average, as little as eight hours of work *per week* can be enough to maintain wellbeing, and that working more than that does not entail improvements in mental wellbeing.¹⁰⁷ A four-day working week, as suggested by the Trades Union Congress (TUC), is therefore psychologically warranted with regard to work-derived wellbeing.

A reduction of working hours would also be beneficial to sustaining a longer working life. Rather than pushing people to exhaust themselves early, we might need to redress aspirations about achievement with a view to the long-term working life.

However, there are strong expectations around what work and high productivity *ought to* look like, and working full-time, long hours, currently falls under those expectations.¹⁰⁸ In that regard, it is unlikely that technological change alone will lower the

standard worked hours per week; instead, changes to legislation and cultural norms are required.

New forms of work: new sources of identity and uncertainty?

Working for a digital platform can provide and restrict autonomy at the same time. At the upper end of the so-called ‘gig-economy’, workers can choose the type of work they do, the order of tasks, and their methods. This personal investment in their jobs gives rise to the identity as independent freelancer. At the bottom end of the scale, workers have less autonomy over their work and often struggle to make a living; financial precarity further restricts work-related choices.¹⁰⁹

Digital-platform workers are also exposed to a new kind of stressor: algorithmic insecurity. Their future income depends on algorithmic decisions. Even those with high levels of autonomy may, sometimes simultaneously, experience powerlessness when their work is rated by customers or they are perhaps even sanctioned by an algorithm.¹¹⁰ The wellbeing effect of algorithmic insecurity is unknown, but there is some indication that powerlessness creates a new need for solidarity among workers, as reflected in newly-formed unions and other, spontaneous forms of self-organisation (e.g., via WhatsApp groups).¹¹¹

The introduction of new technologies, robots and AI-enhanced systems will also affect traditional work, by threatening the existence of certain jobs, whilst significantly changing others. In order to adapt to the changes, workers might have to change their sense of self as well.

New work contexts: new communities?

Digital platforms undermine traditional working communities, whilst simultaneously enabling new forms of collective life—and perhaps redefining or strengthening existing ones. Developing a sense of belonging within a working community and a positive work-related identity is more challenging in digital-platform and remote work. Digital workers feel more isolated, have a

weaker identification with co-workers, and report missing the camaraderie of work colleagues.¹¹²

Seen positively, digital tools can also assist community-building. Online communities are emerging as new places to exchange ideas and collaborate, and also to organise, share experiences and plan collective action. The fact that digital work is less tied to specific geographic locations (i.e., its 'location-independence') means that workers are more likely to remain in their places of origin and hence more likely to actively participate in their existing communities, or in newly created co-working spaces that are organically integrated into the social fabric of neighbourhoods, villages or towns.

Does the digital economy recreate old inequalities?

There is debate as to whether the digital-platform economy creates new forms of inequality. What seems clear is that the digital-platform economy transforms which kinds of employment are considered attractive and which are being increasingly marginalised.

In some cases, previously invisible work located in the informal economy (e.g., gardening, cleaning or helping in the home) has become more formalised and visible in the digital-platform economy. The digital economy also generates new income for some and grants labour-market access for others. Regularly-employed people can supplement their income through entrepreneurial digital activity. The flexible nature of digitally-managed jobs, their easy access and location-independence, as well as the absence of potentially discriminating hiring procedures, may also be beneficial. They permit those with previously limited labour market access to participate in work, and enable them to mould this work engagement around other demands in their life (e.g., childcare duties or health demands).

However, people might also experience increasing marginalisation through digital changes: those with low levels of digital literacy, often found among those from lower-income

backgrounds, struggle to reap the potential benefits of digital-platform work.

Either way, digitalised work needs to be designed in a way that is conducive to the development of a work-based identity, the experience of meaning and a sense of community. From an economic point of view, it is important that the profit generated through digital platforms does not 'drain' out of the local economy into the pockets of remotely located shareholders, but is instead reinvested into the community and its social, cultural, and other infrastructure.

Exclusions based on race, gender, disability or religion

Race, gender, disability and religion, among other factors, shape the contexts of people's work and lives, and thereby impact on opportunities for positive validation.

Being underrepresented in the workplace taints expectations

When people attempt to picture their 'future work selves', in a particular career, they tend to compare themselves with similar people already in such a work situation. Belonging to a minority group at work – be that in terms of gender, race, nationality, sexuality, socio-economic status or religion – can make this comparison more difficult. This can lead to withdrawal and can also affect career goals. Moreover, not fitting the prototypical idea of a certain job-holder risks discrimination, stigmatisation and lowered expectations at the hands of others.

Structural discrimination enforces under-representation

There are structural causes of under-representation. There are, for example, fewer women in higher positions, since (child)care is still predominantly regarded as a female duty, with financial, social and career-related costs. Also, discrimination and bias play

a role, leading to people of certain backgrounds (gender, race, disability, age etc.) being less likely to be hired or promoted.

Paradoxically, some people who would like to work are seen by others as generally 'unfit', due to stereotyping (e.g., based on assumptions connected to gender or physical ability); others, who would not consider themselves fit, might be pushed back into work.

Psychologically speaking, ostracism can enhance in-group solidarity. For example, a strong religious identity could make someone a target for bullying and discrimination, but could also be a source of support from like-minded colleagues. It is unlikely, however, that minority-group solidarity can compensate for overall discriminatory experiences—and discrimination should therefore be confronted wherever possible in the workplace.

The consequences of unemployment

Unemployment is a severely depriving and health-damaging experience for most people. In addition to financial loss, those affected also lack the social benefits of work – interactions with colleagues and clients, the ability to contribute to shared projects, the opportunity to express creativity, the active shaping of one's social status, and having a daily routine. Job loss reduces opportunities to enact, confirm and grow a work-based identity. This does not only concern the unemployed, but also economically inactive people (e.g. homemakers or full-time carers) who often fall 'under the radar' of official unemployment statistics.

Unemployment is particularly dramatic for young people, as they fall behind their peers. People aged 16–25 are in a transition period from childhood, education and dependency into adulthood, work and financial and moral autonomy. Being out of work – or being unable to find work – interrupts this transition, which can have serious consequences for their careers and the development of their working identity.

Poverty, as a consequence of joblessness, exacerbates this. Unemployed young people often report feelings of stigmatisation, or of being regarded as a 'failure', which is unsurprising, given that negative views of the unemployed are, in general, on the rise.¹¹³ As a result, these young people can lose their confidence in approaching positively-challenging work opportunities (of which there are also a declining number). Without the right opportunities to learn, practise and receive feedback, their working-identity development may remain stunted.

There is a recurring debate around whether or not the contexts of work that are crucial for the development of working identities can be replaced by other environments. After all, opportunities to take on responsibility, learn and receive feedback could potentially be provided elsewhere (e.g., in youth clubs). Such alternative institutions, however, have struggled over the past decade, as a result of budget cuts within local authorities.¹¹⁴ With fewer opportunities for positive self-expression, young unemployed people can easily experience a disconnection from wider working society.



Risks

In addition to the key themes of discussion outlined above, the following risks for positive working identity development were highlighted by the cross-sector conversations that took place at Cumberland Lodge in March and July 2019.

1. Social class identities can lead to social division.

Class-based psychological identities reduce complex social realities to simplified, extreme categories that may entail problematic stereotypes, identity threat and division. Referring to class-based identities in public discourse also only resonates with people who identify themselves along class-based lines and excludes others.

2. Digital change can lead to identity loss, and requires adaptation.

Ongoing digitalisation and automatisisation change the ways in which work is conducted, as well as the quality and location of work. These transformations can lead to greater job insecurity and precarity, and require people to adapt their self-understanding as workers. Remote, isolated working can deprive people of identity-confirming – and thus positive – kinds of social interaction.

3. Exclusion from work can obstruct the development of a positive, work-related understanding of oneself.

People who are excluded from the labour market (e.g., because of discrimination, lack of jobs, or lack of digital skills) will have difficulties in developing positive work-related understandings of themselves. Furthermore, feeling underrepresented at work impedes individuals from seeing themselves in certain workplaces in the future, thus limiting their aspirations and career ambitions.

4. Identity threat and identity loss can lead to radicalisation.

Identity threat can be addressed in different ways. One avenue is to reaffirm one's identity (to oneself and others), by displaying more radical and prototypical versions of the self. Another strategy is to denigrate outsiders, in order to clarify one's in-group status and secure membership. A third option is nostalgia.¹¹⁵ However, collective nostalgia does not extend to those that are imagined to exist outside of the remembered past (e.g., migrants or women in the workplace), and it risks exacerbating discrimination and processes of exclusion.

Where positive, work-related identities remain out of reach, people are eventually left with riskier options for self-identification, including, in some cases, affiliation with criminal groups, as highlighted by the conference briefing for the Cumberland Lodge conference on Understanding and Policing Gangs, held in June 2019.¹¹⁶

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Recommendations

1. Move away from class-based identities in public discourse

- Avoid evocations of ‘the working classes’ or ‘the middle classes’ that only resonate with some people, because they have different meanings for different people, and can easily offend or ostracise. Whilst everyone can be identified according to a social class (objectively speaking), when people refer to their own class-based *identity*, they mostly refer to a more subjective, psychological concept.
- Recognise, in policymaking and governance, that concepts of social class are ill-suited for generating an inclusive sense of (national) unity or collective belonging.

2. Put in place the right legislation and offer more inclusive communities for positive working-identity development in digital workplaces

- Improve collaboration amongst policymakers, councils, trade unions and professional bodies, to devise structures that offer the socially-validating interactions, work camaraderie and improved sense of continuity that digital employment settings often lack. These could be virtual or non-virtual, but they would allow digital workers to experience a stronger sense of community.
- Strengthen employment protection for digital or app-based employees, and regulation of the digital economy, to ensure that job quality and workers’ rights are protected and exploitation is prevented.
- Review tax law in response to the complex corporate structures of digital-platform companies, to ensure that a proportion of their revenue is returned to local communities, to help support public infrastructure and local economies.

3. Create the right opportunities for people who are currently excluded from getting into work

- Invest in appropriate social environments, working opportunities and supportive mentorships that enable excluded people to participate in, and gain social validation from, new skills and behaviours, and to develop more positive, forward-looking working identities. More extensive and generous social and monetary support for basic needs (e.g., housing, heating, childcare, public transport and internet access) would further empower jobseekers by helping to tackle the stifling effects of poverty.
- Offer greater support for people with limited digital skills (e.g., through employment support services, local councils and educational services), to help them participate in digitally-organised workplaces and thrive in digitalised societies.
- Increase opportunities for work sponsorships, in the public or private sector, whereby unemployed young people are offered a paid job, together with supportive mentoring.

4. Support workers experiencing changes due to digitalisation and automation

In order to reduce the impact of job insecurity, and to prevent identity threat and confusion, today's significant, and often rapid, digital developments in workplaces need to be managed carefully. Our recommendations are to:

- Provide greater support to help employees cope with, and respond positively to, digital changes – including through trade unions, professional bodies, human resources managers and other stakeholders.¹⁷
- Strengthen legislation around healthy workplaces, to ensure that jobs deliver at least a minimum degree of meaningfulness and sense of purpose to workers.

5. Ensure inclusivity at work and beyond, by tackling discrimination through legislation and community structures

Interventions against structural discrimination are required from policymakers, organisations and society at large, to enable equal access to work for everyone. For example:

- Identify, call out and prosecute cases of structural discrimination.
- Set quotas, and ensure or request balanced shortlists and promotions at work, to help bring more people from under-represented groups into work and enable them to flourish.
- Make decision-makers accountable for why certain people are not shortlisted, hired or promoted, and put sanctions in place to tackle discrimination.
- Work with people at all levels in organisations to challenge prejudices and tackle biases, to render such efforts more robust.
- Tackle indirect discrimination, at a national level, by removing persistent structural barriers that afflict particular groups of workers. For example, expanded childcare support and parental leave rights for women and men would help to ensure greater workplace inclusivity and allow parents to participate more equally in the world of work.

6. Rethink public procurement, digital ownership and taxation, to ensure that profits stay in the local community

Greater investment in local communities is required to create work communities and employment contexts that allow for more positive working identity development. For example:

- Enforce stricter taxation of global companies that sell their services digitally, at a national level.
- Rethink public procurement, with a view to ensuring that public spending is reinvested locally. The successful model championed by Preston Council¹¹⁸ could be a useful blueprint for the rest of the UK.

- Foster a culture of employee-owned business models, by issuing substantial grants to new businesses that meet rigid employee-ownership criteria, as a means for strengthening local economies and making them more resilient.
- Review the ownership structure of algorithms and digital platforms, for example by developing publicly-owned alternatives
- Create municipally-owned alternative apps that mimic the services of existing private apps (e.g., 'meals-on-wheels' rather than Uber Eats), but with fairer working conditions. These would also offer new sources of local revenue.

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