

Better no job at all than a bad one

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By Sydney Morning Herald columnist and reporter – Adele Horin

It is heresy but here are the facts: it is better to be unemployed than to take a lousy job. The findings of impeccable research based on tracking 7000 Australians over seven years run counter to the maxim that any job is better than no job.

It was Sigmund Freud who said love and work were all you needed for a fulfilling life; they were the "cornerstone of our humanness".

He was probably right about love. But he missed a crucial point about work. A good job contributes to a fulfilling life; a lousy job, it turns out, will simply make us more depressed and anxious than if we had no work at all. A lousy job might propel us to a psychiatrist's couch.

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The research team, headed by Dr Peter Butterworth, of the centre for mental health research at the Australian National University, has caused a worldwide stir with its controversial findings.

It has long been accepted that unemployed people do better financially and psychologically when they get a job. This has underpinned the "jobs first" mantra followed by successive Australian governments. Get the unemployed into any job, rather than fancy training, for example, and watch them progress.

The Butterworth team showed it was true that, on average, workers enjoyed significantly better mental health than the unemployed. But it went further to tease out exactly which unemployed were better off psychologically when they got a job.

It found unemployed people were better off over time only if they moved into good jobs. These jobs were defined as those the respondents said paid a fair wage, gave them some autonomy rather than subjected them to intense scrutiny, and were secure. Unfortunately the questions did not run to bully-boy bosses and psychopathic colleagues who surely colour the experience of work.

Unemployed people who moved into good jobs increased their mental health score by 3.3 percentage points above the average. Unemployed people who moved into lousy jobs suffered a significant decline in their mental health. Their mental health score

dropped 5.6 points below average; the lousier the job, the worse the decline. They were more likely to be depressed and anxious than the group that got the better jobs. Even more significantly, they were more likely to be depressed and anxious than people who remained unemployed.

In some ways this is surprising, given Australia's dole for single people is so low you would think any wage would make life easier and translate into a better mental state. But perhaps extra money cannot make up for the misery of a bad job.

The study makes it clear it was not the personal characteristics of a particular group that predisposed them to psychological problems. It was the job that made the difference. If people moved to a better job over the years they were tracked, their mental health improved, and vice versa.

Unfortunately, many people who take lousy jobs get trapped in them. Butterworth told me there was little evidence in the longitudinal study to support the familiar line that for most people a lousy job can be a stepping stone to a good job, a line I have previously found pretty convincing. In fact, it was more likely for people to land a decent job from a state of unemployment than from a lousy job.

Successive Australian governments have financially penalised and denigrated so-called "job snobs" - those unemployed who refused to take just any job. Also penalised were those who left a job for no good reason and applied for the dole. Working in a sweatshop ruled by a tyrant does not qualify as a good reason, and such job leavers face an eight-week wait for the dole.

The Labor government is unlikely to soften the "jobs first" mantra in light of the findings that a bad job can be worse than no job. What may be bad for an individual's mental health may still be good for the taxpayer, at least in the short term, as an unemployed person exchanges the dole for a wage.

Indeed, the government will take a tougher line with the unemployed from July 1. Ignoring official reviews, the government will take harsher action against job seekers who miss an appointment with their job services agency. The dole will be stopped until the job seeker contacts Centrelink. If they miss a second appointment the payment will be stopped with no back pay allowable, and re-started when contact is made.

The young, refugees and the disabled are the ones most likely to have their meagre dole docked if they miss an appointment.

The study should prompt a rethink about the importance of work to mental health. We know from Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development studies that a preponderance of lousy, low-paid jobs is bad for a national economy, and bad for national productivity.

Now the ANU study confirms what many of us know from experience: bad jobs are bad for our psychological health. What it also shows is that even small improvements in workplace culture - more worker autonomy, for example - can bring big mental health benefits across the population.

When the Gillard government announces its mental health agenda later this year, the role of bad workplaces as agents of depression and anxiety must be addressed. After all, work is where most of us spend much of our waking hours. The government's challenge is to promote policies that encourage the growth of decent jobs, not a flight to the bottom.

Happy workplaces make for healthy and productive workers.

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