


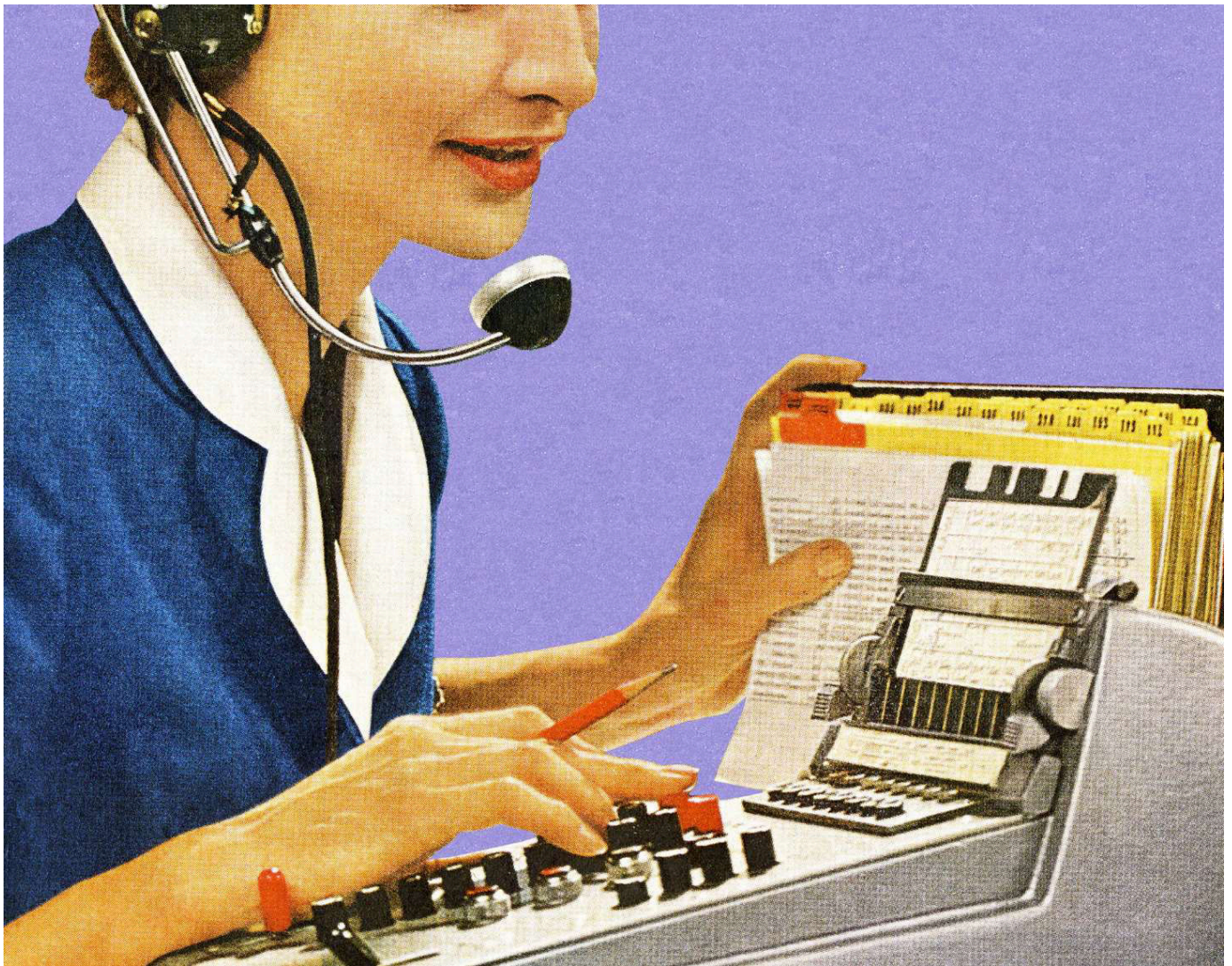


The Expanding Job

Some problems even a wife can't fix

Anne Helen Petersen Apr 17  175  32 

If you find yourself regularly opening this newsletter and value the labor that goes into it....have you become a paid subscriber? Think about it. I'm always telling myself that I'm going to start paying for something when I just get to the computer and have my credit card in hand, and then it takes weeks to do it. But maybe today's your day.



(Getty Images)

There's a story that academics like to tell, in some variation, about the time in grad school when they were writing their dissertations. Usually it starts with someone talking about how long it took to write, which somehow leads to an offhand mention

of someone *else* in their program who did it faster, with seemingly more ease, and just generally more support.

The secret of their success? *They had wives.*

The next beat of the story, regardless of the gender or sexual orientation of the teller, usually goes something like “I wish *I* had a wife to get me through my dissertation!” The rest of the group nods enthusiastically, floating in reverie. Just imagine, during those thick, heady years of research and writing: someone to go shopping and cook meals! Someone to read drafts and catch typos and even give feedback! A wife would be a buoy, a beacon, a savior. What privilege, to have a wife!

Whenever I’ve been a part of these conversations, they have reliably included feminists of all stripes who’d normally frown at this genre of gender/gender role essentialism. But the yearning was there, all the same, for a way of doing the work that felt *sustainable*. We understood that to achieve that sort of sustainability, you had to wind back the clock: to a different sort of job market and configuration of academia, sure. But that set-up was also built on the understanding that every academic would be able to off-load the most time-consuming of tasks to their assistants. Some of those assistants took the form of their wives. Some were graduate students and research assistants. And some were actual department secretaries, who oversaw and facilitated the quotidian tasks that now absorb so many academics’ lives.

Look at most any academic book written by a man before, oh, 1990, and you’ll almost certainly see evidence of this relationship in the Acknowledgments. Often, it’s the wife *literally typing* the book manuscript. Think how much more work was possible, with that labor outsourced! But you see it now, too: consult the books of a particularly prolific male academic, and the labor of his partner will be nowhere to be seen in the actual pages, but parsable, in loose code, in his note of gratitude at the end. Their labor isn’t just what makes the work possible, it makes the entire paradigm of swiftly climbing the career ladder *with a family in tow* possible.

Do I begrudge these people? Should you? It’s a complicated question, because what they’re doing is actually navigating the system as it was designed. The problem, then, is less the people who’ve excelled within that system, and more the system itself — which, like so many corners of the American labor market, still assumes the support of a partner that does not work full-time outside of the home. If you have that

support, you will excel. If you don't, you either have to make enough money to buy it, or you will (perhaps in slow motion, but inevitably) drown.

The assumption of domestic support is just one of part of the equation, though. That support is what makes it possible for people to figure out care for their children and their elders, to ensure that they have nourishing food on the table, to make sure they get a solid, interrupted night of sleep, to feel comfortable inviting colleagues and peers to their homes, to feel confident that they'll have clean clothes when they wake up, and that the problems with their cars or homes or health insurance coverage will be addressed, and their childrens' summer camp schedules coordinated, and holiday cards distributed, and that there'll be something "magical" in place for St. Patrick's Day morning (yes, this is a thing now, don't get me started). That support liberates them from the work of balancing the mental load — and, again, allows them to focus the bulk of their attention towards the work they do for pay and glory.

But the "rockstars" of any profession usually have another secret: they've found themselves in a situation in which they're able to still do *one job*. I don't mean that they're not doing several things at once. I mean they're not trying to do the work that three or four people. In the case of a CEO or president: they have at least one assistant, if not more. In the case of the successful, senior academic: they still have a small army of paid research assistants to do their book research for them and teaching assistants to do their grading and the intense work of interacting directly with students.

These sorts of jobs are increasingly rare. Just two generations ago, magazine journalists would often go into the field, interview a few people, then rely heavily on "researchers" (almost always women) who would flesh out their pieces with historical details and previous reporting. (See Lynn Povich's *The Good Girls' Revolt* for more details on how this worked at *Newsweek*). Part of the reason an ad man like Don Draper in *Mad Men* was able to take naps and be creative all day was *because he had a secretary* doing all the paperwork and meeting-setting and telling him where to be and when. He just *thought big thoughts*.

Contrast that set-up with today's TV journalism, where the current expectation is for MMJs (multi-media journalists) to function as one-person bands, producing, filming, appearing on-camera, and editing their own content in the field, generally for a salary barely approaching a living wage. Comms job ads increasingly demand applicants to

be well-versed in writing and editing — *and* graphic design and social media marketing. A secretary used to provide services for one department; now, she provides them for three.

Sometimes, this job “expansion” is the result of layoffs, downsizing, reorgs, or budget shortages, where remaining workers are told to do more with less — or leave. These over-filled jobs are legion in “passion” occupations (non-profits, education, caregiving) where the maxims of vocational awe make doing more with less a badge of honor. In many organizations, particularly anywhere where a consultant has been called in to “trim the fat,” the jobs that ensured that work was performed smoothly and without overload have been eliminated, the essential components of their job descriptions added onto those that remained. To look back at the last forty years of corporate layoffs is to watch so many employers forget — or be convinced to forget — that *fat has an essential purpose*.

Some job descriptions expanded alongside the ongoing assumption that new technologies (photocopiers, word processors, computers, faxes, email, Slack, Teams, Zoom, online calendars, project managers, or automating shortcuts) dramatically reduce workload, thereby justifying the number of tasks that have been pushed onto the plate of a single worker. In reality, those technologies *do* simplify an existing task — but they also add a new, complex layer of *additional* work. As I discussed with Sarah Marshall on this week’s You’re Wrong About, email did not kill the memo; it created a different, wilder, more slippery sort of memo.

(And then there’s the additional workplace labor required of women, and people who are not gender conforming, and people of color in the workplace — whether related to “the grooming gap,” or reflecting and absorbing microaggressions, or having to constantly arrange your face to so as not to be mistaken for bitchy, or aggressive, or “not a team player.” To be clear, not being a white cis male in the workplace isn’t a job unto itself. But it’s not *not* a job, either.)

Whatever the reason for job role expansion, the effects are the same. There’s usually shitty or non-existent management, a general feel of precarity in the air (even if everyone’s jobs are, in fact, pretty secure) and horrible work boundary hygiene, because the only way to actually do all the things expected of you is to allow work to spill outside of “normal” work hours: into the night or weekend, into parental or sick leave, and into actual PTO, if you give yourself permission to take it.

Employees struggle to adequately perform work that, if someone were to look closely and objectively, are so *obviously* the work of more than one person. But because these are salaried jobs, generally but not always without union protections, that level of work — within the organization, but also within an industry — is just....the way things are. Workers have no choice but to hunker down and do it, because if you don't, you're "not a good culture fit."

●

This sort of job creep was worsened, in multiple ways, by the pandemic, but the pandemic was not its catalyst. These were already smothering jobs, *devouring* jobs that combine with the similarly expanding expectations of child and eldercare to become something darker and more volatile. These days, I think of these jobs as not just expanding, but on the verge of exploding. That might sound dramatic, but the connotation feels right. Stay in these jobs long enough, and they'll guaranteed to leave scars.

We've reached a point of diminishing returns when it comes to productivity, creativity, concentration, cooperation, plus all of the other skills we try to cultivate alongside the labor we do for pay. It's easy to feel like you're actively getting worse at your job when you're past the point of burnout. People might not be quitting work for good — shit feels too precarious for that — many are quitting industries. Or, if they're still in their fields, they're searching for jobs that offer some other way: a staggering 44% of employees are currently looking for a new job.

What do you do with a stat like that? It's not that people don't want to work. It's that their jobs feel, for whatever reason, unsustainable: unsustainable for their mental and physical health, but also unsustainable for their family, and their longterm survival. Many people actually really like the work that they do, if they were, indeed, allocating the bulk of their time to doing that work. And they do could do it so well, for so much longer, with so much more creativity and precision, if they were *just doing that one job*, instead of the three currently required of them.

●

In pursuit of growth, we have whittled our systems down to the most lean versions of themselves. In the name of lowering taxes on the rich, we have pushed our public apparatuses to the point of bare functionality. We are living in a moment of untold

abundance yet so many have opted to survive on the gristle of human experience. (Most) salaried workers are so much more financially stable than so many, but I find us to be far less generous. We are bad, fearful neighbors; we funnel terror of downward mobility into competitive parenting practices; we are fiercely protective of the little time called our own after navigating the demands of our paid and unpaid labor. We're flaky, we're bad at showing up, we have little tolerance for even slight inconvenience, we stew in our own dissatisfactions without acting, because who has the time or energy to *act*, to *do something*, when you're working all the time? People who aren't gaslit by the ever-expanding demands of their jobs, and with far healthier relationships to work — that's who.

When it's left to the individual to resist a system like this, these jobs will continue to expand their expectations of what a single worker can provide. And who will survive the gauntlet? The same people who are able to survive it now: men — in particular, white, cis-gender white men with wives — but also anyone who can lean in or acquire the grit or girl boss in a way that approximates those men. The bar for acceptable and expectable work loads will just keep moving higher, as everyone else keeps stretching themselves as thin as possible to reach it before collapsing on the ground, convinced the failure was theirs alone.



Matthew L. Reznicek
@drreznicek

My therapist and I spent at least half our session talking about the need to shift away from “burn out” to “moral injury.” Your exhaustion isn’t a failure of your capacity, but a structural failure to support your capacity

April 12th 2022

2,227 Retweets 11,405 Likes

So what's the solution? It's not to somehow procure everyone a wife — or, more practically, an underpaid virtual assistant from the global south, and then another, and another — in order to make a job accomplishable for “one” person. Instead, each organization has to ask itself: *what is the work we want, and need, to do?* And if you are utterly unwilling to hire more people to do the amount of work we do, and utterly unwilling to decrease the amount of work you do, then you should be honest with ourselves: you're fine with the human wreckage, you're fine with moral injury, you're fine with churn, you're fine with continually unraveling societal bonds, you're fine

with snow-capped organizations, you're fine with the enduring wage gap, and you're fine with the toxicity that pervades our company.

But if you are not, in fact, fine with any of those things, and want to live by your stated beliefs — as a leader, as an employees, as a member of this society trying to make life *survivable*, not just for yourself, but for others — you need to start over when it comes to the way you arrange work. The wreckage will come, one way or another. It's up for you to decide whether the status quo that gets blown up — or your actual employees.

And if you're an employee, what do the leaders at your organization say they believe — and how does what they expect of you, and your co-workers, actually communicate? No job is perfect. But you can sense pretty quickly if a company is actually blind to the ways it's trying to blow you, or if that explosion is designed as a test to survive. Sure, maybe you can survive it, and continue surviving it. Humans are resilient. We can, and have, endured so much. But it's worth asking, particularly when it comes to work: at what cost, and at whose exclusion?