

ESSAY

In Praise of Idleness Revisited

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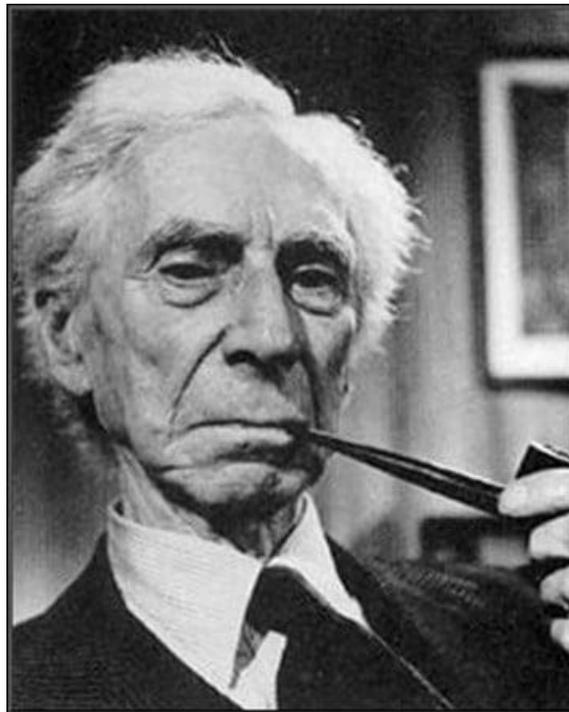
"I THINK THAT THERE IS FAR TOO MUCH WORK DONE IN THE WORLD, [AND] THAT IMMENSE HARM IS CAUSED BY THE BELIEF THAT WORK IS VIRTUOUS ..."- (IN PRAISE OF IDLENESS, BERTRAND RUSSELL)

I remember my first job as an engineer in India. The year was 1970. My work started at eight in the morning. We had to cross the guard shack before 8 am. Being late by a few minutes meant losing half an hour's worth of pay and dropping a few brownie points at the time of the performance review. Using time for personal business meant losing a day's salary. The bosses were mandated to follow these rules strictly.

When I came to the USA in 1974, I found the working environment was much relaxed here, but there was no concept of family leave during a spouse's illness or childbirth. Fortunately, bosses here in the U.S. had much more discretionary powers to provide excuses to the employees during such family emergencies. When my children were born, my boss allowed me to take time off as needed. It all depended on one's relationship with the boss. There was no

concept of working from home. One had to be physically at work during an eight-hour shift. Of course, there was no Internet or personal computer at that time either.

Things got much easier by the time I joined General Motors in the nineteen-eighties.



We had something called flex time where we didn't have to work regular shifts as long as we put in eight hours of work every day. Later, towards my retirement, they allowed us limited hours to work from home.

I always thought that spending one-third of my adult life in a cubicle was a waste of time. Of course, I was ahead of my time in my thinking. My friends and family thought that I was crazy. In fact, I was

influenced by Bertrand Russell's essay, "In Praise of Idleness." When I was in high school, my father often asked me to read classic essays and make precis. "In Praise of Idleness" made a great impact on my nascent mind and, as a result of that, I

believed that spending entire adult life in a cubicle was a waste of human mind and creativity. Before I was engaged to my wife, my mother-in-law asked me, "What is your career goal?"

"I want to retire," was my succinct and shocking reply to her.

Russel wrote in his essay that from the beginning of civilization until the industrial revolution, a person and his family produced goods for their own subsistence. They were also expected to produce a little more for people in the higher echelons of the society.

This economic injustice was designed so that the surplus produce could go to a few elites many of whom didn't work at all (it's still happening in rich Arab countries). On top of that, the labor class was made to overwork so that others could afford to remain idle. Some of the elites used their idle time in pursuit of literature, arts and philosophy. Plato, Michelangelo, Leonardo Da Vinci are some examples.

The same archaic notion about work was still being followed by the employers and accepted by the employees in the twenty-first century work environment until Covid-19 pandemic spread throughout the world. The post-covid era made people to rethink about work. Suddenly, employees now are demanding more autonomy, mastery, and purpose in their pursuits. The employers are listening to labor's demands. They are providing their employees the choice of working from home, office or a combination of both, also called hybrid.

The pandemic has also made many employers realize that the five-day work week as well as the nine to five shift were outdated, ineffective and unnecessary. Employees do not want to be confined to a cubicle for eight hours like we did. They want to be able to walk in the park, pursue hobbies, be with their children or do other activities they enjoy. Employers too now realize that happier people are more productive.

In addition, the workplace needs to adapt to accommodate employees' increased needs for mental health and well-being. Concerns around mental health in the workplace have become more prevalent now than ever before as people are returning to work. The way the workplace looks and functions, as well as COVID-19 safety guidelines, are significant in making sure that workers' priorities are put first. This is consistent with what Russell wrote in his essay. "Give people time, and many will produce good things."

So much creativity is wasted in our current social and economic system, where people are forced to do what they don't want to do, or when they are denied the minimal amount, it takes to live a decent life. While I realize that there is no silver-bullet solution or perfect working environment, the current crisis offers opportunities to reshape employer-employee attitudes towards the workplace and create spaces that are meaningfully centered on the human experience. I hope that this change will be long-lasting.