From the Editor-in-Chief's Desk: Better than Sex? Hooked on Work—at the Toxic Workplace

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The previous editorial included comments on the potential for increase in bullying, mobbing, incivility, and other nastiness emerging in organizational life. I framed this as being potentially worsened as the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) deepens and both individuals and organizations begin to feel the “pinch”—the bite that inevitably accompanies financial problems. Since then, I have remembered that many of our workplaces are already toxic, and create toxic emotions at work (Frost 2003). These workplaces don’t need the GFC to help things along.

Within that framework, Trinca and Fox’s (2004) work, *Better than Sex: How a Whole Generation Got Hooked on Work*, offers an interesting paradox. Trinca and Fox argue, quite successfully I think, that work is increasingly at the center of our lives. Work is the thing we do now to bring both money *and* meaning into our lives. I point out quickly that, while they do acknowledge that “work cannot compete with sex for glamour, excitement and emotion,” according to them it’s pretty close. For many of us, Trinca and Fox claim, our work lives are more fulfilling, empowering, consistent, and controllable than our sex lives. “Better,” they say, “in so many ways” (Trinca and Fox 2004: 3).

They go on to confirm that while the new generation of workers still harps on about the need for work-life balance, longer hours (or fewer hours), childcare, and flexible shifts, for many people these days they argue that “there is no longer an argument about *whether* work should determine how we live. Instead, we debate *how* work should be managed” (Trinca and Fox 2004: 3; their emphasis). We are hooked on work, it seems; not all of us all the time but, for many of us, work has become far more than a means to an end.

As I assess all this, a growing ambivalence grips me viscerally. On the one hand, I find myself accepting Trinca and Fox’s arguments, agreeing that it does seem many of us are hooked on work (although I am still not sure about the bit where work is better than sex). On the other hand, I remain unsure how conscious or unconscious this is, and how positive or negative its outcomes might be. For all those hooked on work, I wonder how many enjoy it, really enjoy it. And how many feel good when they are doing their work, and before their day starts, and at the end of the day. And how many more (or less) look forward to it,

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anticipating their work happily and confidently, knowing it will advance the quality of their lives.

I cannot help but quietly remember, just a short step away from work experiences that are, it is claimed, better than our wildest nights in the bedroom, the uncompromising and constant questions about the ugly, uncaring, and callous nature of our workplaces. Like the slum beyond the skyscrapers, our workplaces can hide unimaginable pain and despair behind the thin veneers of status, money, and power. I am thinking now of the rise of the disposable workforce, the growth of casualization of workers, displaced workers, alienated workers, abusive supervisors, violence, and increasing employment instability (Blauner 1964; Moore 1996; Powell 1998; Frost 2003).

Trinca and Fox (2004) recognize the conundrum and signal that work can also drain people of any energy, time, and desire that make sex and intimacy happen. We know that work can provide, for many of us, great wads of money, satisfaction, enjoyment, enhanced self-esteem, social interactions, and networks, even the venue for choosing a life mate. And yet for many of us, concurrently (which is perplexing in itself), work can also offer anxiety, grief, humiliation, fear, mistrust, and pain. Work can so embrace us as to push away love, deaden our interest in others, and flatten our horizons. Conversely, and curiously from my perspective, it still rates, for a great many of us, as the most important part of one's life. Our reactions to work are an intense paradox.

Let's look at a simple example: the common act of rudeness at work. Rudeness has been noted as having many potentially negative effects in organizations. Rudeness is defined as "insensitive or disrespectful behaviour enacted by a person that displays a lack of regard for others" (Porath and Erez 2007). Rudeness at work can be a source of discomfort both for the target and for the observers of rudeness, and rude behavior may elicit retaliation of some kind, including more rude behavior, as well as other negative and counterproductive outcomes. Rudeness has been shown to harm task performance, both directly and indirectly (Porath and Erez 2007). And rudeness can, potentially, lead to the withdrawal of leader support (Porath and Erez 2007). As I think back to where we started this story, I consider it to be a very bad idea to be rude to your leader, especially if you are hooked on work. The paradox lies with the fact that we still appear to want to spend endless hours at these places of rudeness, regularly facing down the rudeness, working around it, ignoring it, handling it—as if it weren't there. And who could miss the irony of the titillating sexual imagery being presented to us cheek by jowl with all that rudeness.

Seriously though, the pain that spills over from small things can grow into toxicity (Frost 2003). An unfeeling response undermines confidence, esteem, and dignity, and a toxic response decreases people's sense of connection with those around them, a critical element of the workplace experience if people are to desire and be able to do their jobs (Frost 2003). As we find ourselves spending—voluntarily or otherwise—longer and longer hours at our places of work, it could be that we need to attend to more of the personal and interpersonal in our workplaces and spaces. Avoiding rudeness, for example, means thinking before sending that flippant or sarcastic e-mail; it means pausing before being drawn into discussions that might offend another who might overhear; it means giving more consideration to ensure that all are included and respected, as they should be, in all relevant professional and social activities that revolve around work.

My partner shared with me his "favorite" experience of rudeness at a past workplace. He recounted, with a wry smile, how all the people where he had once worked—*all of them*—had organized a luncheon celebration. Not only was he not invited to join them in the festivities, but also, after most had left the office for the grand, warm, and (mostly) inclusive social event, one came back to speak with my partner briefly, asking him to be

sure to give directions to any stragglers who may not know the exact destination. Such is the stuff of workplaces, even those that now claim they are better, more fulfilling, empowering, satisfying, and controllable than our sex lives.

Employee Responsibilities and Rights Journal (ERRJ) endeavors to examine the tensions, paradoxes, pain, humor, even clichés that arise in the course of studying and reflecting upon interactions and engagement between employees and employers. I am keen to encourage scholars interested in and concerned about any aspect of the employee-employment negotiation to write about any of its elements, and to do so showcasing any of the many and varied approaches, methods, and methodologies that are available to explore this negotiation. *ERRJ* is an outlet for all paradigmatic perspectives. Working from and through different paradigms offers us the possibility of exploring the empirical world in new and exciting ways, of using new lenses to shed light on long-standing dilemmas and difficult choices. At *ERRJ*, we also encourage varying and innovative methods and methodologies, as well as offering the value of enmeshing them with both practitioner and scholarly debate. I welcome both theoretical and empirical contributions that may include offerings from surveys to life histories; phenomenology and focus groups; ethnographies and experiments; case studies and observation.

I am also keen to promote *ERRJ* as a journal that offers a potential home not only to outstanding traditional research about the area of employees and work and workplaces, but also to non-mainstream research work and employee-related work of relevance also. *ERRJ* is a journal that considers all aspects and nuances of the often fraught negotiation between employees and their employers. *ERRJ* seeks to explore all aspects of work and employment relations and experiences.

I welcome manuscripts concerned with many of the diverse areas surrounding work and employment. Some examples include: employment sustainability; organizational social responsibility; workplace issues in all three sectors (public, private and not-for-profit); organizational violence; emotions at work; work-life histories; management-change impacts on staff; employee assistance programs; work-family balance; transition into work from school or university; role of unions; management conundrums; workplace adversity; organizational learning for employees and employers; board work and bored work; issues pertaining to vulnerable groups at work including discrimination, gender, disability, and ethnicity debates; and issues surrounding employment recruitment and retention. There are so many more.

Please e-mail me (m.vickers@uws.edu.au) if you have any ideas you think may be of interest to readers of *ERRJ*. I am committed to internationalizing and developing a critical focus at *ERRJ*, and internationalizing still further our readership as we continue to address work- and employment-related issues and debates of concern to practitioners and scholars all around the world. I encourage ideas for themed special issues, especially those that will serve to open up debate in new or emerging areas. Equally, I recognize that it can be useful to return to problems that have engulfed us for years, considering them with a new twist.

I look forward to hearing from you and continuing the debate. I am not sure if I would claim that reading and contributing to *ERRJ* is better than sex—I leave that for you to decide. However, I do urge you to contact me with your thoughts and ideas for development and promulgation. I look forward to hearing from you.

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