What is "Decent and Stable Work"?

Paula Gowdie Rose

The phrase "Decent and Stable Work" is ambiguous, enigmatic, interesting, and a relatively new concept for most of us. It includes "precarity" or "precarious work", but decent and stable work involves so much more. According to the Law Commission of Ontario, precarious work has:

> "less job security, few if any benefits and minimal control over working conditions. Precarious work may be contract, part-time, self-employment or temporary work [and while this affects] all groups of workers, women, racialized persons and recent immigrants are more likely to be "vulnerable workers" engaged in precarious work"[1].

The International Labour Organization (ILO) defines "Decent work":

> "Decent work sums up the aspirations of people in their working lives. It involves opportunities for work that is productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for families, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men."
> (https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/decent-work/lang--en/index.htm)

In other words, "decent and stable work" is not just about fair wages. Decent and stable work involves benefits, a workplace environment/culture that has equitable, inclusive and positive workplace practices that value workers. Moreover, ***decent and stable work enables workers to have positive experiences inside and outside the workplace.***

But, you may say, *"aren't we asking too much of work? Isn't work simply about paying the bills?"*

There are many reasons people work[i]. The most obvious reason is that people need money to finance their lives – to pay for the basics, i.e., food, shelter, clothing, and to satisfy other needs. For many people, work is about much more than the responsibilities completed in the position(s) they hold. Work is about the responsibilities of the position(s), how people are treated in the workplace, the workplace environment/culture and its impacts on individuals while in the workplace or at work, as well as outside of the workplace. For many people, work is part of their identities; it's where they find meaning for their lives, satisfaction in the workplace and outside the workplace. Ultimately, "satisfaction" comes from knowing that we are *safe*, valued and treated fairly – equitably – in our work and workplaces. "Safety" obviously includes the physical but what is often overlooked and dismissed is the ***psychological safety*** of workers. In other words, the treatment of workers as directed by organizational policies, processes and practices, can have negative mental health impacts for workers. ***Treatment that perpetuates inequities in the workplace.***

When a worker's mental health is negatively impacted by workplace practices, the effects spills over into the other parts of that person's life. For example, making and maintaining positive relationships, making good lifestyle choices, maintaining healthy food choices and habits, satisfying

---

[1] Law Commission of Ontario (2012). Vulnerable Workers and Precarious Work Final Report, December 2012. https://www.lco-cdo.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/vulnerable-workers-final-report.pdf.

the other parts of their being in order to maintain wellness[2], pursuing aspirations, etc. Mental health effects of the workplace were acknowledged by the ***Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace Standards***. The Canadian Standard as it has come to be known, was launched in 2013 with objectives of "*promoting mental health and preventing psychological harm at work*" (https://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/English/what-we-do/workplace/national-standard). The Canadian Standards is a voluntary set of guidelines and so it is the choice of employers to adopt the guidelines. To the best of my knowledge, at the time of drafting this article York University had not adopted the Standards.

Additionally, researchers and practitioners have acknowledged mental health in the workplace, its' impacts on workers and its' relevance to decent and stable work – see [ii].

Which of the following scenario(s) would you consider "decent and stable work"?

The following fictionalized work scenarios are provided as illustrations (answer provided below):

Scenario 1: Young white female, single parent to three children. She finished high school but her plans to pursue a college diploma ended abruptly by her first pregnancy. She works three part time low-waged jobs to pay the rent with a little bit left over each month. She's grateful for government monthly child benefits and her mother who helps to "keep an eye" on the children while she works. Other than OHIP Ontario's health care plan, she has no additional health benefits or other financial or community supports.

Scenario 2: Middle aged white male in an executive leadership position. He sets his own hours and has staff who works for him. He travels 10 weeks each year with his family, owns his own home, a boat and vacation home and has an extensive benefits package, including health, clothing, housing and others.

Scenario 3: A young, racialized couple, recently emigrated to Canada as they qualified for the immigration access program. Educated and making above average salaries in their country of origin but Canada offered a "better life" for them and their children. In Canada now for four months and still not able to find work in their fields of study or experience, the wife takes a factory job paying a third of her former salary and is daily demeaned by her supervisor and the other workers. She feels helpless as there is no one to turn to at the workplace for assistance. She has to work even when she and her children are sick because if she does not work, she does not get paid. She is rarely able to leave the factory on time at the end of her shift even though her supervisor knows that she has to pick up her children from daycare by a certain time each evening and that she has no established social network yet in Canada to rely on. The husband fares no better and with a medical degree, resorts to driving for Uber to support his family. After all, as the man of the house, he was raised to take care of his family. Since they are new to Canada, they have limited access to governmental supports and does not have additional health benefits or other financial supports. Also, they cannot

---

[2] The Global Wellness Institute defines wellness *as "the active pursuit of activities, choices and lifestyles that lead to a state of holistic health"* (https://globalwellnessinstitute.org/what-is-wellness/).

be truthful about their circumstances to their parents who are back in their home country because they believe their children are "living life large" in Canada.

Scenario 4:   Single Black female. Successfully completed three university degrees with honourable mentions because her life experiences and those of other Black peoples have taught her that she must "work three times as hard as the others to get ahead". She found full time work that pays better than minimum wage, has extended health benefits and is unionized. She is the only racialized employee in her department, is expected to do the grunt work without question and is given excessive amounts of work to complete. She does not take paid breaks, does not take her lunches, works unpaid hours outside of her work hours and is not included in departmental activities. Her opinions are never requested but when she tries to provide feedback she is prohibited. She does not have the support of her manager or her colleagues. Her workplace is toxic. The quality of her work is stellar, but she has to "fight" to obtain the same type of equipment and tools provided to her non-racialized colleague in order to do her work. She contacts her union rep but no real support is provided because the union rep has not had any training in equity, diversity and inclusion and so does not understand the issues. She decides to deal with the situation on her own. She works an exorbitant number of unpaid hours and deals with the excessive demands of her job and after 6 years, she is diagnosed with a mental health condition by her healthcare provider. WSIB denies her workplace injury claim. The extended insurance provider denies her injury claim. She is now off work, has exhausted her sick days and sick benefits with no financial supports or way to continue treatment for her health condition while she awaits appeals on her WSIB and extended health care claims.

Scenario 5:   Middle aged white lady, married with two children. She has worked in the same department for the past fifteen years and is part of a union. She has the support of her manager, and since first arriving as the department secretary, has been successful in attaining the office coordinator's role. While not the manager, her position as a lead hand/supervisor affords her some authority in the unit. She is able to take her breaks and lunches and leaves the office each day at the end of her paid hours. Most importantly, she ensures that her staff follows the same practices. Moreover, she makes it a priority to build positive working relationships with her staff members – they have regular meetings, establish positive workplace practices, have developed good working relationships, feel comfortable speaking with her privately about their life circumstances because they know that she will safeguard any information they share with her. She advocates for herself, as well as her staff to her manager. A crucial priority for her is to ensure that the work of the unit is completed but that staff in the unit feel safe in their work and the workplace. She has extended health benefits.

Answer: Decent and Stable Work: Scenarios 2 and 5.
May 25, 2021

---

[i] Some resources for a deeper exploration of work (Passport York credentials are required to access the articles at York University Libraries):

- Allan, Blake A., Autin, Kelsey L., and Duffy, Ryan D. (2014). Examining Social Class and Work Meaning Within the Psychology of Working Framework. *Journal of Career Assessment, Vol. 22(4) 543-561.* https://journals-sagepub-com.ezproxy.library.yorku.ca/doi/pdf/10.1177/1069072713514811.

- Bakker, Arnold B. (2011). An Evidence-Based Model of Work Engagement. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 20(4) 265–269.* https://journals-sagepub-com.ezproxy.library.yorku.ca/doi/pdf/10.1177/0963721411414534.
- Bendassolli, Pedro F. and Tateo, Luca (2018). The meaning of work and cultural psychology: Ideas for new directions. *Culture & Psychology, Vol. 24(2) 135–159.* https://journals-sagepub-com.ezproxy.library.yorku.ca/doi/pdf/10.1177/1354067X17729363.
- Davenport, Lauren J; Allisey, Amanda F; Page, Kathryn M; LaMontagne, Anthony D; Reavley, Nicola J. (2016). How can organisations help employees thrive? The development of guidelines for promoting positive mental health at work. *International Journal of Workplace Health Management; Bingley Vol. 9, Iss. 4, 411-427.* https://www-proquest-com.ezproxy.library.yorku.ca/docview/1832159783?OpenUrlRefId=info:xri/sid:primo&accountid=15182.
- Dendinger, Veronica M., Adams, Gary A. and Jacobson, Jamie D. (2005). Reasons for Working and Their Relationship to Retirement Attitudes, Job Satisfaction and Occupational Self-Efficacy of Bridge Employees. *International Journal of Aging and Human Development, Vol. 61(1) 21-35.* https://journals-sagepub-com.ezproxy.library.yorku.ca/doi/pdf/10.2190/K8KU-46LH-DTW5-44TU.

[ii] Some resources about mental health and decent and stable work:
- Blustein, David L., Kenny, Maureen E., Di Fabio, Annamaria, and Guichard, Jean (2019). Expanding the Impact of the Psychology of Working: Engaging Psychology in the Struggle for Decent Work and Human Rights. *Journal of Career Assessment 2019, Vol. 27(1) 3-28.* https://journals-sagepub-com.ezproxy.library.yorku.ca/doi/pdf/10.1177/1069072718774002.
- Blustein, David L, Perera, Harsha N., Diamonti, A.J., Gutowski, Ellen, Meerkins, Tera, Davila, Alekzander, Erby, Whitney, and Konowitza, Lily (2020). The uncertain state of work in the U.S.: Profiles of decent work and precarious work. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, Volume 122, 103481.* https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7449123/pdf/main.pdf.
- Law Commission of Ontario (2012). Vulnerable Workers and Precarious Work Final Report, December 2012. https://www.lco-cdo.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/vulnerable-workers-final-report.pdf.The Shain Reports on Psychological Safety in the Workplace – A Summary: Prepared for the Mental Health Commission of Canada | April 2010. https://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/sites/default/files/Workforce_Psychological_Safety_in_the_Workplace_ENG_0_1.pdf.