

# Introduction. Making work better

Transfer  
2023, Vol. 29(3) 277–284  
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DOI: 10.1177/10242589231206362  
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## Summary

From the premise that better work makes for better societies, the challenge, taken up in the introduction to this special issue of *Transfer: European Review of Labour and Research*, is to explore what makes work better, or worse, and how it can be improved. As a wide variety of experiments shape our economies and communities for the future, a key challenge is to engage in shared learning about these processes in order to stimulate a dialogue between the aspiration for better work and the conditions likely to hinder or facilitate making work better. It is an invitation to move from narrow conceptions of job quality to a broader lens of how world-of-work actors strategise, innovate and incorporate uncertainty into their search for sustainable solutions for better work. Key themes include: why work needs to be better (but is often worse); why better work makes for better societies; how work can be made better; the role of institutions in achieving better work; and, finally, how union strategies are essential to processes of experimentation to make work better.

## Keywords

Better work, better societies, job quality, experimentation, trade union strategies, institutions, actor agency, democracy

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Better work encompasses productive, innovative, healthy, inclusive and meaningful work, where individuals exercise some degree of control and autonomy over their working lives and are free from undue uncertainty and risks to their health and well-being. Better work also entails economic democracy and citizenship as part of a sustainable and solidaristic vision of prosperity for all citizens and future generations. Better work relates to both the conditions of the work experience and the employment status and labour rights that come with it. However, a very different picture emerges from the current era, in which neoliberal reforms, fissured workplaces, fragmented supply chains, financialisation, new digital technologies and global health pandemics often result in worse work and disjointed communities. While there is a clear aspiration for 'better work', many of the institutions that have sought to foster solidarity, equality and prosperity in the most developed economies seem unable to adequately respond to the individual and collective needs of workers.

As a wide variety of experiments shape our economies and communities for the future, a key challenge is to aggregate understanding of these processes and to engage world-of-work and policy actors in shared learning. The challenge, taken up in this issue, is to explore what makes work better, or worse, and how it can be improved. This thematic issue of *Transfer: European Review of Labour and Research* seeks to respond to this challenge by focusing on the constitutive dimensions of work, on whether and how workers choose between these different dimensions, and on how trade unions, organisations and firms, and other actors from civil society and public policy can contribute to better, and not worse, work.

We asked contributors to illuminate aspects of better and worse work in light of their research on different types of work, in different sectors, with varying positionalities, and in different national contexts. The seven articles in this issue explore better and worse work both as a concept and in different national contexts.

These contributions represent some of the ongoing results of an international and interdisciplinary collaborative research project: the CRIMT International Partnership Project on Institutional Experimentation for Better Work. Funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, this multi-year project (2017–2026) brings together a wide variety of Partner Centres and other affiliated researchers in more than a dozen countries in an ongoing dialogue about *the theoretical and practical challenges of experimentation for making work better*.

A previous issue of *Transfer* (Ferrerás et al., 2020; Murray et al., 2020) focused on the nature and processes of experimentation in the re-regulation of work, examining how, in the face of uncertainty related to major disruptions in the regulation of work, various actors engaged in experimentation with new sets of rules and norms and new repertoires. Although these processes clearly impacted work itself, this issue did not address what makes work better or worse, or workers' experiences with regard to different dimensions of work.

This special issue concerns better and worse work. Our objective is to stimulate a dialogue between the aspiration for better work and the conditions likely to hinder or facilitate making work better. It is an invitation for researchers to bring other cases into this comparative dialogue about a broader understanding of work in society and for a wide range of actors in the world of work to embrace this broad lens of better work in the way they strategise, innovate and incorporate uncertainty into their search for sustainable solutions for better work.

This introduction points to a few key insights that run through the contributions to this special issue: why work needs to be better (but is often worse); why better work makes for better societies; how work can be made better; the role of institutions in achieving better work; and, finally, in a context of significant disruption, how union strategies are essential to processes of experimentation to make work better.

## Why work needs to be better, but is often worse

Decades of neoliberal experimentation have undermined the fabric of the social models that once contributed to the cohesion and stability of work (Murray et al., 2020). This includes decreasing union density and collective bargaining coverage and weakening of rights that underpin the standard employment relationship. This has resulted in worse work.

In their contribution, Valeria Pulignano, Claudia Marà, Milena Franke and Karol Muszynski (2023) explore how business models for the digitally-mediated provision of domestic care services in Belgium and France perpetuate the invisibility and informality of this work. Despite these distinctive national regulatory contexts, they show how unpaid work is endemic and, even in formalised domestic care contexts, how these workers, for whom risk is largely individualised, must bear significant economic and social costs. In other words, this work is often gendered, unrecognised, undocumented, informal and often unpaid.

In a telling illustration of worse work, Maxime Bellego, Virginia Doellgast and Elisa Pannini (2023) recount how restructuring at France Télécom (FT/Orange) involved centralised control, a narrow Taylorist division of labour, and systematic pressure on employees to move or resign. In a case of bad work spilling beyond the confines of the workplace, this translated into a social crisis manifested in psychosocial turmoil and multiple employee suicides.

Olga Tregaskis and Alita Nandi (2023) explore how and when training makes a difference in the UK. They are particularly interested in crossing work-life boundaries, especially as regards how training in work and life skills affects both jobs and well-being. Not only do bad jobs constellate, but research suggests that youth moving into poor quality jobs experience lower life satisfaction and well-being than those in unemployment. In other words, and this puts a better work agenda at the forefront of our thinking about inclusion and exclusion, for many young people, a poor quality job is worse than no job at all.

Nikolaus Hammer (2023) further explores the trajectory of economic and social up- and downgrading in apparel value chains in Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean. The tragic consequences of worse work in these value chains have been the focus of much public attention and considerable civil society pressures. Despite ongoing efforts to improve working conditions through a combination of private market-based compliance, public employment standards enforcement, and human rights due diligence, this hybrid governance has proved incapable of fostering better work.

## From job quality to better work and better societies

In contrast to such examples of worse work, better work offers a pivot towards better societies. While research has focused on the quality of particular jobs, major contemporary disruptions underscore the importance of taking a broader approach to work, of understanding that jobs are embedded in lives and societies, and thinking about better work as opposed to the quality of particular jobs. Making work better becomes a key concern for making our societies better.

The contribution by Gregor Murray, Dalia Gesualdi-Fecteau, Christian Lévesque and Nicolas Roby (2023) advances this more holistic approach. In moving from better jobs to better work, they seek to identify specific aspects of work that connect to broader societal trends such as equality/inequality, well-being and life chances, and the opportunity to contribute to the democratic life of the community. The ambition of moving from job quality to better work – albeit aspirational in many respects – is an important step in advancing a broader vision of the centrality of work to the future of our democracies and highlighting the role of better work in creating better societies. Adopting a broader and more dynamic understanding of how to make worse work better, they identify three constitutive dimensions of work: (1) economic, health and social risks; (2) control or

autonomy, namely the capacity to exercise discretion and control over work itself and over the boundaries of this work in relation to other aspects of life outside of work; (3) and expressiveness, which refers to ‘voice’ or the capacity to express oneself individually and collectively, to build a career or life at work, and be able to realise one’s potential at work.

Gerhard Bosch (2023) outlines the huge challenge that the comprehensive structural change required for the decarbonisation of the economy poses to the world of work. Better work is at the heart of this transformation. If well-paid jobs are lost without workers having the skills needed for new green jobs, resulting in worse work (poor working conditions, precarious work), there is a real risk of intractable climate-denying political blockages preventing the implementation of climate change policies. Better work is an essential prerequisite for a better society and world. This entails ‘just transition’ strategies through a range of social innovations in labour market policies, notably training and upskilling, decent working conditions and social inclusion. Better, not worse, work is indissociable from the goal of greener societies and at the very heart of a just transition.

Better work is therefore at the apex of a series of wicked societal problems whose social externalities require the renewal of institutions and the support of individuals and their families and friends. For Tregaskis and Nandi (2023), the lens of training enables them to explore the fluidity of the boundaries between work and life opportunities, notably for disadvantaged groups already experiencing forms of exclusion. For Pulignano, Marà, Franke and Muszynski (2023), the scandal is one of extensive unpaid work through new forms of digital exploitation. For Bellego, Doellgast and Pannini (2023), the psychosocial risks associated with new forms of work organisation raise profound issues. For Murray, Gesualdi-Fecteau, Lévesque and Roby (2023), the issues are related to the meaning of work and democracy itself. For Bosch (2023), better work is no less than an essential condition for the survival of the planet.

## Making work better

The goal of productive, innovative, healthy, and inclusive work is the focus of all the contributions to this issue. There are variable and dynamic paths where worse can become better, but, as shown above, better too often can also become worse.

Bellego, Doellgast and Pannini (2023) offer an intriguing case of making work better. Following a deep crisis at France Télécom related to employee suicides and union campaigns to address psychosocial health in the workplace, the company moved to a more collaborative model involving greater autonomy, broadened skills, enhanced worker participation and a voice in decision-making. This was underpinned by a strengthening of labour’s countervailing power, which supported managers in prioritising psychosocial health as an important organisational goal.

Training is often identified as a key feature of better work. Although access to high quality training can help people to gain skills to access better work and jobs, according to Tregaskis and Nandi (2023), the integration of such training into current business models has proved ‘stubbornly elusive’. They explore how vocational and non-vocational training can provide a pathway to positive life changes and outcomes, especially for those who have to contend with other factors limiting their life chances (employment status, gender, ethnicity and migration status, age and deprivation of the region in which they reside). Drawing on the *Understanding Society* data initiative in the UK, they find that job-related training (including health and safety) offers a way to improve life satisfaction for structurally disadvantaged groups (living in deprived areas, low qualification levels, unemployed), even though men and the white majority still benefit most from job-related training, as better and worse work tends to constellate and training opportunities are more closely associated with better work.

As digital platforms grow exponentially, world-of-work actors engage in various forms of experimentation and move outside their traditional strategic repertoires to achieve better work. The contribution by Sarah Abdelnour, Émilien Julliard and Dominique Méda (2023) illustrates how, given the disruptive nature of work on digital platforms, labour inspectors have adapted their strategies to offset the passivity of the French state (itself imbued with the ideology of gig work to create jobs) and protect the social model of salaried work for these gig delivery workers. By staying at arms' length from the political shift in favour of digital platforms and despite the limited means at their disposal, French labour inspectors strived to ensure that platform workers were recognised as employees. By ensuring stronger rights and protections for these workers, labour inspectors can become both agents of resistance within state institutions and vectors of better work.

The framework proposed by Murray, Gesualdi-Fecteau, Lévesque and Roby (2023) emphasises the multi-faceted complexity of better and worse work and of how workers navigate between their different dimensions as befit their circumstances. This involves 'so-called' trade-offs – sometimes voluntary, often constrained and reflecting the structural asymmetries inherent in the employment relationship – to better fit their circumstances. There is no single configuration, but the constitutive dimensions of better and worse work need to be flushed out, and the complexity of the choices workers make in relation to the constraints they face moving between constellations of better and worse work must be better understood.

### *Institutions for better work*

Over the past decades, neoliberalism has undermined many of the conditions required to meet the challenge of the major structural changes currently underway.

This is the crux of the contribution by Bosch (2023) who argues that the erosion of an inclusive institutional framework undermines the capacity of the German economy to negotiate the green transition. He contrasts exclusive employment systems where transition costs are high with inclusive ones where these costs are much lower, thus facilitating structural change. In exclusive systems where universal labour market institutions are weakly developed, good pay is restricted to workers with strong bargaining power. Inclusive systems comprise active labour market policy to finance the required training and a high degree of collective bargaining coverage that reduces income disparities between companies and sectors and allows workers to change jobs. In other words, the increasing dualisation of employment and the corrosion of the social model underpinning employment is likely to be an important impediment to the digital and green transitions. The success of these transitions depends on the rebuilding of inclusive labour institutions, such as effective collective bargaining coverage, which are likely to facilitate structural change. The practical challenge is to reverse the long erosion of inclusive societal institutions in order to face the most pressing socio-economic disruptions.

As illustrated by Hammer (2023), certain industries present intractable problems for making work better. His exploration of European apparel value chains highlights the ineffectiveness of voluntary human rights due diligence and other 'soft-law' compliance and hybrid private governance mechanisms for making work better. As long as lead firms escape monitoring, state enforcement of working conditions is absent and the realisation of more robust worker-driven elements of supply chain governance lags, worse work is unlikely to become better.

The contribution by Pulignano, Marà, Franke and Muszynski (2023) explores how, despite a regulatory framework aimed at reducing informality, platform-mediated work in the care sector in Belgium and France imposes significant economic and social costs on workers performing the work. Notwithstanding distinctive regulatory national contexts, their study shows how the economic risk borne from unpaid labour is common for care workers as they do not have access to the

protections that limit the performance of unpaid labour. In both contexts, the lack of enforcement of existing regulations and union representation to advocate for better regulations and enforcement are major impediments for better work as unpaid labour is embedded in informal employment relations and individual workers must take on ever greater economic risk (working time and unpaid labour) and social risk (emotional labour to manage expectations, avoid scams and harassment). However, they also locate small institutional differences that matter, for example how platform care workers in Belgium are formally employed by agencies whereas French workers are employed by clients. In practice, this imposes much greater costs on care workers in France, where reputational pressure is compounded by informality, forcing workers to perform unpaid tasks to enhance their job searches and the continuity of their relations with clients.

The case documented by Abdelnour, Julliard and Méda (2023) illustrates how existing institutions can be repurposed to meet the challenges arising from the greater public policy emphasis on job creation than on the protection of workers. They explore how labour inspectors navigate contradictions, indeed pursue internal resistance within state institutions, to promote better work. Labour inspectors continue to view employee status as a primary means of improving work: their agencies support a better work strategy with the goal of protecting the employment-based social model and access to more robust rights and protections associated with that employment status. However, the economic objectives pursued by the state are more focused on ‘promoting job creation to the detriment of the quality of work’, where platform work is readily associated with degraded working conditions because these workers are assumed to be self-employed and not employees. Their contribution illustrates how the agents of the French labour inspectorate strive to ensure that platform workers are recognised as employees, a status that grants the strongest rights and protections. Beyond the intervention of the inspectorate, an institution whose very mission is to ensure that the legal protections put forward are effective, the authors illustrate how the individual agents of the labour inspectorate can become vectors of better work.

### *Crisis, experimentation, and union strategies*

The uncertainties arising from current transformations offer an opportunity for unions and other actors to move outside of traditional strategic repertoires and engage in experimentation to make work better. Faced with the long retreat of the state, a better work agenda points to the need to reorient union strategies.

The case of France Télécom explored by Bellego, Doellgast and Pannini (2023) illustrates how local actors were able to experiment with new forms of social dialogue to improve working conditions, notably through upskilling, autonomy and worker participation. This organisational experimentation, through which an “ephemeral response” to a crisis was successfully scaled up and institutionalised, at both company and national level’, was successful because managers and workers were empowered to experiment with new, more participatory approaches and joint decision-making on work organisation and skills, work-life balance and stress monitoring. They show how unions and other worker representatives can use forms of collective voice to address threats to their members’ health and well-being. This case highlights how unions can use experimental strategies to combat narrow models of work organisation and encourage investment in skills and discretion. A key caveat concerns the balance of power, to ensure that worker interests and collective voice are given sufficient weight in decision-making.

Bosch (2023) also points to the potential for unions to engage in experimentation to advance better work. He cites the German public policy and union initiative on future-oriented agreements for digital transformations. As documented by Bosch and Schmitz-Kießler (2020), companies, workers and their representatives mapped the risks and agreed on mutual areas of concern to be



addressed through future negotiations. These concerned working time, flexibility, data security, project management, leadership, health management and stress reduction, early involvement of works councils and information and participation of employees, as well as skill needs and vocational training. Such an experimental approach might be readily adapted to the requirements of climate change strategies and emulated by unions and public policy authorities in other national contexts.

Tregaskis and Nandi (2023) point to the importance of another form of actor-initiated experimentation. This involves the co-creation of training initiatives involving learners through community networks and social action groups to work on localised and contextual solutions to training needs. These initiatives often relate to social rather than economic objectives, thus linking with larger societal goals for better work. They cite the example of local food initiatives connecting with sustainable food production and poverty, as well as practical DIY (do-it-yourself) projects to counter poor health outcomes for men who often experience isolation after leaving the labour market. Experimenting with such learning communities offers an opportunity to transfer existing skills and learn new ones, develop social networks, shape expectations about the quality of work and life, and generate positive spillover effects across the work-life boundaries.

For Hammer (2023), despite the rich history of experimentation around hybrid governance for upgrading apparel value chains, the lack of effective remedies for worse work in this industry is linked to the weakness of worker-driven governance and the absence of effective public enforcement. The root cause of the situation is related to the weakness of collective action through civil society associations or trade unions. There is scope for experimentation centred on developing union and worker power resources and collective capabilities to provide new forms of leverage likely to improve working conditions.

The contributions to this special issue suggest that it is not simply a question of disembodied institutions but also of actor agency and experimentation to make work better. They point to the need to broaden union goals around better work. This entails addressing structural inequalities and asymmetries at work through organising and greater worker participation. To do so requires a compelling narrative that emphasises the centrality of better work for better societies. It also requires new resources and collective capabilities. Be it in terms of the erosion of social models, the effects of global health pandemics, digitalisation and artificial intelligence or the climate crisis, current transformations highlight the importance of such an agenda. For Bellego, Doellgast and Pannini (2023), the focus is on autonomy, discretion, training for psychosocial health at work and beyond. For Tregaskis and Nandi (2023), meeting important training needs requires greater input from unions and social action groups. For Abdelnour, Julliard and Méda (2023) and Bosch (2023), only a social model that guarantees robust rights can ease the way to the digital and green economy. For Hammer (2023), the underlying weakness of the variety of experimentations in apparel value chains is linked to the absence of strong state enforcement and the weakness of collective action through civil society associations and trade unions. Pulignano, Marà, Franke and Muszynski (2023) point to the importance of organising strategies for platform care workers and the role of legislative initiatives and collective bargaining in mutualising risk and addressing endemic forms of worse work in platform-mediated care work. Murray, Gesualdi-Fecteau, Lévesque and Roby (2023) highlight the need for a workers' agenda centred on the expressive dimension of work and the role of unions and voice mechanisms in better work as a key pathway to better societies.

## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the many researchers of the *CRIMT Partnership on Institutional Experimentation for Better Work* for their contributions to illuminating discussions around experimentation for better work and the *Transfer* Editors and Editorial Committee for their support of this special issue.

## Funding

The *CRIMT Partnership on Institutional Experimentation for Better Work* is supported by grants from the partnership program of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) and the Regroupements stratégiques program of the Fonds de recherche du Québec – Société et Culture (FRQ-SC) and contributions from participating partner centres and researchers.

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