



A vision for good work

Defining 'good work' in the words of young people

“Good work means feeling valued, fulfilled and supported. It means being respected and treated fairly in a workplace that is diverse and inclusive, where there is open and honest communication and decent pay. Everyone should have a voice. Good work is done to a high standard and gives you a sense of achievement. It happens in a place where you can make change happen. Good work protects your health and wellbeing. You’re excited to tell your friends and family about good work, not because they ask but because you’re proud of it.”

Good Work workshop attendees, aged 18-25, July 2024





Summary

On 15 July 2024, a group of eight young people, aged 18–25, came together at Westminster Kingsway College to share their experiences and ideas about what 'good work' means to them. Young people, especially those who from disadvantaged, marginalised and under-represented backgrounds are more likely to be in low-paid and unstable work than their peers. This workshop was the final stage of a project to create a definition of good work in the words of those most affected by unequal access to it.

These young people told us about how good work feels, what they expect from employers and what they want to be able to offer and achieve. Some had positive experiences of the world of work; others spoke of experiencing discrimination, poor management and a lack of support. They were all united in wanting to be supported and enabled to do great things for themselves and their employers.

The quotation above summarises their shared definition of 'good work'. Below, we provide more detail on their discussions, keeping as closely as possible to the language they used to describe their ideas and experiences.

The research process

Between March and May 2024, Workwhile interviewed 25 young people about their experiences of work and how they would define 'good work'. These findings were coded, analysed and summarised, and presented to our workshop attendees for discussion. Participants worked individually, in small groups and collectively to reflect on and discuss the findings from the research and to co-create a shared vision for good work in their own words.

Who did we talk with?

Participants came from diverse backgrounds and had varied experiences of working. They included those in and out of employment; people from low-income backgrounds; those whose genders are currently under-represented in their sector or industry; people from black, Asian or other minority ethnic backgrounds; and those who identify as disabled or neurodiverse.

Deliberations: What good work means

Key themes that emerged from both the interviews and workshop were around purpose, fulfilment, respect, fairness, reward, support, communication, community, and inclusivity.

Our participants talked about being excited, energised and "empowered" by good work: "good work builds you up". They talked about wanting to be successful in their job, and "needing a sense of accomplishment". They wanted to be "productive", "punctual" and work to a high standard. These young people wanted to have pride in their work and see how they were contributing to something bigger, whether a team, or wider cause. They wanted to have a "sense of purpose" and clear impact. This echoed what we heard from our interviews, as well:

"Good work is work that fulfils you and develops you and challenges you in a way that if somebody asks you, ok, "What did you do? What was the impact?" you'd be able to explain."

"Something that you're motivated about. I think that to me is really, really important."



"Understanding the bigger picture and where you fit in, I think it makes you feel a lot more motivated 'cause, you kinda see what you're doing, how it helps other people, how it helps, like the people you're working for."

'Good Work' Interviewees

Our participants wanted to be able to "change things and make a difference", and felt that they, and other young people, had a lot to offer.

One participant talked about wanting work to be so good that "you forget you're being paid". They didn't want to be "counting the days until pay day". For all, though, "good work means good money". The group wanted pay to be fair and reflect the contribution made: "getting paid properly for the work you do" and "feeling that your work is valued". For them, pay is about fairness and respect, as well as covering life's necessities. They wanted to see "meaningful rewards" for work done well. They did not want to be rewarded for presenteeism: "it's what you do that matters, not the hours you spend wasting time".

One workshop participant used the word "content" to describe the simplicity of work being a positive part of your life. Another shared their experience of how work can be unhealthy, to the point where you "dread" it and it makes you unwell: good work "doesn't make my health deteriorate". Participants talked about the need for work-life balance and being able to "take a day off".

They also wanted opportunities to develop in their role and career: a good job "gives me the chance to develop"; it's about "knowing what skills, goals and aims you have" and then having "a clear plan of how to get there".

Participants talked about the need for "supportive structures" and processes. One participant described how good work meant that "you are never unsure or lost". They wanted to have a clear understanding of how things work and what is expected of them. Part of this was "open communication", which was seen as one of the most essential parts of good work. One of our interviewees summarised a similar sentiment:

"Good work is when I...know what I need to do and how I need to do it...I have the ability to decide, but I [also] have the resources to support me to do it."

'Good Work', Interviewee

Our participants wanted to be able to ask for and get support, to be able to be "assertive", and to be able to "have a voice" and share ideas: "being able to be heard". They wanted clear communication between managers and staff, especially about things like pay and any changes that might affect them. We heard how they wanted management to listen to employees and engage with the new ideas they bring. They were clear that just because someone is younger or newer it does not mean that they necessarily have less to contribute.

"Respect" was flagged as a core part of creating an inclusive working environment. "Diversity" and "inclusivity" were incredibly important to these young people. They talked about the need for "respect on subjects even if you don't agree", and how "different people should all feel included". We heard negative experiences of this in relation to young people expressing their gender identity and sexuality. Some members of the group shared their own experiences of being discriminated against because of their race. One participant described a workplace where the team "made me feel I didn't belong" and talked of wanting to have "a work environment that is reflective of me". This echoed thoughts that were also shared through interviews:

"I think the respect comes from people not dismissing, like not being dismissed simply because of your age or your lack of experience. Because I've certainly been in situations where because you're the youngest person in the room or because you're the newest person in the room, your opinion is disregarded because of that."



"You want to feel comfortable enough to complete what you've gotta do, knowing you can walk around freely and speak to people as well."

'Good Work', Interviewees

In contrast, the positive interactions they had with others was a key part of a good working day. They wanted "a nice team", "strong relationships" and a "sense of community". They also wanted to "see people around [them] being good at their job, working smarter and taking responsibility" and "people willing to do things differently". This reflected what we heard from the interviews: "I think having a team that you're really comfortable around and having people around you that genuinely care is really important". One interviewee put it as being about "developing those communities".

Many of the young people we spoke with liked the flexibility of being able to work from home. Others talked about being energised by seeing colleagues in person and finding it "hard to resolve issues and learn fast when working entirely remotely". They liked to have the choice to do what was best for them, their personal and family lives, as well as for getting the job done well. They talked about having "autonomy", being able "to take responsibility for your work and have control".

What next: Implications for employers

We are in no doubt that good work matters deeply for young people at the start of their working lives. Whatever their circumstances, whatever their pathway into employment, good quality work supports young people to thrive at this crucial transition point.

This new definition, created by a diverse group of young people, helps us to understand the factors that are most important in creating good work.

Most of all, it's a message we hope is an empowering one, for businesses of all sizes.

For while decent pay is, of course, important, it's one factor amongst many. The majority of the other things young people want from work – respect, a voice, diversity and inclusion, to have their health and wellbeing supported – don't depend on the big budgets and scale of resources available only to large businesses. They are dependent on leadership and culture – very human factors that are available to businesses of all sizes.

With that in mind, we'd urge business leaders and managers to make a culture of good work, built around this definition, their priority. Focus especially on those who are line managing young people: are they trained and equipped to motivate, engage, coach and mentor young people, and to create respectful and inclusive cultures in their teams? Are you giving them the time to do this effectively? Is this the culture that's modelled by the most senior people in the organisation?

We hope the definition also gives policy makers food for thought, moving from raising the floor of minimum employment standards to supporting an aspirational vision for good work.

Our young people also told us – unprompted – about the rewards for employers and the economy of getting this right. Good work was synonymous with the ability to deliver quality. They were passionate about wanting to be able to achieve great results for their employers and to make a positive impact in the world – to have their productivity unleashed. And what employer wouldn't want their youngest colleagues to tell all their friends and family about their work because they're proud of it?



About Workwhile

Workwhile is a not-for-profit initiative with a mission to create a more equitable world of work. We work with employers to create more good work and to ensure that everyone can access it. We have grown from the successful London Progression Collaboration pilot project, and are currently incubated and hosted by IPPR (the Institute for Public Policy Research).

About the authors

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