

**BULLSHIT JOBS:
A THEORY**
by David Graeber

Summary & Worksheet

The Book In Three Or More Sentences:

You spend a decade performing tasks you secretly believe are worthless? You're not alone. In this book, David Graeber argues that instead of reducing the working hours, so we can spend more time doing what we love, we have collectively chosen to have access to more shiny but insignificant things. *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory* includes a series of interviews of people who openly share how their jobs feel - and actually are - meaningless which leads to dissatisfaction and purposelessness.

The Core Idea:

If the tasks you're executing serves no purpose to the world - and you know it - you'll have a hard time rationalizing your daily actions. Sadly, the world is full of such occupations. Eventually, people enter a paradoxical situation: they realize at some point that their job is pointless and that it doesn't add any real value to the world. Yet, they can't retreat and pursue a meaningful goal because worthy jobs are underpaid.

Highlights:

- *If the work you do doesn't feel meaningful and it's not contributing to the greater good you'll feel worthless.*
- *The desire to make a change and to be the cause of something is encoded in our genes.*
- *Often the valuable work that's not sexy, but actually helpful, is left unnoticed by the public.*

5 Key Lessons from Bullshit Jobs:

- *Lesson #1: If Removed Position is Unnoticed by Others Then It Surely Was Bullshit*
- *Lesson #2: There are Five Major Varieties of Bullshit Jobs*
- *Lesson #3: Working a Bullshit Job Can Trash Your Confidence and Lead to Misery*
- *Lesson #4: We Have Inherent Desire to Be The Cause of Something*
- *Lesson #5: Society Pays Nickels For Work That Is Actually Valuable To Others*

Lesson #1: If Removed Position is Unnoticed by Others Then It Surely Was Bullshit

What is a bullshit job?

While in most of the cases when you're doing something for long enough it surely starts to feel like bullshit, the point the author is trying to make is a bit more complex.

The definition of a bullshit job mentioned in the book is the following:

“A bullshit job is a form of paid employment that is so completely pointless, unnecessary, or pernicious that even the employee cannot justify its existence even though, as part of the conditions of employment, the employee feels obliged to pretend that this is not the case.” David Graeber

This conclusion is based on the endless letters David Graeber received after first publishing an article about BS jobs.

The author was asked to write something provocative which eventually turned into a sensation – and this book.

His essay published in the radical magazine Strike! in 2013 was based on a hunch. But after being bombarded by letters from readers his suspicion turned out to be quite real.

The lack of a clear ending. The absence of purpose and completeness instills a sense of degeneration in the person executing this task and a sense of wanting to “hang himself”. His job is so painfully pointless that he can't justify his actions even when they are rewarded with money.

This is what qualifies as a bullshit job. Contrary to any logic of modern economics, the world is now full of such occupations.

Lesson #2: There are Five Major Varieties of Bullshit Job

You're not sure if the work you do categorizes as worthless?

Probably the sorting outlined by the author will help you.

The following types are the major varieties of bullshit jobs based on the research of David – mainly by sorting testimonies send from readers from all over the world.

Here they are in short:

- **Flunkies:** Jobs that exist to make someone else look important. Imagine a doorman. Surely people can press the bloody button in the elevator. But when someone else does it for you, you feel beyond cool. And if you think that this is not a common occupation, think about jobs like a receptionist or a secretary. In most of the cases, the person sitting behind the desk is there only to increase the importance of the other person (the boss) working next door.
- **Goons:** Not gangsters or martial artists. Here the occupation “goon” refers to work that has a negative impact on the world. Think about the army. Countries need armed forces because other countries have armies. Another example is PR specialists. Their main job is to convince other people that certain services are good – mainly by deceiving them.
- **Duct tapers:** Basically cleaning up after someone else – proofreading, fixing code, cleaning, doing tasks that can be automated but no one bothers to automate. Duct tapers fix things done by others because the person created the thing often doesn't have time to do it perfectly. Or, when the person lacks skills but is considered an “asset” for the company – imagine long term employees or the boss.
- **Box tickers:** This work is exactly what the name suggests – clicking boxes and adding data to sheets. Again, a large part of the work can be either automated or completely removed. Imagine an office clerk whose sole job is to move paper from one pile to another. Box ticker jobs exist mainly because governments somehow still adore bureaucracy and paper applications.
- **Taskmasters:** This occupation is divided into two subcategories: 1) Primarily supervisors assigning work to others. This is bullshit be-

cause the work itself can mostly be distributed without the need of this person. 2) Taskmasters create meaningless tasks for others so they can later supervise the progress of meaningless tasks. So not only their work is worthless, but they create false work for even more people. Imagine a middle manager in a corporate firm.

Lesson #3: Working a Bullshit Job Can Trash Your Confidence and Lead to Misery

We spend a third of our lives working. But what if the work we do doesn't add any real value to the world and we can't rationalize our daily tasks?

The people interviewed in the book report that it feels demoralizing and depressing.

The work we do many times has a life of its own. Life, different from our family and friend's circle. Tragically, when this life is lacking purpose agonizing feelings start to consume our mind.

Based on the stories mentioned in the book, here are the main things people report when they consider their job worthless:

- Anxiety: You fear that other people will realize – any moment now – that what you're doing doesn't make sense – or that you're not doing anything at all.
- Undermined confidence: Your confidence is shattered because you're not accomplishing anything. The lack of challenging tasks might feel good at first but at some point the convenience becomes unbearable.
- Eroding pride: By nature, we want our actions to matter. If we're not doing anything useful, and if we're rational thinkers, we'll begin to fear that other people in the office will think that we're choosing this way of living. That we're intentionally slacking off.
- Worry of doing harm: Some jobs are simply useless. Others are not only soul-destroying, but they are also insidious. They require the person to convince others to buy products they, themselves, know for the fact that they can actually cause harm or lead to some sort of addiction.

We get most of the meaning in life from the work we do – but what if the work is complete bullshit? What if we're paid to do nothing? What if we're pretending to work?

We start to doubt our own value as citizens of the world. Eventually, life

becomes a misery.

We either quit or we convince ourselves (somehow) that there's no other way we can feed our family.

“You might ask what kind of economic system creates a world where the only way to feed one’s children is to spend most of one’s waking hours engaged in useless box-ticking exercises or solving problems that shouldn’t exist.” David Graeber

Lesson #4: We Have Inherent Desire to Be The Cause of Something

Comments like these are quite common in the book: “I have never been paid so much to do so little.”

You're paid to do nothing? Why don't you just shut up and enjoy your life?

Apparently we can't.

Karl Gross, a German psychologist mentioned in the book discovered that we have an inherent desire to be the cause of something. He calls it, “the pleasure at being the cause.”

While observing infants, he discovered that they express utter joy when they figure out that they can cause predictable effects in the world. Yes, they'll most probably throw something or smash something on the floor – that doesn't matter. What matters is the realization that “they can do stuff.” That they can cause something to happen.

This inner motive is something that is inherited. It's what guides us throughout our whole life. It explains why people seek power, why we want to have kids, why we want to win battles and conquer more land.

This also explains why we despise work that doesn't have any real meaning.

When our actions don't matter in the work we do, they erode our feeling of existence. The thing we want to feel above all.

“Children come to understand that they exist, that they are discrete entities separate from the world around them, largely by coming to understand that “they” are the thing which just

caused something to happen – the proof of which is the fact that they can make it happen again.” David Graeber

Lesson #5: Society Pays Nickels For Work That Is Actually Valuable To Others

We’re facing the following dilemma: Work a corporate job that is worthless and probably hurting others but high-paid. Or, quit, become a schoolteacher so you can teach kids valuable things but struggle to care for your own family.

What can you do?

You’ll most probably choose to dress in a hoody (or a fancy suit) and pretend that the work you do is somehow contributing to the greater good of humanity. It will be a tough act and you’ll most probably need to visit a therapist but someone needs to provide for the family, right?

Sadly, this is what happens nowadays.

Silicon Valley firms are booming and everyone is willing to sell their soul in order to have the ability to work in a fancy office. Yes, you will be designing apps and games that are undermining other people’s attention but the other choice is not going to help you live the “good life.”

Meanwhile, if all of a sudden bus drivers, garbage collectors, and schoolteachers disappear we’ll all struggle to find someone to take care of our kids. Plus, live in a really nasty smelly world.

And it’s not only that.

Our society believes that if the work you do is valuable, if your creation is helping people – imagine an open-source software – you should offer it for free. It will be wrong to ask for money. Or to put it differently, you should work a meaningless job while making sure that the useful tool you’re creating is free for others.

This is the mentality our society (sadly) believes is right.

“Given that people choose to work on core technologies for free, no company is investing in those technologies. The underinvestment means that the core technologies are often unfinished, lacking quality, have a lot of rough edges, bugs, etc. That, in turn, creates need for duct tape and thus proliferation

Actionable Notes:

- Develop time discipline: In the nineteenth century, poor people were poor because they lacked time discipline. They spent their time doing unimportant things – wasting it. Things are not so different nowadays. Even if you’re caged in a soul-crushing job, you can still make use of your time. What merchants did in the past was to place a human skull on their desks. This served as a reminder that they should make good use of their time because each moment passing by gets them closer to death.
- You either rationalize the situation or you quit: As observed, there are a lot of meaningless jobs in the world. This was true in the past and it’s true today. Actually, according to the findings in the book, nowadays “40 percent of jobs are completely pointless, and at least 50 percent of the work done in nonpointless office jobs is equally pointless.” So, what to do? You either quit or you convince yourself that your job is somehow meaningful. If you can’t do the latter even if you try, you can just stay because you want to provide a good life for your family.
- Learn new things while performing your bullshit job: If your jobs classify as a BS you can do three things: Feel incredibly dull; Quit and find something else to do; Use the time to learn something new. The third option is quite useful. The book is full of stories where people shared how they learned new languages, started businesses even, while in the office. Of course, if you plan to do that you should be prepared for the possible consequences – being fired.
- Start a side project: You don’t want to take advantage of the free time in the office to learn something new? Start a side project that is in line with what you consider meaningful in the world. If you can’t quit, and if you don’t think that it’s fair to use the time in the office to start your own business, start a side project. Write. Organize events. Teach youngsters valuable skills during the weekend. This side gig can save your life, and sanity, while ticking boxes.
- Prepared for the pointlessness of the modern workplace: You just graduated and you’re ready to save the world from self-destruction? Hold your horses. The amount of bureaucracy that’s involved in every decision in an organization and the endless meetings can be soul-destroying. If you want to make a change in the world you should not only learn patience, you should school yourself in human behavior. Realize that people don’t like changes – that’s why everything is protected with layers of paperwork.

Commentary and My Personal Takeaway

Bullshit jobs exist and will continue to thrive because we value the wrong things. We're species obsessed with gaining more shiny objects and showing off in front of others.

The majority of the products that are available for purchase are useless or simply another version of something already existing. But that's what people want – variety. We want novelty. We want attention. At least that's what we think we want.

In all of the interviews shared in the book, a common theme appears from the depressed people doing a worthless job: "I contribute nothing to the world!"

Beneath our desire for attention and a fancy title is hidden our desire for purpose. For doing something that matters in the world and actually feeling that this thing you're doing is somehow helping humanity.

Key takeaway:

You have two options. Option A: You can get a sexy high-paid job in an office and spend your whole life doing utterly meaningless tasks. Option B: You can engage in no so extravagant job that comes with a significantly lower paycheck but fills your body and soul with purpose.

While the first option is the common path, the second option is the one that has the potential to make you not only widely successful but also incredibly satisfied with what you're doing.

Notable Quotes:

"There were plenty of surveys over whether people were happy at work. There were none, as far as I knew, about whether or not they felt their jobs had any good reason to exist." David Graeber

"Jobs that should be wonderful, since they pay you lots of money to do little or nothing and often don't even insist you pretend to work, somehow drive people crazy anyway because they can't figure out a way to channel the time and energy into anything else." David Graeber

"In the end, you can see people doing the nongratifying duct-tap-

ing work during office hours and then doing gratifying work on core technologies during the night.” David Graeber

What to read next:

- Actionable [Book Summary: The Path to Purpose](#) by William Damon
- Actionable [Book Summary: Barking Up the Wrong Tree](#) by Eric Barker
- Actionable [Book Summary: How to Fail at Almost Everything and Still Win Big](#) by Scott Adams

INTERACTIVE SHEET FOR NOTE-TAKING

Reading alone won't help you understand the actionable notes. You need to engage with the content. Answer the question below (just type inside the boxes) to outline your future steps:

1. Will there be a difference in the world if your job is eliminated tomorrow?
2. How can you best make use of your time if you're involved in a BS job?
3. If the work you do shouldn't exist, what meaningful side project can you start?
4. List the best things about your BS job if you're stuck and you can't quit:
5. What you value most? How can you make this your primary source of income:

Don't forget to save your changes.