



Refusing busyness

Stephen Dunne and Michael Pedersen

There are easier places to work, but nobody ever changed the world on 40 hours a week. But if you love what you do, it (mostly) doesn't feel like work.

Elon Musk, November 26th, 2018¹

On the 9th of January 2017, Micha Kaufman – the CEO and co-founder of the online gig-economy facilitator Fiverr – announced their 'In Doers We Trust' campaign. Brash in tone and boastful almost beyond belief, Kaufman's (2017) auto-eulogy held forth on the virtues of 'the age of the lean-entrepreneur' which his organisation both enables and celebrates. Fiverr matches your capacities to a buyer by translating human endeavours into tangible commodities and Kaufman's blog post is both a manifesto and an audit. The headline's polemical 'from an ideal to a movement' (*ibid.*) becomes a quantification of what their doers have done:

In the nearly seven years since Fiverr was launched, we've built something special: A community of millions spread across 190 countries, posting over 10 million Gigs, and buying over 30 million services. (*ibid.*)

¹ <https://twitter.com/elonmusk/status/1067173497909141504>

Next, he clumsily mentions Fiverr's 'countless' beneficiaries. After this comes the tautological 'doers are at their best when they're doing', the world-alienated 'cities you call home' and the closing promise, from which thoughts of laxatives and nursing homes can hardly stray: 'Wake up every day to get shit done. We'll help you do it.' (*ibid.*). Kaufman's is not a well-written text. But we should resist the temptation to dismiss it as bullshit (see Frankfurt, 2005; Graeber, 2019; Spicer, 2017) and instead entertain the possibility that such talk matters. Not for what it literally says – because see above – but for what it shows us about how busyness is now experienced and embraced. Throughout their campaign copy 'dreamers' are ordered to 'step aside', 'ideas' are said to be merely 'cute' and, as their most controversial poster affirms:

YOU EAT A COFFEE FOR LUNCH. YOU FOLLOW THROUGH ON YOUR FOLLOW THROUGH. SLEEP DEPRIVATION IS YOUR DRUG OF CHOICE. YOU MIGHT BE A DOER.

The perverse appeal of such rhetoric consists in its obviously bleak but seemingly honest diagnosis of modern existence. Understand yourself as a competitive economic agent, as a possessor of human capital and as a vehicle of the entrepreneurial spirit, or else! According to Jia Tolentino (2017), it exemplifies

the American obsession with self-reliance, which makes it more acceptable to applaud an individual for working himself to death than to argue that an individual working himself to death is evidence of a flawed economic system.

Fiverr's celebration of individual autonomy is a commodification of the precarious doer's lack of options. They are not suggesting new ways of thinking and being to their audiences. They are instead normalising that audience's own overworking of itself (see also Bloom, 2013; Cederström and Grassman, 2008). In this, they offer both a *window* onto the realities of lean entrepreneurship and a *mirror* for those busying themselves within that world. So we see here a structural imposition masquerading as an individual disposition. Doers, for their part, find their experiences mirrored by Fiverr's discourse not because they want to but because they have to. Instead of castigating Doers as dupes, we should instead recognise them as desperate.

And yet, if it troubles you to contemplate numerous 'Doers' working themselves onto illness and/or death, all you need to do is recognise their own

choices as their own faults and, as such, as their own problems. Sympathising, you may well wish they would make better decisions – you might even seek to persuade them accordingly – but we should neither physically coerce nor legally oblige them into doing so. Such is the libertarian’s tough love. Such is the state of solidarity in the age of lean entrepreneurship.

It isn’t only precarious labour that now finds itself eating a coffee for lunch (Haider, 2018; Muhr et al., 2012; Read, 2014), of course. One of the upshots of the 500 interviews Laura Empson (2017) conducted for *Leading professionals* is that if you want to succeed as a professional of any kind, you will need to work. A lot. Empson’s study neither celebrates nor condemns busyness. Hers is rather an empirical investigation into the culture of overwork’s historical development and social-psychological reinforcement (see also Hochschild, 1997; Schor, 1991; Weeks, 2011). Empson (2018: 4) writes:

Paradoxically, the professionals I studied still believe that they have autonomy and that they are overworking by choice. They do not blame their organizations, which after all have invested in work-life balance initiatives and wellness programs. Instead, they blame themselves for being inadequate (...). If they suffer burnout, they think it is their fault. Their organization and its leadership are absolved of responsibility, so nothing fundamental changes.

The bosses were not commanding Empson’s respondents to work 70-hour plus weeks. They were rather obliging themselves to graft so hard. But why? They know very well that they do not have to work so much. They also know that doing so is detrimental to their own health, and to their domestic responsibilities (Bittman, 2004; Darrah, 2007; Gershuny, 2005). And yet they do it anyway, even coming to believe that this lamentable condition is nobody’s fault but their own. A few weeks after *Harvard Business Review* published Empson’s piece Jack Ma, the founder of the Alibaba Group, announced that he expected ‘996’ levels of commitment from his employees (Paul, 2019). A few months after that, the Cambridge classicist Mary Beard tweeted:

Can I ask academics of any level of seniority how many hours a week they reckon they work. My current estimate is over 100. I am a mug. But what is the norm in real life?²

Ma speaks from the position of a be-like-me billionaire while Beard's lament is that of a worriedly self-mugging don. Despite such differences the message throughout is clear: if you want to succeed as a professional, as a professor, or as a whatever-Jack-Ma-is, you must expect super-normal efforts from yourself. According to Bellezza et al. (2017), we should understand such conspicuous displays of busyness as knowing signals, as performative displays, as public humblebrags. Being seen to work excessive hours, they argue, today amounts to a status symbol, a tactical manoeuvre, an instance of self-promotion. Whereas Thorstein Veblen (2009) demonstrated the strong historical association that has existed between the occupation with leisure and the cultivation of virtue, these authors suggest that, today, busyness has become honorific. This might explain why people *say* they work excessive hours but it leaves us wondering why they actually *do* so.

The explanation provided by Lashewicz et al. (2020) is much less theatrical. For them, professional over-exertion emerges within a vicious circle throughout which we take cues from our peers about how busy we should be. These observations create feelings of guilt and anxiety whenever our own behaviours do not match them and, particularly in the case of men, these feelings of guilt and anxiety become compounded by a reluctance to share feelings of inadequacy and vulnerability. Again, nothing changes: the 996-ers prioritise their callings, the professionals take their cues from one another and the professors blame themselves.

Whereas lean entrepreneurship seduces the precarious worker into the process of its own destruction, the asceticism of professional over-exertion involves a heightened degree of agency. The Doer, that is to say, is largely a product of working conditions that they have not chosen while the overworked professional is, at least partially, a product of its own volition. Neither position is particularly enviable but the predicament of the latter is clearly preferable. For in it resides the possibility of refusing the ongoing

² <https://twitter.com/wmarybeard/status/1198351088832962560>

imposition of busyness, if only we were willing to get out of our own ways. Experiments in systematic work reduction such as the Four Day Work Week (e.g., Abildgaard, 2020; Barnes, 2020; Coote et al., 2020; Gomes, 2021; Grosse, 2018) might be seen as collective instances of such refusal. But even these, as Clare Holdsworth (2021: 155) recognises, ‘will not work for everyone (and those for whom it does work are likely to be in more secure employment situations)’. The refusal of busyness, it seems, is both a possibility which the professional worker will not pursue and a luxury which the precarious worker cannot afford.

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