

Working to Labour:

self-branding in an uncertain economy



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Autonomy



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Introduction

Self-branding as a concept

Most attention to self-branding has focussed on the theoretical implications of the term. Some have emphasised that having a brand relies on first modelling the worker as a firm.¹ Others have focussed on worker responses to self-branding discourse and the ways that such responses offer insight into the worker's relation to labour market uncertainty.² However, little attention has so far been paid to the discourse itself. This report analyses the discourse as it appears in personal-brand management and self-help texts, as well as recent online advice offered in articles featuring in *The Guardian* and the *Huffington Post*.

Earlier self-brand literature tended to imagine its reader as performing white collar work. And while white-collar workers are still the most obvious target of self-brand literature, more recent texts also focus on a less specific, more general 'worker'; self-branding is an ever-more widespread feature of contemporary work culture. In essence, the literature tells us that any kind of worker can and should have a self-brand. Yet, despite the term's ubiquity, there is still little consensus over its meaning. This report suggests that self-branding is a new word for an old phenomenon: employability.

Historically, the concept of employability surfaces during periods of high unemployment, first emerging at the beginning of the twentieth century to differentiate between those who were willing and able to work and those who were

¹ See Gershon, I. (2017). Down and Out in the New Economy.

² See Christin, A., & Vallas, S. (2017) 'Work and Identity in an Era of Precarious Employment: How Workers Respond to Personal Branding Discourse'.

³ See Gazier, B. (1998a) Observations and recommendations, in: B. Gazier (Ed.) Employability – Concepts and Policies. Also see Gazier, B. (1998b) Employability – definitions and trends, in: B. Gazier (Ed.) Employability: Concepts and Policies. Also see Gazier, B. (2001) Employability: the complexity of a policy notion, in: P. Weinert, M. Baulkens, P. Bollerto et al. (Eds.) Employability: From theory to practise.

not.³ This ‘dichotomic’ model of employability largely faded from public discourse and policy making due to its overly simplistic and binary definition of the labour market, but traces of its rationale are still present in the recent turn to ‘initiative employability’.⁴ This version of the concept arrives in the 1980s, with companies and governments claiming to no longer be able to provide secure, life-long jobs, instead focussing policy initiatives on improving the worker’s skills and training to make them more adaptable for a newly flexible labour market. Alongside this largely corporate initiative, governments such as the Labour Party of the early 2000s introduced employability at the level of employment policy. This included making the receiving of jobseeker’s allowance dependent on attending employability workshops.

Beyond policy, employability also names the kind of hidden ‘shadow work’ that goes on every day in the economy.⁵ This might include the ‘work-for-labour’ one does when working on a CV, updating a LinkedIn profile or networking outside of office hours.⁶ This report suggests that self-branding involves a pervasive culture of ‘work-for-labour’, whereby one’s free time is infringed upon by work carried out beyond the workplace.

Self-branding and trends in the labour market

As the concept ‘work-for-labour’ suggests, employability places the burden of responsibility for finding work on the worker. On the one hand, self-branding - and employability more generally - can be seen as a cultural response to a number of changes making the labour market increasingly uncertain - changes that taken together might be regarded as a ‘crisis of work’. On the other hand, making the worker ever-more responsible for finding gainful employment is out-of-step with these very transformations, which make finding work an increasingly challenging activity. These ongoing processes include:

⁴ See Lindsay, C & McQuaid, R (2005) ‘The Concept of Employability’.

⁵ Illich, I. (1980). Shadow Work.

⁶ Standing, (2011). The Precariat: the new dangerous class.

1. Automation

The transfer of tasks to machines from workers is an ongoing feature of industrial societies, but recent developments in machine learning and other forms of AI are making possible an unprecedented transfer of work away from the worker. In this regard, predictions around the potential and actuality of labour-saving technology vary dramatically. Even on the more modest predictions however, a significant amount of jobs across OECD countries are expected to be heavily transformed, restructured or replaced in some capacity (see Figure 1).⁷

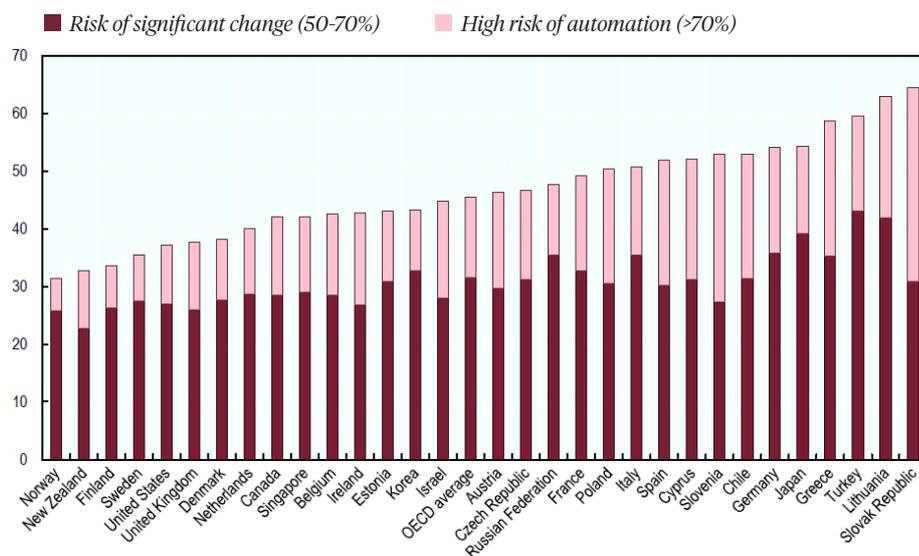


Figure 1: Cross-country variation in job automatability, % of jobs at risk by degree of risk.
Source: OECD 2018

⁷ Frey C and Osborne M (2013) 'The future of employment: how susceptible are jobs to computerisation'. Available at: http://www.oxfordmartin.ox.ac.uk/downloads/academic/The_Future_of_Employment.pdf.

See also PwC (2018) *Will robots really steal our jobs? An international analysis of the potential long term impact of automation*, PwC: London. Available here: <https://www.pwc.co.uk/economic-services/assets/international-impact-of-automation-feb-2018.pdf>.

See also OECD (2018) 'Automation, skills use and training'. Available at: <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/2e2f4eea-enpdf?expires=1532003387&iid=id&accname=guest&checksum=EA29137A856DE3A0966D0C62E9504D67>

2. Job polarization

For commentators such as David Autor, the most pertinent result of the next wave of automation is a further ‘hollowing out’ or polarization of the job market – with ‘white-collar’, mid-level jobs set to gradually disappear.⁸ Jobs in the middle of the income bracket tend to be routine and are, therefore, more likely to be automated (see Figure 2).⁹ Alongside this, the trend toward the creation of jobs that are either cheaper when involving human labour or are simply too sophisticated to be automated will only advance.¹⁰ What some authors describe as ‘lousy jobs’ - low-skill, low-income and low security - still tend to be cheaper when fulfilled by human labour than technology – and therefore do not require automation from a cost-cutting perspective. These ‘lousy jobs’ will likely flourish alongside those ‘lovely jobs’ that are still too sophisticated to be automated away.¹¹

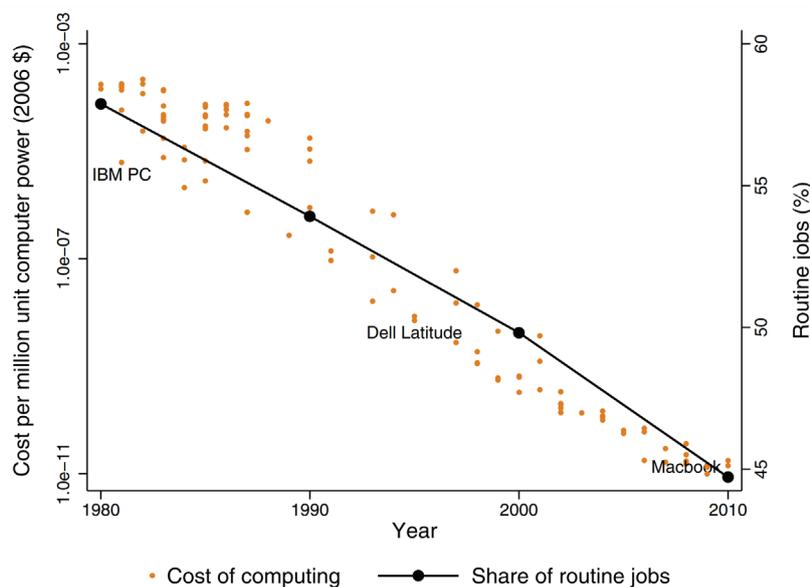


Figure 2: Computers and the decline of routine jobs in the United States, 1980–2010
Source: Frey, Berger & Chen (2018)

Notes: This figure shows the rapid decline in computing costs for a variety of models launched between 1980 and 2010 based on (updated) data from Nordhaus (2007) and assimilated by Frey, Berger & Chen. It also plots the declining share of US employment in routine jobs over the same period based on calculations from public use census data for 1980–2010 obtained through the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS) (Ruggles et al., 2017) and the definition of routine jobs in Jaimovich and Siu (2012).

⁸ Autor, David B., (2015) ‘Why Are There Still So Many Jobs? The History and Future of Workplace Automation’.

⁹ Goos, M. and Manning, M., (2007) ‘Lousy and Lovely Jobs: The Rising Polarization of Work in Britain’.

¹⁰ Autor, David B., (2015).

¹¹ Goos, M. and Manning, M., (2007).

3. *The rise of precarious work*

Precarious work is becoming an ever-more present feature of the UK job market. A precarious job might involve an undefined number of hours of work per week (such as a zero-hours contract position) or a short-term contract (less than six months). Precarious work is on the rise: in the year 2000 only 225,000 workers were on 'zero-hours' contracts; by 2017, nearly a million workers were on this type of contract, which can often preclude regular wages and stable income.¹²

Such contracts are insecure not only in terms of income but also in terms of time. A report by the Living Wage Foundation found that there are '1.3 million people who have regular wages but experience unpredictable working hours, making planning around other commitments and meeting costs more difficult'.¹³

Recent research from the University of Hertfordshire and the TUC has found that the number of people working for online labour platforms at least once a week has more than doubled between 2016 and 2019 (from 4.7% of the adult population to 9.6%). For the large majority of people this is to top up their incomes from other jobs (TUC, 2019).¹⁴

As these processes continue to make the labour market ever-more uncertain, self-branding is likely to become ever-more pervasive, at least in part because automation and polarization are likely to have the greatest effect on the jobs of white-collar workers – the demographic most obviously targeted by self-brand discourse. Moreover, short-term and casual work entails many changes in one's job or role – uncertainties that self-branding claims to turn into 'opportunities' for the worker (an aspect of self-brand management literature that I deal with in the next section, 'Uncertainty as an opportunity').

¹² ONS (2018) 'Contracts that do not guarantee a minimum number of hours: April 2018'. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/articles/contractsthatdonotguaranteeaminimumnumberofhours/april2018>

¹³ Living Wage Foundation (2018) 'Living Hours: Providing security of hours alongside a real living wage'. Available at: <https://www.livingwage.org.uk/sites/default/files/Living%20Hours%20Final%20Report%20110619.pdf>

¹⁴ TUC (2019) 'Platform Work in the UK 2016-2019'. Available at: <https://www.feps-europe.eu/attachments/publications/platform%20work%20in%20the%20uk%202016-2019%20v3-converted.pdf>

Outline of the report

In the broadest sense, the analysis of this report allows us to see the various ways that contemporary management scholarship advises the worker that the most effective way to maximize their employability is to treat themselves as a brand.

The report utilizes Boltanski and Chiapello's methodological claim that because such literature instructs managers on how to run firms and organise workers it has a significant effect on the orientation of contemporary work.¹⁵ The report extends this methodology to a sample of 17 personal brand self-help and management texts to consider the ways in which such literature instructs the worker on how to manage themselves.

More specifically, the literature demonstrates the various ways in which employability has become central to contemporary forms of self-management. The report suggests that we need to move beyond standard understandings of employability as a target of government policy to instead regard it as a culture that brings work into all areas of our lives. When we think about employability we tend to imagine:

1. The qualities, skills, training and experiences that allow a worker to gain and maintain employment and the common ways we communicate these qualities - a CV or a profile on LinkedIn.
2. Government work schemes such as 'Back to Work' and 'The Work Programme'.

¹⁵ Boltanski, L & Chiapello, E (1999), *The New Spirit of Capitalism*.

Beyond this limited sense of the term, the report finds three broad trends relating to employability across personal brand management and self-help literature:

1. The notion of self-branding shifts the onus of responsibility to find work onto individuals by regarding insecure working conditions as an 'opportunity' to harness the potential of a competitive labour market.
2. To stand out in this market requires that the worker construct a unique and consistent employability proposition - their 'promise'.
3. The maintenance of this promise entails an ever-more thorough extension of work into leisure.

① Uncertainty as Opportunity

In the previous section, the report outlined a number of uncertainties endemic to the current labour market that might best be regarded as a ‘crisis of work’. Across personal brand management and self-help literature there is a general consensus that these growing insecurities and uncertainties are not only inevitable, but should be regarded as opportunities for the worker.

We find three key features of flexible labour markets that the literature identifies as opportunities for the worker:

1. The loss of a stable worker role
2. Temporary employment contracts
3. Regular and ongoing unemployment

Loss of stable role

The sense that a new flexible regime of labour is inevitable and, therefore, must simply be accepted by the worker is found in the first publication to use the term ‘personal brand’ - Tom Peters’ (1997) article for Fast Company, ‘The Brand Called You’:

Start right now: as of this moment you’re going to think of yourself differently! You’re not an “employee” of General Motors, you’re not a “staffer” at General Mills, you’re not a “worker” at General Electric or a “human resource” at General Dynamics (oops, it’s gone!). Forget the Generals! You don’t “belong to” any company for life, and your chief affiliation isn’t to any particular “function.” You’re not defined by your job title and you’re not confined by your job description. Starting today you are a brand.¹⁶

¹⁶Peters, T. (1997) ‘The Brand Called You’.

Because of this, Peters goes on to tell the reader, ‘the main chance is becoming a free agent in an economy of free agents’. The demise of a stable workplace, secure role and long-term employment is a ‘chance’ to become a ‘free agent’. Peters emphasises the potential gains for workers while overlooking the associated instabilities and uncertainties faced by the worker in a flexible labour market.

Temporary Employment Contracts

The tendency to celebrate insecurity is also found in Dan Schawbel’s (2009) *Me 2.0: Build a Powerful Brand to Achieve Career Success*, which opens by telling the reader:

Don’t think of the brand called YOU as being confined strictly within a single corporate environment. Even if your current job description and title put you in a corner, both literally and practically, you can – and should – stand out as an individual with a unique set of talents and marketable skills. Remember, no employment contract spans a lifetime, which means you have the mobility and freedom to shape your career and path as you see fit.¹⁷

The loss of a secure employment contract is represented as the worker no longer being ‘confined’ to the drab stability of a single job or work environment. The associated lack of stable career trajectory is an opportunity for ‘mobility’ and ‘freedom’, a chance for self-empowerment. Accessing these new opportunities requires a flexible attitude geared around a sense that all jobs and projects are temporary.

Regular and ongoing unemployment

Self-brand literature tends to represent job loss and unemployment as an opportunity for the worker to find new employment. In *Brand You: Turn Your Unique Talents into a Winning Formula*, John Purkiss and David Royston Lee (2012) tell the reader that:

¹⁷ See Schawbel, D. (2009) *Me 2.0: Build a powerful brand to achieve career success*, p2.

[Y]ou are likely to change jobs more frequently than your parents did. It is better to build your track record than to worry about hierarchies and internal politics. If someone fires you, someone else will want to hire you. It is more important to be employable than employed.¹⁸

The authors regard precarious labour as less a problem for 'parents' more for a younger generation entering the labour market. Self-branding, therefore, is an activity undertaken by those new to the labour market who should no longer expect stable and ongoing employment.¹⁹ Periods of unemployment are to be expected but to mitigate the effects of such instability and uncertainty one should work on their employability. The worker should expect to regularly change or lose their job in the contemporary labour market, but working on their employability through the cultivation of a successful self-brand will mean that every loss is ultimately a gain. The sense that it is 'more important to be employable than employed' suggests that the means are more important than the end; that is, an income. By disregarding the basic fact of employment - that to survive people need to generate an income - the authors are disregarding the basic material needs of the worker.

¹⁸ See Purkiss, J & Royson Lee, D. (2012) *Brand You: Turn your unique talents into a winning formula*. p2.

¹⁹ See also Montoya, P & Vandehey, T (2008): *The Brand Called You: Make your business stand out in a crowded marketplace*. See also Peters, T. (1999) *The Brand You 50 (Reinventing Work)*.

② The Worker Promise

Personal brand management texts paint a picture of a working life fragmented by casual and temporary work. The texts maintain that a self-brand is central to cohering the worker's various past and present jobs into a unified whole. Key to this is the common claim that a self-brand takes the form of a consistent and authentic promise. This promise is a more general feature of employability culture: a cv promises the prospective employer that the candidate is willing and able to fulfil the role; wearing the correct attire at a job interview promises the employer that the candidate takes the role seriously.²⁰

Advice relating to the worker's promise is contradictory across the literature and even within particular texts. This suggests that these contradictions might stem from more general problems with the notion and practise of employability itself. For example, the literature tells us that the worker's promise should simultaneously:

1. Set and meet expectations
2. Remain current (adaptable)
3. Be authentic (consistent)

Set and meet expectations

In *The Brand Called You: Make Your Business Stand Out in a Crowded Market Place*, Montoya & Vandehey (2008) open the book by telling the reader that:

[A] Personal Brand is a promise. It tells prospects what they can expect when they deal with you. It's an implied covenant between a service provider and a client that

²⁰ Phull, M. & Stronge, S. 'Broken Promises', forthcoming *Autonomy*, 2019.

²¹ Montoya, P & Vandehey, T (2008) *The Brand Called You: Make your business stand out in a crowded marketplace*. p5.

makes the client believe, “Every time I see this person, I will receive a certain quality of service and care”... A Personal Brand creates expectations in the minds of others of what they’ll get when they work with you.²¹

Maintaining expectations requires that the worker’s promise remains consistent over time. It acts like an unspoken contract between the worker and the employer or ‘client’. The point is to make the future behaviour of the worker predictable so that the employer has a sense of what they will receive.

For Montoya and Vandehey, the promise of a self-brand not only helps to translate a fragmented and incoherent working life into something clear and marketable, but in doing so provides the employer with a clear statement as regards the worker’s track record and future prospects. While such literature emphasises that self-branding is good for the worker, more often than not employability is imagined from the perspective of the employer.

Remaining Current

Throughout the literature there is a continual emphasis on brand adaptation. Schawbel tells the reader that:

Making sure your brand reputation is seen as current is also important. When a brand doesn’t seem relevant anymore and has no differentiating qualities that make it special, its reputation suffers. People will notice that you seem out of date and avoid your brand. You must ensure that your personal brand stays current, yet it must be consistent over time as well. For example, if you walk into a McDonald’s, whether you are in Japan, or in the United States, the product you purchase will be consistent, despite small cultural differences.²²

A successful self-brand is supple to societal and cultural developments. The worker must adapt their brand according to both geographical and historical requirements. Like the

²² See Schawbel, D. (2009), p8.

flexible labour market that self-brand literature is responding to, the worker's brand is expected to be eminently adaptable. This represents, if not a contradiction in the literature, then at least an inconsistency that the worker is expected to navigate: how can a self-brand be simultaneously consistent and flexible? Purkiss and Royston Lee turn to the Tesco slogan 'every little helps' in an attempt to answer this question:

For a long period every little helps meant helping the customer save money through low prices. Then more and more people became concerned about wasteful packaging and the need to recycle. Tesco responded by using the same slogan in a new series of advertisements. These showed ordinary people and celebrities transporting their shopping without using plastic bags.²³

The point being that the brand embodied in the slogan 'every little helps' remains a consistent promise to the customer while its meaning changes with historical and cultural developments. The authors neither show how this example relates to the worker nor explain how an entire person can act like a slogan. The complexities relating to this issue are not only entirely absent from Purkiss and Royston Lee's book but remain generally unexplored across the literature.²⁴

Authenticity

The worker should not construct a false self-image; rather, their promise must be authentic. Schawbel tells the reader that:

Those who pretend to be someone they are not run the risk of being exposed. Just as good romantic relationships are based on genuineness, openness and a willingness to be up front from the start, in business, your relationships depend on authenticity. Authenticity

²³ See Purkiss, J & Royston Lee, D. (2012)

²⁴ See Blumenthal, I & Wilson, J. (2008) *Managing Brand You: 7 Steps to creating your most successful self*. See also Broad, J. (2016) *The New Brand You: Your New Image Makes the Sale for You*. See also McNalley, D & Speak, K (2011) *Be Your Own Brand: A Breakthrough Formula for Standing Out from the Crowd*. See also Montoya, P & Vandehey, T (2008).

showcases exactly who you are and what you can deliver. For example, if you brand yourself as a freelance writer, you should be able to back that up with a portfolio of solid writing samples.²⁵

As well as meeting expectations and moving with the times, the worker's brand promise must be authentic. Making promises that are not within the worker's capacity to deliver will lead to failure. Instead, the worker must act honestly and be themselves. Again, this begs the question: how can a worker simultaneously be their authentic self while changing in accordance with the times?

The literature suggests that employability relies on a veneer of authenticity but, in reality, requires that the worker act according to whatever the status quo dictates. In this way, the literature represents a self-brand as an edited version of authenticity synonymous with the worker's skills and capacities.

In *Career Distinction: Stand Out by Building Your Brand*, William Arruda and Kirsten Dixson seek to show the reader how authenticity can be married with adaptability:

In the new world of work, the only constant is change. Thus, you cannot stand still as everything around you evolves. But fine-tuning your brand doesn't mean losing your authenticity. In fact, it suggests quite the opposite. As your brand evolves, it becomes an ever more accurate representation of who you are. No matter how your brand might change your larger vision and long-term goals remain constant. Evolving your brand means thinking of new ways to deliver on your personal brand promise.²⁶

Once again, the literature fails to tell the worker how precisely they are supposed to balance between the pressures of a flexible labour market and maintaining their authenticity. Curiously, the text suggests that the worker's brand promise becomes more authentic the more it adapts to historical and cultural developments. In this regard, by advising the worker to treat their 'authentic' self as eminently adaptable, such literature factors in personality and attitude as adjustable parts of a flexible workforce.²⁷ As such, the demands of a flexible labour market enter aspects of the worker's life far beyond the workplace.

²⁵ See Schawbel, D. (2009), p5.

²⁶ See Arruda, W & Dixson, K. (2007) *Career Distinction: stand out by building your brand*. p191.

²⁷ See Carson, M (2016) *Introduction to Personal Branding: ten steps toward a new professional you*.
See also Kaputa, C (2012a) *Breakthrough Branding: How smart entrepreneurs and intrepeneurs transform a small idea into a big brand*.

③ Leisure as Labour

In the previous section, it was shown that self-brand literature tells us that the labour market now demands the adaptation of the whole 'authentic' person. As such, this report finds that maintaining an authentic brand promise entails an increasing extension of labour into leisure. According to Harry Beckwith and Christine Clifford in *You Inc: The Art of Selling Yourself*, one's entire 'being' is branded:

Yes, you sell your skills in this life. You sell what you know and can do. If by using your skills you are able to help enough people, you will become secure and may become rich. Beyond that, however, the most critical thing you sell is literally yourself, your being. People "buy" optimists because they enjoy their company. They "buy" people with integrity because people with integrity do what they say they will. Like Maytag washing machines, people with integrity can be relied upon.²⁸

This quote exemplifies the degree to which management literature advises the worker to incorporate branding into their lives. The integration of employability into one's 'whole being' takes place through a number of activities that take place beyond the workplace. Across the literature, three key activities translate leisure time into opportunities to brand the self:

1. Social media as a form of work
2. Cultivating a 'digital footprint'
3. Networking at conferences, social events and parties

Personal brand management texts tell the reader that in the age of ubiquitous social media each of us has a brand even if we do not realise it. Through our images, posts, videos and contacts, we are each bestowed with a brand which we must define and cultivate. Making oneself employable now involves the savvy use of social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn. To this

²⁸ Beckwith, H & Clifford, C. (2007). *You Inc: The Art of Selling Yourself*, p7.

effect, an article in the HuffPost tells the reader that:

Many times you do not cultivate your personal brand, but it still exists... The digital footprint is a very important contribution to a personal brand. Digital footprint is what you do online. If you or someone comments or posts about you online, it will become your digital footprint. An AVG study suggests that children under the age of 2 already have a digital footprint. In the increasingly digital world of today, the question is no longer if you should have a personal brand, but if you cultivate and nurture it to build something meaningful.²⁹

The article suggests that in 'the digital world of today' the worker's choice is not whether they have a brand but only what kind of brand they wish to advance. Their digital footprint acts as a kind of uncensored brand which the worker must cultivate through 'comments' or 'posts' into something marketable. Importantly, this is something the worker does whenever they are online, not just during working hours. In short, the article advises the worker to treat their leisure time as an opportunity to advance their employability.

Similarly, an article in *the Guardian*, 'Building your brand: how to project a powerful personal image', advises the worker that:

Building your brand is as much about what you don't say as what you do. You owe it to your future self to safeguard your reputation – the one that prospective readers, employers, clients or fans will see... The best possible filter, however, is to post only messages which enhance your current or future career, be they updates about your latest work, links to new material or viewpoints about your industry sector.³⁰

More explicitly, the article tells the worker to spend their free time protecting and advancing their reputation as a means to 'enhance' their employment opportunities. As such, the worker's employability is in continual negotiation, decreased or enhanced

²⁹ Hemani, M. (2017) 'What is Personal Branding? Why you should seriously consider investing in it'.

³⁰ Burke, C. (2014), 'Building your brand: how to project a powerful personal image'.

by what they decide to post online. In other words, self-branding and online activity are regarded as synonymous activity. Posting a comment or image is always already an act of self-branding. Both of the above articles represent employability as an inevitable and central feature of social media use. Most importantly, social media activity predominantly takes place outside of work hours, suggesting that self-branding is an activity that takes place during leisure time.

As well as advising the worker to fill their leisure hours with the work of their social media presence, self-brand literature also encourages the worker to spend their time ‘networking’:

How should you go about expanding your sphere? Find ways to interact with your fellow employees and network with as many influential people as possible across groups, departments and corporate hierarchies. Networking occurs in every situation you encounter with friends, colleagues, family and even teachers. As you befriend others, they will be more inclined to become part of your social life and extend opportunities, possibly to their own corporations.³¹

Self-branding collapses the boundaries between intimate and professional relationships. No longer is there a separation between time spent with family and friends and time spent with associates, colleagues or clients. Every relationship should be regarded as a means to the end of finding work. The literature encourages us to replace the traditional intimacies of friends and family with the ‘cold intimacies’ of the workplace – intimacies that might advance our career or work-based prospects.³² Thus, employability discourse asks us to measure relationships by their potential to sustain or advance our ‘opportunities’.

The term ‘opportunities’ repeatedly arises across the literature as a way of defining the value of a given activity or relationship. Leisure time should be spent focussing on activities that maximize our opportunities. These activities, compiled from

³¹ See Schawbel, D. (2009) p11.

³² See Ilouz, E. (2007) Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism

the literature, are featured in the box below:

- Use social media: LinkedIn, Twitter and Facebook
- Build and maintain a personal website
- Start and maintain a weekly blog
- Start an online podcast
- Google your name and optimize results regularly
- Use and monitor forums and discussion boards
- Write online articles
- Use the website Medium
- Attend requisite social events such as conferences, dinners and parties

④ Conclusion

This report concludes by emphasising that contrary to management and self-help literature, self-branding - and employability more generally, should be counted as a form of work. Cultivating an online presence, answering e-mails and messages outside of office hours, as well as networking at social events, are the 'shadow work' asked of individuals that props up a labour market increasingly geared toward a flexible and adaptable workforce. These activities are, for the most part, unpaid and take up time once spent as leisure. Self-brand discourse tends to obfuscate these facts by describing the activities that comprise employability as 'investments', 'opportunities' and 'prospects', which hides the climate of insecure and low-paid jobs that compel the worker to spend their leisure time working on their brand in the first place. If we don't include these activities under the category of work, then we leave a blind spot in our understanding of overwork and its relation to both mental illness, lack of free time and global warming.

Employability and Mental Illness

Overwork is currently the main reason for work-based illness, with work-related stress, anxiety and depression accounting for over half of sick absences taken each year.³³ While there is no present study that demonstrates the work during leisure hours that accounts for the shadow work of self-branding, this report suggests that the burden of employability comprises a significant part of overwork in the present moment. This report suggests that a further study that interrogates the links between employability, leisure time and poor mental health is necessary.

One way we can think about self-branding and its potential impact on mental health with available research is through a study by Kroll and Pokutta that uses qualitative data to show what the ideal day's schedule would look like in terms of optimal wellbeing (see Figure 4).³⁴

³³ See Health and Safety Executive, (2018), 'Work related stress, anxiety and depression statistics in Great Britain 2017'.

³⁴ See Kroll, C. & Pokutta, S. (2013), 'Just a perfect day? Developing a happiness optimised day schedule'.

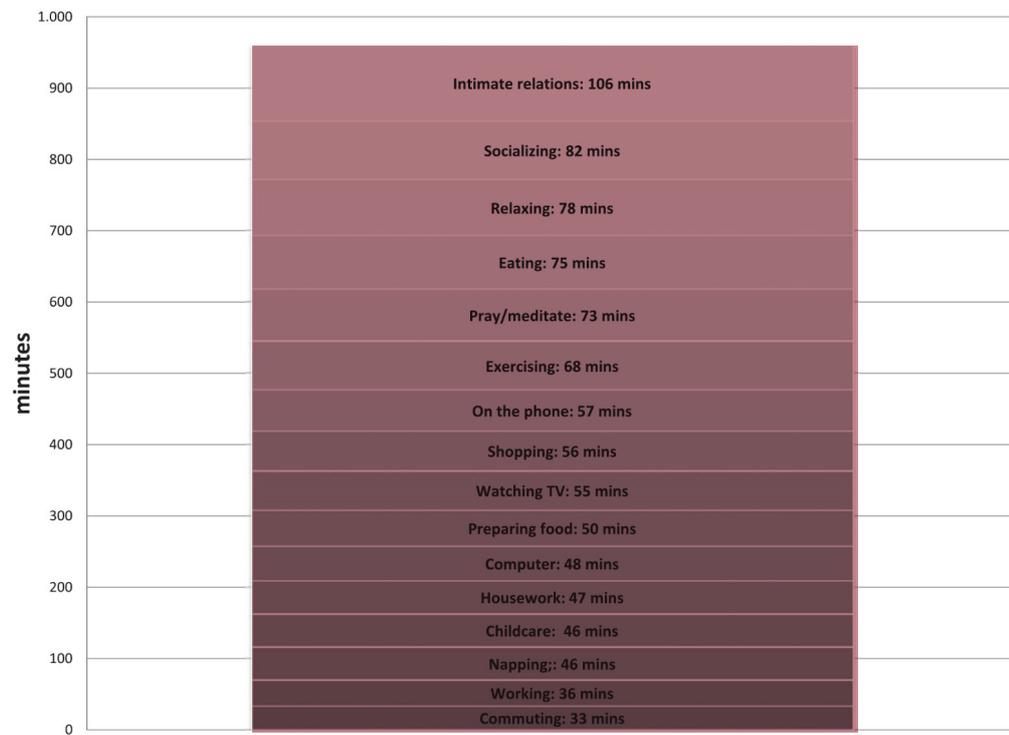


Figure 3: The 'Perfect Day'
Source: Kroll and Pokutta (2013)

'Working' takes up a mere 36 minutes, while 'intimate relations' 'socializing' and 'relaxing' are the activities that contribute most to optimal wellbeing – leisure activities that self-branding literature encourages us to treat as work. For instance, self-brand literature tells us to network in the evenings as opposed to 'socializing', and to occupy time that could otherwise be spent 'relaxing' by instead using social media to cultivate an online presence. Activities that are usually regarded as leisure become work, an activity that is judged to be very low in terms of what maximizes our wellbeing. While the Kroll and Pokutta study suggests that significantly less work than we currently undertake would be good for our general wellbeing, self-brand literature asks us to turn ever-more of our lives into work.

In a number of studies looking at the impact of decent leisure time on workers as various as paramedics, teachers and the self-employed, Sabine Sonnentag and her colleagues have found that those that get a chance to mentally detach from their work are less likely to experience 'negative affect' and difficulties in the workplace.³⁵ Self-branding, on the contrary, requires that the worker take their work home, collapsing the distance between work and non-work that Sonnentag demonstrates is necessary for our wellbeing.

³⁵ See Sonnentag, S., (2003) 'Recovery, Work Engagement, and Proactive Behaviour: A New Look at the Interface Between Nonwork and work', *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 88:3, pp. 518-528. See also Fritz, C., and Sonnentag, S., (2005) 'Recovery, Health and Job Performance: Effects of Weekend Experiences'. See also Sonnentag, S., et al. (2008), 'Being engaged at work and detached at home: A week-level study on work engagement, psychological detachment, and affect'. See also Sonnentag, S., et al. (2014), 'Making Flow Happen: The Effects of Being Recovered on Work-related Flow Between and Within Days'.

Employability and Global Warming

The relationship between work and global warming has been interrogated by a number of studies that found a reduction in working hours would have a significant impact on lowering carbon emissions.³⁶ With increasingly little time left to avert irreparable damage to the earth's ecological system, a reduction in working hours is rapidly becoming a necessity. A recent report from Autonomy found that to keep the UK below the necessary 2C rise in temperature would require a decrease of working hours to nine per week.³⁷ While the study points toward the greenhouse gas emissions (GHG) being produced during formal working hours, it does not consider the work we do beyond those hours. To deliver on the positive effects of such a reduction in work-related GHG would require a similar reduction in extra-workplace work such as self-branding.

Increasingly, working on one's employability relies on the use of information technologies outside of the workplace. A Greenpeace report shows that the use of such technologies - in particular, social media activity - will make up over a fifth of the world's electricity use by 2020.³⁸ The report demonstrates that nearly all of this energy is supplied by coal, gas and nuclear power, with only a small proportion coming from credibly renewable sources. As the report has already shown, self-brand literature advises the worker that success in the twenty-first century labour market will increasingly rely on the savvy use of social media.³⁹ Work on one's employability such as writing a CV is increasingly supplemented or replaced by online work such as creating and maintaining a LinkedIn profile. Judging by the conclusions drawn in the Greenpeace report, this work outside the workplace is contributing to carbon emissions that are already having an enormously negative impact on our ecological system, an impact that will only intensify in the years to come.

³⁶ See Rosnick, D., Weisbrot, M. (2007), 'Are Shorter Work Hours Good for the Environment? A Comparison of U.S. and European Energy Consumption'. See also Nässén, J., Larsson, J., (2015) 'Would shorter working time reduce greenhouse gas emissions? An analysis of time use and consumption in Swedish households'.

³⁷ See Frey, P. (2019), 'The Ecological Limits of Work: on carbon emissions, carbon budgets and working time'.

³⁸ See Greenpeace (2017) 'Clicking Clean: who is winning the race to build a green internet'.

³⁹ See Schawbel, D. (2009). See also Purkiss, J & Royson Lee, D. (2012).

Research Suggestions

To better understand the effect employability and its associated activities are having on our health and the environment would require a time-use study that investigated:

1. The amount of time individuals spend working on their employability each week
2. The kinds of activities individuals undertake to maximize their employability
3. The amount of time individuals spend on each of these activities.

Such data would allow for calculations and statistics that would yield more accurate information relating to the effects employability has on our health and wellbeing, as well as the ecological system at large. However, due to the diffuse and ambiguous nature of such activities, such a study will inevitably be difficult.

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