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DECENT AND INDECENT WORK



FIONA CHRISTIE ARGUES THAT DECENT WORK PROVIDES CAREERS PRACTITIONERS WITH AN IMPORTANT TOOL TO USE WITH CLIENTS IN CRITICALLY EVALUATING THE LABOUR MARKET

Decent Work and Economic Growth together make up Goal 8 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which are the basis of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (<https://sdgs.un.org/goals>). There are four pillars to the goal:

1. Employment creation/access to work
2. Rights at work
3. Social protection
4. Social dialogue

(Global Commission on the Future of Work, 2019).

The International Labour Organization (ILO) argues that internationally, governments, employers and trade unions need to work together to make Decent Work a reality for more people.

The inclusion of Decent Work as an international SDG is welcome, although the ILO’s conceptualisation has critics. Criticisms include; that it does not address the concerns of workers in more informal jobs enough; it does not prioritise meaning and dignity at work; it ignores how ‘worker voice’ may be expressed outside of the union movement. Others have pointed out the need for a more holistic view on careers, and to consider how Decent Work intersects with other SDGs such as Good Health and Wellbeing.

Why it’s important to pay attention to Decent Work
Despite Decent Work being a ‘UN Goal’ there is evidence that, for many workers in society, even in an advanced economy such as the UK, work conditions are being eroded. The Taylor Review (2017) described the growth of atypical work, including diverse groups of workers, some of whom have lucrative freelance incomes while others struggle to get by in insecure gig economy and zero hour jobs.

Blustein (2019) writes eloquently about eroding work conditions in the US. It was his book that spurred me to want to do some research about young workers in the UK to explore the consequences of uncertainty at work especially in sectors which are typically insecure, e.g., the arts, hospitality, retail.

In the research, we were interested in how young people resist uncertain working lives and this led us to ask questions about Decent Work. The research was conducted during the Covid pandemic which amplified the uncertainty of working lives. It was a qualitative, longitudinal project in which we interviewed participants twice and witnessed how circumstances changed over time.

What are young people’s perspectives on Decent Work?

Interesting themes emerged about how young people viewed the pillars of Decent Work. Regarding social dialogue, many were sympathetic to the idea of collective action through trade unions to improve working conditions, though very few worked in jobs where unions





were active. Many welcomed the role of social protection for workers, e.g., via the furlough scheme, but felt that much protective legislation disbenefits young people, e.g., different minimum wage thresholds. In principle, they were vocal about the importance of rights at work and were sensitive to potential discrimination; many expressed a strong value-system in arguing for the rights of workers, especially in key worker roles during the pandemic. They defined Decent Work in expansive ways including the scope to earn enough to get by, be happy, have dignity, be valued and have career progression. They were aware of how defining Decent Work could be quite subjective based on different value systems.

How can careers practitioners use Decent Work with clients?

Using Decent Work as a lens within a research project and observing the rich responses from young people, leads me to argue that careers practitioners can use Decent Work as a tool to discuss labour market issues with their clients. It provides a clear way to spell out what good working conditions should be.

Discussions of Decent Work may be most useful in group-based curricular work, especially when exploring the labour market. It can provide a framework to stimulate learning about the merits of different types of work and critique ideas which can glamourise insecure work, e.g., the notion of the 'side hustle'. However, even in careers work with individuals, the Decent Work Scale (Dodd & Burke, 2021) could be a useful tool to use to understand how individuals feel about their work and whether it is 'decent' or not.

As a careers professional, I aim to navigate the tension between realism and optimism. It can be hard to highlight poor aspects of work, when trying to foster optimism, especially in careers that are generally always insecure, e.g., for artists and musicians. Candy Ho's work in Canada allows for use of UN SDGs (including

Decent Work) to stretch her students to think not only about what they want from work but what their values are and what they may be able to contribute to the world. Such an approach attempts to weave challenging questions about the world but in positive ways, which can feed into how individuals see their work purpose. (<https://careerguidancesocialjustice.wordpress.com/2021/02/17/the-sdgs-for-career-exploration-and-purpose-interview-with-dr-candy-ho/comment-page-1/>).

In addition to working with clients, as careers practitioners, an awareness of Decent Work can prompt us to advocate for our clients more firmly whenever we can. The professional responsibility to advocate can be something practitioners feel less comfortable with, but it is important to seize opportunities to speak up for our clients.

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Fiona Christie is a member of the Decent Work and Productivity Research Centre in the Faculty of Business and Law. She has recently edited a book about Decent Work (2021) and guest edited a Special Issue of the Journal of the National Institute of Career and Educational Counselling (2020) on the topic. She has just finished research (funded by the British Academy) with young people in insecure jobs which generated findings about their perspectives on Decent and Indecent Work www.mmu.ac.uk/research/research-centres/dwp/projects/young-people-job-insecurity

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