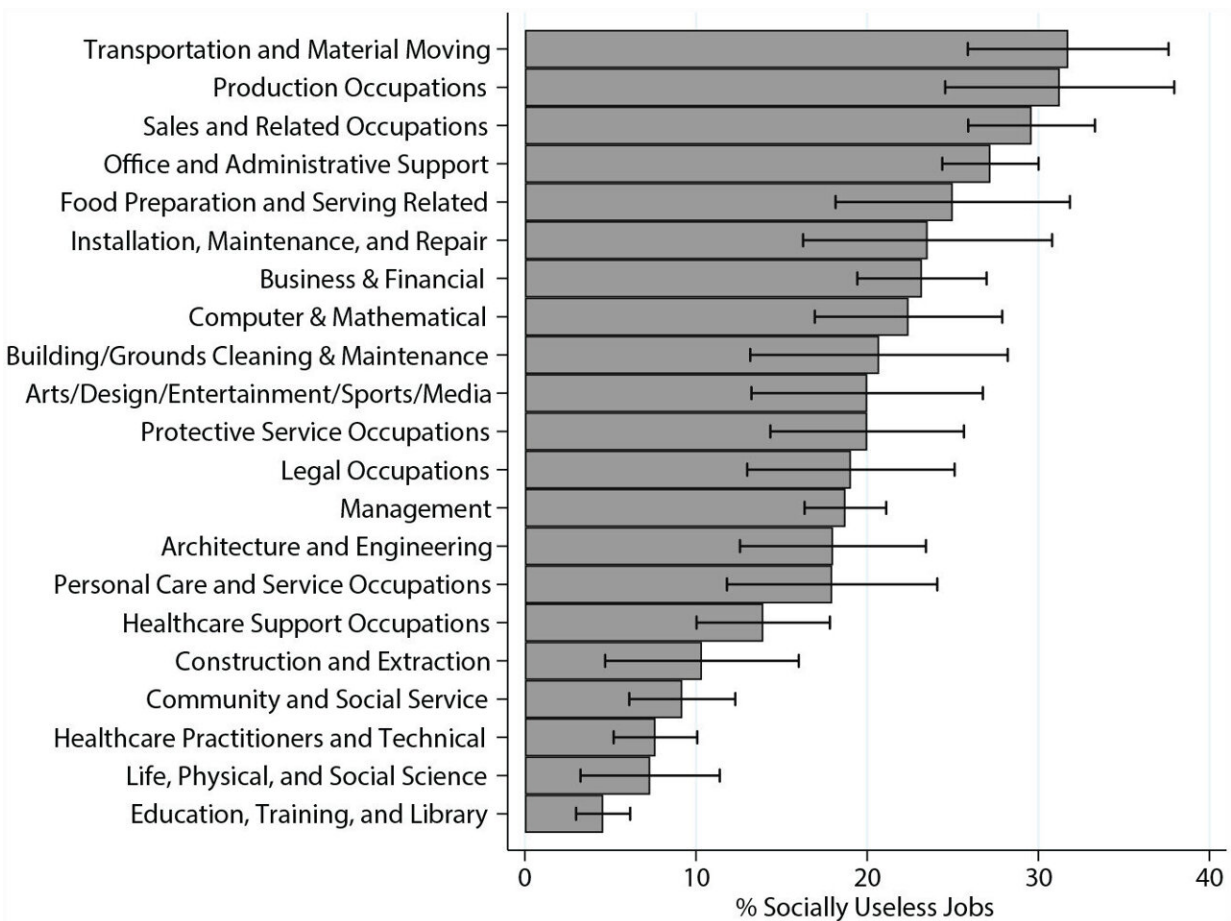


Many people feel they work in pointless, meaningless jobs, research confirms

August 1 2023, by Tony Trueman



Percentage of socially useless jobs by occupation. Credit: *Work, Employment and Society* (2023). DOI: 10.1177/09500170231175771

The theory that many people feel the work they do is pointless because

their jobs are "bullshit" has been confirmed by a new study.

The research found that people working in finance, sales and managerial roles are much more likely than others on average to think their [jobs](#) are useless or unhelpful to others.

The study, by Simon Walo, of Zurich University, Switzerland, is the first to give quantitative support to a [theory](#) put forward by the American anthropologist David Graeber in 2018 that many jobs were "bullshit"—socially useless and meaningless.

Researchers had since suggested that the reason people felt their jobs were useless was solely because they were routine and lacked autonomy or good management rather than anything intrinsic to their work, but Mr. Walo found this was only part of the story.

He analyzed [survey data](#) on 1,811 respondents in the U.S. working in 21 types of jobs, who were asked if their work gave them "a feeling of making a positive impact on community and society" and "the feeling of doing useful work."

The American Working Conditions Survey, carried out in 2015, found that 19% of respondents answered "never" or "rarely" to the questions whether they had "a feeling of making a positive impact on community and society" and "of doing useful work" spread across a range of occupations.

Mr. Walo adjusted the raw data to compare workers with the same degree of routine work, job autonomy and quality of management, and found that in the occupations Graeber thought were useless, the nature of the job still had a large effect beyond these factors.

Those working in business and finance and sales were more than twice as

likely to say their jobs were socially useless than others. Managers were 1.9 more likely to say this and office assistants 1.6 times.

"David Graeber's 'bullshit jobs' theory claims that some jobs are in fact objectively useless, and that these are found more often in certain occupations than in others," says the study, published in the journal *Work, Employment and Society*.

"Graeber hit a nerve with his statement. His original article quickly became so popular that within weeks it was translated into more than a dozen languages and reprinted in different newspapers around the world.

"However, the original evidence presented by Graeber was mainly qualitative, which made it difficult to assess the magnitude of the problem.

"This study extends previous analyses by drawing on a rich, under-utilized dataset and provides new evidence.

"It finds that working in one of the occupations highlighted by Graeber significantly increases the probability that workers perceive their jobs as socially useless, compared to all others. This article is therefore the first to find quantitative evidence supporting Graeber's argument."

Law was the only [occupation](#) cited by Graeber as useless where Mr. Walo found no statistically significant evidence that staff found their jobs meaningless.

Mr. Walo also found that the share of workers who consider their jobs socially useless is higher in the [private sector](#) than in the non-profit or the public sector.

More information: Simon Walo, "Bullshit" After All? Why People

Consider Their Jobs Socially Useless, *Work, Employment and Society* (2023). [DOI: 10.1177/09500170231175771](https://doi.org/10.1177/09500170231175771)

Provided by British Sociological Association

Citation: Many people feel they work in pointless, meaningless jobs, research confirms (2023, August 1) retrieved 28 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-08-people-pointless-meaningless-jobs.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.