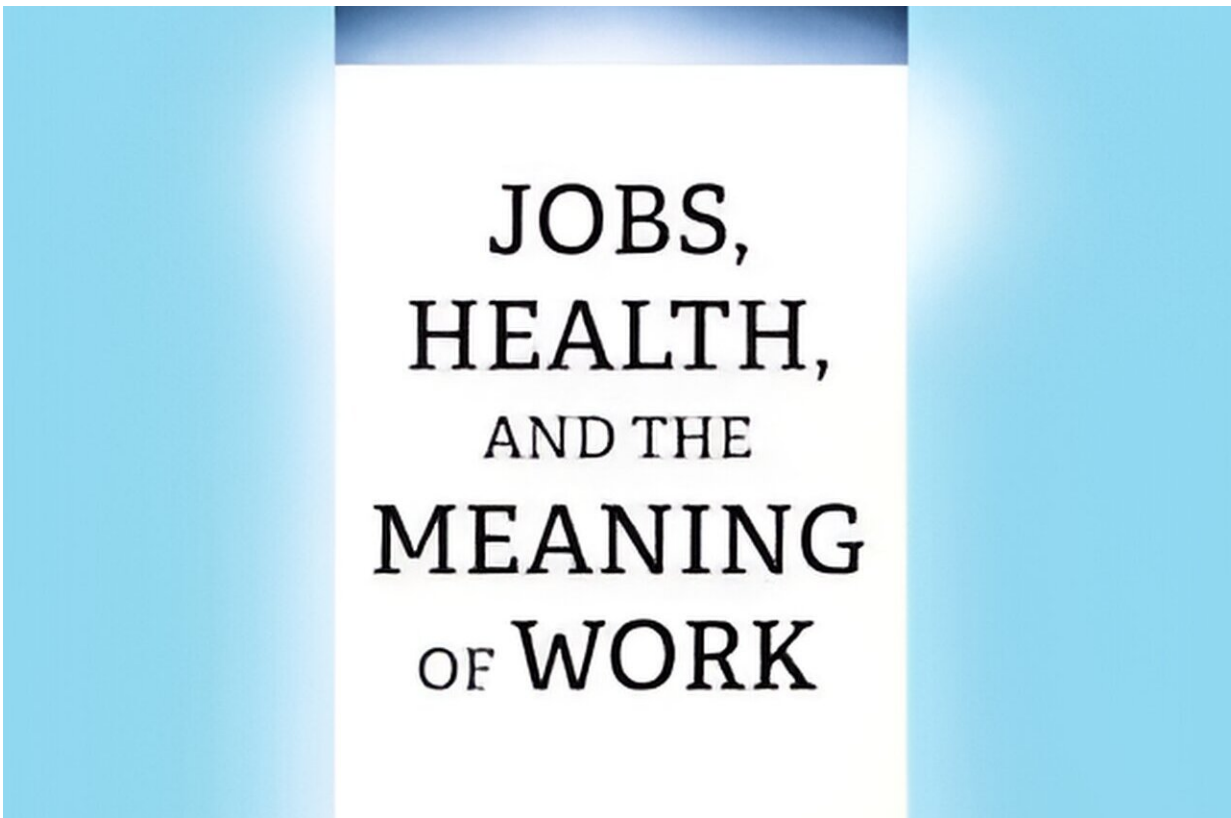


Want a job you'll like? Think about more than the pay, expert says

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Credit: MIT Press

Work often defines us. The first question many people ask when meeting someone new is "What do you do?" For those working full-time, a huge portion of their waking hours will be spent on the job. But how

often do we think about the role work plays in our lives—and the lives of others?

Mary Davis, an economist and associate professor in the Department of Urban and Environmental Policy and Planning, was struck by that question as she began her sabbatical year in the middle of the pandemic. She was driven, she says, to understand "how work interacts with the [health](#) and well-being of people who do the jobs."

Health is impacted by more than just risky occupations, she says, like fishing for lobster solo in the North Atlantic. Health is also affected by job stress, autonomy in the workplace, and finding meaning—or not—in work.

Davis covers these and other topics in her new [book](#), "Jobs, Health, and the Meaning of Work." She wrote the book, she says, to "share the lessons with others seeking jobs that will not only provide balance between work and the rest of life, but also stimulate the idea of work as a source of health, longevity, and the full expression of life's meaning."

In it, she highlights stories of individual workers, including herself, describing her first job as a convenience store clerk in rural Florida, where her boss imbued the value of hard work, and her first job out of college as a federal drug cop at airports—which propelled her back to school.

Tufts Now spoke with Davis, who in August began a new position as senior associate vice provost for education at Tufts; she will also keep her appointment in the Department of Urban and Environmental Policy and Planning.

Some people feel defined by their jobs, but many

people just see work as a way to pay the bills. They might share the sentiment I once saw on a bumper sticker, which said, "I owe. I owe. It's off to work I go."

Work is universal, but how each of us translates that experience in our lives is different. In the book, I try to emphasize that even in things like the risk factors of jobs, each person handles them very differently. There's no one size that fits all. Something that is health damaging to one person can be health promoting to another.

I have a sister whose mantra is, "I work to my pay." She has a totally different job than I do. My job is creative and entrepreneurial in many ways. As a professor, I've been able to chart my own course and do interesting things. My take on work is that I'm paid to do what I want to do, and her take is she's paid to do what she doesn't want to do.

Has the nature of work changed due to the pandemic?

I think people's expectations for work have changed. There have been generational shifts in how workers view work and their effort. Even though the Great Resignation, when a much higher than average number of Americans quit their jobs starting in early 2021, has subsided, what pushed it is still there. Workers are more likely to change jobs that are dissatisfying to them than they used to.

Another big change is the number of people looking specifically for remote work. I think as a result of the pandemic, they have a better sense of what they want out of their work lives and are more likely to demand it. And employers are responding. Even employers who want more face-to-face time in the workplace are being more flexible and allowing remote work to attract the best employees.

With remote work, I don't think that we'll be going back to the way it was before. Lots of remote workers are never going to go back to an office space, at least in their current job.

Is the change to remote work a good thing?

I think it's a huge shift, and it has pros and cons. As a [single parent](#), I can understand why having that flexibility and being in the home can be very important to work-life balance in some cases.

But in other cases, how you relate to your peers and how the organization fits together is important to meaningful work. Isolation does not promote a sense that work is meaningful, but good relations and a community feeling do.

I think there's an impact on meaningful work that we don't quite understand yet. Distancing people from their peers is likely to have a negative long-term impact on their sense that work promotes their well-being.

In the book, you describe the case of a remote worker being surveilled and so in fear for her job that when she had a heart attack, she didn't seek help until her shift was over, luckily still in time to survive.

There's definitely more surveillance involved in [remote work](#). It is going to be challenging for years to come as employers figure out the pros and cons of making sure people are efficient, balanced against the potential stress and burnout effects of micromanagement and surveillance.

The gig economy is something that has changed

working for many people. What are the upsides and downsides?

Lower-wage workers who survive on this style of contract work are more likely to suffer ill health effects from work. But others do those jobs very much by choice, and it's a positive experience. I've met many an Uber driver who enjoys driving around and talking and earning extra money. Those types of workers are benefiting from the gig economy.

Sometimes the [gig economy](#) is presented as being uniformly bad and that we need to create protections for all these workers, but in fact, it's mostly the vulnerable workers—often minority and lower-income workers—who need the protection, not all gig workers. This is why legislating the industry has proven to be so tricky. Effective policies to protect gig workers have to account for the often-conflicting needs of very different worker groups.

Can you talk about how the work environment affects people's physical and mental health?

There is a range from long-term chronic health effects to acute effects. If you look at a fisher falling overboard, for example, that's an acute danger. That is what we've always looked at in the past when considering occupational health—hazards and how to reduce them.

But what many workers face nowadays is more often long-term chronic stress and burnout, sometimes from bad bosses, sometimes from bad organizational structures, as well as pay systems that aren't fair or transparent or company values that don't align with the workers' values.

[Irregular scheduling](#) has also been shown to have negative health effects. Workers can't tend to their own health with irregular work schedules. On

the other hand, there's a lot of evidence to suggest companies and bosses can remedy this type of situation by creating more predictable scheduling.

What's one piece of advice you'd give based on your research about work?

As I looked at my own work life, how I struggled through various situations, I was able to step back and wonder, what exactly is causing stress right now? Is it something that I can control? Is it something that's organizational? Is it something personal? I was able to do that, looking at my own work life, and found ways to change situations, when that was possible.

The more you know your interests and understand what job situation works best for you, the more you will be able to leverage that in the job market to get a better deal in your work life.

Provided by Tufts University

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