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Scale

One of the strangest aspects of work is that we don't do it solely, or sometimes even principally, for money. This makes us vulnerable not just to poverty, but also to crises of a more psychological kind. We harbour a demanding ambition to find work that can provide us with something that can best be captured by the word 'meaning'. We hunger for this meaning quite as much as we crave status or enrichment. Meaningful work comprises any activity that impacts positively on another's life, either by reducing suffering or increasing pleasure – a definition that can encompass everything from the life-saving interventions of the cardiac surgeon to the seductive efforts of a pastry chef or Anatolian rug-weaver.

In truth, the vast majority of jobs contribute in some way to the welfare of others. Only a very few are properly devoid of meaning; for example, a career devoted to making fake remedies for hair loss or cancer, or one encouraging those on low incomes to gamble more. However, crucially, a great many jobs are in the odd position of being meaningful while not in any way feeling meaningful.

This problem is rife in the modern age for a very particular reason: the changes in the scale and tempo of work ushered in by industrialisation. Most work now takes

place within gigantic organisations that are engaged in a variety of large, complicated and slow-moving projects – and where it can therefore be hard to derive, on a daily basis, any tangible sense of having improved anyone else’s life in any way. The customer and the end product are, in the gigantic structures of modernity, simply too far-flung in space and too distant in time. It can be hard to reassure ourselves of our worth and purpose when we are only a single unit among a 20,000-strong team on four continents pushing forward a project that might be ready in five years.

There are sound reasons why the work practices of large organisations proceed at a glacial pace. Product development in sectors such as aeronautics and banking, oil and pharmaceuticals cannot happen overnight. The time frames are logical, but in terms of individual experience, they go directly against our natural, deeply embedded preference for a rapidly unfolding story.

The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle (385 BCE–323 BCE) observed that a key requirement for a satisfying piece of theatre was that it should be over relatively quickly. There might be tensions and complications and unexpected changes of direction, but in a few hours

and three acts, there should be a feeling of genuine completion.

It's not just in theatre that speed is attractive. The concentration of action also helps to explain the appeal of sport. In ninety minutes, a football match can take us from a perfect, neutral start to a precise result. However, if football were like modern work in terms of scale and pace, one can imagine it unfolding on eighteen pitches with twenty-two balls and 10,800 players kicking around for thousands of days without any overview of the progress of the game. By the standards of our innate longings, our work unfolds in a disordered, overextended and confusing way.

Our labour feels meaningful not only when it is fast, but also when we get to witness the ways we are helping others; when we can leave the office, factory or shop with an impression of having fixed a problem in someone else's life. This pleasure too is threatened by scale. In the massive organisations of modernity, we may be so distant from the end users of our products and services as to be unable to derive any real benefit from our constructive role in their lives. Spending days improving terms on contracts in the logistics industry truly will lead to a

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moment when a couple can contentedly enjoy some ginger biscuits together in front of the TV; optimising data management across different parts of an aerospace firm – along with thousands of other coordinated efforts – truly will contribute to the moment when a young family can bond together on a beach holiday. The connections are genuine, but they may be so extended and convoluted as to feel dispiritingly flimsy and unreal in our minds.

It's a tantalising paradox, and a kind of tragedy, that because of the unavoidable scale of modern work, we may pass our lives helping other people – and yet, day to day, be burdened by a harrowing feeling of having made no difference whatsoever.