

## What makes people unhappy with work?

The veil of silence over work-related psychosocial risks has been lifted for good. News reports – often of tragic events (France Telecom, Renault, etc.) – have turned floodlights onto the dark side of today's working world. It is a world where growing numbers of workers suffer from stress, burnout, physical or mental bullying; where some workers at the end of their tether put an end to their lives. The literature on this subject is growing.

The bookshelves on these so-called emerging occupational risks now groan with tomes of all kinds and all views: analytical reports, whistleblowing pamphlets on degrading managerial practices, satirical challenges to the link between mental stress and the world of work, handbooks on "new" good management practices to limit the fallout from obsessive-compulsive productivity-chasing, etc. A real curate's egg, in other words.

Amongst this outpouring of writings, Vincent de Gaulejac's latest book *Travail, les raisons de la colère* (Why work makes us rage) stands out. The author cuts right to the chase, delivering a lucid critique in layman's terms of the changing world of work, why workers are increasingly unhappy in it, and the multiple (economic, political and scientific) issues that play into it.

Its big merit is surely the convincing way it lays to rest various misconceived and pointless arguments that currently muddy the waters of most debates on ill-being at work. The author rejects the pseudo-psychological analysis which dismisses the fact that work makes people ill and lays all the blame for individuals' unhappiness at their own door.

Vincent de Gaulejac argues that the scale of unhappiness alone gives the lie to this approach and that instead of individual solutions (e.g., stress management courses) which are as much use as plasters on a wooden leg, we should be attacking the real causes of ill-being, the reasons for healthy rage.

Or again: de Gaulejac counters the positivist dogma that there is no such thing as ill-being because there is no agreed "objective" way of measuring it with the pragmatic question of whether the tragedies that are

being played out make it futile and irresponsible to simply "wait and see" due to quibbling over the "figures". Is improvement possible unless it is first accepted that subjective dimensions exist and are affected by the increasing demands made on them (the author moots the concept of "psychological abuse") from the post-Fordist experience of work?

Changes in work organization and management since the 1980s have radically transformed all three dimensions of the work experience: *doing*, *getting* and *being*. Production conditions and the nature of work (*doing*) have been transformed by automation, industrialization and the service orientation. The guarantees of *getting* – i.e., the financial but also symbolic rewards received for work – have been eroded by the flexibility agenda and the battering taken by employment law and social protection. Finally, the *being* aspect is also altered by the abusive and self-interested managerial ideology which claims that personal fulfilment is bound up with how much the individual puts into the organization. Having identified the origins of ill-being at work, Vincent de Gaulejac offers instructive illustrations of the harm done in both the private and public sectors through detailed case studies.

While this thought-provoking work leaves one in no doubt that the rage welling up from the shopfloor is justified, the need is now to go beyond analysis and work out the mechanics of collective action to halt the trend and restore to the many the assurance that work and well-being can go together. At a time when European governments are calling for people to stay working longer, redefining a sustainable work experience is a challenge as ambitious as it is essential. So – to work!

— Fabienne Scandella

### **Travail, les raisons de la colère**

by Vincent de Gaulejac,  
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