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COMMENTARY

Work can be good; not all work is good—let's make it better

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Introduction

Kaplan et al.'s (2025) historical review and perspectives raise several interesting questions for industrial and organizational (I-O) psychology researchers and practitioners to consider (i.e., "I-O professionals" or IOP, hereafter). Related to this, we see several, more fundamental concerns that need to be addressed. In general, there is a surprising lack of attention to core psychological principles regarding identity, meaning, and motivation in Keynes' argument (Kaplan et al.). Human beings are not consistently rational, and we form emotional attachments to goals. We also tend to possess a strong and persistent drive to move forward, get ahead, and strive for what is next. These underlying qualities and characteristics of human motivation and goal pursuit are difficult to reconcile with the notion that we should be spending less time focused on activities that efficiently meet these needs (i.e., structured work) and more time on activities where these needs may or may not be met, depending on how we structure and apply our available resources (i.e., leisure).

All of us need restorative periods of leisure to support, facilitate, and counteract the effects of our experienced demand periods of work. However, despite decades of work-related stress and recovery research, there remains a need for better, more sustainable design and management of work experiences that can support (not constrain and hinder) workers' abilities to achieve some sort of rhythm and balance in their personal management of resources. Instead of getting lost in an academic exercise about whether a philosopher was right or wrong in his predictions about humanity, let's use this opportunity to redouble our efforts as IOP to take the lead in helping employers and workers identify, achieve, and sustain a rhythm and balance to work, nonwork, and leisure pursuits that makes life possible and worth living. In the remainder of this commentary, we explore three areas in which IOP need to focus more attention: increasing our understanding of leisure, facilitating rhythm and balance, and optimizing work and leisure.

Increasing our understanding of leisure's purpose and impact

If leisure is the opposite of work or working, then it is reasonable to believe that leisure time equates to recovery time. However, recovery as a process does not fit neatly into either a leisure or broader nonwork domain, given that resource depletion and renewal occur in all life roles. Stress from work can carry over into personal or nonwork time, just as moments of resource gain can happen while working (e.g., Cranley et al., 2015). Given this complexity, IOPs need to dig deeper to address more fundamental questions about what leisure is for.

If leisure were to become equivalent to or more prevalent than work, its value would likely be reduced. As an illustration, consider the negative impact of near-total leisure on humanity

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depicted in the animated science-fiction movie WALL-E (Stanton, 2008). From a more philosophical and spiritual perspective, consider whether what is sweet can be known and appreciated without recurring exposure and experience with what is sour. Similarly, could or would the restorative benefits of leisure be experienced in the absence of the resource depleting demands of work? Along these lines, if we recognize that a primary purpose of leisure is to restore depleted resources, what happens when those resources are mostly or fully restored? What does the purpose of leisure become then? As with most things in life (including batteries), more recharging and restoring does not lead to better outcomes; sometimes it leads to an explosion.

Facilitating rhythm and balance in life

Echoing comments by Kaplan et al., work provides structure to our lives and the importance of this needs to be more fully understood and appreciated. As noted by Kaplan et al., not all forms of work are compensated employment (e.g., childcare, housekeeping, self-care, volunteerism/service). As such, differentiating between work and leisure is not the same as differentiating between work and nonwork aspects of life. Considering this, is it even reasonable to suggest there could be a sustainable equation for life that reflected an even 50/50 balance between time invested in work versus leisure? What about something more extreme, like a 40/60 "split"? Keynes' expectation that humanity at this point should be defined more by its leisure than its work pursuits does not reflect any sort of balanced reality. It even seems a bit demeaning, almost as an indictment of the purpose and potential of humanity to do something more than just "take it easy." This is particularly important to note given the increasing evidence that purpose is a predictor of mortality (e.g., Martela et al., 2024). Do more people find purpose in and through their work or their leisure?

Our ability to flourish as human beings requires a sustained rhythm and an active balancing of our work and leisure. There was a time when this rhythm and balance was dictated and maintained by naturally occurring cycles of light and dark, and the passing of seasons. Through the past couple centuries of industrialization, these natural rhythms have been disrupted, but does this mean that a philosopher's ideas warrant more of our attention than natural rhythms and age-old truths? As an example, why are we so quick to ignore even older teachings and traditions that emphasize the importance of recurring rhythms or cycles of work and rest (e.g., from within the Jewish and Christian religions, the Sabbath, Sabbath Year, and jubilee years; Eisenstein, n.d.; Jarrett, 2023; Theology of Work Project, n.d.)?

Building on this, what might we be able to learn and do differently in terms of how we design and manage our work and leisure rhythms? Is it not worth at least exploring the possible benefits of one true respite day per week and recurring longer breaks every few years (e.g., sabbaticals) for workers regardless of industry? Along these lines, how might we help each other to develop and sustain recurring routines of recovery that facilitate success in our work and leisure? As an example, facilitating regular physical activity and exercise for workers is a way of improving their capacity and well-being in the future (e.g., Li et al., 2024). Similar effects could be achieved with work design and work-related resources that help workers to regularly get sufficient and high-quality sleep, adequate nutrition, and flexible time to spend with family or friends.

The work that Keynes was reflecting on in his time and juxtaposing against leisure is not the same kind of work that all humans experience today. Although there are still jobs today that are as difficult and physically demanding as much of the work in Keynes' time, there are also many forms of current employment that are less a necessity for survival than a way of passing time while feeling productive and gaining access to valued resources (e.g., pay, benefits). Many workers today may choose to work more than they pursue leisure because the former provides more direct access to important and valued resources than the latter. Here again IOP have an opportunity to reconnect with a long-lost part of our past and to work with organizations to help do a better job

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of vocational guidance and management for workers, from recruiting through to retirement and beyond. When our work is more of a choice than a necessity, it is more important than ever to ensure that people are playing the right version of the game for whomever they are (and whatever their needs are). We also need to be careful that we do not allow or encourage management via gamification strategies to move us or the employees we manage in a wrong direction (cf., https://cacm.acm.org/news/the-games-people-play/).

Optimizing work and leisure

Related to the preceding comments, IOP have tremendous opportunities to improve peoples' experiences with work and leisure by designing and optimizing jobs and work environments to protect worker health safety and well-being. By doing this, we can help to ensure that work can achieve its full potential as a positive force and source of resources for workers (cf., Aitken et al., 2023). This means considering ways in which work schedules, tasks, and other demands influence a worker's ability to maintain some sort of work and rest balance or rhythm. This may need to start with more IOP getting better at helping organizational leaders to accurately define, identify, set, and manage workload limits for real (not superhuman) workers (e.g., Matthews & Reinerman-Jones, 2017).

In addition, there may be benefits in aligning work hours with workers' natural energy cycles. A strategic approach to work redesign could be to synchronize work schedules with employees' natural energy rhythms. This may involve revisiting existing work on work time preferences (e.g., "morningness"; e.g., Bohle et al., 2001) but expanding its application beyond shiftworking populations and increasing the sensitivity of how these preferences and associated needs are measured (e.g., Kosenkranius et al., 2023). Related research on chronotypes, or the natural tendencies people have toward being more energetic in the morning or evening, highlights the importance of understanding when employees are at their best (e.g., López-Soto et al., 2019).

Rather than enforcing a uniform work schedule for everyone, organizations can consider more flexible hours that allow workers to perform tasks during their peak energy periods and take breaks or engage in recovery (i.e., intersperse moments of leisure) during low energy times (Fritz et al., 2011; Vosika, 2023). For example, someone with a morning chronotype might thrive with a schedule that emphasizes intense work in the earlier part of the day, followed by time for recovery in the afternoon; someone with an evening chronotype might benefit from starting later, working through the afternoon, and recovering in the morning.

Shifting away from rigid, traditional work structures is becoming increasingly popular in the workplace, and some employees are gaining greater autonomy to design their workday around what suits them best. This is another area where IOP can help to educate employees and employers about what this means, what this looks like in practice. As more organizations embrace this approach, work becomes more personalized and accommodating; it also can become more ambiguous and confusing for everyone involved. As organizations experiment with fully remote and hybrid modes of working, IOP can help to educate leaders, managers, and workers regarding best practices for making these different modes of work *work* for them.

Optimizing individuals' quality of recovery during moments of leisure needs to be a goal that IOP are targeting just as much as optimizing the productivity that each worker can generate in a given work role. Simply cutting back on work hours is insufficient if that "free" time is not spent engaging in activities that genuinely help people to recharge. As such, the optimization of the work–leisure relationship does not boil down to increasing leisure and reducing work. Instead, it is about helping to ensure that time spent in either form of pursuit is time well spent.

Related to this is the common misconception that recovery of resources through leisure can only happen outside of work time and contexts. This belief is not supported by research (e.g., Cranley et al., 2015; Zacher et al., 2014), and adhering to it hinders our consideration of

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strategies for incorporating moments of leisure throughout periods of work. By embedding recovery into the workday itself (e.g., through microbreaks, built-in reflection time between meetings/appointments, scheduled personal vs. group work time, limited meeting slots each day or each week), we can create a more sustainable approach that facilitates workforce productivity and well-being.

Organizations can also play a critical role in this process by promoting a variety of practices that encourage effective recovery. Simple steps like setting collective expectations for recovery and availability, promoting physical activity, or offering resources for stress management can make a difference (Almén et al., 2020; Barber et al., 2023; Sonnentag et al., 2022). Investing in and incorporating efforts like these serves to protect organizational employment investments by helping to increase the likelihood that workers can fully and productively engage when they are at work.

Reducing or compressing work hours is not a guaranteed strategy for improving the quality of workers' leisure or lives more generally. Organizations can help to educate and support employees in these matters, as part of initiatives to create healthier, more balanced work cultures. Related to this point, consider that many of the identified core elements to resource recovery (see Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007) include individual experiences with choice/control, mastery, relaxation, detachment, and social connection. It is often assumed that these are more likely and more restorative when present outside of paid employment contexts, but this may be a false assumption. These elements and qualities may be easier to find in and through well-designed employment than in our varied leisure pursuits.

Conclusion

Work is a path or doorway leading to resources that we all need to survive and thrive. Not all work is designed equally well, and we as IOP need to spend more time responding to this challenge as a field. This means focusing our attention, expertise, and efforts toward refining and (re)designing jobs and work to be in forms that are not detrimental to human health, safety, and well-being. This means designing and managing work in ways that consider what workers need to reach their full potential.

Unfortunately, many of today's jobs are essentially little more than compilations of nonessential tasks, albeit ones that generate profit for an organization and thus lead to resources that may be valuable to workers. Some of these jobs realistically could disappear and the world would continue to spin; others are essential forms of work that need to be redesigned for real (not super) humans or humans as machines. Workers in any of these jobs need the help of IOP to ensure they can achieve any sort of rhythm or balance in their resource management.

Take physicians for example: They are indispensable to society, but the intense demands on their time, effort, and energy (i.e., long hours, on-call duties, and additional responsibilities outside their scheduled shifts) can severely impact their health and well-being. The constant demands they experience are not balanced with adequate leisure and recovery, and instead have few built-in limits. The consequences of sustained functioning in this type of scenario negatively affect physicians' physical and psychological health, and risk compromising the quality of care they provide to patients (e.g., Krämer et al., 2017).

Improving approaches to work design and management to facilitate optimal work–leisure rhythm and balance is among our greatest opportunities as IOP to make a real impact. Instead of wondering if Keynes was right or wrong, why don't we show the world how to "do work well?" Let's leverage all that we know about job and work design, human motivation, and occupational health and safety to improve work design and management so that all work can be done in a way that benefits individuals and society.

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