

**SURVIVING
THE DAILY
GRIND**

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BARTLEBY'S GUIDE TO WORK

PHILIP COGGAN

The
Economist

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To all the long-suffering office workers of the world

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PREFACE

Imagine that this is the plan for your working day. First, you have a two-hour Zoom meeting in which your manager will outline a “holistic” approach to the company’s strategy. Then there will be a call from the marketing team which plans to rename your group the “operational solutions” team. Finally, there will be a mandatory lecture under the guise of your company’s “thought leadership” programme. Does the prospect fill you with dread? Do you wish you could create an avatar who could nod sagely and say “quite right” occasionally, to save you the bother of attending any or all of these events?

Then this is the book for you. It is designed for workers who find their job frustrating (but need the money) and for managers who have learned to talk in corporate waffle but wish they could express themselves more clearly. It is based on the things I have learned as the Bartleby columnist on management and work at *The Economist* but also in a 40-year career at organisations, large and small.

The book is not a compilation of columns but, inevitably,

some of the ideas and phrasing will have appeared before in *The Economist*. Writing at book length has given me the opportunity to organise and hone the concepts that sustained the column over the years.

As *Economist* writers are anonymous, the author of the column was always referred to as “Bartleby” and I have maintained this habit in the book. Because the column was about work and management, the issues had touched me directly, so there is much more of the personal voice than is usual for *Economist* writers. This also allows me to take a more offbeat and humorous tone than my colleagues who have to cover such weighty matters as Chinese foreign policy and climate change.

At the end of the book, readers will understand why modern work is organised in a way that can be so frustrating. And the book will also show that things don't need to be this bad; there are ways of managing people that are less bureaucratic, that allow individual workers to be more creative and spend less time in meetings and do not involve language that is seeped through with obfuscation and circumlocution. But enough. This is not the time to “circle back” or “reach out”. Let us get on with it.

Philip Coggan
November 2021

INTRODUCTION

It is one of the great mysteries of modern working life. Why do so many managers pollute their utterances with so much inane jargon? When we leave home and head to the office, it is almost as if we have to speak a different language. This language is one of the reasons why work can be so tiresome.

To understand why this climate has developed, we must call on the spirit of the great C. Northcote Parkinson, a 20th-century management writer, who created “Parkinson’s law” – that “work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion”. This new guide will propose a number of new working laws and amend some old ones.

The first law is: *jargon abhors a vacuum*. All too often, executives know they have nothing significant to say in a speech or to write in a memo. But they are aware they have to say *something* and, furthermore, that they have to speak at some length. So they use long words, obscure jargon and buzzwords to fill the space.

The second reason for managers to use jargon is to establish their credentials. By using these terms in their vocabulary,

they feel they are demonstrating their expertise and fitness to rule. Like a priest intoning the liturgy in Latin or a football supporter chanting the team song, their language shows they belong to a tribe.

The manager's colleagues or subordinates are unlikely to challenge them on their use of banal language or impenetrable jargon, for fear of causing offence or revealing their own ignorance. Social convention makes them reluctant to declare that the emperor has no clothes or makes no sense.

Of course, most managers are perfectly decent people. In a sense they are trapped in their roles, just as a heavy-set Hollywood actor will become typecast as a villain. They use the jargon because it is expected of them. For a long time, managers had their own dress code as well; a suit and tie for men, a jacket, blouse, skirt and heels for women. The rise of Silicon Valley casual (T-shirt and chinos) has created more freedom in the last 20 years (although more for men than for women). The language is just another version of the uniform.

Another reason for the flourishing of corporate babble is the ephemeral nature of much modern work. Most modern humans are not hunting game, growing crops or even making physical objects – tasks where the aim is clear and output can be easily measured. Instead most people in the developed world work in the service sector. Some service sector activity has straightforward aims: cutting hair or serving meals, for example. But lots of us work in jobs with titles that would have baffled our ancestors: creative director, logistics coordinator or social media curator. Those who hold these jobs may not be entirely sure how to measure success. So they try

to look busy and, in doing so, invent activities to keep their colleagues and subordinates busy.

Thus the irritations of modern working life are not confined to language; they also relate to managerial behaviour. Part of the satisfaction of being a manager comes from telling other people what to do, rather than being told what to do yourself. Power, even in small things, can be exhilarating. If you want subordinates to attend a meeting, you can insist on it; the same goes for evening functions and 7.30am breakfasts. Allowing underlings to miss these occasions would undermine the manager's authority. Chimps grin to gain acceptance and show submission to the leader of the group; office workers show up to their boss's unnecessary meetings to achieve the same effect.

In turn, junior managers are driven by the need to meet the demands of the corporate hierarchy. There is an old rhyme:

Great fleas have little fleas upon their backs to bite 'em,
And little fleas have lesser fleas, and so ad infinitum.

The same system applies in companies, but in reverse. Each layer of management has another layer above it all the way up to the chief executive. And in a big company, the chief executive has to worry about the board of directors and the shareholders. A corporate culture is set from the top. Junior managers may worry that, if they appear too relaxed with their subordinates, they will not be marked for promotion. Business magazines are full of pieces lionising chief executives who get up at 4am to deal with their e-mails; they spare less

thought for the poor schmucks who wake to find five messages from their boss before they have had their breakfast.

When managers are uncertain about the usefulness of their own activities, they are naturally tempted to create artificial goals for their teams to meet; boxes to tick and lists to check. It is a long-established rule that too much bureaucracy is a characteristic of bad organisations. The *Simple Sabotage Field Manual*, compiled by the OSS (the precursor to the CIA) during the second world war, had a number of suggestions for managers who want to undermine the work of their team.¹ These include “insist on perfect work in relatively unimportant products; send back for refinishing those that have the least flaw” and “multiply the procedures and clearances involved in issuing instructions, pay checks, and so on. See that three people have to approve everything where one would do.”

Other suggestions for sabotage include “talk as frequently as possible and at great length” and “bring up irrelevant issues as frequently as possible”. And the OSS manual suggested that the best way to lower morale is to be “pleasant to inefficient workers” and “give them undeserved promotions”. If you think that your company is following the manual, you are probably not alone.

So many of the things we find most frustrating at work – the endless meetings, the meaningless jargon – are social constructs, rather than actions necessary to fulfil the required tasks. Indeed, one of the reasons we find these things so annoying is that we know very well that these elements are not useful, and yet they are forced upon us. As Rousseau might have said, had he been born in the modern era: “Man was born free, but is everywhere stuck in a meeting.”

C. Northcote Parkinson spotted many of these problems in the middle of the 20th century. He described how bureaucracy tended to propagate itself. An overworked manager will ask to hire two subordinates (not one, because a single underling might become a rival). These subordinates will generate paperwork which the senior manager will have to review, making the boss even busier and potentially encouraged to demand even more staff. This is just one illustration of his law that “work expands to fill the time available”.

Work's other compensations

Working life is not all bad, of course, and its appeal is not just the ability to earn money. There is the camaraderie of colleagues. The occasional satisfaction of a task well done. The intellectual stimulation that comes from dealing with new ideas or new people. And, most importantly, work gives our lives purpose: a reason to get up in the morning that does not involve playing video games or watching Netflix.

For these reasons, being out of work is a dismal experience. A study of the long-term unemployed in Germany found that 15.6% suffered from minor depression and 34.4% had major depression. Fatigue and difficulty in concentration were two of the common symptoms of those affected. Human brains evolved to be active and we get bored with nothing to do. Just as importantly, we get our social status from our job: “What do you do?” is a common conversational opener. Being a doctor normally gets lots of kudos; depending on the social setting, announcing yourself as a banker or gun salesman might not be as popular.

The result is that, even though sometimes we can't live

with work, we keep going because we can't live without it. It is hardly surprising that we find some elements of employment to be tedious and pointless; the same restlessness that makes us bored without work means that we chafe at the constraints of spending a large proportion of our working hours serving the interests of our employers, rather than ourselves.

This book is intended to help ordinary workers survive the daily grind, by allowing them to spot the absurdities and the bullshit pumped out by management, and to find ways to do a good job without losing their sanity. But it is also designed to help managers become better at doing their jobs, by pointing out some of the obvious traps that supervisors fall into. If managers get better, the working lives of ordinary employees can improve too. People often don't leave bad jobs, they leave bad managers.

This dual approach harks back to the Herman Melville short story *Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street*, which inspired me to name a column in *The Economist* on management and work. The 19th-century story tells of a man called Bartleby who takes a job in an office as a scrivener (clerk) and initially seems very keen. Suddenly, however, he refuses all requests from his boss, saying: "I would prefer not to." No attempts at blandishment, reasoning or threats from the manager could make him change his mind. Eventually the recalcitrant starts living in the office and the firm has to move premises to avoid him; Bartleby ends up wasting away in prison, too lethargic even to eat. In its own way, the story can be seen as the tale of a worker refusing to conform to society's demands by performing meaningless tasks. Alternatively, the

tale can be seen as an illustration of the failure of managers to find ways of motivating their staff.

This book will give many instances of occasions where employees would understandably be tempted to say: “I prefer not to.” But first, we need to consider how work practices evolved into the current system.

A potted history of work

Work has changed dramatically over the millennia. Anthropologists point wistfully to the days when hunter-gatherers could garner all the necessary food, water and firewood in 15 hours a week, leaving the rest of the time free for leisure. We have only limited information about what they did with that free time – cave painting and jewellery making excepted. They had none of the modern pastimes, from books through TV to recorded music, to keep them entertained. There is vigorous debate about whether life in those ancient times was more violent or less violent, or indeed more pleasant, than it is today. But a hunter-gatherer lifestyle could not sustain anything like the size of human population that exists in the 21st century.

Anthropologists now believe it is humanity’s ability to co-operate that allowed us to outpace other hominids. Stronger social networks allowed us to develop better technology which in turn allowed us to feed more people and develop even denser networks. Agriculture enabled the human population to expand substantially but at a significant initial cost. Focusing on a small number of crops made humans less healthy, and at risk of famine. Gathering in large numbers in close proximity to domesticated animals

left humans prone to infectious disease. Farmers had to work harder than hunter-gatherers – sowing, weeding, harvesting the crops and converting the grains into bread and other meals. Early agricultural societies were less egalitarian, as grain had to be stored, and thus those who controlled the stores were in charge of the food supply. Over time, land ownership became concentrated among a narrow elite; had you been born a thousand years ago, the chances are high that you would have been a peasant with a low life expectancy.

The emergence of small towns and cities led to a host of new occupations. Some were specialised – shoemakers, blacksmiths and brewers who could take advantage of a large group of customers gathered in the same place. Other people became servants to look after the elite; some were slaves who were regarded as the property of their masters, to be bought and sold without any consideration of their interests.

Until 1800 or so, most people worked on their own, or in small groups. Organised employment was rare. There was no need for management theory or bureaucracy. The textiles industry, for example, operated on a “putting-out” system whereby merchants brought yarn to be spun, or cloth to be woven, sewn or shaped by a largely female workforce, operating in their own homes. People were paid for the amount they produced.

But the industrial revolution changed all that. Machinery was used to spin and weave cloth, and this machinery used water and steam power. The workers had to gather in a central place, the factory, and operate machines owned by the mill owner. They were required to turn up for a shift, often of 12–14 hours a day. Their time was no longer their own. At

work, there were strict rules on behaviour, including bans on talking, enforced by foremen or overseers. Many factories recruited women and young children because they were more docile than adult men. Like the emergence of farming, this economic shift also came at a high initial cost. People crowded together in cities with no plumbing or sewers and life expectancy declined sharply in places like Liverpool or Manchester.

Lifestyles also changed as a result. Many people did not own a watch or a clock. So that required a new infrastructure, including “knocker-uppers” – people who went from door to door to wake sleepy workers, and the factory whistle or horn to signify the beginning and end of the shift. In time, this would lead to punch cards to prove that employees had arrived and left on time.

The emergence of trains, and later buses and cars, allowed some workers to commute longer distances to their place of employment, leading to the “rush hour”, a concept unimaginable in the 18th century. And the industrial revolution also saw the emergence of large companies, particularly in the rail and energy sectors. These companies needed people to record details such as sales, wages and the supply of raw materials. In turn, this led to “white collar” workers who were grouped together in offices, under the ever-seeing eye of their supervisors.

By the early 20th century, the modern pattern of work had appeared, with many employees working for large companies or the government, working a set pattern of hours (eventually 9 to 5, five days a week) from the time they left school or university to the time they retired. (The word

“weekend” was first used in 1879.) And those workers had to deal with a hierarchy of managers, stretching all the way up from the team leader to the chief executive. Big companies tend to have departments that handle different functions (marketing, finance, personnel and so on) and cover different regions and countries. Each required a management structure.

Not every job fitted into this pattern, of course. Some people were self-employed, usually those with a marketable skill such as plumbing. This gave workers more freedom at the expense of less security. In recent years, we have seen the emergence of the “gig economy” in which people are not treated as full-time employees and often lack security or the right to sick pay or holiday pay. At the moment, though, most people are still “wage slaves”, as they have become known. And they have to put up with the tedium, the jargon and the idiocies that this book will describe.

The pandemic and after

It is often said that crises do not create new trends in society; they simply accelerate those that are already in place. The covid-19 pandemic looks like being another example of the theory. It will advance the pre-existing trend for people to shop online, rather than in physical stores, and for consumers to use plastic cards, rather than cash, for purchases. And it will also accelerate the trend for people to work remotely, rather than in the office.

Why did so many people gather in offices in the first place? The rationale was that office communication was largely conducted on paper – memos, purchase orders and

the like – and people needed to be close together so the paper could be passed around. Managers wanted to keep a close eye on their staff to ensure that they were not slacking; meetings were held face to face.

Given the technology of the day, this was an understandable way of organising things. But technology slowly changed. Some big companies had offices all over the world and they had to communicate via telegram, telephone and letters. By the 1970s and 1980s, the facsimile machine offered a way to transmit documents. But until the last two decades of the 20th century, these forms of communication were either expensive or slow.

The internet, and better broadband connections, changed all that in the 1990s and 2000s. Managers were able to have detailed and instant communications with their staff and their overseas subsidiaries, enabling them to keep track of sales, shipments and stock levels. Documents could be transferred onscreen rather than on paper; there was no need for everyone to gather in the same place.

It took time, however, for patterns of work to change. Most people were still required to endure the rush hour and a long commute in order to turn up at the office at the same time every weekday. In part, this was because working from home was regarded with suspicion; employees were suspected of slacking when not under the boss's watchful eye. Remote workers felt more isolated and were less likely to feel part of the team.

The pandemic changed everything. Suddenly, governments imposed economic lockdowns and offices were closed. Many people were forced to work from home. Managers and

employees made the best of it. Employees were saved from the morning and evening commute and worked, on average, 48 minutes a day more than when they went into the office.

The sudden prevalence of working from home shows that changes in long-established patterns of work can occur. So that gives us hope that we can eliminate some of the other annoyances that this book will describe. Some companies do things much better, allowing workers to prioritise the tasks they find most important; some managers are direct and clear when they speak.

Over the course of this book, we will try and help readers cope with the vicissitudes of modern work. We will update Parkinson's law, examine and update the Peter principle (that people are promoted to their level of incompetence) and create new "Bartleby's laws" that will help readers navigate the new world of work. The book will suggest ways of improving job interviews, feedback sessions and corporate celebrations. And it will provide a cynical, but useful, guide to the jargon that managers spout. If we all take the lessons to heart, work does not have to be a four-letter word.

GETTING STARTED

Much of this book will discuss the frustrations of working life. But the trickiest problem may be getting a job in the first place.

Interviews

In 2019, a tweet from Olivia Bland, a 22-year-old Briton, went viral. She had suffered what was dubbed the “interview from hell” which left her crying at the bus stop. The interviewer, a man called Craig Dean, scrolled through her Spotify list and criticised her musical choices, made rude remarks about the way she sat and called her an underachiever. Olivia said she “felt like being sat in the room with my abusive ex”. The bizarre kicker is that, after all the aggravation, she was offered the job. Wisely, she turned it down.¹

Mr Dean apologised for any hurt he had caused. But the broader point is that his interviewing technique was severely misguided. Ms Bland’s musical preferences were of no importance unless she was applying to be a disc jockey. Interviews should not be a random series of questions about a

candidate's personal life since these will only produce subjective responses on the part of the interviewer.

Far too many questions at interviews are pointless. "Where do you see yourself in five years' time?" is a classic example. A few bold souls may be tempted to answer: "Sitting in your place on the other side of the table," but this response is as likely to irritate as impress. Seriously, how can any of us know where we will be five years from now? Another terrible question is: "What do you think is your biggest weakness?" It is tempting not to admit to any faults at all or to come back with a clever-dick answer like: "My greatest weakness is that I'm a perfectionist." But this question is unlikely to lead to an honest answer. Candidates' ability to deal with this query is probably dependent on their ability to lie, or obfuscate. So if they answer it well, the chances are high that they are the sort of person who will mislead their boss when a project gets into difficulty.

Glassdoor, the website that allows workers to rate their employers, published a list of the 50 most-asked interview questions which is worth a glance.² Aside from the obvious "Why should we hire you? What are your strengths?" there are tricky questions like: "How do you handle pressure?" and "Where can you improve?" It is considered wise to admit to some shortcomings and then reveal how you are addressing them. Some firms ask if you know the name of the chief executive or their main customers, so best to do some research before you turn up. But it is slightly depressing to see that some ask about your favourite website, or the last book you read, which sounds more like a bad first date than an interview.

Experts generally agree that the approach most likely to result in hiring the best employees, and a more diverse workforce, involves a structured interview. The same set of questions should be asked of all candidates so they can be easily compared. And some of those questions should relate to job attributes like experience or skills. A meta-study of personnel selection methods found that structured interviews were significantly more useful than unstructured interviews in finding productive employees.³

An even more rigorous approach is to get the candidate into the office for a while and ask them to perform one of the tasks they are likely to undertake if they get the job. A survey by LinkedIn, a social network for employees, found that one of the most useful techniques was to assess the candidates' soft skills, such as teamwork and flexibility.⁴ Many companies use a 20-minute psychological test. A 2017 survey found that 32% of human resources teams used such tests when hiring executives and 17% of them used these tests when recruiting hourly workers.⁵ But the tests vary widely in quality and are subject to bias; in 2018, two US companies agreed to stop using their tests after the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission determined that they adversely affected applicants because of their race or national origin.

An ingenious (although admittedly niche) alternative, practised by Walt Bettinger of financial broker Charles Schwab, is to invite the candidate to breakfast. Beforehand, Mr Bettinger asks the manager to mess up his guest's order and then see how the candidate reacts: are they rude or understanding?⁶ Presumably tantrum-throwers fail to get hired.

Some companies interview their candidates remotely

on video and then use the services of software companies that offer algorithms designed to assess the jobseekers. The algorithms analyse facial expressions with the aim of determining characteristics such as dependability and emotional intelligence. But in January 2021, Hirevue, one of the leading companies in the field, said it would no longer use visual analysis in its job assessments and would focus on other factors such as language.⁷ Psychologists point out that people express emotions in a wide variety of ways, which cannot always be interpreted reliably from facial expressions. Furthermore, since the interviewees know they are being analysed, the process is likely to be artificial; it is hard to be natural when you know you are being scrutinised so closely.

Of course, getting an interview is often the biggest struggle of all. Many multinational companies now use a computer algorithm to sort through the thousands (sometimes hundreds of thousands) of candidates who apply to work for them. This step is inevitable as the companies would need to have vast teams to analyse the applicants individually. In theory, this can work well. An algorithm can be unbiased if designed correctly. But what matters is the information the programmer puts into it. If the ideal credentials are based on the attributes of the current workforce, and most employees are white, male and privately educated, then the algorithm may well pick more people in that vein.

Many jobseekers may fail to get to the interview stage because of the way that they have prepared their resumé or curriculum vitae (CV). Victoria McLean, a former headhunter and recruitment manager, set up a company called City CV to help job applicants. She says that 75% of resumé

may be rejected immediately, often because they lack the key words that the algorithm is searching for. These words often relate to the type of experience the company requires. So candidates should pay careful attention to the job advert and the language it uses; if it mentions the acronym PM (for project management), for example, a qualified candidate should use PM in their resumé. They should also make sure their LinkedIn page has the same details as their CV as employers may well use their entries to cross-check.

Biased hiring

Employment biases can emerge in many different ways. One study found that adverts on Facebook for jobs as taxi drivers and janitors were more likely to be shown to ethnic minority users whereas postings for pre-school teachers and secretaries were more likely to be shown to women.⁸ This may well be because those employers who place their ads choose to optimise their search based on how many views (that is, how much engagement) they get; the algorithm may then target those people who have responded to similar adverts in the past.

The wording of job adverts is also important. Research shows that women are less likely to apply for jobs when the adverts use words such as “aggressive” or “ambitious”. One company changed its advert to focus on qualities such as enthusiasm and innovation, and used a photo of a woman rather than a man; it found that the proportion of female applicants rose from 5% to 40%.⁹

Racial bias is a significant problem. A study of US job applications found that white people with a criminal record

received as many callbacks from employers as black people who had never committed an offence.¹⁰ There is also evidence that employers discriminate based on something as simple as a candidate's name; certain types of forename are associated with African-Americans or Asians, for example. Some applicants may accordingly feel forced to "whiten" their name by choosing an Anglicised version, or by applying with their middle name if it is associated with those of European descent, like David or Jane. Another approach is to add "white-sounding" hobbies like hiking or skiing. A study found that 25% of African-Americans who whitened their resumé's got callbacks for interviews compared with 10% of those who did not.¹¹

Many companies now have "diversity and inclusion" policies that aim to counteract biases, and will sometimes have an executive responsible for overseeing the issue. One answer on the recruitment front is to have interview panels that are more diverse, on the grounds that people have an innate tendency to pick people like themselves. If the panel is all white and male, it is hardly surprising if those are the candidates they choose. Making sure that there is at least one woman, and one person from an ethnic minority, on every shortlist is another potential approach.

The danger is that companies try to create a diverse shortlist of candidates but only include a "token" representative female or member of an ethnic minority. One study tested bias by asking students to pick a candidate for the post of athletic director; the candidates had similar qualifications but some had white-sounding, and some black-sounding, names.¹² When two candidates were white and one black,

the panel tended to pick a white applicant, but this switched when two of the candidates were black. The same pattern occurred when it came to gender; the panel picked a man when two of the three candidates were male and a woman when two of three were female. Another study found that, if there were just one woman in a four-person shortlist, her odds of being selected were practically zero; this rose to 67% if three of the four candidates were female. (Of course, those odds are less than chance would suggest, but it is still a lot better.)

Bias can result from trivial issues. Black hair tends to be curly and requires treatment to straighten it, which can involve potentially harmful chemicals.¹³ Many black women opt to wear their hair naturally, or use alternative styles such as braids or coils. But this causes them to look different from white employees and leads to discrimination. One study found that “black women with natural hairstyles were perceived to be less professional, less competent, and less likely to be recommended for a job interview than black women with straightened hairstyles and white women with either curly or straight hairstyles.”¹⁴

Things are slowly changing on this front. In the US, seven states (at the time of writing) have passed CROWN acts, prohibiting “discrimination based on a person’s hair texture or hairstyle if that style or texture is commonly associated with a particular race or national origin”. In November 2020, United Parcel Service, the delivery group, changed its dress code to allow facial hair and black hairstyles like afros and braids.¹⁵ However, that raises the question of why the group had a hair code for delivery drivers in the first place:

like most customers, Bartleby simply wants his parcels to arrive on time and doesn't mind whether the driver has a mullet or a moptop.

Another bias is against motherhood. A 2007 survey found that businesses rated mothers as 10% less competent and 15% less committed to their work than non-mothers and their starting salary was 7.4% lower than their childless peers.¹⁶ When it comes to being recommended for management, childless women were 8.2 times more likely to qualify than mothers. Remarkably, the odds were the other way round for men. Fathers were 1.8 times more likely to be recommended for management than childless men.

An anecdote by Betsy Holden, who eventually became co-chief executive of Kraft Foods, illustrates the problem. When she was a vice president at the firm, she became pregnant for the second time. "No one has even done this job with two children," her male boss fretted. "How many children do you have?" she asked. "Two," he replied.¹⁷ This double standard is remarkably common.

The need, and indeed desire, to take maternity leave seems to be another problem. This can interrupt the career progression of many women. Unless they return to the office in a matter of weeks, they may find that the company has moved on without them, offering new projects and promotions to others who have remained in the office. But management is not like school, where if you miss a term's worth of lessons, you will find it impossible to pass the exams. If you were a good manager before you had a baby, you're just as likely to be a good manager afterwards.

Even when they are in the job, women can find that

conventions and even equipment are biased against them. In construction and engineering, tools and safety jackets are designed for male hands and bodies, not those of females. Nor has there been much research on the long-term effects of using things like cleaning products on female bodies whereas the effect of inhaled particles on male miners has been studied extensively.¹⁸

And then of course there is the issue of sexual harassment. A 2017 survey in the US found that 45% of women had experienced unwanted attention in the workplace¹⁹ and the figure for Britain was 50%.²⁰ This category includes lewd remarks and questions about an individual's sexual history; worse still, 10% of British women have experienced physical assault at work. This is clearly a problem that has been around for generations and women have been intimidated from reporting it to their (largely male) bosses for fear of ridicule or dismissal. The #MeToo movement has encouraged more women to report the problem but clearly a lot still needs to change; some of those who suffer most are in low-paid jobs like cleaning or waitressing. (Some customers seem to think that, because waitresses depend on tips, they have to put up with offensive behaviour.)

Things have improved for those women who do make it to the top of the executive tree; they have the money to pay for childcare. It has helped that many more women have university degrees than 50 years ago, and society is also marked by assortative mating, with high-achieving couples tending to marry each other. Women now comprise more than a fifth of senior executive positions in US firms, compared with 10% in 1996. Some companies are exceptionally accommodating,

providing rooms where nursing mothers can express milk, sinks to wash the breast pumps and even courier services to deliver the milk to the baby when the mothers are away on a business trip.

Even within the male gender, there is discrimination. Participants in a study were shown pictures of male employees of a business consultancy, with similar clothes and masked faces. When asked to rank them in terms of team leadership, they rated the taller men more positively. Indeed, research has shown that taller and more attractive men earn more than their shorter and plainer colleagues. Other research showed that square-jawed men negotiated higher signing-on bonuses for themselves than longer-faced round-jawed peers.²¹ People seem to have a certain image of a strong leader (usually a man) and defer to those who fit the template.

Changing minds

It can take a long time to shift these stereotypes. But it is worth remembering that, a hundred years ago, there were hardly any women doctors or lawyers. Some men probably thought that those professions were beyond female capabilities. But now that women doctors and lawyers are commonplace, we hardly think about it. The same will become true of women in many other professions.

In 1970, only one in 20 of the performers in the top five US orchestras was a woman. No doubt there were some people who said this was down to innate ability; women were just not as musical as men. But from that decade onwards, orchestras started to use blind auditions in which the candidates performed behind a screen. This approach made it

50% more likely that women would make it through to final selection. To eliminate another potential source of bias, performers were asked to remove their shoes in case the sound of high heels unconsciously affected the selection process.²²

Many companies have adopted diversity and inclusion policies to try to improve their ethnic mix in recruitment, and to ensure that workers from ethnic minorities feel valued when they do join the firm. These policies seem to work better for some groups than for others. A survey of US workers by Glassdoor found that African-American employees gave their companies a lower rating than average (3.49 out of 5, versus 3.73) whereas Asian and Hispanic employees gave their firms a higher-than-average rating.

Some companies try to deal with these issues by asking staff to take unconscious bias training, which tries to tackle the hidden prejudices that we are reluctant to acknowledge openly or may not even be aware that we possess. (There are plenty of tests you can take online for this tendency, based on the speed of your response; for example, to see whether you associate black faces with weapons and white faces with harmless objects.) The evidence that these courses really change attitudes is shaky. A Harvard study that examined the effect of training on gender bias found a positive change in attitudes towards women in the workforce but little change in behaviour, except among those who were already favourably disposed.²³

As a result of these studies, some people argue that all this emphasis on diversity is sheer “political correctness” which distracts staff from hiring the best staff available. It makes no economic sense for companies to be racist or sexist,

they say. Companies that fail to hire the best talent will be outcompeted by those that do. Indeed, research by Bank of America found that companies with greater gender diversity on their boards were more profitable, and the same was true for companies with more ethnically diverse workforces.²⁴

So why isn't the approach universal? One argument is that the causation is the other way round; only the strongest companies can afford to take a more inclusive approach. Another is that, even if a diverse approach is beneficial, the effect may be slow to appear and may be small in the initial years. Managers have many other issues to worry about.

This is not just about ability. For any company that deals with consumers, it makes sense to have a team of executives who broadly reflect the target market. If the team is entirely white and male, its members may not notice if a product is unlikely to appeal to women or people from ethnic minorities, or indeed that a marketing campaign may turn out to be offensive to other groups.

The first days

The first few days at a company can be alienating and intimidating. At one job, Bartleby turned up at the appointed time and day and was sent upstairs to his new department. "Who are you? Nobody told me you were coming," said the team manager. It was not an encouraging start and relations with that manager (who soon left the company) were never great.

Large companies try to avoid this problem by creating a formal structure for new employees, in a process known in the jargon as "onboarding". This may involve a half-day of talks and videos, training in the software needed to undertake the

job, a tour of the office or factory, and so on. The team leader may take the employee to lunch to chat through the process. Many companies go further and put in place a mentor or “buddy” who may not be part of the same team but is sufficiently experienced to offer wise advice about the “culture” of the company. It is always useful to know which managers can take a joke, and which are humourless automatons; how long one can take for lunch and when is an acceptable time to arrive and go home; what things can be put on expenses; and which are the nicest sandwich and coffee shops to visit during working hours.

Some companies go one step further by sending employees a welcome pack before they join; at a consumer goods firm, this may contain some of the group’s products. Many firms set workers up with a laptop or mobile phone in advance.

Mentoring is another popular approach. Each new employee is assigned to someone more senior, but who is not their direct manager. This need not be the same person as the culture “buddy” where the relationship is likely to be short term. Mentors are people who workers can turn to if they find they are struggling with a project, or with their boss, or if they are trying to figure out the best route to promotion. The junior worker should be confident that the conversations will remain confidential. A meta-study of mentoring found it was effective in boosting the careers of junior staff although informal links proved better than formal ones.²⁵

One problem is that senior men may be reluctant to mentor younger women, for fear that the relationship is seen as inappropriate.²⁶ A survey in the wake of the #MeToo

movement found that nearly half of male managers felt “uncomfortable participating in a common work activity with a woman, such as mentoring, working alone or socialising together”.²⁷ And it’s not just the men; women can worry about how a relationship with someone of the other sex may appear to colleagues. The easiest way to deal with this is openness; have mentoring sessions within the office rather than outside them, and make sure that everyone is aware that the discussions are part of a mentoring relationship.

But getting started at a company is one thing. The big irritations of working life may be only just beginning, as the next chapter will explore.