
DECENT WORK AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR CAREERS

JAMES A. ATHANASOU

Private practice, Maroubra, and La Trobe University

The principle of decent work was first espoused in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Since 1999 the International Labour Organisation has operated according to a Decent Work Agenda and in recent times the movement towards the provision of decent work as a means of improving the quality of life has gathered momentum. Decent work is relevant to career development worldwide and embodies: a reasonable income; equal opportunities; safe working conditions; trade union representation; and a social safety net. Evidence is provided that decent work is not necessarily a feature of employment or career development across various countries. In a time of workplace fragmentation there are pay differentials in favour of workers under collective bargaining; working hours are longer than stipulated; overtime is not compensated; or there is work-related physical and mental stress. This paper explores the concept of decent work and its implications for career development.

As far back as 1948, the *Universal declaration of human rights* expressed the concept of decent work in relation to employment of acceptable quality:

- (1) Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment.
- (2) Everyone, without any discrimination, has the right to equal pay for equal work.
- (3) Everyone who works has the right to just and favourable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity, and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection. (United Nations, 1948, article 23)

Since 1999 the International Labour Organisation has operated according to a Decent Work Agenda because it is a key component of the fight against worldwide poverty and social exclusion. Obviously, decent work has been considered as fundamental to optimal career development. The interested reader is also referred to *Decent work: A better world starts here* (International Labour Organisation, 2009). This web movie is available in 29 languages and gives a three-minute overview of the concept of decent work.

The four aspects of decent work are reflected in Figure 1: namely, productive and freely chosen employment; rights at work including the core labour standards; social protection; and social dialogue. The

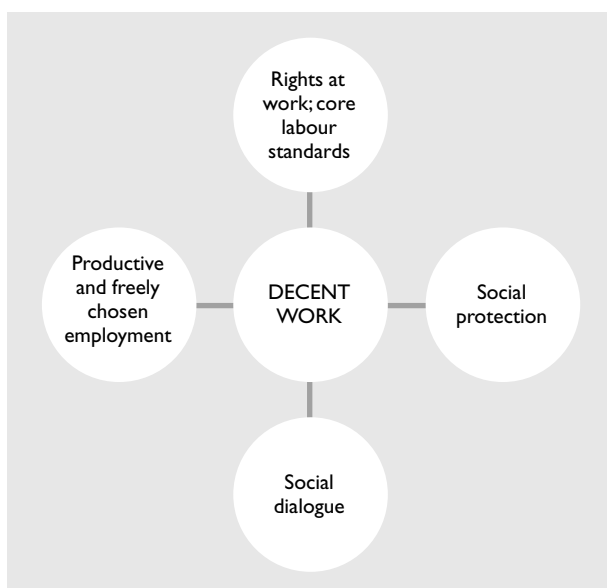


FIGURE 1: COMPONENTS OF DECENT WORK

core labour standards form the basis for social rights. In practical terms, they embody these features:

- an income that permits the worker a reasonable life
- work where there is equal opportunity and without discrimination
- occupational health and safety
- trade union representation
- a social security safety net for illness, disability, old age and maternity.

The concept of decent work embodies a set of coherent principles that are broad enough to take into account the varying social and economic conditions throughout the world. That is, they allow for local and wider implementation (UNESCO, 2009). The right to decent work encompasses these features:

- adequate work of acceptable quality in which rights are protected and which generates a sufficient income
- income-generating pursuits such as wage employment as well as self-employment or home working
- the availability of work and conditions for income generation
- fair and favourable conditions of work (e.g., suitable wages, occupational safety and health, hours of work and the right of workers to organise)
- work that is consistent with the dignity of a person.

The right to work excludes abusive work, such as bonded labour (adapted from UNESCO, 2009).

The European Union has decent work as part of its social agenda but has also adopted an external policy strategy with other nations. It noted:

Half of the world's population have (sic) no social protection; in many developing countries the majority of workers are employed in the informal economy, with low productivity and income and no social or labour protection. (Commission of the European Communities, 2006, p. 12)

These principles represent minimum employment rights that are important for tackling inequalities for the world's 1.4 billion working poor in places where half the world's workers earn less than US\$2 a day or a world where some 2.2 million people die of work-related accidents each year. The principles (namely, conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity) are also a stark reminder that they should underlie all human resource management practices and also be maintained in developed nations. It might be considered that, by and large, decent work is already a feature of employment and work in developed nations but this is far from the case.

An indication of the extent to which decent work does not apply across various countries is provided by the international WageIndicator surveys. WageIndicator collects its data through a permanent and voluntary web survey and the questions in the survey relate to working conditions. Its report (Oz, 2008) on decent work is based on 342 000 employees from 11 countries, surveyed from 2006 to 2008. One of the findings related to paid overtime. Overtime hours

were not compensated at all in 18% of cases in Finland (all percentages rounded), 41% in Germany, 54% in the United Kingdom and as much as 79% in Mexico. This is only one of the many factors that is relevant for decent work and indicates that basic criteria for decent work are not being fulfilled even in developed nations.

For practical purposes, decent work can be identified through straightforward indicators based on the International Labour Office conventions. They have been formulated here by the author for career development practitioners as a checklist (see Table 1). These principles of decent work are pragmatic criteria and should apply equally to developed as well as developing nations. Certainly

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there will be gaps in working conditions even in the most developed nations and the checklist that has been provided may offer a guide for practitioners. Having

established this international picture it may then be helpful to consider the extent to which decent work does exist in Australia.

TABLE 1: A CHECKLIST FOR DECENT WORK

CRITERIA FOR DECENT WORK	✓ or X
<p>Work and Wages</p> <p>Your wage is sufficient to cover the living expenses of you and your family members</p> <p>Your wage compares reasonably to the general level of wages or the living standard of others</p> <p>Your wage is paid regularly</p> <p>You are not forced to work overtime</p> <p>If you work overtime, then you are paid extra (minimally the basic hourly wage plus all additional benefits you are entitled to)</p>	
<p>Work and Holidays</p> <p>You receive a minimum of three weeks paid holidays</p> <p>You do not have to work during national holidays or weekends</p> <p>If you have to work on a national or religious holiday, you are entitled to compensation</p> <p>If you have to work during the weekend, you have the right to a rest period of 24 uninterrupted hours instead (not necessarily in the weekend, but at least in the course of the following week)</p> <p>If you have children at school then your paid holidays are allowed to coincide with the holidays of school-going children</p> <p>If you have family responsibilities, then you have the same opportunities as other workers who have no such responsibilities</p>	
<p>Maternity and Work</p> <p>If you are pregnant or on maternity leave, you are entitled to medical and midwife care without any additional cost</p> <p>If you are pregnant or you are breastfeeding, then you should be exempt from work that might bring harm to you or your baby</p> <p>Your maternity leave is at least 14 weeks</p> <p>During maternity leave, your income should amount to at least two-thirds of your preceding salary</p>	
<p>Health and Safety at Work</p> <p>Your employer makes sure that the workplace is safe</p> <p>Your employer provides protective clothing and other necessary safety precautions for free</p> <p>You receive training in all work-related safety and health aspects</p> <p>You have been shown the emergency exits</p> <p>When you inform your superior about an imminently or actually dangerous situation on the job, you are not made to take up that job while the situation lasts</p> <p>Your rights to work and income are protected when you are ill</p> <p>The first three days of your absence due to sickness are compensated</p>	

When you are ill, you are entitled to an income of 60 per cent of the minimum wage) for at least six months

You should not be fired during the first six months of an illness

If you are disabled due to an occupational disease or accident, you receive a somewhat higher benefit than when the cause is not work related

Social Security

You have the right to a pension from the age of 65, set as a percentage of the minimum wage or a percentage of the earned wage

If the breadwinner dies, the spouse and children are entitled to a benefit, expressed as a percentage of the minimum wage, or a percentage of the earned wage

If you are unemployed then you will have a right to an unemployment benefit for a limited period of time set as a percentage of the minimum wage or a percentage of the earned wage

You and your family members should have access to the necessary minimal medical care at an affordable price

Fair Treatment at Work

It is taken as given that men and women receive equal pay for work of equal value, regardless of their marital status

There is no pay inequality based on religion, race or ethnic background

The wages and salary system is clear and open

There is a clear match between pay and position

There is no sexual intimidation or gender discrimination

All workers, regardless of gender, religion, race or ethnic background, are entitled to equal training and education opportunities

You know whom to turn to for help in case of discrimination

Whenever you ask questions about discrimination or file a complaint, you feel protected against intimidation and against being dismissed

Children at Work

There is no work performed by children that could harm their health or hamper their physical and mental development

Forced Labour

You are allowed to look for work elsewhere

When you look for work elsewhere, you are not threatened with dismissal or reduced pay

You, not your employer, hold your own passport or ID

When you have not yet fully paid back a personal loan provided by your employer, you still receive pay

Trade Union Rights

Your trade union is entitled to negotiate with your employer on the terms of employment without hindrance

You are free to join a trade union (this is part of the fundamental human rights)

You are not put at a disadvantage when you are active in a trade union outside working hours

TOTAL CRITERIA FOR DECENT WORK

INDICATORS OF DECENT WORK IN AUSTRALIA

The nature of employment in Australia has been changing with increased fragmentation in the structures, opportunities and pathways leading to diversity but also paradoxically to inequality (see Australian Centre for Industrial Relations Research and Training, 1999; Watson, Buchanan, Campbell & Briggs, 2003). Some broad indicators of decent work in Australia are canvassed in the final sections. No claim is made that this coverage is comprehensive. The data and subsequent figures are all taken directly from the official statistics.

High Levels of Unemployment

It would be hypocritical to say that decent work exists in a world that is plagued by continual joblessness. In the Australian context it refers not only to the levels of unemployment in a community where, first, around one person in 20 in the labour force is seeking work (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009a, p. 29) or, secondly, where there were 179 800 out of a total of 453 400 persons looking for full-time work for more than 26 weeks (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009a, p. 50) but also to, thirdly, the joblessness in families that precludes some individuals from exercising the full range of educational or vocational choices. For instance, the official statistics indicated that jobless families accounted for 12% of all families in August

2008 but understandably unemployment falls hardest on the single-parent families that have an unemployed parent. Overall some 454 500 or 11% of all children in Australia live in a family (lone parent or couple) where no member is employed (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009b, p. 23).

Moreover, there are vast differences in unemployment rates between socioeconomic areas within the one city. These influence direct access to opportunities. Figure 2 indicates a long-standing discrepancy in the availability of work at the two social extremes of Sydney.

Furthermore, if decent work implies access to employment, then this is not the case for many Indigenous Australians. In 2007, the unemployment rate for the Indigenous population was 14% overall and even higher at 17% in regional areas compared with around 4% for Australia as a whole in July 2007 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008a, p. 13). The inescapable conclusion is that work—let alone decent work—has not been available for all Australians even in times of economic prosperity.

Pay Differentials

In Australia there has been an underlying egalitarianism or social contract that permeated the community's thinking about work and careers. It was embodied in the basic wage, industrial awards and our social security system. This is fast disappearing due to deregulation

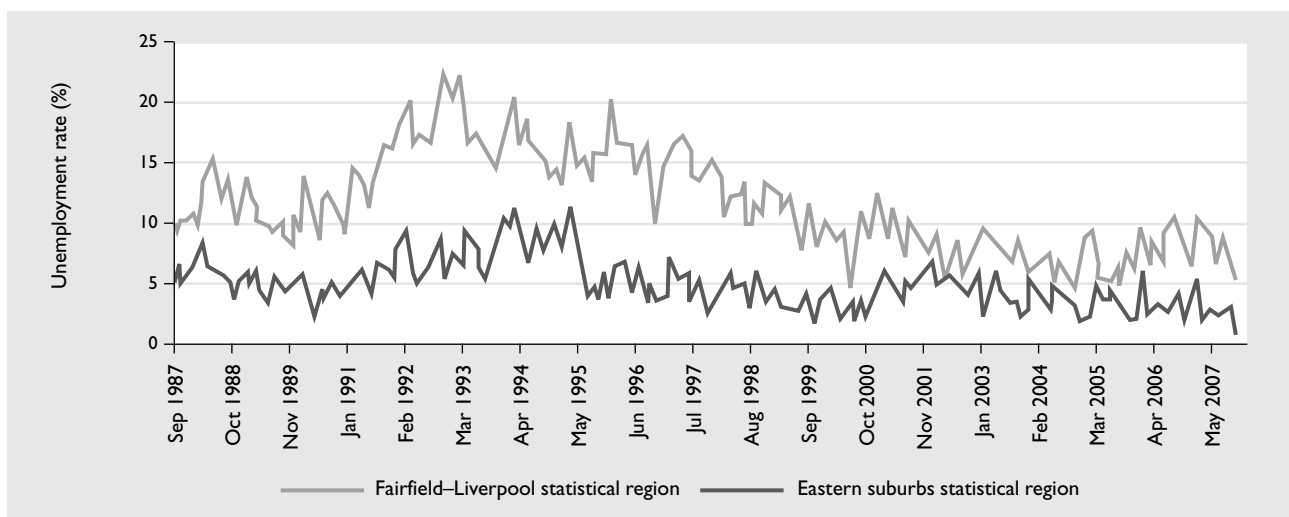


FIGURE 2: UNEMPLOYMENT RATE DIFFERENTIALS ACROSS AREAS OF HIGH AND LOW SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS IN SYDNEY (SOURCE: AUSTRALIAN BUREAU OF STATISTICS, 6204.0.55.001, LABOUR FORCE HISTORICAL TIMESERIES, AUSTRALIA, FEBRUARY 2009)

of the labour market, international competitiveness, the privatisation of many government services as well as federal or state budget spending cuts. The changes come at a social cost to people's lives and careers. In the current workplace relations environment, an employee's pay is set through collective bargaining (39.8% of employees) or individual bargaining (38.7% of employees) or through reference to the industrial award system (16.5% of employees). One of the principles of decent work is that there should not be pay differentials in favour of workers under collective bargaining. Yet the average weekly total earnings for full-time employees under an industrial award or pay scale were only \$730.00 per week compared with \$1278.60 per week for collective bargaining (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008b, p. 27). This discrepancy is further highlighted in the pay differentials across workers and executives. Any concepts of fairness seem to have been eroded internationally, much to the detriment of future generations.

Paid Leave

Even if people are employed there is no guarantee that they will receive their full entitlements to such basic benefits as paid leave. In 1941, annual leave of one week became standard increasing to three weeks in 1963 and four weeks in 1973. By August 2008, full-time employees without paid leave entitlements (paid sick leave or paid holiday leave or both) accounted for around 10–11% of all full-time employees. Paid maternity leave is an area in which Australia is behind other countries; in 2008, it was available to only 47% of full-time employees (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008c, p. 49). Once again, the lack of paid leave entitlements falls heaviest on the 2.5 million part-time employees and those in the lowest skilled occupations.

Work and Family Balance

Even when employment is obtained and minimum entitlements are achieved then there are other barriers to decent work. Despite the introduction of the 38-hour working week in the federal Metal Industry and other awards as far back as 1981, the average hours worked by adult full-time non-managerial employees in 2008 were 39.7 hours per week (Australian Bureau

of Statistics, 2008b, p. 22). The excessive time spent at work is reflected in the official description of a parent's working arrangements:

Putting in extra hours at work (paid or unpaid) was the usual practice for one parent in 41% of cases, and both parents in 17% of cases, among couples with children. Working extra hours was especially common in families where both parents were employed full-time. One or both parents usually worked extra hours in 70% of these families, however relatively few were doing this to increase their income (12% of those who were paid for their extra hours). People were mainly working extra hours to get the work done and meet deadlines. (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009c).

The final section of this paper considers not only whether one obtains work, is rewarded for it appropriately and maintained some work–life balance but also whether one managed to obtain some occupational health and safety.

Work-related Injuries

In the 12 months to June 2006, around one in every 16 workers experienced a work-related injury or illness. These rates are highest amongst particular age groups (workers aged 15–19 years) and selected occupational groups. Production and transport workers, tradespeople and labourers accounted for more than 40% of all injured workers yet made up around 30% of all employed persons (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008d). Of those who received a work injury or illness in 2005–2006, just over 43% had not received any occupational health and safety training (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006, p. 5). Of course, the most severe type of work-related injury or illness is one that results in death; during 2005–2006 there were 434 work-related fatalities (270 people died while working; 123 died while travelling to or from work; and 41 bystanders to a work activity died) (Australian Safety and Compensation Council, 2008, p. 1).

CONCLUSIONS

It seems that neither in Australia nor internationally can one confidently assert that decent work is the

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norm. There is evidence of the following barriers to the achievement of decent work:

- many do not work and that in some socioeconomic groups (either as a consequence of or as a corollary to other factors) many endure the problems of entrenched, prolonged and major joblessness that keep them on the lowest economic rung
- there are substantial pay differentials for workers in different industrial relations arrangements
- paid leave is not universal
- work intensification has taken a toll on parenting
- many suffer death or injury in the workplace.

In short, the hypothesis that decent work is a feature of various economies and particularly work in Australia cannot be supported without qualifications. It is possibly a generalised perception from the image of a mythical Australian Lake Wobegon, where everybody is above average.

The existence of these barriers alone is a major impediment to someone's career development at every stage. This applies equally to those who are privileged in some way as well as to those who suffer disadvantage through no fault of their own. It shows that career development is not a level playing field in which resources, opportunities, working conditions or rewards are evenly distributed. Vocational psychologists and others in this field have a moral obligation to advise people about these potential limitations and restrictions so that they do not enter the world of work starry-eyed and ripe for exploitation. Moreover there is a social obligation to become vocational activists in order to achieve equity and fairness in the modern workplace.

This article is part of a wider program of research and it is recognised that it has not been possible to document every aspect of decent work in the space available. For instance, there are other equally important occupational standards for decent work that deserved mention and were not covered. In an Australian context, these would include the extent to which there is equal opportunity or discrimination; trade union representation; child labour and exploitation; and the provision of a social safety net for disability, illness, old age and maternity.

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Returning to the introduction to this paper and paraphrasing the 1948 *Universal declaration of human rights* one could say that in Australia not everyone is able to exercise the right to work, to choose employment freely, to endure just and favourable conditions

of work or to be protected against unemployment. Not everyone receives equal pay for equal work and there is no guarantee that the person who works will receive just and favourable remuneration, ensuring for themselves or their family an existence worthy of human dignity, and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection.

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AUTHOR



Dr JIM ATHANASOU is retired from the University of Technology, Sydney. He has continued in part-time private practice as a psychologist and consultant in vocational guidance preparing medico-legal reports for courts. He is co-editor with Raoul Van Esbroeck of the *International handbook of career guidance* (2008), author of *Evaluating career education and guidance* (2007) and developed the *Career interest test* used at www.myfuture.edu.au.

Email: athanasou@optusnet.com.au

THEORY AND PRACTICE

This section is designed as a brief professional review of the article. It provides relevant study questions and answers for readers to test their knowledge of the article.

In what year did the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* outline the concept of decent work in relation to employment of acceptable quality?

Answer: 1948

List the five core labour standards that form the basis for social rights.

Answer: The five core labour standards are an income that permits the worker a reasonable life; work where there is equal opportunity and without discrimination; occupational health and safety; trade union representation; and a social security safety net for illness, disability, old age and maternity.

What five factors were chosen by the author to indicate that decent work is not the norm in Australia?

Answer: In Australia a significant proportion (> 5%) in the labour force do not work and some socio-economic groups endure problems of entrenched joblessness that keep them on the lowest economic rung; there are substantial pay differentials for workers in different industrial relations arrangements; paid leave is not universal; work intensification has taken a toll on parenting; and many suffer death or injury in the workplace.

What are the consequences of lack of decent work?

Answer: Non-decent work is an impediment to someone's rightful career development at every stage. This barrier applies equally to those who are privileged in some way as well as to those who suffer disadvantage through no fault of their own. It means that career development is not a level playing field in which resources, opportunities, working conditions or rewards are evenly distributed.