



Me, Myself and Work

Self-Esteem and the UK Labour Market

By Andy Westwood, The Work Foundation

About The Work Foundation

The Work Foundation, a not-for-dividend public interest company, exists to inspire and deliver improvements to performance through improving the quality of working life. It believes that productive, high performance organisations are those committed to making work more fulfilling, fun, inspirational and effective, and through engaging their workforce succeed in integrating the many aims crucial to organisational success.

For more information on The Work Foundation, go to:
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About the CTPA

The Cosmetic Toiletry and Perfumery Association represents a thriving, responsible and vibrant industry in the UK. Its members are manufacturers and distributors of cosmetic and toiletry products as well as ingredient suppliers. Covering a diverse range of products, the CTPA is the authoritative public voice on regulatory matters and best practices. The cosmetics industry is a substantial employer, contributing a positive balance of payments to the UK economy and providing exciting and innovative products to the consumer.

For more information on the CTPA, go to:
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Foreword

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Me, Myself and Work: Executive Summary

Self-esteem has become a major issue for politicians, employers and employees alike. High self-esteem is deemed to be an increasingly desirable asset with more and more products and services promising to help achieve it. It has become a part of our everyday conversations: about work, health, society and our relationships. But self-esteem is also an increasingly contentious subject with some describing it as the *'most important issue facing society today'* (Oprah Winfrey) and others as *'snake oil'* (Nicholas Emler; Joseph Rowntree Foundation) or a *'cultural myth for our times'* (Frank Furedi).

But above all, self-esteem has become one of the most important aspects of our working lives in the UK today. The 'self-esteem industry' is now one of the UK's most important economic sectors – spanning education, the service sector and manufacturing, and employing large numbers of people. Sectors linked to boosting self-worth such as the beauty, diet and fitness and cosmetic industries, contribute some £15 billion each year to the UK economy.

Other more traditional sectors such as publishing and advertising are increasingly concentrating on or selling self-esteem – with a proportion of the overall value of these businesses, this figure rapidly doubles to nearly £30 billion'. Furthermore, self-esteem has become an essential skill in most workplaces and particularly so in a range of growing lifestyle businesses.

Why is self-esteem so important in our working lives? Society has become more individualised and the world of work more risky, with successes and failures more personally felt than ever before. But work may not be quite as risky as it appears: in 2000 the average time that workers spent in jobs was just over 7 years – up from 6 years in 1992. The average weekly working hours for all workers in the UK is now 31.8 hours, one of the lowest in Europe².

But despite a healthy economy, more jobs and low unemployment, many still feel that work is less secure. We might be staying in our jobs longer; but we no longer like them quite as much as we used to do. We do feel less secure, less happy about pay and prospects, working hours or the type of work we are asked to do. Work doesn't seem to be challenging or rewarding our real abilities as much as it used to do and this isn't doing much for our self-esteem.

In new polling for this report, 87% of respondents thought that their jobs were either quite or very important to our notions of self-esteem³. A massive 93% of respondents thought that confidence in their appearance was an important or very important factor in building self-esteem.

We also looked at the precise factors that would make people perform better in their work. 1 in 5 said more money, and 1 in 3 wanted more training and 19% thought that having high confidence levels was the most important factor. We find that our self-esteem depends, in variable amounts, on the following:

- What we know
- What we want (and expect)
- What we do
- What we have achieved (in work and in life)
- Who we compare ourselves to
- How we look

How we look – and how we, and others, think we look – appears to matter a great deal and is an important component of our self-esteem. Women may be no more obsessed about the way they look than men. In this sense the increased value placed on appearance is becoming a more gender-neutral phenomenon, aided by an evolving economy more dependent on personal and 'high touch' services.


Political ambitions for a fairer, more socially mobile and meritocratic society inevitably exacerbates this increasing focus on the self. Having high self-esteem and the resilience to cope with the risks and setbacks that accompany work and opportunity is more essential by the day. Without it the health risks and personal damage posed by unemployment, or declining status are high. It is not surprising then that politicians such as Tony Blair and George Bush, as well as various academics and commentators, place such a high premium on self-esteem.

Self-esteem matters. Not because a growing self-esteem industry has created new forms of demand amongst the population or because governments see it as a social 'cure all' for a widening variety of societal ills. But because self-esteem acts as a personal counterweight to rapid and far-reaching changes in the labour market and in society as a whole. The increased currency of how we feel about ourselves is a natural consequence of an individualising society and a shifting economy.

Having high self-esteem stands people in good stead once in work. It is a skill that employers want and a personal attribute that helps organisations to work more productively. People with higher self-esteem are likely to be more productive, more resilient, more satisfied and better at their jobs. Helping people to seek the best for themselves is also important; what Ivan Lewis, the Minister for Adult Skills calls the '*dignity of self-improvement*'.

Employers should also recognise that employees with higher self-esteem make for better workers; happier, more productive and more valued. Bosses need to give more credit for good work and to strive for better relationships with staff. Entrepreneurs should also look at the business opportunities provided by self-esteem whilst those already in business should continue to recruit, develop and reward staff who are improving their self-confidence.

Individuals need to do more to enhance their skills, appearance, networks, jobs and expectations. They should look at the jobs and careers offered by the expansion of the self-esteem sector and the opportunities to start new businesses or to be self-employed. They also need to be more realistic about what they want and whom they compare themselves with. But the culture of self-improvement appears to be the most crucial, underpinning self-belief, new skills, personal attributes and experiences and creating a happier and more productive workforce.



'Our starting point is a profound belief in the equal worth of every human being and our duty to help each and every one – all children and all adults – develop their potential to the full – to help individuals bridge the gap between what they are and what they have it in themselves to become.'

Gordon Brown⁴



1

Introduction

*'Our starting point is a profound belief in the equal worth of every human being and our duty to help each and every one – all children and all adults – develop their potential to the full – to help individuals bridge the gap between what they are and what they have it in themselves to become.'*⁴

Gordon Brown

Self-esteem may be an increasingly important ambition for politicians in the UK and abroad, but there is also an opposite view; that self-esteem is a dangerous myth – partly shaped by an 'industry' with its own selfish gains at heart – and perpetuated by politicians and business leaders who see it as a panacea to the risks in today's society that they have helped to create.

Either way, self-esteem is now big business. The 'self-esteem industry' is also becoming one of the UK's most important economic sectors – spanning education and training, much of the service sector and major manufacturing businesses. Together they are responsible for employing huge numbers of people throughout the country, including in some of the most deprived cities and regions. From manufacturing workers in large industrial complexes to the part time, self-employed selling cosmetics door-to-door in the suburbs; from Jobcentre Plus training programmes for the unemployed to executive coaching sessions in the boardroom, the self-esteem industry is thriving.

Oprah Winfrey believes that low self-esteem is the biggest problem facing the world today and Princess Diana in her famous Panorama interview described it as the cause of her bulimia. But in a recent Joseph Rowntree Foundation study by Professor Nicholas Emler much of this populist view was rejected out of hand:

'The widespread belief in raising self-esteem as an all-purpose cure for social problems has created a huge market for self-help manuals and educational programmes that is threatening to become the psycho-therapeutic equivalent of snake oil.'

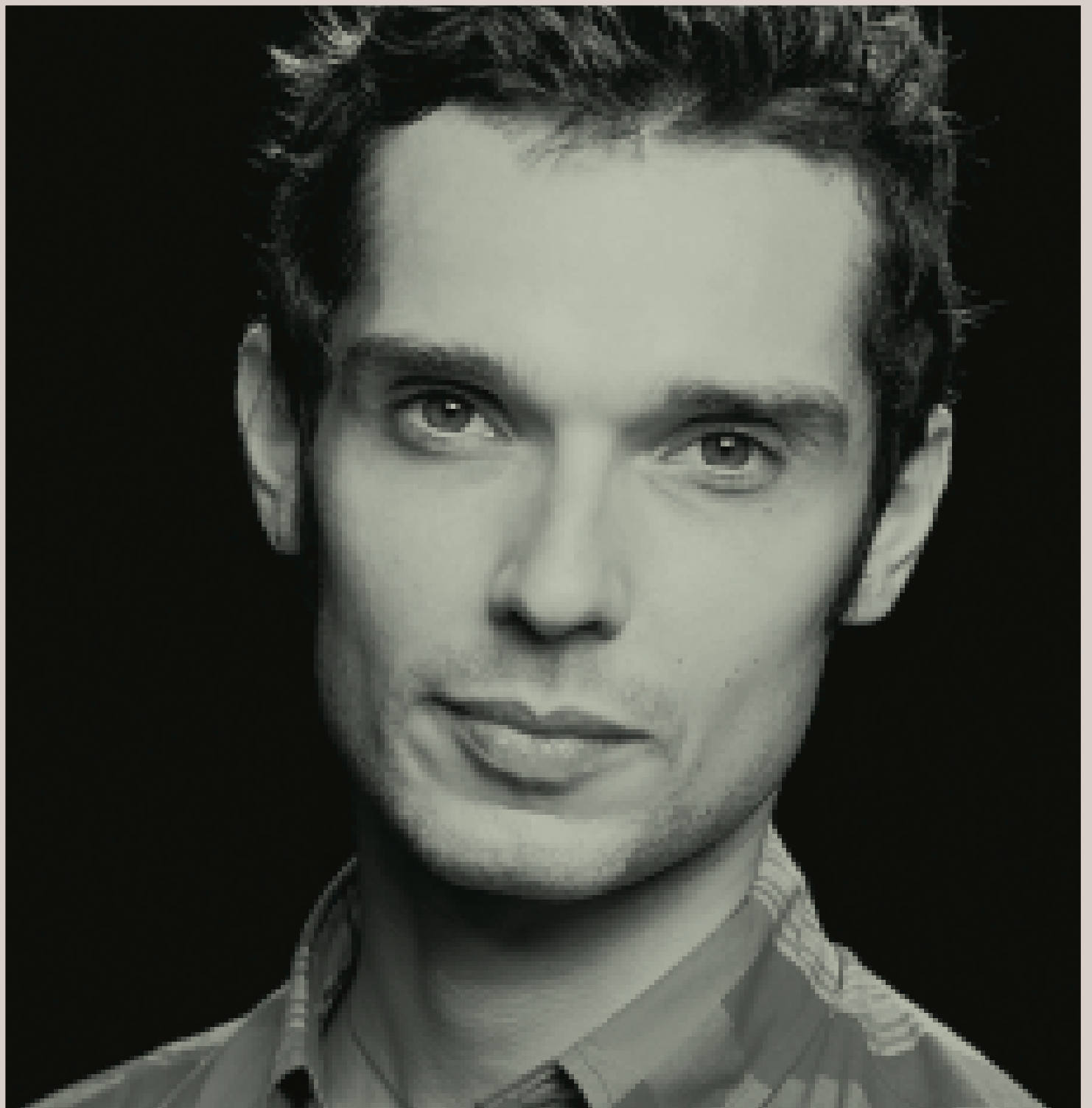
So what are the real aspects and consequences of self-esteem that matter in today's society and labour market? Is building self-esteem a solution to an increasingly riskier society or just a popular delusion that is fooling policy makers and the public alike?

In **Section Two** of this report, we will calculate the size of the self-esteem industry; discover which businesses are involved in it and why it has become one of the most important sectors of the economy.

Section Three will consider the reasons why self-esteem has become an essential personal attribute for coping with modern society and the reality of the risks and changes in the modern workplace.

Section Four looks closely at how self-esteem affects our performance in the workplace and, through new polling research, at people's own views about what makes them successful and productive at work.

Section Five looks at how many different figures in public life have embraced self-esteem and how it relates to their own work while Section Five asks what governments, employers and we, as individuals, should ultimately do about it.





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‘Gurus on Google’:
The Self-Esteem Business

‘How we feel about ourselves crucially affects virtually every aspect of our experience, from the way we function at work, in love, in sex, to the way we operate as parents to how high in life we are likely to rise. Our responses to events are shaped by who and what we think we are. The dramas of our lives are the reflections of our most private visions of ourselves. Thus, self-esteem is the key to success or failure.’

Dr Nathaniel Branden – ‘How to Raise Your Self-Esteem’⁵

He would say that wouldn't he? He is one of the world's leading self-esteem gurus, multi-millionaire, bestselling author (*The Six Pillars of Self-Esteem*), *Honoring the Self* and an autobiography) as well as a mentor to millions. He also has a helpline, runs weekend seminars and can be contacted at the appropriately named *Branden Institute of Self-Esteem*.

Branden proves that there is a demand for such services and that the self-esteem business is big business. And he's not the only one who works in this industry. *How to Raise Your Self-Esteem* is just one of nearly 1,500,000 entries listed in a worldwide Google search. Scan through these results and you'll even find a book by the Duchess of York. Undoubtedly, we expect more 'self-help' gurus to be earning a living in America. Equally we would expect America to be at the forefront of the self-esteem and self-help industries. Oprah Winfrey has called low self-esteem *'the key problem facing society today'* and is adamant that high self-esteem provides the only solution to it. But others make this point too. The Australian historian and commentator Robert Hughes has described the importance of the 'self' as now sacrosanct and virtually unchallengeable in American culture and society.

The industry appears to be well established here in the UK with the increasing needs of a *'Self-Esteem Society'*⁶ driving it. This developing aspect of UK society was described in the recent Demos research report published, like this study, in association with the CTPA. As Demos revealed, increasing amounts of public and private funds are being spent on boosting the way we feel about ourselves.

From Open University courses to cosmetics and publishing, the sector is growing dramatically. The 'self-esteem industry' is fast becoming one of the UK's most important economic sectors – spanning education and training, the service sector and even the much beleaguered manufacturing sector. It is responsible for employing huge numbers of people throughout the country including in some of the most deprived cities and regions.

Self-esteem businesses are growing on our high streets. According to a recent survey from the Yellow Pages business directories, since 1992 the entries for various self-improvement services have rapidly increased whilst traditional high street shops have been declining. Aromatherapists have increased by some 5,000%, followed by a 1,780% increase in cosmetic surgery services and 1,445% increase in dieting and weight control businesses. Not far behind are make-up artists and services – up by 1,007% and reflexology (829%) and Alexander technique (724%)⁷. According to his analysis of the Yellow Pages research, Dr Tim Leunig of the London School of Economics described the shift thus:

'If we're no longer a nation of butchers, bakers and candlestick makers what are we? It seems that we have moved not only beyond the basic necessities of life but almost beyond goods themselves, so the areas of growth are things that make us feel better about ourselves.'

Self-esteem is a concept that is increasingly dominant in a vast range of products and services. It might be stretching the point too much to say that they all make up a specific industry, but whether we are talking about magazines, books, perfumes, shampoos, cosmetic surgery, qualifications, private health clubs, television programmes, dieting, lifestyle coaching or academic research, self-esteem is playing a part in their growth.

Looking good, feeling good?

One of the most obvious parts of such a sector are the cosmetics and beauty industries. €58.16 billion is spent on cosmetics each year in Western Europe⁸. In 2003, the UK spent nearly £6 billion pounds on cosmetics, toiletries and perfumery (up by 3.6% on 2002), with some £782 million on fragrances, £827 million on colour cosmetics, £1.1 billion on skin care, £1.5 billion on hair care and £1.7 billion on toiletries – soap, toothpastes, shaving products, bath and shower products and deodorants and anti-perspirants⁹.

Within this total expenditure some of the biggest growth markets have been in products for men – who now spend an average of £84 each year on beauty products compared to £138 per year for women. Since 1998 the male grooming market has grown by some 800% – the market for male skin care, moisturisers and facial wash is now worth £15.2 million each year¹⁰.

Read all about it?

Take a look at *'Men's Health'* magazine and the products featured within it. A recent issue contains features such as *'So Near, So Spa'* which tells readers about all the products that men could buy as an alternative to spending a lot of money on a day at a health spa as well as *'47 ways to trim an inch'* and *'Your 3 week plan for bigger muscles.'* And there are plenty of alternatives: *'Men's Fitness'*, *'GQ'*, *'FHM'*, *'Maxim'*, and *'Esquire'*. In the female magazine market titles such as *'Cosmopolitan'* and *'Vogue'* have been doing this for years.

And other areas of popular culture have been catching on too. *The Sopranos* is built around the main character's course of therapy with a psychiatrist, quickly diagnosed as having poor self-esteem. In the UK we have lifestyle shows such as the *'Life Laundry'*, *'What Not to Wear'* and *'Would Like to Meet'* – and chat shows like *'Trisha'* and *'Esther'* as well as imported shows such as *'Oprah'* or *'Jerry Springer'*. And no one could ever accuse of Robert Kilroy Silk of not being interested in either his own or other people's self-esteem.

Whether it's the British Journal of Organisational Psychology or *Top Santé Health and Beauty*, chat shows or bestselling novels and self-help guides, it is clear that self-esteem has a major impact on our media and publishing industries.

Self-esteem and the unemployed

Since the election of the Labour Government in 1997, the focus of welfare to work programmes has been on improving the self-belief and confidence of varying groups of jobseekers. In America, George Bush's welfare to work partnership is designed to create 'more independence, more self-esteem, and more jobs and hope.'¹¹

In January 2000, the Employment Minister, Tessa Jowell, announced that all 'New Dealers' would be offered personal presentation courses. At that time the Employment Service was also offering a programme for under 18s called 'Life Skills', teaching the importance of basic hygiene, as well as social skills¹². More recently, this thinking has been more widely applied. In 2003, the Government recommended that employment programmes for lone parents should concentrate heavily on building self-esteem.

*'We believe that many lone parents would benefit from an intensive jump start – a short period that is designed to engage, to excite the imagination, to build self-esteem and mutual self help'*¹³

The Reed employment agency runs various New Deal and Employment Zone programmes. Operating in places like Glasgow, Southwark, Hackney, Doncaster and Haringey, Reed have worked closely with lone parents, long-term unemployed and people with no or low levels of formal qualifications. They have looked closely at the role of self-esteem in improving clients' ability to find and keep work and help clients to buy interview clothing in order to get them into jobs.

With some groups, Reed is now experimenting with personal makeovers. In Liverpool and Southwark, they have organised sessions that provide cosmetic advice, colour choices and interview preparation with the help of local businesses. These makeover days help to recruit potential clients as well as to provide practical help on getting into jobs.

The Wise Group is a not-for-profit firm based in Glasgow. It too has many Government contracts designed to help the unemployed back into work. One such programme provides a route to the proliferating jobs – in Glasgow and other large cities – in the service sector: up-market bars, hotels and restaurants. Called the 'Aesthetic Skills Training Programme', the objectives are to build confidence, improve social skills, motivation, health and fitness, and to develop a wide range of personal presentation skills. In order to address these issues the pilot programme covered topics such as:

- What's beautiful – which involved identifying people who 'look and sound good' and also determining why they do so.
- Making the most of yourself – consisting of education in personal grooming, dress and personal presentation skills.
- Food, Health and Beauty – developing a healthy eating plan; a one-to-one session with a personal trainer; maintaining a beauty routine; receiving a professional make over and taking part in a photographic session.

Self-esteem and the education business

The recent advent of such services for the unemployed have followed more traditional practices in the education system. The privately educated might be likely to have other attributes such as wealth, social networks, status and breeding that may also help to boost their self-esteem, but nevertheless their schools are all keen to emphasise that it is a desired and positive outcome of their educational system. At Harrow, the website describes self-esteem as essential to academic achievement:

But getting pupils through exams is not the most important thing about education. As we have done for centuries, Harrow prepares pupils for a life of leadership, service and personal fulfilment. We promote independence of thought, respect for others, creativity, and a sense of responsibility for one's own actions, and for the good of society. All are important for life beyond school and university¹⁴.

Eton, Winchester, Westminster, Benenden and Rugby all have mission statements or objectives that say similar things. Other institutions make claims about activities that will help to achieve higher self-esteem. And for those alumni of public and state schools who make it into the uppermost rungs of business life, there are still many opportunities to revisit or renew their feelings about themselves and their own personal abilities. Reed also offers a course through its training arm entitled 'Self-Esteem For Peak Performance'. For just £425, a one-day course will teach high flyers from the top rungs of business that:

'Self-esteem is the foundation of self-motivation, assertive communication and personal empowerment. It is the pivotal ingredient in achieving success at any level. For many people self-esteem has been misshapen or even damaged during life's journey. We can all benefit from understanding the secrets of self-esteem and how to build self-esteem within ourselves and in others. This workshop is designed to give a clear understanding of what self-esteem is, where it comes from and how it can be strengthened, thereby enhancing personal behaviours and interpersonal relationships.'

Examining self-esteem?

The creation of the National Curriculum in the early and mid 1990s centred on a wider recognition of all pupils abilities and achievements. Central to this was the introduction of the GCSE examination and its larger number of pass grades. However, it was far from universally popular. Melanie Phillips, author and Daily Mail columnist, wrote 'All Must Have Prizes'¹⁵, a critique of the education system in 1996, before New Labour came to power. She criticised the fact that greater pass grades would supposedly help to enhance students' self-esteem:

*'The GCSE was thus a good exam because it enhanced their 'self-esteem'. The priority therefore was not what they actually were achieving but whether they felt good about themselves. This rotten corruption of the concept of self-esteem lies at the heart of the destruction of our relationship with children. It is rotten because it is built on telling them a series of lies... Of course self-esteem is crucial. But self-esteem does not emerge from lies and self-delusion. It has to be based on something that is worth esteeming.'*¹⁶

But as Frank Furedi, Melanie Phillips and Nicholas Emler have all proved, there is also money to be made from taking an 'anti' self-esteem stance too. According to Frank Furedi, self-esteem is the '*cultural myth for our times*' and a dangerous temptation for governments and individuals alike. He sees much of the increasing obsession with the 'self' as a profoundly modern phenomenon.

But how much money is all this worth? If self-esteem increasingly defines a type of lifestyle-orientated set of businesses and activities, then what is its total value to UK plc? If we add together those sectors that seem to be explicitly and solely about boosting our feelings of self-worth such as the cosmetic, beauty, diet and fitness industries as well as the increasing numbers of lifestyle shops and services on our high streets, then the figure quickly exceeds £15 billion per year in the UK alone.

There are now over 2,000 private health clubs with nearly 6 million members in the UK, all paying memberships and buying fitness clothing and equipment¹⁷. According to the BBC some 20% of UK women aged 25-64 have attended a '*Weight Watchers*' class compared to 7% in the US and just 2% in Germany. It was estimated that '*Weight Watchers*' holds 6,000 meetings a week in the UK, with an average of forty members - each paying £4.50. That adds up to over £50 million per year before even thinking about the growing range of '*Weight Watchers*' food products available in our supermarkets.

If we also consider the increasing proportions of activity devoted to such activities from more wide ranging sectors such as fashion, the UK clothing and textile industry produces around £16.5 billion worth of goods annually and employs 300,000 people¹⁸. The UK's publishing industry is worth £18.37 billion in 2000 and employed over 164,000 people in 2000¹⁹. The advertising industry in the UK was worth over £17.2 billion in 2003²⁰. And government too; the Learning and Skills Council has an annual budget of over £9 billion per year, whilst the Department for Work and Pensions spends over £1 billion per year on Welfare to Work. A significant proportion of all of these industries and budgets is spent on helping people to improve their self-esteem.

If we also consider the rapid expansion of luxury goods available in the world today, and the amount of money that UK residents spend annually on such status symbols, then we could also add a proportion of expenditure on luxury cars, jewellery and housing as well as on food, holidays, household goods and so on. It is reasonable therefore to assume that self-esteem, as an 'industry', is worth over £30 billion pounds a year to the UK economy and growing by the day.

The fact is that people want to read about self-esteem, to study it, buy products or services to improve it – and ultimately to do so in order to feel as good about themselves as possible. This extends at least partially to the vast majority of our private spending over and above the purchase of our basic necessities. And tomorrow's necessities are yesterday's luxury items. Our collective need to feel better about our individual lives is seemingly without end.

Why?

A black and white close-up portrait of a woman with her hair in dreadlocks. She is smiling and looking slightly to the right of the camera. The image is set against a light background and is framed by a dark border.

3

'I Get Knocked Down – But I Get Up Again':
Self-Esteem as an Antidote to Risk

'A sense of impermanence is blowing through the labor force, destabilizing everyone from office temps to high-tech independent contractors to restaurant and retail clerks. Factory jobs are being outsourced, garment jobs are morphing into homework, and in every industry, temporary contracts are replacing full, secure employment. In a growing number of instances, even CEOs are opting for shorter stints at one corporation after another, breezing in and out of different corner offices and purging half the employees as they come and go.'

'No Logo', Naomi Klein²¹

Why has self-esteem become such a big issue in the workplace? What is different about our lives today that increases our need to feel better about ourselves? There should be little doubt that much is owed to two dominant issues: the way that society is evolving and the way the world of work has changed.

But what exactly has changed in the workplace and what effect is it having in our wider society? As Naomi Klein observed, people seem to have more jobs, with less security, less pay and considerably more risk. If this is indeed true, then why has having high self-esteem become the policymakers' answer to the risks and problems in the working world today? Why do Presidents and politicians see improving self-esteem as a route out of unemployment and poverty? And why is self-esteem becoming the so-called 'social vaccine' of public policy?

The rise of individualism

Ever since de Tocqueville first described the individualised society of 19th century America, sociologists and other commentators have focused on the US for evidence of the way that our lives have changed. As Oprah Winfrey and Robert Hughes showed, self-esteem is critical to contemporary American society and individualism has helped to create the cultural context for this.

*'As we live in a more individualized culture, we have been brought up to expect satisfaction. When we do not get it, we are more attuned to our sense of failure. We are more likely to see failure as a personal judgement upon us, rather than as a product of external factors beyond our control. We want to be successful on our own terms. But as a result we run the risk of failing on our own terms as well.'*²²

David Brooks, the New York Times columnist, says that we now have unrealistic expectations of ourselves – a 'brutal form of narcissism', where 'the weight of the universe is placed on the shoulders of the individual.' Personal achievement and its consequences for wealth and status matter today more than ever before. Brooks argues that this is one of the most important aspects of American society. Personal achievement has combined work and wider society into a dangerous cocktail of rampant individualism and personal vulnerability. Charles Leadbeater has described UK society in much the same way;

*'Much of the moral furniture upon which earlier generations could rely – faith in God, the nation, the family – have become threadbare in the last forty years. As individualism has become stronger, so we tend to take our setbacks more personally.'*²³

Both Leadbeater and Brooks note that tough times are likely to have more impact on individuals than in the past. In earlier times, we could collectively experience the ups and downs of society and the economy without such fear of solely personal failure. Today, such turbulence is more complex and more individually felt. Whether in good or bad times, the rewards and risks have multiplied significantly.

Nevertheless, society still has a pecking order in much the same way that it has always had – and those at the top of a more individualised society or workplace still tend to feel better about themselves than those at the bottom. As Alain de Botton suggests, if the rich deserve to be rich for their hard work, intelligence and enterprise, then in a meritocratic society, the poor might equally deserve to be poor and have the low self-esteem that goes with that status because they've been lazy and useless. This is an inescapable consequence of a society that is dedicated to either the notion of meritocracy or social mobility.

*'A meritocracy has many attractions. But it would also have downsides; there would be downward as well as upward mobility i.e. there would be losers as well as winners. This could create economic instability and social tensions: the losers would have no one to blame for their circumstances but their own lack of ability and commitment.'*²⁴

But the place where a meritocracy is meant to work best is the workplace. It is in work that our true talents and potential are meant to be fulfilled. A meritocratic labour market may indeed make working life less predictable or comfortable. But is that why work appears to be more important – and more risky – than ever? Or, like self-esteem, is the idea of meritocracy just

a convenient shorthand response to a labour market that is out of control?

Has the world of work become more risky?

In the UK, at least, there are more jobs than ever before, unemployment is at its lowest level since the 1970s and wages have risen constantly in that time. Average earnings are now around £25,000, GDP per head has more than doubled since the 1960s²⁵ and the health of the economy is taken for granted. Gordon Brown has pointed out that the UK is experiencing its longest period of sustained economic growth for over two hundred years²⁶.

According to the International Labour Office (ILO), security and productivity are directly related. Creating an Economic Security Index, ILO has put countries like Sweden, Finland, Germany and Canada at the top and the UK, despite having the fourth largest economy in the world, down in fifteenth place²⁷. Other commentators and pressure groups see this economic boom as founded on working misery for millions of people both in the advanced and developing worlds. Certainly, we know that the 'job for life' has passed and that in its place has come the temporary, or less secure, job.

Naomi Klein is adamant that this is making work and society more insecure. She estimates that each day some 4.5 million workers are assigned to jobs through temporary agencies in Europe and the US, and that the real number of such employees in Europe and the US is approximately 36 million people. In the UK, as the labour market has apparently 'evolved' in the same way, the temp industry has flourished: between 1994/5 and 1996/7, temporary and permanent placements rose by around a third and a half respectively.²⁸ By the late

1990s, around 51% of all employers were using private agencies for at least some of their recruitment.²⁹

There are other assumptions that also apply in today's labour market; chiefly that we are all working harder and for longer and that we tend to feel more insecure in our work. Such assumptions colour our view of work and society and the cumulative perception is that the world of work has become an altogether more difficult place. But why do we believe that work is more risky?

Fig. 1 Average job tenure by level of job (1992 - 2000)

Occupation type	1992	2000
Higher management/professional	86.3 months	109.1 months
Lower management/professional	82.7 months	94.9 months
Administrative	53.9 months	82.3 months
Routine non manual	60.6 months	59.7 months
Technicians and supervisors	103.1 months	101.7 months
Skilled manual jobs	77.7 months	68.9 months
Semi and unskilled manual jobs	74.3 months	87.7 months

Source: PSI/ESRC Working in Britain Survey 2003

As Fig. 1³⁰ shows, the time we spend in our jobs is actually increasing in virtually all occupation levels except for skilled manual jobs – the inevitable consequence of large scale job losses in manufacturing during the 1990s. In 1992, the average time that workers were spending in jobs amounted to over six years (74.3 months), but in 2000 this average had actually risen to over seven years (87.7 months). The widely assumed picture of a flexible labour market with a growing number of temporary or freelance employees moving from job to job is not that accurate after all.

We often hear that Britain works the longest hours in Europe but this is not true either³¹. The average number of weekly working hours for all workers in the UK stood at 36.2 hours in 2001 – the third lowest at the time in Europe. In 2004, the average number of working hours for all workers has now dropped to 31.8 hours. Even if we look at the average for all full time workers then it is only 37.1 hours per week³². Men are slightly different but even they aren't working the longest hours in Europe, according to Francis Green of the University of Kent, this dubious accolade now falls to the Greeks and the Irish. Some groups – such as men in higher paid sectors and occupations – might be working longer hours (four out of five people working over 48 hours a week are men) but others are not. We have, for instance, more people working part time than most European countries. The general picture is again much less straightforward than it appears.

But these statistics are not always that useful because risk is at least as much about personal perception as it is about national data. Everything is relative. And neither do individuals necessarily feel that such risk is entirely down to being made redundant. Other factors matter too, such as the fear of being condemned to low paid work, or the worry that costs of living are considerably more predictable than future earnings.

Bad jobs and hard work

In her recent book³³, Polly Toynbee found that there was enormous demand for low skilled low paying jobs in London. Fran Abrams in *Below the Breadline*³⁴ had a range of similar experiences in the service sector: Between them they found work in both the public and private sectors as nursery nurses, care workers, cleaners, packers, stackers and cake makers. Barbara Ehrenreich, in her investigation into low paid work in the US, did some similar jobs, working in restaurants, shops and in people's homes.

But, according to the Office for National Statistics (ONS), it is this service sector that explains the recent growth in employment to record levels: statistics released by ONS showed employment in Britain reached a record high of 27.9m people in the three months to June. Unemployment fell 5% to 1,458,000 over the same period. At 74.7% the UK has one of the highest employment rates in the world exceeding both the United States (71.4%) and Japan (68.5%)³⁵.

Robert Reich, former labor adviser to President Clinton, has observed that *'there's no natural limit to what people want and are willing to pay others to do for them'*³⁶. This applies to routine work in personal care and other 'basic' public and private services, but also to a whole range of more sophisticated products and services that quickly achieve a 'must have' status. For Reich this service sector growth is based on a growing need for personal attention and improved self worth:

'Such work will include the pampering of bodies and minds through what are now called recreation specialists, aerobics instructors, personal trainers, massage therapists, tour guides, spiritual guides, personal coaches, teachers, drivers,

*waiters and the like. It will also include caring for infants and children, the sick and the mentally disabled and increasingly the elderly. By the second decade of the 21st century, millions of corroding baby boomers will need a lot of personal attention.'*³⁷

There may well be less esteem in many of these jobs even if they are primarily designed to increase well being in others. The dignity usually found in work may not quite apply in the same way as is forcefully argued by the likes of Polly Toynbee and Barbara Ehrenreich.

Structural change

We assume that somewhere during this process of structural change, the job for life has disappeared even if average job tenure appears to be rising – indeed Government ministers now talk about *'employability for life'* as the best modern alternative³⁸. Union membership has declined partly because of such change but also because of legislation largely introduced during Margaret Thatcher's time as Prime Minister. She famously boosted the culture of individualism through her incentives for enterprise and her *'no such thing as society'* approach to public services and to communities. But she never really said this - her real words being *'there is no society, only individuals and their families.'* As Brooks, Klein and Leadbeater have all observed, she might have had a point.

However, although wages and GDP might have risen overall in the last few decades, wage inequality has also grown sharply in that time. This might have started because of the encouragement of Thatcher in the 1980s but it has increased much further since 1997 and the election of the Labour government. In some ways we might have a fairer labour market since 1997 – the

minimum wage approaches £5.00 and in work tax credits further boost income levels – and there are more regulations about flexibility, working time and anti-discrimination than ever before – but there is an inevitability about the growing gap between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots’, even though this is no longer as simply divided between those with jobs and those without.

Sometimes work is risky. We still fear unemployment, but we are also insecure in our work for other reasons. We fear losing our jobs, not just because we might not find another one, but because we might not find another one like it. Job insecurity is driven as much by the fear that we will have to drop down into occupations that are a long way beneath our expectations and income levels. Jobs that are clearly available but of no practical use to our improving lifestyles. We fear that we won’t be able to keep up with the car payments, private health insurance or the mortgage payments and the patterns of consumption that make up our daily lives.

People fear having to work in the bottom end of the polarising labour market. As the numbers of jobs in middle-income areas hollow out³⁹, the fall in income and status is likely to be greater – and the fear more intense. Not many people will do what Lester Burnham (Kevin Spacey’s character) did in ‘American Beauty’ and go from a highly paid advertising job to the drive through window of Mr Smileys.

Achieving goals

Evidence suggests that UK employees are becoming more critical of their workplaces, and increasingly less satisfied with what they offer. In particular on issues such as working hours, workload, training and pay, the

level of workplace satisfaction has declined visibly. More and more workers are dissatisfied with their prospects and pay levels, and working hours have all roughly halved in less than ten years.

Fig. 2 The search for satisfaction

	1992	2000
Prospects	23%	15%
Pay levels	25%	13%
Job security	44%	39%
Use of abilities	54%	44%
Use of initiative	58%	49%
Hours worked	44%	24%
The work itself	54%	42%
Amount of work	40%	22%
Variety of work	50%	37%
Training	32%	22%
Overall	52%	45%

Source: PSI/ LSE ‘Working in Britain’ Survey

Clearly, this suggests that while we might be staying in our jobs longer, we no longer like them quite as much as we used to (this data is drawn from the same survey as Fig. 1). We do feel less secure, less happy about pay and prospects, working hours or the type of work we are asked to do. Put simply, work doesn’t seem to be challenging or rewarding our real abilities as much as it used to do and this isn’t doing much for our self-esteem.

One way of understanding these factors is to look at how Alain de Botton describes his notion of status anxiety:

*'A worry, so pernicious as to be capable of ruining extended stretches of our lives, that we are in danger of failing to conform to the ideals of success laid down by our society and that we may as a result be stripped of dignity and respect: a worry that we are currently occupying too modest a rung or are about to fall to a lower one.'*⁴⁰

He concludes that 'our self-esteem in this world depends entirely on what we back ourselves to be and do'. In other words our levels of self-esteem are defined by how close we get to achieving our different ambitions in life and work. De Botton and others have established that we measure our achievements against those of our near neighbours and peers. As Richard Layard has described:

*'First, I compare what I have with what I have become used to (through a process of habituation). As I ratchet up my standards, this reduces the enjoyment I get from any given standard of living. Second, I compare what I have with what other people have (through a process of rivalry). If others get better off, I need more in order to feel as good as before.'*⁴¹

And in western societies we encourage aspirations and pretensions – whether it's by advertisers and corporations imploring you to buy new things, or politicians wanting you to be more enterprising and go-getting. Inevitably, individuals are going to feel bad if they can't afford such products or lifestyles. In *'The Affluent Society'* the eminent American economist JK Galbraith asked whether we could say for sure that the deprivation that causes hunger is any more or less painful than the deprivation that causes our envy of our neighbour's new car⁴².

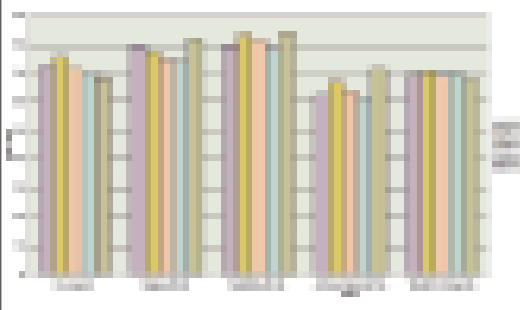
Or as the pop group Talking Heads perhaps more famously put it in *'Once in a Lifetime'*:

*'You may ask yourself 'How do I work this?'
You may ask yourself 'Where is that large automobile?'
And you may tell yourself:
'This is not my beautiful house'
'This is not my beautiful wife'*⁴³

So how do UK workers measure up against these parameters? How are they feeling compared to the goals and ambitions that they have set for themselves and compared to the achievements of their friends and contemporaries?

Older workers and retired workers (see Fig. 3 opposite) are most satisfied with their lives and achievements, whilst 16-24 year olds are the least happy with their levels of achievement. You would expect this from de Botton's analysis as younger people have clearly had much less time to achieve their own career objectives, unless they are professional actors, models, musicians or sports stars, for example.

Fig. 3 Age, happiness and life satisfaction



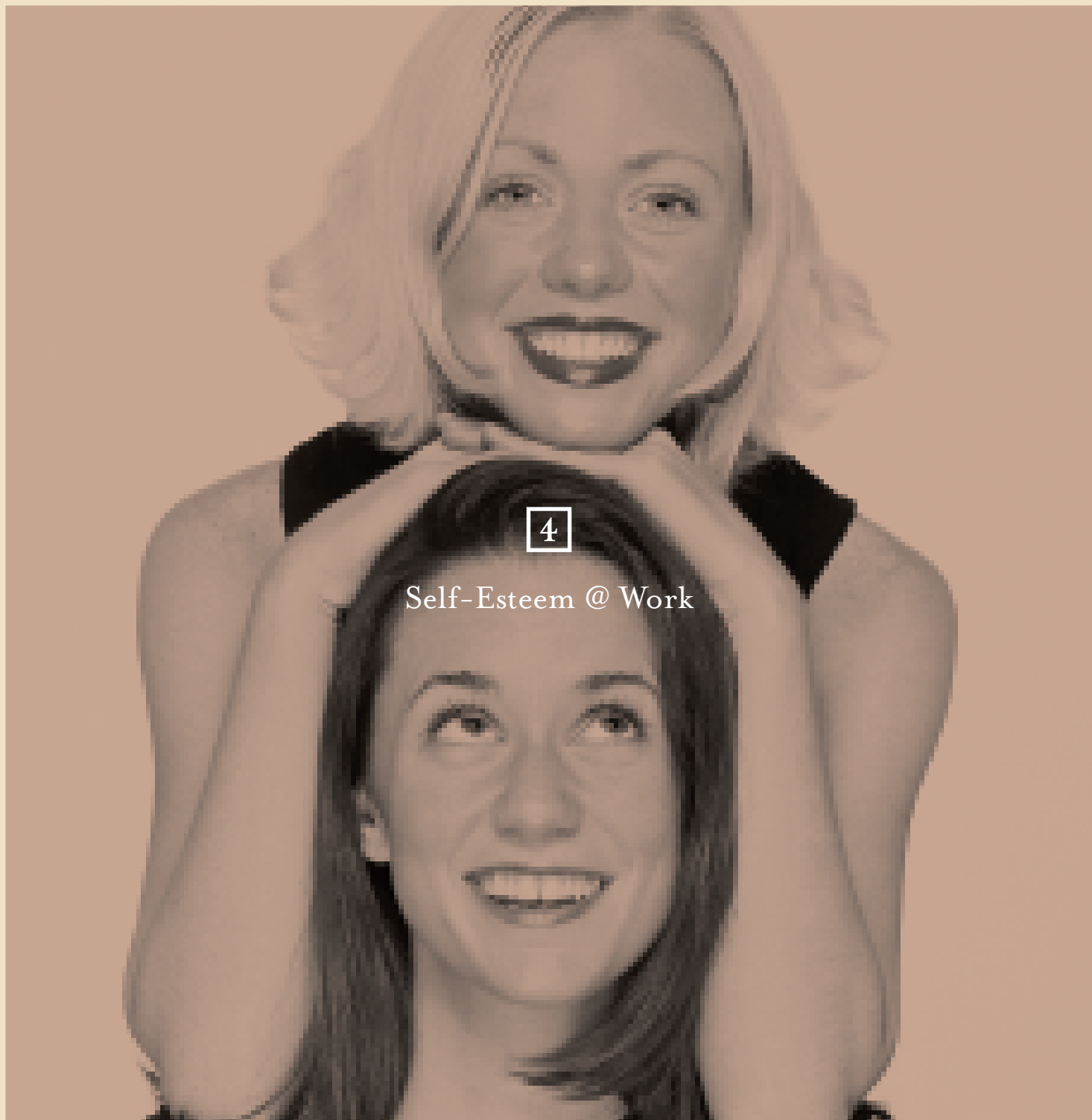
Source: *Status Anxiety* Alain de Botton p3/4

Predictably, the people least satisfied with their lives are the unemployed. Over half did not believe their lives were good or that they had achieved their personal goals. Those classified as economically inactive but not claiming benefit – predominantly women looking after children – were also very happy with life and largely keen to point out that they had achieved their goals in life.

So both society and the workplace are posing more risks for people's health, incomes, security and their place in the world. And work itself is getting riskier, for essentially for two different types of reasons. Firstly – and most importantly – for those at the bottom of the heap it appears to be getting harder to find or keep work; harder still to find meaningful or well-paid work with any sort of potential career progression. Secondly, the risk of losing status in the labour market is increasing. There is further to fall as income inequality expands and many people in the increasingly stretched middle areas of the labour market fear the prospect of having to work in lower paying jobs.

We might not feel the greatest of sympathy for those at the higher end of the labour market but nevertheless their feelings of risk are very real, as are the lengths to which they might go to preserve their hard-won positions in the economic or social pecking order. They will continue to work long hours, to commute for long hours and to fight to preserve their positions – to 'make hay while the sun shines' as suggested by Bill Clinton's former Labor Secretary Robert Reich⁴⁴.

And all this is happening amidst an increasingly individualised society. Political ambitions for a fairer, more socially mobile and meritocratic society inevitably exacerbate this increasing focus on the self. Having high self-esteem and the resilience to cope with the risks and setbacks that accompany work and opportunity is more essential by the day. Without it the health risks and personal damage posed by unemployment, or declining status are high. It is not surprising then that politicians such as Tony Blair and George Bush, as well as various academics and commentators, place such a high premium on self-esteem.



4

Self-Esteem @ Work

'Work is at the heart of our lives. It is, of course, the source of the income that sustains our capacity to live. But it is more than that ... Above all, work is a supremely social act: work cannot be prosecuted by ourselves as solitary individuals, but rather through a network of relationships. To have work, and to be respected at work by others, are central to both individual well-being and to working effectively.'

Will Hutton, Working Capital, The Work Foundation.

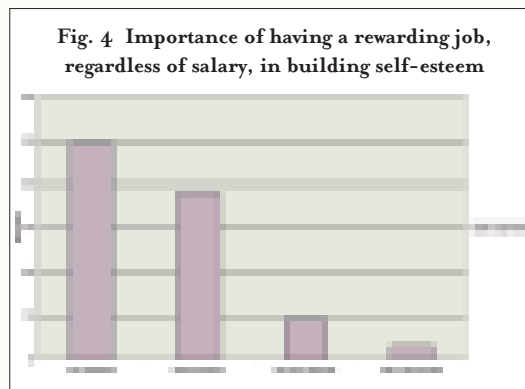
If work, in its wide variety of forms, is a better option than unemployment, then once we are securely within it, how else might it affect our levels of self-esteem? And are there things that we can do that help to increase our self-esteem and our likelihood of finding work that we enjoy and that fulfils our goals? In a sense, any increase in self-esteem and in job satisfaction may be hard to unravel as they tend to build together towards the same psychological ends. As the sociologist Richard Sennett observes, *'work has long seemed character-building, increasing both self-esteem and respect from others.'*⁴⁵

So work in any form will improve some perceptions of self-esteem, but better and more fulfilling work will do it even more as Katherine Newman concluded in *'No Shame in My Game'*:

'For those of us lucky enough to have jobs we enjoy, jobs that confer prestige and respect, jobs that pay well and allow us to do so much more for our children, this value comes easily. Of course we think work is dignity.'⁴⁶

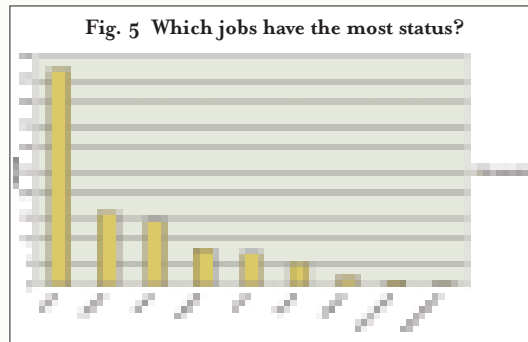
Max Weber and others have seen the work ethic as a universally good thing – involving the proving, or making of one's self through work. In Weber's eyes, all work had dignity and inherent self-esteem. Although Weber never directly experienced some of the low status jobs available in today's labour markets, like those studied by Katherine Newman or Barbara Ehrenreich, the view is still a remarkably popular one.

And this goes for good and bad. If our jobs are great and we love them (no matter how banal they might seem to others) then we feel good about ourselves. If the jobs are of poor quality (and in this case it matters much more what other people think about them) then suddenly we don't feel so good. Fig. 4 below shows that a good job does make significant contribution to our self-esteem, with some 87% of respondents believing that our jobs were either quite or very important to our notions of self-esteem:



Source: Demos CTPA *The Self-Esteem Society* July 2004

But then there are others who are seen as doing low status jobs and who therefore do not merit our respect as users or consumers, for example fast food workers, traffic wardens and other transport staff. On London Underground, we verbally abuse them (the RMT claim that over 90% of their members have been abused in some way) and we also physically assault some public servants whilst looking down on others.

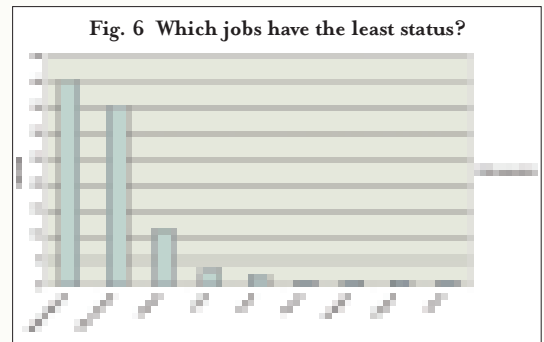


Source: ICM Polling

Establishing which jobs have most esteem is an interesting process. In a poll of over 2000 people commissioned for this study, we found that most people still love a doctor (47%) – a job that has commanded respect since ancient times. More surprising perhaps is that politicians score relatively highly too with 16%, and generally higher amongst all age groups and regions than the supposedly high esteem public service jobs like nursing (7%), teaching (5%) and firefighting (8%). This may come as a shock to the politicians who consistently extol the virtues of such jobs in the current debates about public service reform. It may also come as a surprise to the public service unions who have long

assumed that their members get more respect than either lawyers or politicians.

However, when the question is posed the other way (see Fig. 6), politicians don't quite get off so lightly – coming third with 11%, way ahead of all public service professions. But more sadly perhaps is the fact that the people or jobs that we respect the least are also the ones that are there to serve us – waiters, waitresses and shop workers – a damning assessment of the status of work that has become most widespread in our restructured labour market.



Source: ICM Polling

But there is a lot more to this than just the work we do. High status jobs have always been around and so too have those that come with considerably less prestige. What is increasingly different is that more and more jobs are dependent on workers to have self-esteem, to interact happily with customers and to project positive lifestyle experiences into products, brands and workplaces. Self-esteem is something that is increasingly a part of how products and services are

marketed – and how workers are recruited and trained in the organisations that supply them.

*'We consider the realm of work to be crucial to self-esteem, because it is through work that people master reality and sustain their existence. Thus work which one chooses as a value and which is done rationally ... is a source of self-esteem. Self-esteem also has consequences in work.'*⁴⁷

There are a myriad of consequences in the workplace for high self-esteem, as well as new demands for it. And demand is not just because of risk, but also about the growing commercial power of workers with high levels of self-esteem.

A changing labour market

We have seen the growth in the service sector in the past three decades and the increasing sophistication of services and consumers within society. Furthermore we have also witnessed a growing feminisation of work with more women in the workplace and more feminine qualities in demand. There has been huge growth in personal and household services as well as in the personal contact between individuals and organisations in more traditional environments. This is often described as 'high touch' work – and high touch means high levels of personal contact.

Chris Warhurst and Dennis Nickson of Strathclyde University have closely studied the service sector in Glasgow and have detected new and distinct forms of jobs growth:

'There is now an increasing conflation of individual and organisational use of aesthetics, as companies seek to

*mobilise, develop and commodify individual employees as physical capital. The capacity of employees to look good and sound right has become a highly marketable asset for employers. Employees become embodiments of the employing organisation and/or simply attract more customers through the door. Hence employees become reconfigured as organisational 'human hardware', intended to create commercial benefit for their employing company.'*⁴⁸

They describe this as an increasing demand for what they call 'aesthetic labour':

*'Aesthetic labour will feature heavily in future job growth; it also raises significant employment issues, and demands a significant policy response. If employees are required to be able to present themselves to customers in ways that engage those customers' senses – in short, if they have to 'look good' and 'sound right' – this implies major, and to many people, uncomfortable changes in skills and training provision and social inclusion initiatives.'*⁴⁹

Aesthetic labour is therefore about image, arguing that competition in the service economy is about branding and experience as much as product. Employers are looking for staff that can embody the image and experience the company is trying to sell – as well as provide great service. As such, these attributes are closely related to more recognised social skills – communication, interpersonal abilities, team-working, high self-esteem and so on.

The importance of personal aesthetics, not only for getting but also doing a job, is recognised by Ewart Keep of Warwick Business School and Ken Mayhew of Oxford University, who argue that *'vocational education and training providers would appear to need to be thinking about speech training, deportment, and personal grooming classes rather than degrees, GCSEs or NVQs'*.

Feminisation of work

One of the things that supermarkets such as Asda has been swift to recognise and to exploit, has been the growing role in the UK workforce played by women. Asda has been one of the largest employers of women for some time – alongside other retailers such as Tesco and Marks & Spencer – and it has rapidly tailored their employment practices to them. One of the reasons why it has won so many plaudits for its working practices is because of its approach to flexibility – it offers flexible, but stable working hours as well as special leave for just about anything, from children's first days at school to nativity play leave and grand-parental leave.

Asda has reacted to the following changes in our workforce. In the last two decades, the working-age female employment rate in the UK has increased by 7% since the early 1980s⁵⁰ – this at a time when the opposite was happening for men⁵¹. In particular, married women have seen their employment rates rise from 62% to 74% during the same period – as have those for women with dependent children; there are now more lone parents in work too. Since April 2001, through the New Deal for Lone Parents, over 254,000 lone parents have found work – a rise of some seven percentage points.

And this trend is expected to accelerate in the next few years. According to recent research from the Work Foundation, over 80% of workforce growth up to 2010 will be accounted for by women⁵².

How are we looking?

How we look or, more correctly, how we 'think' we look, plays a considerable part in our overall levels of self-esteem. This might be obvious; we prefer to look our best when we are involved in important events – having a job interview, going on a date, getting married, making presentations and so on.

However, as we have seen the world of work change – particularly in service sector and high-touch occupations – the economic premium on how we look has shifted upwards. Furthermore, as society has become more individualised, and frequent knock backs more personally felt, the negative risks to how we feel have also intensified. Improving the way we appear and feel about ourselves is one way to insure against such knock-backs. And, with an increase in disposable income, we have more money to spend on products and services that offer these improvements.

Finally, as relationships with organisations and colleagues have become more temporary – in the same way as our personal lives – then the need to be continually on our best footing has increased too. In today's society and labour market, there are now more times when you have to look your best than in the past; more job interviews, more face-to-face contact, more networking, more presentations and public speaking and more need to impress others.

*'If you aren't willing to pay attention to how your image will 'hit' an employer, you won't get the job.'*⁵³

Getting a job in the first place has always been a time when looks and appearance matter a great deal. Interviews are a time when snap judgements are made and how we look plays a significant part. Welfare to work providers have been using personal job accounts to buy clients interview suits for several years. In the US, Oprah Winfrey endorses a charity that donates old business suits to the unemployed and homeless for job interviews.

But appearances also matter once you are in work. Presentations need to be delivered, sales need to be made and face-to-face communication and teamworking are now essential skills for all employees. According to a recent article in the Guardian, in any sort of presentation to a live audience, 55% of the impact you make is visual, 38% is down to voice and only 7% is what you say⁵⁴. In such situations, the voice is also important and many leading politicians and business leaders have been coached in order to improve the presentation style. This worked well for Margaret Thatcher but less impressively for the self-styled 'quiet man' Iain Duncan Smith.

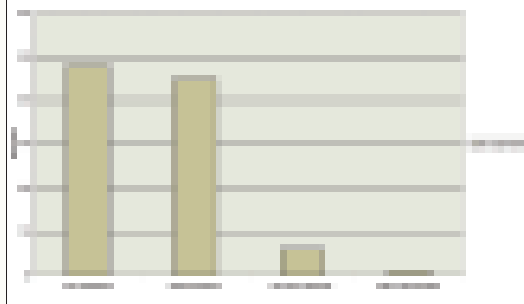
Research has also found that how we look is an important factor in a person's self-esteem.

*'One of the most intriguing findings in self-esteem research is that self-ratings of physical attractiveness are consistently and strongly correlated with self-esteem... since people make such inferences (valid or not) about the traits and character of other people based on their looks, they may also make such inferences about themselves.'*⁵⁵

Interestingly, self-esteem is affected by self-rating of appearance; you don't really have to look good, you just have to look your best or think that you do. There is also a complex juxtaposition between cause and effect here – sometimes our looks contribute to higher self-esteem and sometimes our high or low feelings of self-worth have direct consequences for how we manage our appearance;

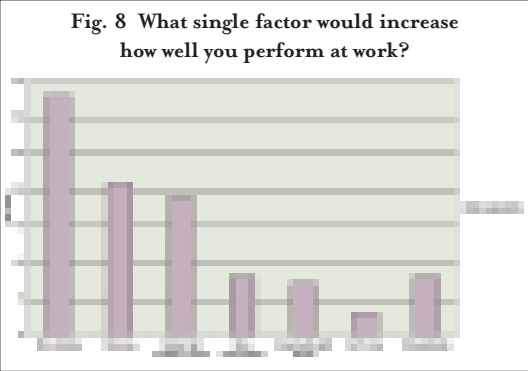
*'People who fundamentally like themselves may project this onto or generalize it to their physical appearance ... They may also take greater care of their physical appearance as an expression or celebration of the way they feel about themselves. Conversely people who dislike themselves may neglect their physical appearance since they feel they have nothing to celebrate. They may also feel that an improvement in their physical appearance would be incongruous if not tied to an improvement in their deepest view of themselves.'*⁵⁶

Fig. 7 Importance of appearance as a factor for building self-esteem



Source: Demos CTPA The Self-Esteem Society July 2004

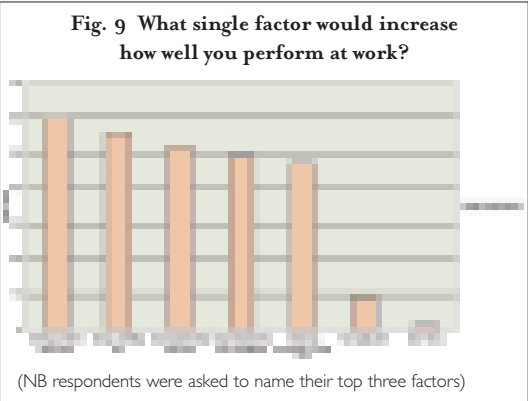
In a recent poll carried out for *The Self-Esteem Society* published by Demos and CTPA, a massive 93% of respondents thought that confidence in their appearance was an important or very important factor in building self-esteem. It may not be the most important factor, but there is no getting away from the fact that our looks are a pretty important ingredient in our individual sense of wellbeing.



Source: ICM Polling

That said, in polling commissioned for this research we looked at the precise factors that would make people perform better in their work. One in five said more money, and one in three wanted more training. 19% thought that having high confidence levels was the most important factor whereas 8% claimed that this was not applicable, either because they did not work or because their self-esteem was so high that nothing could improve their workplace performance.

Assuming that improved confidence and self-esteem makes people more efficient in their work, we also asked what factors would specifically help to build their self-esteem in the workplace.



Source: ICM Polling

Self-esteem might be a relatively new concept for how we perform in the workplace, but the factors that are likely to improve or reinforce it are very familiar: Pay or promotion matters to around half our respondents, but softer factors are considered more important. Getting on with your boss, with colleagues and getting sufficient credit for good work matters more. Also important is the type of work we do – whether the job has status in our own and other people's eyes and whether we are personally fulfilled by it.

What does all this mean for individuals in the workplace? Having high self-esteem appears to stand you in good stead once you are in work. It is clearly becoming a skill that employers want to deploy in the delivery of new products and services. It is also a personal attribute that helps organisations to work more productively. For employees, more jobs appear to be available for people with higher self-esteem. As it translates into what Michael Marmot and other psychologists call 'self-efficacy' it also pushes people more quickly into promotion and career development within firms or when applying for better jobs in other organisations.

Workers with higher levels of self-esteem are increasingly desirable because they are likely to be more productive workers, as well as more marketable in a labour market that is commoditising self-esteem. Utilising high self-esteem workers means more sales and higher productivity for employers. Subsequently this often elusive personal quality, as well as the factors that contribute to its enhancement, are becoming increasingly important aspects of all our working lives.





5

Politicians, Plumbers and Pop Idols:
Self-Esteem in the New and Old Economies

‘We’ve got a better sense of what’s happening in America, and we’ve got better hair.’

Senators **John Kerry** and **John Edwards**⁵⁷.

The US Presidential election is entering its final phase and both candidates have been trained and judged in how they look and present themselves. John Kerry may have been talking with his tongue firmly in his cheek when he described his and John Edwards' hairstyles, but both the Democrat and Republican candidates have devoted enormous amounts of time and money to how they look and to how their wives, supporters and party workers are presented to the American public.

In the UK voters are just as likely to be affected by appearance and presentation. Margaret Thatcher, John Major and Iain Duncan Smith all had voice and style makeovers, with varying degrees of success, whilst Tony Blair and New Labour have also been derided for their obsession with looks and presentation. In their 1997 election campaign and in their first years of government it was alleged that candidates and ministers were urged to dress as smartly as possible and in the case of their men, to cut down on the amount of their facial hair: Stephen Byers and Peter Mandelson duly shaved off their moustaches whilst other old Labour stalwarts like Frank Dobson and Charles Clarke kept their beards intact. We may accuse them all of style over substance – and of spinning in particular – but they are seeking a record breaking third General Election victory.

Life, love and the American way

The American work ethic is the driver of their enviably high productivity rate as well as their intensifying working lives. It is driven by the way they want to live, the belief that they have in the way they will achieve it and by the incessant level of new things for them to buy.

The more things there are to consume, own and desire, the harder we have to work, the more money we have to earn and so on. As Richard Layard describes it, we are caught on a kind of *'hedonic treadmill'*. But the truth is that the high standards of living in American society may have helped to pervert the perceptions of their lives – and their collective and individual levels of self-esteem – in the eyes of the rest of the world. As David Brooks finds, this confidence starts in their education system where virtually all high school seniors expect to be millionaires by the time they are fifty.

*'As you may have noticed, 90% of Americans have way too much self-esteem (while the remainder has none at all).'*⁵⁸

However, he may be describing what Michael Marmot sees as a natural *'self-enhancement bias'*, where we all tend to say that we are or just feel better than the average. This may be a practical antidote to Marmot's social gradient of health or it may just soften the differentials a little bit. But it follows that you have to be careful when you ask people how well they are doing, how well they are going to do or how good they feel about themselves.

When self-esteem goes bad

It is inevitable that we might get our self-esteem wrong and just as we might undervalue our overall assets and attributes, there is an equal possibility for overdoing so too. David Brooks is referring to this as a widespread process amongst the majority of Americans. However, this perception is more of a problem in cultures where we are encouraged to be more self-effacing, deferential and to know our places in the order of things.

In this way, people with too much self-esteem are often the objects of derision whether they have made something of their talents or not. It is one of the reasons why we are often so quick to abuse some of our own compatriots or peers when they are ambitious or successful.

Some of the UK's most popular television programmes often demonstrate this. The *'Pop Idol'* and *'Fame Academy'* series contain some of the most ruthless assaults on contestants' self-esteem to be seen in popular culture. Simon Cowell and Richard Park, in particular – as both the producers and chief pantomime villains – have made entire careers out of it. Cowell's fellow judges, such as Paula Abdul in America and Nicki Chapman in the UK, seem to be there almost entirely to help to build and maintain the contestants' self-esteem.

And yet the contestants in these or other TV talent shows who feel the judges' scorn are quick to reply that they will succeed, that they have real talent and that they believe in themselves and this is their dream. But most get voted off and are never heard of again. Even winners like *One True Voice*, *Hear'Say* or *David Sneddon* don't last long.

Ironically, the winners tend to be the most self-effacing or the ones that have needed to overcome major barriers to either their talent or self-confidence. Gareth Gates had a major stammer and Michelle McManus was seriously overweight and yet both managed to win or achieve success in spite of the low self-esteem that these issues appeared to cause. Rik Waller and Darius Danesh⁹⁹ were both thought to have far too much self-esteem yet failed pretty miserably.

The TV industry by now knows that we love to watch people with such self-esteem issues – whether they are from celebrity or ordinary life. Channel 4's *'Brat Camp'* provided an intriguing insight into the over-confidence of a group of appalling young people sent from the cosseted and over-privileged lives in the UK to America in order to have their self-belief and arrogance reassessed. *'Posh Plumbers'* investigated the apparently growing trend for people in high-powered, well paying jobs to quit and to become plumbers. Partly because they want more control over their working lives and partly because they want to feel better about what they do for a living – and partly because they have heard that they can still earn around £80,000 a year fixing people's toilets.

'Big Brother' is perhaps the ultimate example of people with too much self-esteem. As the programme has entered its fourth and fifth series, the applicants all seem to be convinced that they will be worth watching and fantastically entertaining for a variety of reasons. And yet even the most arrogant contestants can quickly see their self-belief challenged and shattered. A process that makes for compelling and extremely popular television:

'I don't think I like myself much most of the time. I feel quite worthless a lot of the time and I think I'm quite defensive because of that. Sometimes I feel positive about myself, but most of the time I feel quite unconfident. I have a very low self-esteem.'

Kitten from Big Brother Series 5⁶⁰

Politicians too, can appear to have far too much confidence in their abilities or convictions. It is one of the reasons that they are not as popular as they would like to be. Arguably though, having such high self-esteem is as much as a prerequisite for politicians in their careers as it is for *Pop Idol* or *Big Brother* contestants.

Think about Peter Mandelson. Vilified as one of the chief architects of New Labour and of the 'spin' that supposedly accompanies it, he has just been appointed as the UK's new European Commissioner. This is the third 'big' job that he has had since 1997, having had to resign from the first two as Secretary of State for Trade and Industry and then Northern Ireland following the home loan and Hinduja passport scandals. Neither appeared to seriously dent his personal levels of self-esteem. When he accepted the EU Commissioner's job, he agreed with Tony Blair 'that he was the best man for the job'. He referred back to his acceptance speech when being re-elected as the MP for Hartlepool in 2001:

'I am a fighter, not a quitter!'

Resignation speeches of front line politicians tend to be anything but humble. Consider the way that Margaret Thatcher, Iain Duncan Smith, Robin Cook or Clare Short announced their various departures from office as well as the repeated statements from Peter Mandelson. They all say much the same things when their time is up. Bill Clinton managed to follow a similar path, but despite his impeachment, with his job as President of the United States intact:

*'So nothing - not piety, nor tears, nor wit, nor torment - can alter what I have done. I must make my peace with that. I must also be at peace with the fact that the public consequences of my actions are in the hands of the American people and their representatives in the Congress. Should they determine that my errors of word and deed require their rebuke and censure, I am ready to accept that.'*⁶¹

And all of them did so with their eyes firmly and solemnly looking into the camera, wearing their best clothes and with impeccable hair. In fact you can guarantee that all of them went through a number of rehearsals as well as with serious consideration about whether they were striking the appropriate visual and auditory notes.

But as we have seen, politicians don't always wait until they are either on their way up or down before they go for some kind of makeover. Conservative MP Ann Widdecombe, who used to be described as 'Doris Karloff', has been quick to criticise voters' obsession with looks and presentation:

*'People's values are upside down. We aren't bothered about content, let alone spiritual matters. It's all looks, looks, looks - completely trivial. William Hague was criticised because he was bald and Ken Clarke because he was roly-poly. People concentrate very much on your appearance in politics.'*⁶²

But she too joined in with a well-publicised transformation, changing her hairstyle and colour and attempting to lose weight. She also made an appearance – occasionally at least – on the first series of 'Celebrity Fit Farm'. And she did a lot better than Rik Waller⁶³. But whoever we are and whatever we do, we appear to function better if we have higher levels of self-esteem. As researchers from the University of Maryland in the US suggest, high self-esteem employees are desirable for a large number of reasons:

'In contrast to people with low self-esteem, those with high self-esteem are more likely to (in rough order of robustness of findings):

- Believe they are physically attractive
- Be satisfied with their jobs (and lives)
- Avoid stress or burnout on the job, especially in response to negative events
- Believe that they have the abilities needed to succeed in their jobs
- Eschew reliance on formal methods of job search in favour of personal contacts
- Choose challenging goals across a variety of tasks.

*In summary, people with high self-esteem are more likely than people with low self-esteem: to like themselves, to have confidence in themselves, to enjoy their jobs and lives, to be resistant to potentially negative or threatening events, and to be less easily influenced by external pressures.'*⁶⁴

They are more productive, more resilient, more satisfied and better at their jobs. And better preserved too.



6

Conclusions:
What Must We Do With Self-Esteem?

**'You have brains in your head.
You have feet in your shoes
You can steer yourself any direction
you choose
You're on your own
And you know what you know
And YOU are the guy
Who'll decide where to go.'**

'Oh the Places You'll Go!' Dr Seuss

Self-esteem matters. Not because a growing self-esteem industry has created new forms of demand amongst an easily manipulated population. And not because governments see it as some kind of social 'cure all' or an easy policy vaccine to a widening variety of societal ills. Rather because self-esteem acts as a personal counterweight to rapid and far-reaching changes in the labour market and in society as a whole. The increased currency of how we feel about ourselves is a natural consequence of an individualising society and a shifting economy.

To sum up we can safely say that our self-esteem depends – in variable amounts – on the following areas:

- What we know
- What we want (and expect)
- What we do
- What we have achieved (in work and in life)
- Who we compare ourselves to
- How we look

How we look – and how we, and others, think we look – appears to matter a great deal and is an important component of our self-esteem. This is not because we have all become vain and self-obsessed, although that may be the case with some people. Furthermore, this is no longer just a female phenomenon. Women may be no more concerned about the way they look than men. In this sense the increased value placed on appearance – something that writers such as Naomi Wolf and Andrea Dworkin have always criticised as a longstanding problem for women – is becoming a more gender-neutral phenomenon, aided by an evolving economy.

It would though be a mistake to assume that how we look is the most important aspect of self-esteem or to the jobs that people are doing. But it would be equally foolish to assume that it doesn't matter at all or that it is just a small, rather frivolous element to much more important factors. As the researchers at the University of Maryland found, *'as a global estimate, self-esteem applies to the whole self'*. Of course, as this implies, there are many other important factors too – not least that occupied by our brains – our qualifications and educational records are increasingly vital too. So too are a whole range of other personal attributes and experiences as well as the possession of wealth and the obvious material things that it brings.

We can then be reasonably confident that we know what makes for healthy self-esteem for individuals, but also the overall factors that make up a healthy society and a productive and fulfilled workforce:

*'These immaterial and personal assets do not just include knowledge and skills. They also include: a capacity for self-expression, self-esteem and confidence; an appetite to learn, formally and informally; the ability to sense opportunity; the ability to get on with people from diverse backgrounds; a sense of self-respect and pride in where you come from. One of the most critical issues for public policy is how we make sure access to these personal assets is fair and equitable.'*⁶⁵

But as David Brooks observes there are many people from up and down the social ladder who don't quite manage to get this right – and it is up to government and other purveyors of public policy to try and help them. As we know for much of the time this is rarely the fault of the individual – some people are simply endowed with more of these advantages than others and although they might still fall prey to status anxieties, they should not be the focus for policymakers.

For them, self-esteem does offer some tantalising possibilities for how to intervene in the lives of the disadvantaged. If people feel better about themselves and their life chances, then the riskier, individualised labour market provides less of a challenge for them. Collectively, groups that suffer wider forms of disadvantage such as ethnic minorities, lone parents and people with disabilities can also improve their prospects if they too can somehow feel better about their own situations and life chances.

A 'Social Vaccine'?

Many commentators are convinced that governments can never create this improvement even if they want to. Charles Leadbeater argues that *'self-esteem cannot be redistributed in the way income can,'* instead it has to be *'personally produced'*⁶⁶.

Self-esteem has been branded as a *'social vaccine,'* an attribute that empowers individuals and inoculates them against a wide range of social problems. In *'The Self-Esteem Society,'* Demos describes the important findings of the 1989 *'California Task Force to Promote Self-esteem,'* which researched the potential for public policy to benefit from enhancing self-esteem. It found that the family – and parental influence in particular – was an important factor in establishing *'authentic and abiding self-esteem'*. The school climate too was considered crucial. Once people had developed higher self-esteem they were less likely to be involved in self-destructive behaviour such as alcohol and drugs abuse, violence or crime and less likely to become pregnant as teenagers.

There is a clear resonance here with some of the major policy directions that New Labour have taken since 1997. Early years interventions such as Sure Start, rigorous school improvement programmes, NHS reforms and various employment incentives are all characteristic of this approach.

Others have a slightly different perspective on how individuals can produce or earn self-esteem. The sociologist Richard Sennett, in common with Leadbeater, points out that *'self-respect cannot be 'earned' in quite the same way people earn money'*. Instead he argues that the main problem confronting society *'is how the strong can practice respect toward those destined to remain weak'*⁶⁷.

We need to be able to develop a collective way of treating those at the bottom rungs of society better: Their conditions may be improved in absolute terms but in a relative sense there will always be people who are worse off than others. The condition of those at

the bottom should not be permanent either for those individuals or their family members; meritocracies should be constantly open to self-improvement. The right to potentially high levels of self-esteem should underpin any fair society, but so too should the right to expect status to be re-ordered if deserved.

Equipping all citizens or potential employees with the best education, networks, public services and personal self-belief is therefore a desirable objective. Providing the incentives for people to seek the best for themselves is also important – and central to the Labour government's philosophy; Ivan Lewis, the Minister for Adult Skills calls this the '*dignity of self-improvement*'⁶⁹. Labour's approach to both skills and to employment via the New Deals and associated tax credit incentives could be described less as a social and more of an economic vaccine. This should be further reinforced. Entitlements for learning and personal development as well as the time required to pursue such objectives are essential.

The better you feel about your own abilities and life chances then the more likely you are to learn, aspire and to achieve better things. So, continued improvement in early years and general education is vital. But so too may be the need to compel people to improve themselves – this is particularly relevant for welfare to work and benefits recipients as a condition of receipt. Compulsion, in the form of skill development and the self-confidence and social networks that usually accompany such activity, should underpin more social benefits.

Unlike Leadbeater and Sennett, others believe that you can and should try to make a difference to individual self-esteem. Richard Layard stresses that, '*it exists and it can be taught by parents and teachers*'⁶⁹. We do need to find more effective ways of teaching such attributes in our school and college systems. By extension this also raises the 'public policy' premium on better public services – and particularly improving them for families, early years development and in schools and qualifications.

Self-esteem must become a more important focus for both social and economic policy – an insurance against the twists and turns of a modern society and its economy. If we believe that you either have it or you don't and that it is impossible to teach or to redistribute then we will be missing a vital opportunity. Furthermore, it is essential to improving the productivity of individuals and the economy as a whole.

There is a wide range of things that both individuals and governments should be doing to improve the way that individuals see themselves within our society. Of course many of these are very difficult to do – making schools better; making vocational training better; making individuals realise that they can and should improve their lot in life. Government has included self-esteem in many policy initiatives from the classroom to the jobcentre. And yet they do not seem to have appreciated that it should be the galvanizing heart of many of these initiatives and at the very centre of how we function in society and perform at work.

We need to recognise how important self-esteem has become in our economy, award high priority to its further development, enhance, teach and instill it, value it, relate it firmly to the education and qualifications system, understand how it is developed, (see those with too much of it) and put self-esteem at the heart of our approach to improving the quality of the workplace and wider society in the UK today. There are major recommendations here for government, employers and individuals alike:

Government should continue the improvement of public services and the construction of a more socially mobile society. They should also appreciate and support the growing ‘self-esteem industry’. Potentially this is one of the UK’s most important sectors, providing a major source of new jobs, enterprises and a fast-growing contribution to the UK’s GDP. It cuts across traditional manufacturing and the newest areas of personal and household services, bringing together the old and new economies. There are important consequences for departments supporting new and established businesses that offer vocational training and skills development supporting the use of science and technology in the sector. Most importantly though, the Government should reappraise the centrality of self-esteem in education and welfare policies. For people to be able to reach their full potential, they must have the confidence as well as the ability to do so.

Employers should also recognise that employees with higher self-esteem make for better workers – happier, more productive and more valued. Bosses need to give more credit for work well done and to strive for better and more productive relationships with staff. Would-be entrepreneurs should look closely at the business opportunities provided by self-esteem, whilst those already operating in the sector should continue to recruit, develop and reward staff whose high self-esteem are enhancing their business performance.

And what of ourselves? We know what tends to make us feel better about our lives and our work, and much of this we have significant control over. Our skills, our appearance, our friends and networks, our jobs and our expectations all matter enormously. We too should look at the jobs and careers afforded by the expansion of the self-esteem sector. There are also significant opportunities to start new businesses or to be self-employed in these areas, helping us to develop lifestyles that many now crave.

But we also need to be more realistic about what we want and whom we compare ourselves with – unreasonable ambitions and comparisons can have dangerous side effects for our health as well as our self-esteem. But above all, self-improvement appears to be the most effective thing that we can do. **It underpins self-belief and acquiring new skills, personal attributes and experiences that will help us to be happier, to earn more and to be more productive at work.**

Then we’ll all feel better about ourselves.

Notes

- ¹ This estimate is made up of the overall value of self-esteem based industries and proportions of those sectors that have a growing stake in its value. For a full explanation see section 2 of the full report.
- ² Labour Force Survey September 2004
- ³ ICM Poll commissioned for this research 2004
- ⁴ Speech to Rowntree July 2004
- ⁵ *How to Raise Your Self-Esteem* Nathaniel Branden p5 Bantam, New York 1987
- ⁶ *The Self-Esteem Society*, Demos and CTPA July 2004
- ⁷ Aromatherapists and Cosmetic Surgeries are the new high street stars – London Evening Standard 2 August 2004
- ⁸ COLIPA market statistics Website: www.colipa.com
- ⁹ Cosmetics industry in numbers - CTPA Website: www.ctpa.org.uk/ukmarket
- ¹⁰ *Observer Men Uncovered* 27 June 2004
- ¹¹ White House Bulletin 27 February 2002
- ¹² *Looking Good Sounding Right*, Warhurst and Nickson, Industrial Society 2002
- ¹³ *NEP Final Report of Steering Group on Lone Parents Work Works* April 2003
- ¹⁴ Barnaby Lenon, Head Master, Harrow School
- ¹⁵ This was a highly controversial book – eliciting reviews such as ‘This is crap by anyone’s standards’ – by Professor Ted Wragg, Independent.
- ¹⁶ ‘All Must Have Prizes’ Melanie Phillips p333 1996
- ¹⁷ www.prospects.ac.uk
- ¹⁸ www.prospects.ac.uk
- ¹⁹ www.ukpublishing.info
- ²⁰ Advertising Association website www.adassoc.org.uk
- ²¹ *No Logo*, Naomi Klein p231 Flamingo 2000
- ²² David Brooks, ‘On Paradise Drive’ Simon and Schuster 2004
- ²³ Charles Leadbeater – ‘Up the Down Escalator: Why the Global Pessimists are Wrong’ Penguin p8 2002
- ²⁴ *Social Mobility: A Discussion Paper*, S. Aldridge, Cabinet Office, April 2001
- ²⁵ *Labour Market under New Labour*, Gregg, Wadsworth et al, 2004
- ²⁶ Budget Speech April 2004
- ²⁷ ‘Fear infects flexible workplaces’ Ashley Seager The Guardian 2nd September 2004
- ²⁸ Federation of Recruitment and Employment Services 1997
- ²⁹ Atkinson, Rick, Morris and Williams 1996
- ³⁰ Source: PSI/ESRC Working in Britain Survey 2003
- ³¹ Francis Green 2004 and John Philpott 2002-2004 CIPD, Perspectives series
- ³² Labour Force Survey September 2004
- ³³ ‘Hard Work: Life in Low Pay Britain’ Polly Toynbee 2003
- ³⁴ *Below the Breadline, Living on the Minimum Wage* Fran Abrams, 2002 Profile
- ³⁵ ‘On top of the world for jobs’ The Guardian Lorraine Cushnie Saturday August 23, 2003
- ³⁶ *Future of Success* – Robert Reich p27
- ³⁷ *The Future of Success* (ibid) p29
- ³⁸ Ivan Lewis, Minister for Adult Skills in various speeches and articles
- ³⁹ Goos and Manning in the ‘Labour Market under New Labour’ ed Gregg and Wadsworth 2004
- ⁴⁰ *Status Anxiety* Alain de Botton p3/4

- ⁴¹ Richard Layard in Robbins Memorial Lectures at May LSE 2003
- ⁴² JK Galbraith *The Affluent Society* Penguin first published in 1958.
- ⁴³ Talking Heads *Once in a Lifetime*
- ⁴⁴ *The Future of Success* Robert Reich etc
- ⁴⁵ *Respect* Richard Sennett p188
- ⁴⁶ *No Shame in My Game* Katherine Newman p287
- ⁴⁷ Locke, Knight, McClear, University of Maryland p16
- ⁴⁸ *Looking Good Sounding Right* Chris Warhurst and Dennis Nickson p12 2001
- ⁴⁹ *Looking Good Sounding Right* p1 (ibid)
- ⁵⁰ The participation rate of women aged between 16 and 59 years old increased from 65% in 1984 to 72% in 2002
- ⁵¹ Consider ‘*The Full Monty*’ – the most successful UK film of the last twenty years. It depicted the unemployment of a group of male steelworkers amidst the growing employment of their wives, girlfriends and other female family members. Many of them in the film worked at Asda in Sheffield – jobs that were considered beneath the men.
- ⁵² *The Ethical Employee*, Steve Bevan, Work Foundation 2003
- ⁵³ *No Shame in My Game* (ibid) p74
- ⁵⁴ Steve Hamilton – Hamilton Agency for voice workshops – quoted in *Guardian Office Hours* 12th July 2004. ‘*Figures of Speech*’ article by Hugh Wilson
- ⁵⁵ International Review of Industrial and Organizational Psychology 1996 Ed Cary Cooper and Ivan Robertson ‘*Self-Esteem and Work*’ E Locke, K McClear and D Knight University of Maryland
- ⁵⁶ E Locke, K McClear and D Knight University of Maryland (ibid)
- ⁵⁷ As reported in The Times 9th July 2004
- ⁵⁸ ‘On Paradise Drive’ David Brooks p73
- ⁵⁹ Both were so convinced that they were talented that they just kept coming back – to Celebrity Fit Camp, Reality House and Pop Idol – to some degree of success it has to be said.
- ⁶⁰ C4 website June 2004
- ⁶¹ Clinton’s Apology 11th December 1998 – White House
- ⁶² *Drop Dead Gorgeous* – Guardian Article 10 July 2004
- ⁶³ Weymouth Pier Summer 2004
- ⁶⁴ International Review of Industrial and Organizational Psychology 1996 Ed Cary Cooper and Ivan Robertson ‘*Self-Esteem and Work*’ E Locke, K McClear and D Knight University of Maryland
- ⁶⁵ ‘On Paradise Drive’ Brooks p214
- ⁶⁶ ‘Up the Down Escalator’ Leadbeater p215
- ⁶⁷ ‘Respect: The Formation of Character in an age of Inequality’ – Richard Sennett Penguin 2003
- ⁶⁸ In a speech to Natfhe and Niace – John Baillie Annual Lecture April 2004
- ⁶⁹ Richard Layard (ibid)

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