

High-Tech High Jinks, Low-Road Employment

Lab Rats: How Silicon Valley Made Work Terrible for the Rest of Us

by Daniel Lyons (NY: Hachette Books, 2018)

reviewed by Nicholas Kapoor

Daniel Lyons here comically portrays the bizarre fads that have taken over part of the current high-tech workplace. Activities that are slowly being integrated in places such as Silicon Valley, like Hackathons and Lego workshops, although ridiculous, are seemingly implemented with good intentions. However, as Lyons, a seasoned tech journalist, slowly began to look deeper into these trends he began to discover the motives behind many of these techniques and uncovered an unsettling reality about the modern workplace. His research focus quickly transitioned from “goofy gurus passing off New Age Bullshit as management science” to why the modern worker is essentially being short-changed on a multitude of levels. Lyons takes a rather leftist approach to this issue, as he’s consistently seen criticizing various high-income individuals, specifically the Silicon Valley billionaires who are the ones implementing the kinds of programs he discusses. Whether you agree with him or not, Lyons uses consistent logic and credible research to support his arguments and, all in all, provides eye-opening insight into the conditions of the tech work world today.

Lyons takes a very methodical approach to address his grievances with the current state of the workplace, he breaks up the book into four parts. First, “Misery in the Maze”, introduces the reader to the reality of the current high-tech workplace, the people who are responsible for it and the history of American human resource management (and why we shouldn’t trust it). In Part II, “The Four Factors of Workplace Despair”, he delves deep into how Silicon Valley executives have created a stress inducing and unsettling environment for our workers. Part III, “The No-Shit-Sherlock School of Management”, provides various real life examples on both sides of the spectrum and finally, the final section, provides “seven rules for building a sane, healthy, happy culture at work. Not only does he clearly breakdown his argument, however, rather than just picking out problems, he also provides his own opinion on how to potentially improve things.¹

So, what exactly is he talking about? Especially when looking at the countless different ways that big corporations seem to improve the lives of their employees, where is the problem? and is it true? Firstly, the percentage of workers who say that they’re satisfied with their jobs has dropped almost 10 percent from 1987 to 2016 -- likely some indication that the quality of jobs is decreasing. Furthermore, various studies have indicated

¹ “Part II.” Lyons, Daniel. *Lab Rats: Why Modern Work Makes People Miserable*. Atlantic Books, 2019, pp. 136-236.

that work-related stress has even made workers physically ill. Lyon attributes this primarily to a lack of humanity in the workplace. He argues that the leaders of the larger corporations are so focused on optimizing their profits that they forget that every single one of their employees is still a human. He discusses four different causes for workplace despair.

The first cause, which is the most obvious, is money. Although the economy has been consistently growing over the past few decades, the middle and lower classes aren't seeing any of the benefits of that growth. The middle-income household percentage of aggregate income dropped from 62 percent in 1970 to 43 percent in 2014. Meanwhile, the share of upper-income households grew to 49 percent from 29 percent over that same time period. Essentially, workers are not being paid as they should. Not only is this unfair, but this majorly contributes to unnecessary financial pressures that the working classes have to deal with.

Next, Lyon addresses our nation's huge problem with job insecurity currently. A mentality that stems from a presentation from Netflix preaching that we employees should be treated like players on a team rather than a family. As Netflix was the poster-child for the internet revolution, this statement completely changed how companies treated employees in the future and essentially disintegrated years of traditional wisdom regarding how employees should be treated. Employees from this point on were essentially stripped of any sort of job security. Regardless of how well you are performing, the anxiety that you may or may not be doing well enough was now unavoidable. This sense of job insecurity is extremely psychologically harmful and often correlates with higher rates of depression and suicidal thoughts. This contributes to the overall theme of employees blatantly disregarding the well-being of their employees. Disguised as motivation or ways to improve the mindsets of their workers, philosophies like this are just excuses for employers to run their employees into the ground and forcing them to think it's okay.

Another contributor to misery in the workplace that Lyons discusses is the constant and abrupt change to the work environment. As bizarre management fads continue to modify the workspace, workers struggle to keep up with the varying conditions. Something as simple as the physical space in which one works, workers are going from working in quiet, private offices to massive rooms called "open offices". These open spaces are loud, lack privacy and flat out make employees miserable. Worst of all, companies advertise them as solutions to "foster collaboration" when in reality they're just trying to save money on office space. We see a similar trend on the technological side of things. As technology continues to advance, companies are not considering the impact of implementing new technologies on their workers. Regardless of the unnecessary stress a new technology might inflict on an employee, if they think it will improve profit or productivity, companies will implement it. However, at the end of the day technology is supposed to be subordinate to humans, not vice versa, so in many cases the technology that is intended to make workers more efficient, will not only slow them down but also drive them nuts.

Lyon's fourth and final point, the dehumanization of the worker, perfectly wraps up all of the other three points. All the previous examples we've seen fall under the category of dehumanization. However, in this

section, Lyons is referring to dehumanization in the sense that humans are more and more being treated like machines. Much of this type of dehumanization is coincidentally driven by technology. As companies continue to automate their tasks, they are also using technology to monitor and optimize the way humans work. Uber is a great example of this, not only do they manage almost three million employees primarily through software, however, they are able to craft a very specific employee-employer connection that entails no relationship at all. As Lyons says “To the driver, what is Uber? Where is it located? What does it look like? Uber is a black box. Uber is an app on a smartphone.”² It sounds almost comical, but it’s a reality for millions. When Uber decides that they want to go fully autonomous and remove human drivers from their platform they hold little obligation to their current employees. This is just one of many examples of how technology is dehumanizing workers.

However, Lyons does address some positives in the industry as well. He acknowledges companies such as Basecamp, who refuse to succumb to the traditional notion that a company’s only purpose is to return a profit for its investors. Rather, they prioritize creating good jobs and a good product, and Lyons goes on further to discuss how this attitude is actually better for the industry as a whole. Surprisingly I think Lyons makes one of his most important points of the book in this section. This is in comparing the benefits that a company like Basecamp provides for their employees as opposed to other Silicon Valley giants. Basecamp provides benefits such as funds for gym memberships, massages, charitable donations or even money towards a co-working place. What’s important about this list is that they provide things that will each improve the quality of an employee’s life. When you compare this to the gimmicky techniques that Lyons discusses, such as Lego building sessions or playing with Play-Doh, Lyon’s point is very clear. These types of activities make workers feel like they’re part of a “Kindergarten Experiment” or “Lab Rats” and although employers claim that they’re to improve the quality of life of workers, they really just use them as a way to pretend that they care about the well being of their workers.

Finally, Lyon compiles a list of rules that he believes, based on his research, will build a “sane, healthy, happy culture at work”³. The rules are: Spend more on humans, slow down, use less tech, close the gap, turn a profit and finally obey the golden rule (you know: treat people the way that you’d like to be treated). Each of these rules are pretty simple and all contribute to making the workplace more humane.

This comprehensive breakdown in my opinion is very representative of Lyon’s ability and dedication to his craft. Although management readers may fault him for views that align more with the left side of the political spectrum, each of his points is backed up with concrete information from relatively unbiased sources. He thoroughly breaks down his complaints with the current condition of the workforce, gives examples of some people who are doing it right, and tops it off with suggestions and an outline to create a safer workspace. No

² Lyons, Daniel. *Lab Rats: Why Modern Work Makes People Miserable*. Atlantic Books, 2019, pp. 242.

³ Lyons, Daniel. *Lab Rats: Why Modern Work Makes People Miserable*. Atlantic Books, 2019, pp. 371.

matter how conservative one may be, I think it's very difficult not to understand his perspective and to appreciate the depth and detail with which he makes his case.

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