

# Epidemic of nonsense work | The Express Tribune

Abbas Moosvi July 18, 2022

Key institutions will be populated by individuals play-acting at the workplace year after year

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In a recent publication by the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE) titled *Is Work Only Meetings?*, it was documented that government officials spend an average of 5-9 hours a day on meetings alone. These meetings are generally thought of as staff engagements that purport to involve high level discussions on matters of grave importance. They can be broken down into ‘pre-meeting’ meetings that accumulate to 1-4 hours, the meeting itself that usually totals to around 2-4 hours, and ‘post-meeting’ meetings of 1-3 hours — all funded by taxpayer’s money.

Not to mention the fact that in the majority of cases most participants are not exactly sure what the overarching purpose of the meeting is, what their specific role is, and whether anything substantive is expected to emerge from the huddle. In many cases, these engagements are meant to serve a purely symbolic function whereby time is killed under the guise of work. Similar to virtue signalling, this phenomenon may aptly be deemed ‘conscientiousness signalling’ — a theatrical performance to convey the message that some important activity is taking place.

David Graeber, in his book titled *Bullshit Jobs*, highlights how these kinds of pastimes are not exclusive to the public sector thus emphasising their ubiquity in private corporations. The reason for this is psychological i.e. management’s desire to be pleased and complimented by those underneath them in order to feel wise and ‘in charge’ at all times — something that is even more heightened in Pakistan due to its colonial heritage and deeply entrenched institutional norms. This is evidenced by the frequent photoshoots of official meetings in which a designated media officer is assigned the role of rushing around the room with a DSLR to take aesthetic photos of everyone and then uploading carefully curated sets on social media for public consumption.

One of the primary reasons why employment has taken on a purely symbolic nature around the globe over the past few decades is that the idea of ‘work’ has been linked to notions of morality. Initiated during the early stages of the Protestant revolution, the belief was that if one were constantly busy or at the service of some task then salvation in the afterlife was more or less guaranteed. In other words, it did not matter whether anything useful or worthwhile was being done; what mattered was how occupied someone was, which was equated to the ‘enhancement of God’s

kingdom on Earth'. The implication here of course was that idleness was the ultimate sin; that being still was a sure shot strategy to achieve eternal damnation. This idea perforated across time, space, and cultures, and is commonplace even today, accepted as the default state of affairs.

Naturally, the net impact of all this was to optimise institutions not for performance or efficiency but for activity, regardless of how useless it was. In the global public domain, incentive structures are such that parties in power are compelled to deliver results in a predictable, routinised, and tangible manner largely due to the ever-present threat of ouster by the people come election day in case of failure. In Pakistan, governments are not accountable to the citizenry at large. Instead, they answer to other actors — landed elites, men in uniform, industrial hubs, and other 'power centres' that determine whether parties return to power following a particular term in office.

Unless this elaborate system of gatekeeping is not overhauled by radical democratisation via land reforms, liberation of unions and associations, major cuts to non-development and non-combat defence expenditures, and genuine empowerment of local body governments, the state apparatus will continue to be captured by elites and used to enhance personal wealth. Key institutions will be populated by individuals play-acting at the workplace year after year, which has unfortunately been Pakistan's story since its inception.

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