

OPINION

Why we all might want to bring a bit of Barbie to work

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CONTRIBUTED TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

PUBLISHED YESTERDAY



What can we learn from Barbie about resisting objectification at work?

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Is Barbie now a feminist icon? Maybe? Okay, probably not. However, she might just be the icon of workplace empowerment that we've been looking for.

A prominent theme tackled by the Barbie movie is the objectification of women. Contrary to Barbieland, where the Barbies are in charge (and the Kens are most definitely not), when Margot Robbie's Barbie first enters the Real World, she notices something is off. She feels "conscious of my ... self?" Men leer and jeer at her, with one going so far as to grab her butt. Unlike Barbieland, in the Real World, Barbie has to deal with being sexually objectified.

We appreciated this spotlight on the objectification of women. It is much needed. However, without necessarily meaning to, as business professors who study organizations and work, we also watched the movie through the lens of employment – and we saw another way in which Barbieland illuminated certain inadequacies in the Real World. In Barbieland, each of the Barbies has a specific profession they are proud of (author, lawyer, physicist) while the Kens (spoiler alert) eventually take issue with the fact that they aren't afforded individual identities or meaningful work (their profession is listed broadly as "Beach").

Interestingly, in the movie's Real World, workers are experiencing something even worse than the Kens. At Mattel headquarters, they occupy plain, dark cubicles and wear the same forgettable outfits. One lowly office worker has to be asked for his name on several occasions, while a group of C-Suite suits aren't afforded names at all. They all do what the boss tells them to do, for the sole benefit of the company.

In her 1995 essay Objectification, [philosopher Martha Nussbaum](#) identified the qualities involved in objectifying someone – the seven ways in which we might treat a person as a thing. First, instrumentality and ownership: treating a person as a tool used for the purposes of another, as if they are owned by another. Next, denial of autonomy and subjectivity: preventing a person from choosing how to act, and ignoring their interests and feelings. Finally, inertness, fungibility and violability: expecting a person to lack agency, treating them as interchangeable with others, and infringing on their boundaries.

What is most interesting about this list is that many of the items align with how we think about present-day employees. Employees are instruments – resources – used by companies to fulfill the needs of customers, with little choice or autonomy; they are fungible, interchangeable with all other

employees in the same position; their work-life boundaries are often violated since their labour is owned by the company, and any expectations they might have of leaving work at their workplace are increasingly eroded. Their subjectivity is most definitely denied – the feelings and interests of employees are rarely taken into account. This is simply the description of typical working conditions in current late-stage capitalism. The drab, cubicled and nameless employees in the Barbie movie's Real World were not an exaggeration.

Corporations act as if they own us, or at least our labour, and aim to squeeze out as much productivity from us as they can. Whether it's the algorithms of the gig economy that turn workers into numbers, the partner in the firm whose worth is solely determined by the amount of money they bring in, or the quest for "professionalism" in the office that leaves no room for personality or work-life balance, companies are increasingly taking the "human" out of "human capital."

So, what can we learn from Barbie about resisting objectification at work?



RICK BOWMER/THE CANADIAN PRESS

First, we need to bring our whole selves to work. In our work, we hear over and over again that we are training our students to be “professional,” not just to learn the technical skills of accounting or marketing or whatever courses they are expected to take. But we resist the notion that we must teach them all to be the same, to leave themselves at the door. The truth is that when you try to fit within the image of the ideal worker, it is easier for others to see you as an object – someone who could be anyone, indistinguishable from everyone else in your position.

In Barbieland, the Barbies put their whole selves into their work, wearing brightly coloured costumes that showcase their personalities. In the end, even Weird Barbie finds her place in the Barbieland government – without having to be less weird. We should all be encouraged to bring our weird and wonderful selves to our work. Employers and co-workers should be able to see you as a real human being, with interests and desires of your own.

Second, we need real autonomy. Before the pandemic, CEOs and managers in companies of all sizes said workers were simply unable to work from home – we couldn’t be trusted to be productive. It was assumed employees needed the ever-present surveillance of bosses and even co-workers to keep us focused, to keep productivity high. Autonomy was seen as antithetical to work.

Often, the autonomy that matters is having control over our schedules or the right to say no to certain customers – a promise that was made in the gig economy, but one that is often left undelivered, as shown in the recent documentary *The Gig is Up*, about the failings of the industry. Even in the gig economy, there is no autonomy: Algorithms have taken the place of bosses.

But in Barbieland, none of the Barbies seem to report to a boss. Even their president shows up to a group sleepover, and they definitely don’t have an algorithm quantifying their work lives. Yet each day, they go off to work with a sense of purpose. This is the key to autonomy: purpose.



Barbie dolls are displayed in the Careers Today exhibit during the 2021 Barbie: A Cultural Icon Exhibition in Las Vegas, Nevada. GABE GINSBERG/GETTY IMAGES

Purpose is why productivity went up during the pandemic – we were all invested in keeping the world going – and why it has gone down in recent months. We all started questioning what we were doing. With purpose, autonomy becomes a real possibility.

Third, we also need to support each other. So often in the workplace, we are pitted against one another as part colleagues, part competitors. We fight over what we are told are scarce resources: pay increases, bonuses and even “good jobs” from the boss. Our workplaces reflect (and exacerbate) our individualist ideology.

In Barbieland, it is a lovefest at work. Compliments for everyone! And while a lovefest might not be realistic in our workplaces, it does point to the importance of community and support.

If we are to put our weird and wonderful selves into our work and build the purposeful autonomy that we require, we need support from others. We need a

community that accepts us as human beings, not simply as objects fulfilling our corporate duty.

Another spoiler: After the Kens take over Barbieland by instituting their own brand of patriarchy, the Barbies can only break free by becoming aware of the fact that they've been objectified. After hearing a bit of feminist theory, they break out of the Kens' spell, and are able to be intentional about the way they resist. Their individual personalities and autonomy return.

This awareness is crucial.

If we are to solve the current labour crisis, we need to be aware of all of the ways we are objectified and bring forward our humanity as we rethink what work should be.

We are not suggesting that following the plot of Barbie is a panacea for objectification – there are so many ways we are objectified at work, and the movie only scratched the surface. But as we think about how to redesign work, there is much we can learn about resisting objectification and reclaiming our humanity.



The new line up of 2018 Barbie Career dolls at the 2018 New York Toy Fair including eye doctor, beekeeper and paleontologist.

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