

it's as if someone
were out there
making up
pointless jobs just
for the sake of
keeping us all
working

/ James Saunders

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it's as if someone were out there making up pointless jobs just for the sake of keeping us all working (2025) is part of a series of pieces that explores purposeless work. The piece presents the players with a set of pointless jobs which they must complete within the constraints set for the performance, which might include time limits, specific sequences reliant on others' work being completed, or a greater degree of personal choice. The means of allocating jobs determines some aspects of the performance, reflecting potential differences between management structures in employment contexts. The degree of autonomy players have in choosing how to complete their jobs reflects the opportunities for personal task management in workplace settings.

The piece explores the way the amount of agency we have in our work and the types of jobs we are tasked with impacts on our effectiveness and levels of motivation. The required jobs in the piece are all fairly arbitrary and lacking in apparent utility, asking players to rationalise their own motivations for submitting to the requirements placed upon them by the particular management structure in operation. As with a number of my recent pieces, the title is drawn from David Graeber's book *Bullshit Jobs*. It is well worth reading.

Any number of performers with any sound-producing means.

Duration: at least 10 minutes

SETUP

Each player needs one or more job cards which they must complete within the allotted time.

Players may have an unequal number of jobs to complete, or a more balanced distribution across the group.

Jobs can be allocated using any method, such as random selection, player choice, negotiation, a single person deciding or a committee determining distribution, and so on. Think about the implications of the chosen method of allocating jobs.

Some jobs are time-limited, or require a specific number of actions, or can be repeated.

If nothing is stated, players should use their discretion and complete the jobs appropriately.

If an allocated job is not possible due to resource or skill availability, reassign it to someone else and choose a replacement.

Players will need the necessary resources to complete their allocated jobs. In general, many of the jobs can be completed with any sound-producing means. Some jobs require specific objects (e.g. paper) or a type of object (e.g. a pitched instrument or recording device).

PERFORMANCE INSTRUCTIONS

In general, everyone is independent, just getting on with their job, although some actions require other people to do things in order to complete them.

A performance could involve players undertaking a single job or being given a set of jobs to complete in the available time, perhaps with a schedule.

Other constraints are possible, such as requiring a supply and demand situation where some jobs can only be started when other jobs have been completed. Dependencies such as this can be planned in advance.

Players with multiple jobs can complete them in sequence or in parallel.

Once players have finished their work they may rest, or help others with their work, or take on more work.

All players should determine the best way to complete their allocated work within the constraints specified for the performance.

Do the jobs with no sense of performance; just get on with what is required in a task-focused manner.

Do the best you can.

Choose one other player.
Each time they complete an action, make an action of your own. Always make the same action.

Strike one object against another object 73 times.

Drag one object across another object starting every 25 seconds. Always drag the object between the same two points, stopping when the destination is reached.

Choose three pitches and play them one at a time as short sounds, at least 41 seconds apart.

Make a single unbroken sustained sound. If it stops at any point, just sit and wait without playing again.

Make a burst of very short, very fast repeated sounds and then wait for at least 18 seconds before repeating, or not.

Sing a very quiet high pitch which may occasionally stop and start uncontrollably. Take a break after every third breath.

Tap the five fingers of one hand in logical sequences on the surface of an object.

Play a short-pitched sound followed by a long-pitched sound. Each time the short sound or the long sound should have the same pitch as one of the pitches in the previous pair.

Make a barely audible sustained sound only when nobody else is making a sound.

Play a sequence of seven different chords with enough time between each chord that the previous one may be forgotten. Repeat this sequence as many times as needed.

Play a very slow melody comprising a sequence of 19 pitches. Pitches may be repeated and pauses of any length are possible.

Make a fairly consistent sustained textural sound for 25 seconds, then pause for 25 seconds, repeating this cycle as many times as needed.

Make a very short sound once in every 20 second block. The sound can occur at any point in each 20 second block.

Hum a sustained pitch very quietly so that it is likely nobody will notice. Breathe and take a break as required.

Continuously manipulate an object in your hands. Occasionally take a break if you need to.

Play a piece of recorded music so that it is barely audible, pausing briefly 42 times at irregular intervals and then stopping.

Push an object across the floor as slowly as possible. When you reach the edge of the available space, stop pushing.

Place a small object inside a larger object and move the larger object so that the smaller object moves around within it. Take regular breaks that are longer than the preceding period of movement.

Make bursts of white noise lasting eight seconds, alternately very loud and very quiet. Do this 26 times, with breaks between each block of any duration.

Play a very slow pulse using a sound that decays. The pulse should be slow enough that others might not recognise it as such.

Make a very quiet short sound every 17 seconds.

Tear a sheet of paper into 92 separate pieces.

Whistle a very quiet high sustained pitch lasting a single breath, repeating this 18 times.

Drop a single object on the floor 54 times.

Make a recording lasting 11 seconds then play it back. Do this 14 times.

Alternately click your fingers, clap your hands, or fold your arms but do not repeat an action sequentially. Make 92 actions.

Rub two objects together for seven seconds, wait for at least seven seconds, and then repeat this sequence 26 times.

Try to balance an object on one edge, stopping when successful or after 96 times.

Stack eight objects to form a tower, stopping when successful or after 48 attempts.

Play a sequence of six falling pitches, then repeat 28 times, each time swapping the order of two neighbouring pitches.

Make the last sound. If you fail, try again.

Try to make a sound just before any other player makes a sound.

Make a sound after each other player in sequence, moving from left to right across your field of vision. Repeat if needed.

Choose two players and make a sustained sound after one player makes a sound and stop when the other player makes a sound.

Using as many sources as are available to you, keep a lot of sounds active at the same time. Stop occasionally then restart.

Make 54 unique sounds.

Draw round the outline of up to 22 objects with a pencil on paper.

Draw 34 intersecting straight lines on a sheet of paper, then shade in any area bounded by these lines.

Make only one sound. Choose this sound carefully.

Turn a device on and then off 38 times, ensuring the duration for which it is on is always different.

Play a sequence of four pitches in ascending order, then play the same sequence backwards. Repeat this 29 times.

Make a clicking sound with your tongue every time you see someone move, up to a maximum of 71 times.

Crumple a sheet of material very slowly over a period of three minutes, ensuring the sound is continuous.

Walk in a circle while dragging your feet. Complete 24 full circles.

Play a recording of a sound then record that playback, and repeat this process 19 times.

Shake a container with small objects inside for six seconds, then pause for six seconds. Do this 24 times.

Choose one player and breathe in synchronization with them for at least two minutes, making the breath audible.

Strike different parts of the same object to find 23 distinct pitches or timbres.

Make a high-pitched sound that slowly descends to a low-pitched sound over 90 seconds. Rest for 30 seconds, then repeat two times.

Every 22 seconds, play the loudest sound you can followed immediately by the quietest sound you can.

Slide an object across a resonant surface at varying speeds, completing 39 separate slides.

Choose three different materials and tap them in sequence 81 times.

Bounce an object 44 times, attempting to maintain a regular rhythm but accepting when it becomes irregular.

Play a pitch, then play a pitch exactly one octave higher or lower. Continue alternating for 27 pairs.

Make a scraping sound that lasts exactly one breath. Repeat 35 times, attempting to make each breath last the same duration.

Play a very low sustained pitch that gradually increases in volume for 50 seconds, then stops abruptly. Repeat as needed.

Stand up and then sit down 43 times.

Play a sequence of pitched sounds where each sound is slightly quieter than the previous one, stopping when the sound becomes inaudible or after 26 sounds.

Open and close a hinged object 57 times at irregular intervals spanning at least four minutes.

Choose one other player and mirror the duration of any sound they make, starting your sound when theirs stops.

Arrange objects in descending order of the pitch they produce when struck.

Choose two players and only make a sound when both of them are simultaneously making sounds. Use the same sound each time.

Wind a mechanical object 36 times, allowing it to run down completely between each winding.

Play a sequence of 18 extremely short sounds as rapidly as possible, then pause for at least 30 seconds before repeating.

Play a very simple ascending melody using only five pitches, repeating it 47 times, each time at a different tempo.

Choose one player. When they make a sound, sing a pitch that harmonizes with it.

Make a sound, then wait until all other sounds have stopped before making another sound.

Make one sound-producing action continuously for as long as possible without any breaks, stopping only when you must.

When any player starts making a sound, join in making the same type of sound. When they stop, stop. Repeat this 26 times across different players.

Make a loud percussive sound followed immediately by complete silence for eight seconds. Repeat as needed.

Identify the quietest sound you can possibly make. Make this sound 62 times, attempting to make each instance even quieter than the last.

Make a sustained drone that wavers slightly in pitch. Continue for as long as you can sustain the sound, then rest. Repeat as needed.

Drop an object, let it settle completely, then drop it again. Repeat as needed.

Play a sequence of eight ascending pitches. Repeat this sequence, but each time start on a different pitch. Repeat 19 times in total.