Designing Jobs for Humans: Minimalist Principles in Employment Policy Reform

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DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.91100597

Received: 16 November 2025; Accepted: 24 November 2025; Published: 26 December 2025

ABSTRACT

This study explores how the concept of minimalism in design can be applied to redesign modern employment policies and restructure today's labour systems, with a focus on humanisation, efficiency, and sustainability. As workplace dissatisfaction, burnout, and the growing complexity of employment rules have spiralled out of control, the study seeks to investigate how a simplistic approach to professional issues, as exemplified by architecture, design, and behavioural science, could simplify job designs, enabling the matching of labour policies to employee well-being. The objectives of the study are twofold. It is first critical in evaluating the limitations of the current employment arrangements, particularly those that are evidenced by bureaucracy and watchful compliance needs. Second, it proposes a simpler policy paradigm with an emphasis on clarity, autonomy and purpose. The examples of Denmark and Germany. The Netherlands were used as a case study that helped to draw a beneficial insight, which helped to see the effectiveness of the minimalist and human-centred ideas implementation. These are flexicurity, vocational training incorporation and a part-time job system that would facilitate work-life balance. The evidence suggests that minimalist employment policies increase employee activity, mental well-being, and the ability to adjust to the new economic conditions. To sum it up, this paper argues that minimalist employment reform is not only sound philosophically, but it is also practical. Governments can use labour systems that are not only efficient, but also functional and humane by doing away with superfluous complexity and rolling up important but essential ideals of labour dignity, freedom and healthiness.

Keywords: Minimalism, Employment Policy, Job Design, Human-Centred Work, Policy Reform.

INTRODUCTION

The modern working space is in a state of upheaval, not only due to the technologies' disruption and the global competitiveness issues, but also due to the growing worker dissatisfaction, mental health issues, and structural inefficiencies of the employment policy. Most jurisdictions, especially developing nations, have made their labour laws unduly complex, stressing outdated industry patterns. These programs often emphasise more on economic determinants such as productivity and the level of compliance rather than individual workers. This makes the employment regulations in these countries become restrictive, bureaucratic, and alienating, thereby generating an environment at the workplace that fails to facilitate innovation, reduce autonomy and poses a dangerous threat towards worker well-being.

This paper argues that the said systemic complexity is not an inevitable by-product of contemporary labour markets, but a result of poor design. The present study proposes a paradigm shift in the design of the employment policy that consists of lean ideas of design and architecture, which nowadays are also more and more applied to behavioural economics. Minimalism is all about cutting out what is unnecessary so that room can be given to what is critical. In its application to the work design and labour policy, it encourages one to turn to a core set of

values: dignity, purpose, and human agency. By refurbishing the labour systems to intentional, caring designs, governments can come up with employment policies not only more effective, but also more in sync with several human psychological needs.

To get a better understanding of what such a change could be, one can refer to countries that are already including human values in their labour relations. An example is Denmark, which is renowned worldwide due to its flexicurity model, where the freedom of companies and the security of employees are applicable. Within such a strategy, organisations can hire and dismiss workers with ease. This is, however, complemented by a strong social protection net and generous unemployment compensation and labour market programs, which help the displaced individuals to effectively join the labour force swiftly. As opposed to being an unstable system, this type of system can be considered as being resilient, which allows Denmark to maintain a low rate of unemployment without compromising the dignity of its workforce (Andersen & Svarer, 2007; European Commission, 2007).

Furthermore, another example is Germany, which has introduced a dual vocational education and training (VET) system consisting of classroom learning and concrete training. This plan does more than just get people fit to the workforce in practically required skills, but also removes a sense of lack of identity and purpose in the workplace. Moreover, the German law on employment stipulates the position of workers in the boards of companies, which is achieved through co-determination that facilitates the involvement of employees in decision-making and enhances organisational trust (Bosch & Charest, 2008; Thelen, 2014). All this educational, legal, and institutional support is a type of minimalist logic that is supposed to design the shortest possible system capable of satisfying the actual needs of humans in the world with no superfluous complication.

The Netherlands, too, has a unique paradigm where there exists diversity and a sustainable work-life model. The government of the Netherlands ensures that benefits such as healthcare, pension and job protection are available to part-time employees in proportion, which is significant since a high percentage of citizens in the Netherlands are employed part-time, particularly women. This method allowed establishing more equality in terms of gender, increased labour force rates, and reduced burnout, without losing any economic performance (OECD, 2019; Visser, 2002). Again, one can see the principles of minimalism, and the policies should be flexible, fair, and directly related to the realities of the workers on a daily basis.

Malaysia, among many other countries, however, is plagued by outdated regulatory systems that fail to consider the contemporary body of labour relations. Overregulation, excessive administrative procedures and a lack of flexibility are only some of the reasons that often result in disengagement, inefficiency and even exploitation. Workers are normally considered as a cog in a machine instead of being perceived as individuals with needs, objectives, and rights. When reforms do occur, they are usually reactive, fragmented, and limited by institutional or political inertia. As such, the goal of this research is to propose an alternative rooted in clarity, simplicity, and humanity.

This paper contends that a minimalist, human-centred approach to employment policy is not only desirable but necessary. Through a comparative analysis of leading international models, theoretical application of design and behavioural economics, and critical engagement with existing Malaysian labour structures, this study aims to chart a new path forward. A path where employment systems do not merely function, but flourish, serving not only economic growth, but the people who drive it.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In light of the profound and ongoing global ecological, economic, and social crises, it becomes essential to critically examine the very structures of work and the systems through which labour and its products are organised and exchanged. While current work organisation models have achieved remarkable efficiency, they have also contributed to a range of adverse consequences. Many workers face deteriorating mental and physical health, manifested in burnout, chronic stress, a diminished sense of purpose, occupational illnesses, and even depression or suicide.

All these issues highlight the importance of reassessing the objectives and frameworks of life design interventions. Thus, this literature review is created to delve into the evolution of the field in response to the

challenges, while at the same time, investigate any existing outlook that also seeks to align career development practices with both human well-being and sustainable futures.

Minimalist

The documentary *Minimalism: A Documentary About the Important Things*, which debuted on Netflix on December 15, embodies the core philosophy of minimalism, which is an intentional and mindful effort to simplify life by removing excess and concentrating solely on what holds genuine value. Reflecting Albert Einstein's renowned adage, it aspires to "make things as simple as possible, but no simpler," emphasising clarity and usefulness without compromising depth or significance (Drew, 2016).

Employment Policy Reform

Employment policy reform refers to the systematic review and restructuring of a nation's employment strategies to enhance job creation and improve labour market efficiency. This process typically involves adopting a comprehensive and integrated approach that balances both demand and supply-side factors. In several countries, such reforms include aligning macroeconomic and sectoral policies with labour market policies (LMPs), such as skills training and retraining programs, employment services, wage subsidies, and public job creation initiatives. In others, reforms may focus primarily on LMPs, while broader economic policies are pursued independently, with indirect impacts on employment (Wang, 2017).

Effective employment policy reform also encompasses the development and strengthening of mechanisms for implementation. This generally begins with the establishment of clear employment targets, followed by the formulation of an actionable plan, budget allocation, and the introduction of robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks. Key to successful reform are the institutional arrangements organised around three core pillars, which are the coordination, to ensure alignment among stakeholders; accountability, to track progress and outcomes; and support systems, to provide the necessary infrastructure and resources for sustainable policy execution (Wang, 2017).

The History and the Development of Policy Reform

The International Labour Organisation (ILO), established in 1919, enshrined foundational goals such as the prevention of unemployment and the provision of a living wage. In 1964, these principles were further institutionalised through the Employment Policy Convention (No. 122), which offered a normative framework for member states to develop employment strategies centred on full, productive, and freely chosen employment. Governments initiating National Employment Policy (NEP) processes are encouraged to follow the guidelines set out in Convention No. 122.

As of May 2021, 115 countries across diverse income levels had ratified Convention No. 122, demonstrating a widespread global commitment to employment regardless of economic standing. Employment continues to be a pressing issue worldwide, prompting many nations to adopt National Employment Policies (NEPs) as strategic instruments. The early 2000s marked a pivotal shift, as countries recognised that economic growth alone was insufficient to generate adequate and decent employment. This realisation, coupled with increasing democratic governance and public demands for job opportunities, spurred a wave of employment policy development. The 2009 global financial crisis further intensified this trend, with the majority of the 69 countries currently implementing NEPs having launched the process after 2008.

More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 underscored the critical importance of employment policies in crisis response. Additionally, local political and social upheavals, such as the Arab Spring and post-conflict recovery efforts in countries like Iraq and Mali, have further motivated governments to establish or enhance employment strategies. These developments highlight that employment policy extends beyond economic growth, playing a vital role in fostering social stability, rebuilding post-conflict societies, and promoting effective governance.

Factors of the Needs for the Improvement of Employment Policy Reform

The loss of dignity, stability, integrity, and security in the contemporary workplace is a term gaining more currency in recent debates on the reformation of employment policy that have re-imagined the context of workplaces as marked with fractured contracts, lack of adequate protection and insecure livelihoods. The normative shift away from worker-centred values has been cited as a core contributor to widespread disengagement, deteriorating mental health, and stagnating productivity (Stewart, 2025). When a job sign fails to uphold foundational human principles, such as autonomy, security and fairness, it not only reduces participation but also undermines trust in labour institutions. Reform is therefore not merely a matter of legal adjustment but of recalibrating the moral and structural architecture of employment to reflect minimalist human needs.

The second push for reform emerges from the political consequences of failing labour systems. The resurgence of far-right populism, particularly in post-crisis Europe, has been partially attributed to a working class disillusioned with neoliberal employment regimes (The Guardian, 20025). Where workers experience instability and devaluation, political narratives that oppose pluralism and liberal democratic norms find traction. Reform, then, must be understood not only as an economic corrective but also as a democratic safeguard, where enhancing job dignity and equity can act as a buffer against authoritarian drift. Such urgency elevates employment reform from technocratic ambition to a civic imperative.

Critical evaluations of employment structures also suggest that minimalist principles, which are adequacy, accessibility, and balance, are not only normatively desirable but strategically efficient. Policies that privilege simplicity in enforcement, clarity in rights, and universality in protections avoid the bureaucratic opacity that often excludes vulnerable groups. Experience in countries with active reform efforts demonstrates that a refocusing of employment on needs that are fundamental and universal to human beings, like secure contracts, rest and representation, bears real fruits in terms of retention and morale. Thus, the minimalist principles of policy reform should not be a weakening of ambition, but a conscious statement of purpose in order to create jobs that enhance the human condition as opposed to employment that takes advantage of it.

Minimalist Employment Policy in Malaysia

The pattern of labour laws in Malaysia shows a contradiction between structural transformation and authentic humanistic minimalism. Sceptics might observe that changes in legislation like the Employment (Amendment) Act are only a step in the right direction towards ensuring that international labour standards are adhered to, but these changes are shallow insofar as ensuring a fundamental shift in the balance between capital and labour is concerned, which has always been a colonial trend (Hwa, 2021). This legacy scheme maintains the discretionary power of employers, limits the freedom of unions, and leaves workers politically and socially divided. From a minimalist design perspective, such reforms concentrate on formal compliance rather than working on the simplification of power structures and the empowerment of workers as agents in forming their work themselves.

It is more unrealistic but has an even narrower path of improvement in job redesign to the codification of flexible working arrangements (FWA) in law. Sections 60P and 60Q will help to institutionalise the right to seek flexibility and obligate employers to give them responses and will be a procedural breakthrough (Jones, 2025). Nonetheless, this right is not a promised approval and does not question organisations' inertia and cognitive complexity in employment positions. The minimal ideal is redesign of work to minimise friction and mental burden; statutory requirements simply facilitating requests with no requirement to turn invasive simply are not the vision of minimalism. The employers are still able to deny such requests, which is a reform, as it formalises choice, leaving the substantive autonomy unchanged.

As a group, these policy changes outline more stepping stones as opposed to redesigning work. On the one hand, the growing pressure to amend union laws creates an avenue to collective agency, but the reform efforts have been halted and usually cannot eliminate institutional domination (Jones, 2025). Conversely, FWAs are mostly created as a means of procedure that evades the inner problems like work fragmentation, objective identification, or task organisation by the workers. According to the perspective of a minimalist, this duality underscores the

need for employment policies that go beyond procedural flexibility to reconfigure work at its core, which is by simplifying roles, reducing cognitive burdens, and positioning human experience at the heart of labour reform.

Minimalist Employment Policy in Denmark

Denmark's flexicurity model presents a compelling case for minimalist job design, as it reconceptualises work structure to prioritise autonomy and productivity through simplification. The model's dual focus, which is flexibility in employment arrangements and employee security, suggests a deliberate move toward reducing unnecessary constraints in job roles while safeguarding worker well-being (Basit, 2025). Yet this balance relies heavily on overarching systems rather than on-the-ground job architecture. From a minimalist perspective, while the model loosens hiring constraints and provides social safety nets, it does not inherently simplify the internal logic of jobs, where task fragmentation, decision-making complexity, and cognitive overload remain untouched. Consequently, what appears minimalist is largely procedural rather than experiential, leaving the minimalist potential in job design underutilised.

In addition, the introduction of hybrid work in the Danish flexicurity regime raises potential and constraints of minimalist employment reform. The trend of hybrid models makes people more independent and can better achieve a work-life balance, which are two major human-centred design principles of trust and self-direction (Basit, 2025). Nonetheless, in the absence of deliberate job redesign, role clarification, time mapping deliverables, and reducing the friction between the remote and in-office tasks, hybrid setups are likely to further exacerbate mental complexity, as opposed to reducing it. This demonstrates a policy paradox of minimalism: flexibility on the one hand makes the individual powerful, but on the other hand, makes ambiguities and work system overloads present.

To make minimalist employment reforms truly human-centred, the policies set by Denmark would require reversal, no longer focusing on preconditions of choice but on establishing simplicity and coherence in day-to-day labour.

Minimalist Employment Policy In Germany

Germany sets a good example of minimalism with its reforms in the employment policy that eased the path into the sphere of stable and meaningful work. The German dual vocational education and training (VET) system integrates theoretical learning with on-the-job apprenticeships, so that youth develop real-life experience in entering work, shortening the time for them to adjust from the academic setting to the workforce (Cedefop, 2024). This VET system also makes the process of skill development simpler according to the industry requirement, instead of devising elaborate licensing systems or credential inflation that are highly rigid. This minimises inefficiency, which can be correlated to the non-alignment of education output and the industry's employment demand.

Furthermore, the German co-determination policy demands that firms beyond a particular size must permit employee representation in supervisory boards (Bosch & Charest, 2008). Decision-making is decentralised in this system, and collaborative forms of governance are encouraged, which minimise the contentious issues between labour and management. From the minimalists' point of view, co-determination prevents the over-regulatory micro-management of organisational life by incorporating the accountability and dialogue directly into the organisation itself. Employees can exercise agency in the process of collective bargaining, as well as by participating effectively in corporate governance, which enhances institutional trust and social solidarity (Beckmann & Bellmann, 2002).

It is vital to note that these minimalist reforms contribute to long-term stability and resilience in the labour market. Unemployment rates among German youth remain significantly lower than in many comparable economies due in part to the efficient transition facilitated by the VET system (OECD, 2019). However, the reliance on gig and platform work in the last few years suggests that there are vulnerabilities not addressed by Germany's traditional vocational training and co-determination frameworks (Hsieh et al., 2023). Moreover, codetermination practices have been credited with enhancing firm-level productivity and reducing adversarial

labour disputes (Frege, 2002). Germany's model reflects minimalist design by removing unnecessary layers of intervention while preserving essential worker protections and social cooperation.

Minimalist Employment Policy in the Netherlands

The Netherlands is another winning example of minimalist reform of employment policy, especially regarding its solution to part-time employment. Since the 1980s, the Dutch government has aggressively engineered its labour policies to promote part-time work and protect workers' rights to social benefits and protection by law. Part-time workers obtained a proportional right to healthcare, pensions, and parental leave; the latter being the rights and benefits typically available only to full-time employees, through the legislative efforts of the Equal Treatment (Working Hours) Act 1996 (OECD, 2019).

This change of policy signified a minimalist ideology of basing labour arrangements on the real needs of workers

as opposed to the strict full-time employment standards. With the spread of part-time employment, especially by women, the level of participation in the labour force went up without the need to compromise work and life (OECD, 2023). The Dutch employment law removed the unwanted complexity in the legal systems by balancing work and home legal structures with the various household and caregiving needs so that individuals can decide on the working hours that best fit their personal situations without having to worry about losing economic safety.

Moreover, the Dutch model of part-time offered macroeconomic stability, through the spreading of work more extensively within the population and releasing unemployment pressure for individuals, by balancing work and familial care in case of economic recessions, such as during Covid-19 (Yerkes et al., 2024). The least interventionist policy design here involved the removal of regulatory barriers to part-time work through flexible arrangements that did not prejudice worker dignity, autonomy and protection. The effectiveness of this system shows how, with minimalist reform, it is possible to reach both efficiency on the labour market and social justice by emphasising core values instead of strict uniformity. Nevertheless, the push towards vocational training and co-determination policies creates a more comfortable atmosphere as young, vulnerable workers cannot exploit what is given to them; thus, the potential to exploit becomes unexploited later down the line, suggesting that there are limitations in fully realising the minimalist job protection (Eleveld, 2022).

The Role of Contractual Relationships In Minimalist Employment

The fundamental part of employment regulation is through the individual employment contract, which outlines the legal rights and responsibilities of both employees and employers. In various countries, these contractual frameworks have grown excessively complex, creating legal uncertainty and power imbalances (Deakin & Wilkinson, 2005). Minimalist employment policy reform emphasises the simplification of these contracts to ensure accessibility, clarity, and fairness (Freedland & Kountouris, 2011).

A simple, yet standardised employment contract helps workers to achieve full comprehension of their employment terms without the assistance of specialised experts or through costly legal disputes. Clear provisions regarding wages, benefits, working hours, termination rights, and dispute resolution foster transparency and reduce opportunities for exploitation, particularly among vulnerable workers (ILO, 2021). For example, Germany's mini-job program fosters a minimally contractual approach to jobs under a certain number of hours while still offering social insurance/minimum wage protection; similarly, the Netherlands' part-time protections afford part-time employees equal access to benefits of full-time jobs (Bosch & Charest, 2008).

Additionally, simplifying contractual relationships allows labour markets to quickly adapt to evolving forms of work such as gig work, freelance contracting, and remote employment, all while preserving essential worker protections (ILO, 2021). However, developments like pitch services increasingly dependent upon management should raise awareness of the need for legal protections as algorithm-driven work often places access to benefits in ethically questionable areas, hiding employment, legality, compliance, agency and equity (Wood et al., 2018). This corresponds with the primary concept of minimalist models, which is to simplify while retaining important parts of the fundamental human needs of dignity, security, and autonomy in the work environment.

METHODOLOGY

It is a juridical-normative and hermeneutic research to argue and critically think about the employment policy of Malaysia based on the minimalist and humanistic reform policy. The juridical-normative approach allows principled criticism of legal systems, including the Employment Act 1955 and the flexible work provisions, by determining whether they come into conflict with values such as dignity, autonomy and well-being. The hermeneutic angle promotes a contextual reading of the Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands models, demonstrating the manner in which their labour systems provide an insight into the greater cultural and socio-political ideals. Through the use of both legal analysis and the knowledge offered by design theory and behavioural economics, this approach can offer a reformist critique of models of compliance and support a simplification and value-based model of employment.

FINDINGS

The following section shows what the research has found, thus addressing the role of minimalism as an

organising concept in employment reform. On the one hand, being based on several theoretical approaches to the nature of work and global policy solutions, its discussion will evaluate how simple, clear, free, and human-focused designs can reinvent the modern world of work. The research covers several jurisdictions, among them being Malaysia, Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands, and analytically encompasses a variety of employment patterns, flexible working arrangements, vocational training frameworks, part-time employment conditions and the simplification of contracts.

The results of this case study reflect a common theme in that policies of some countries have been taken to seem like minimalist policies, but in reality, many of them failed to deliver in relation to the job redesign and the empowerment of their workers. The minimalist reform must not be limited to procedural efficiency, as it should worry about the lived reality of workers, their cognitive overload, meaningful engagement, and enshrine equity and dignity at the heart of employment systems. With the exception of one, every content discussed in the sections below presents another aspect of this challenge, indicates aspirations, and at the same time, the weakness of minimalism as a mechanism of changing the future of work.

Minimalism As a Framework for Human-Centred Employment

Where minimalism is used as a regulatory practice of employment reform, it goes beyond a mere externality of aesthetic/operative minimalism. It is a philosophical and system-level shift of employment systems developing around the centrality of the human experience in policy development. Instead of making employment systems lean down to the bones, minimalist employment reform expects that deliberately avoided causes of unnecessary processes, structural competencies, and mental overhead are swept clear so that the sense and dignity of work become visible. In this regard, minimalism accentuates the overall values like independence, straightforwardness, and purposefulness, which are proven to contribute to motivation, well-being, and productivity (Slemp & Vella, 2015). This theoretical approach correlates with the information presented by design thinking and behavioural economics, indicating that simplified, human-friendly systems facilitate improved decision-making and work conditions health (Theurer et al., 2018).

One such practical use of this principle is that of lowering job fragmentation. At modern workplaces, jobs are usually atomised into excessively detailed or redundant assignments, which cause alienation, mental exhaustion, and they lack of meaning. Minimalist job design is aimed at overcoming this, facilitating coherence and task autonomy, which allows workers to gain a clear picture of their duties but do so in a constructive manner (Michaelis et al., 2021). This is because of a greater degree of psychological satisfaction and performance driven by the emphasis on role clarity and self-direction (Laguerre & Barnes-Farrell, 2024). Instead of mere trimming of job descriptions or reduction of working hours, the proponents of minimalistic reform propose a rational reorganisation which will guarantee every work task to contain direct reference to the aim and the psychological satisfaction of the worker.

More importantly, introducing an economic policy of minimal employment implies challenging institutional norms and assumptions that have been practised. Complexity in the employment system is far too often assumed as sophistication or need, crowding out the concern that complex systems often cover and hide control mechanisms that kill trust and agency. Efficiency is sometimes confused with effectiveness, even though such systems reduce employee independence or increase decision fatigue. Minimalist reform is therefore an intentional rejection of these structures and poses the question of whether each policy, task or rule can only be said to enhance human experience or is simply a perpetuation of hierarchy. The aspect of autonomy is of particular relevance; studies indicate that work settings characterised by the opportunity to make choices and engender job design and self-determination, or, in other words, job crafting, play a valuable role in enhancing well-being, creativity and engagement (Reiche, 2023).

This greater sense of purpose is needed in order to avoid the hollowing out of employment reform. Aesthetic policies modification or the appearance of some new flexibility procedure related to changing the job structures cannot reduce the impacts on the psychological and cognitive load of workers when the reimagination is not conducted. Real minimalist reform does not deny employment systems but acts as a reconfiguration, an active bit of restructuring at the base of all employment systems, human dignity. Minimalism has become a moral necessity in contemporary employment policy because it is this realignment that makes the adherence to minimalism more than simply a matter of aesthetics.

Overregulation In Malaysia Weakens Worker Agency

The issue of legislative reform versus actual worker empowerment is well described in the existing labour system of Malaysia. Though the idea of modernising the labour law has been present in the recent changes with the Employment (Amendment) Act 2022 as the latest regulation, the lineage of top-down management is still deeply rooted. One of the most prominent ones is the cancellation of Sections 60P and 60Q, which enable employees to formally apply the Flexible Work Arrangements (FWAs), including flexible work schedules or working at home. Although on the surface these provisions seem like a step in the right direction, they do not change the balance of power to that of the employee. Barts do not need to accept such requests, and they can refuse the application at their free will without providing valuable explanations (Jones, 2025).

It is representative of a larger problem, however, of proceduralism of the process that carries the appearance of progress. The right of requesting flexibility and the right of assessing flexibility are basic opposites. In the real world of work, such requests present a psychological burden to workers- they will have to make complicated requests, wait on vague human resource reactions, and deal with the ambiguity of employer decisions that are not necessarily made in the best interest of the workers (HRM Asia, 2020). In the minimalist employment approach, being straightforward, focused, and with less mental burden, such a reform presents friction instead of solving it. Instead of being a guiding force of the philosophy of minimalist policy, namely, simplicity, fairness, and power to the people, it keeps structural inequality with the pretext of legal modernisation.

Moreover, power imbalances are still emblematic of the employment system in Malaysia. The strictness in the workplace pecking orders, the incompetent union legislature, and bureaucratic obstacles to collective bargaining prevent sincere labour input. According to Ng (2021), reforms are merely facial and responsive and do not break the chains of colonial power structures that give benefit to employers and workers. Problems associated with structures like job fragmentation, over-monitoring and voice in decision-making have hardly been addressed. Such aspects do lead to a high amount of disengagement, dissatisfaction, and burnout, particularly within low- and middle-income segments of the employment market.

This is critically important to minimalist philosophy because what it requires is not only procedural access, but also the redesign of institutional logic. The right to request autonomy is not enough; the architecture of work should be made autonomous. It would entail the need to change the culture in workplaces, the attitudes of the managers, and employment norms which are absent in most Malaysian organisations (The Edge.

Markets, 2022). In the absence of this type of change, the Employment (Amendment) Act is liable to be an empty gesture, promising flexibility on the one hand, and overly controlling systems on the other.

Finally, the labour reforms in Malaysia can be seen as a lost opportunity to get involved in the underlying objectives of minimalist employment design. Genuine reform ought to result in those conditions where the flexibility is not demanded but anticipated, where the autonomy of the worker is not subordinate, but is institutionalised. Until such time policymakers have the strength to actively engage the obstacles of cognitive, structural, and cultural impediments to worker empowerment in Malaysia, such employment law will remain bound and constricted to a rather regressive state of responding to changes as opposed to being change agents.

Denmark's Flexicurity Model: Resilient But Superficially Minimalist

Denmark is regularly hailed as an international leading example of innovation in employment policy, in which flexibility of the labour market and robust social safety nets are successfully balanced. Three pillars form the basis of this model, which include flexible hiring and firing legislation, generous unemployment insurance and an active labour market policy that includes retraining schemes. On the macroeconomic scale, the model has been used to deliver low unemployment levels, facilitate workforce mobility, and respond to necessities in the labour market without the stagnation typical of work protection systems[36]. Through this, it has received a reputation for being resilient and adaptive, particularly in times of economic upheaval.

But once considered as employed under the framework of minimalistic employment reform, which opens a strong

Focus on human-centred design, the concepts of simplicity, and ease in job designs, the flexicurity approach starts to reveal its deficiencies. Denmark has done much to minimise the institutional friction and allow easier movement between jobs, but has done minimal to deregulate the world of work itself against the burdens and complexity inherent in work demands. Most job positions, especially in hybrid or knowledge-based set-ups, are still more complex than they should be. Ambiguities, superfluous decision-making and redundant communication platforms are used to burden workers with responsibilities that do not exist, but there are still too many questions and decisions to focus on clear responsibilities and autonomy (Eurofound, 2022). These micro-level deficiencies fail to deliver on the essence of minimalist reform that not only hosts a call for simplicity in the procedure, but also an experiential integrity.

The disconnection can be particularly seen in an increase in hybrid and remote work setups in Denmark. These forms, despite the location flexibility they provide, tend to frustrate the boundaries between work and life, thereby making workers lack structural support or even clarity of their roles. This leads to increased pressure between institutional flexibility and the reality of life. According to the recent commentary, a lot of current Danish employees are exposed to stressful situations, including vague requirements of the work and performance outcomes, asynchronous communication overload, and disjuncture in the workflow, which contradicts the essence of minimalism (LUMS Centre for Entrepreneurship, 2025). That is to say, it is highly likely that, whilst the system suits the employers and protects the workers against economic uncertainties, it does not guarantee that the process of working itself will be made smooth, purposeful, and psychologically viable.

More critically, perhaps the greatest lesson to be learned through the Denmark model is that minimalist employment policy cannot stop with institutional arrangements to realise the human-centred reform goal. It should seep into the life of the job structure. The flexibility advantage is based on its macro design, and its drawback is its inability to simplify the internal reasoning of work. Safety nets and mobility are only minimalist reforms. What is needed are jobs designed to ease the cognitive burden, be clear with regard to deliverables, and involve intrinsic motivation. Devoid of these factors, even the loosest policy environments can maintain complexity and isolation of workers.

In order to have a complete potential of being minimalist, Denmark needs to transform in terms of giving processes flexibility into a structural one. This implies a process of proactive redesigning of the performance of jobs, assignments, and the interaction of workers with their duties. It follows that, until that time, flexibility will continue being institutionally modest, yet on-the-ground cumbersome, as a scheme that guarantees economic viability, but not a complete attainment of humanistic sustainability.

Germany's Dual Vet System And Co-Determination: Effective Minimalist Tools

An interesting example of a minimalist employment reform is Germany, which has a two-fold vocational education and training (VET) system and a co-determination legislation. The two-tier program of VET incorporates both theoretical learning and direct apprenticeship in the workforce, which makes the education-to-work transition seamless. This eliminates a mismatch between education levels and the real requirements in the industry, which in other jurisdictions can cause inefficiencies, underemployment or even a lack of skills. With a minimalist perspective, the VET model lowers entry barriers into the labour market; concentrates on core skills and avoids overlaying certification processes and bureaucratic licensing. It enables us to acquire skills that are highly specific, operational and in the realities of lived life at work (Cedefop, 2024).

More importantly, the German co-determination system formalises workplace democracy through a duty to have employee representation in the supervisory boards of larger businesses. This structure will allow the workers to participate in strategic decision-making, stimulating trust in an organisation, weakening adversarial labour-management relations, and decentralising authority. In a minimal reform perspective, the contribution of co-determination is that it exchanges excess supervision or micromanagement with internal forms of mutual accountability, which minimises the need for outside enforcement and enhances internal validity. It makes governance simple and facilitates involvement, achieving one of the main minimalist principles of creating human-based systems by design, i.e. not by policies enforced reactively (Bosch, Charest, 2008; Beckmann, Bellmann, 2002).

Nevertheless, even with its advantages, the German VET and co-determination models have also been failing to adapt their methods to recent changes in labour that have led to the emergence of gig and platform work. These new forms are not part of the established vocational systems and can become marginalised in participatory processes, on which the co-determination is based. Thus, although German style is an effective minimalist model in conventional industries, more malignant and dependable forms of work, the future of German style as a model of success will be based on its ability to democratise simplicity and extend it to more stagnant and dispersed employment strategies.

The Netherlands And Inclusive Part-Time Policy

The Netherlands serves as a progressive illustration of minimalist reform in the part-time work policies, especially its attempt to balance labour protection and the current realities of lifestyle. In the Netherlands, the Dutch government has incorporated powerful legal safeguards for part-time workers in the presence of the Equal Treatment (Working Hours) Act, expansion of the time of caring coming to benefits like healthcare, pensions and parental leave without discrimination based on working hours (Visser, 2002). This invention is characterised by one of the main minimalist tenets: minimising unwanted forms of rigidity within the employment model, preserving just proportions of equity and safety. The Dutch model has no sympathy with full-time employment as a norm and admits that a high degree of flexibility can be beneficial to the economy and the individual when reasonably organised.

The overall use of non-standard work (especially by women) has resulted in labour participation contributing to a lower degree of burnout, work-life balance without compromising macroeconomic productivity (OECD, 2019). Taken in minimalist terms, such a policy lightens the cognitive and logistic load of coping with the exigencies of work-family balance by legalisation of what is actually present in social practice and accords it the structural legitimacy of a legal constitution. It is indicative of the change where the workers were made to fit into structures (uniform systems) to make systems fit the various human needs.

However, there are limitations to the Dutch model. The critics indicate the potential threat of unwarranted part-time employment or career standstill to the less secure industries, especially to the young or poorly skilled workers. Furthermore, because platform labour and short-term contracts are on the increase, the inclusive logic behind part-time protections will need to change in order to encompass those who are employed outside the traditional employment relationship. The low-friction, part-time model used by the Netherlands, however, proves that low-friction nudges can work for economic efficiency and social justice alike.

Contractual Simplicity as A Pillar of Minimalist Reform

The design of the employment contract itself is considered one of the most underemphasized but basic aspects of minimalist employment reform. Many legal structures have also expanded their contracts to be overly complex with technical wording and vague terms that lead to confusion instead of clarity regarding the rights of a worker. The legal opacity perpetuates the status quo of power, especially for vulnerable workers, as they neither provide legal representation nor have legal leverage (Deakin & Wilkinson, 2005). Conversely, minimalist reform is an effort to demystify the process of contracts by streamlining the structure, standardising vital terms and making it available. This not only helps in minimising transaction costs but also confirms the principle of dignity that enables the workers to know and apply their rights without feeling excessive dependency or fear.

The minimalist contractual practices that have been instituted by some countries seem to represent the best examples, in this case, Germany and the Netherlands. Germany has what is called “mini-job” contracts, wherein people are legally working part-time with simplified terms, albeit at a minimum wage and with social insurance. Likewise, Dutch part-time contracts are equipped with proportional benefits as well as non-discrimination provisions. In the two cases, it is evident that it can be simplified without having to leave essential protections.

Such simplification also makes it easier to adopt new types of labour, such as the gig economy, remote working, and online recruitment sites. Minimalist contracts allow the legal system to adapt to changing employment realities by emphasising clarity and enforceability rather than the complexity and control of the contract. Nevertheless, there are risks within some overly flexible contracts, in terms of algorithmic and gig-based employment, which hide the issue of legal responsibility altogether. Therefore, the minimalist model should be an attempt at balancing: it has to eliminate frictions and misunderstandings without compromising safeguards to ensure all workers of their autonomy, equity, and transparency, however informal or flexible.

Employment Reform as A Democratic Safeguard

The findings reaffirm that employment reform plays a vital role in preserving democratic integrity by addressing the socio-economic inequalities that erode public trust and political participation. Work, beyond being a source of livelihood, serves as a central pillar of social identity, belonging, and civic engagement. When individuals are subjected to precarious working conditions, limited workplace voice, and economic insecurity, their outcomes are often exacerbated by neoliberal labour policies and the fragmentation of the job market, where they experience growing disconnection from political processes. The 2024 OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions highlighted that only 30% of respondents across OECD countries believe they have a say in their political system. Simultaneously, a majority expresses concern over their household finances and economic well-being. These figures reflect a clear relationship between declining trust in democratic institutions and the quality of working life.

The rise of far-right populism and political polarisation is increasingly linked to this widespread sense of alienation and exclusion among the working population. Studies confirm that workers who feel economically insecure and socially invisible are more likely to disengage from democratic processes, or worse, support populist narratives that promise to “speak for the forgotten.” Employment reform, especially when grounded in minimalist principles that prioritise equity, dignity, and worker voice, has served as a vital corrective mechanism. When reforms strengthen collective bargaining rights, ensure fair wages, and guarantee predictable employment, they not only improve material conditions but also re-establish workers’ stake in the democratic process. The reinforcement of worker autonomy and participation in decision-making at the workplace level acts as a civic foundation for broader democratic engagement.

Social dialogue, especially through trade unions, further illustrates the mutually reinforcing relationship between employment systems and democratic resilience. As demonstrated in Chile, trade unions like CUT have played a transformative role in policy-making by engaging in institutional platforms such as the Consejo Superior Laboral. This tripartite space has yielded significant labour reforms, including record increases in the minimum wage, reduced working hours, and fostered inclusive, consensus-based public policy. The CUT’s role in advocating for ratifications of ILO conventions and in promoting laws such as the landmark Karin law on gender-based violence underscores the democratic value of organised labour. Unions not only help address immediate

workplace injustices but also contribute to the broader cultural and institutional stability of democracy. In essence, strengthening labour institutions through employment reform and active social dialogue contributes not just to economic fairness but also to the protection and renewal of democratic values.

Minimalist Design Must Extend Beyond Policy to Job Architecture

Minimalism, when applied solely as a surface-level policy or visual aesthetic, cannot fulfil its potential as a transformative force in the workplace. To be truly effective, minimalist principles must go beyond procedural reforms and be embedded in the very architecture of daily work, including how tasks are structured, how physical and mental space is managed, and how employees engage with their environments. The narrative provided demonstrates this necessity vividly. The increasing number of employees reporting overwhelm due to cluttered environments, excessive tasks, and mental overload signifies that real change must occur at the operational level, not just in written policy.

Adopting minimalism in job design requires simplifying workflows, redefining priorities, and creating intentional physical spaces that reduce distraction and foster focus. For instance, keeping only essential tools on a desk or paring down daily tasks to what truly aligns with core responsibilities demonstrates how minimalist thinking reshapes everyday professional life. It is through these tangible changes by removing the physical clutter, shortening to-do lists, and integrating wellness-centred routines that minimalism becomes more than an idea, where it becomes a living, working reality. Tools such as Vorecol's work environment module, which help assess and improve workplace climate, underscore the importance of measuring and aligning actual job structures with minimalist goals.

Additionally, the adoption of minimalist practices such as prioritising meaningful tasks, creating calmer spaces, and letting go of unnecessary commitments helps in streamlining mental processing and reducing emotional strain. These changes benefit both personal well-being and collective productivity. The examples of figures like Marie Kondo and Joshua Fields Millburn highlight the importance of removing non-essential elements to unlock greater creativity, clarity, and satisfaction. These practices are not just lifestyle choices, but they form the foundation for a redesigned job architecture that nurtures purposeful, sustainable engagement in the modern work environment.

In conclusion, the integration of minimalism into the structure of work is not just about its policies, but it also provides a practical pathway for enhancing focus, reducing burnout, and aligning organisational culture with the values of simplicity, clarity, and human-centred design.

Minimalist Job Design Model Framework

In achieving the intended minimalist outcome, the paper proposes a minimalist job design framework which would provide policymakers and organisations a clear and proper method of evaluating and redesigning work so that it would become simpler, coherent and psychologically sustainable. Such a model should contain the following:

1. The main purpose is the ability to determine the role so that all tasks will align with the central outcome of the job.

2. The cognitive burden upon workers should be reduced by limiting the number of software systems used in navigating work, thus minimising unnecessary decision-making actions, and streamlining communication through the use of essential channels only.

3. Job descriptions are to be mainly focused on a small section of the main output, which will ensure real output of the work rather than a tedious and fragmented list of duties.

4. Tasks are mainly to be organised in a more coherent group so that workers would be more focused on the continuity of tasks as compared to constant task switching.

5. A clear determination of space for workers' autonomy to be implemented so that employees can exercise self-determination within defined boundaries, giving them the ability to organise their tasks that will support efficiency and well-being.

Therefore, this model framework, if implemented, would garner operational minimisation that will result in a clear, focused and manageable work nature, thus allowing workers to perform effectively without the worry of complexity or mental strain.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the findings, this research proposes that Malaysia should take a concerted effort in transforming gradually to minimalist human-focused employment policies, placing particular emphasis on ensuring human dignity, independence and simplicity in work arrangements. First, policymakers must leave the superficial reform, such as the procedural FWAs, behind and embrace work redesign in an attempt to minimise the cognitive and administrative burden on workers and place control over the game back into their hands once again. Taking a cue from Germany's dual vocational education and training (VET) system, Malaysia can establish persistent learning-employment ties, reduce transition shock between education and the job market, implement efficient credentialing procedures, and further provide meaning and identity to the experience that young professionals go through (Bosch & Charest, 2008). These strategies would solve the long-standing skills-gaps prevalent in Malaysia, at the same time matching the jobs appropriate according to the abilities and interests of the workers.

Second, it is important to underline the legal changes, which may focus on simplification and transparency of the contract. Difficult employment contracts in Malaysia do contribute to the power inequality and prevent workers from comprehending their rights (Deakin & Wilkinson, 2005). Demystification of employment relationships can be achieved through standardisation of major contractual terms, such as working hours, wages, components, leave entitlements and termination conditions, which can enable and reduce transaction costs and thwart disputes. The case of the German system of mini-job and the Dutch policy on protecting part-time workers can be used to demonstrate that simplified, well-defined outlines of contracts can serve to protect the necessary safeguards whilst simultaneously allowing the labour markets to be flexible (Frege, 2002). Third, principles of co-determination must also be integrated into institutional redesign to induce democracy and trust at the workplace. The German employee representation model on the firm boards has not only improved the productivity in businesses, but it has also developed the avenues through which employees would effectively shape the decisions that generally affect their lives(Ozgen, 2021; Wagner, 2005). These methods may be adjusted in Malaysia through means of requiring formulated employee consultation machinery in larger organisations, hence making the decision-making process decentralised and reducing combative labour relations.

Lastly, the change of the employment policy in Malaysia must clearly be made for both economic and civic necessity. These trends of the erosion of stable and meaningful jobs are internationally associated with the backsliding of democracies and the popularity of populist movements (The Guardian, 2025). Minimalist policies focused on the reinstatement of security, justice and a sense of purpose in the workplace will help strengthen social cohesion in Malaysia and prevent the destabilisation of political processes. To successfully implement these recommendations effectively, Malaysia needs to consider forming a tripartite commission on employment design to consist of representatives of the government, the employers, and the workmen, with the assistance of behavioural researchers and design theorists. It would be a body which can create and manage the minimalist policy innovations, keeping a check on the results and allowing iterative adjustments in tactics, ensuring that reforms are no longer legally impregnable, nor impenetrably cold in terms of fit to human psychological and social needs.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored how minimalist design principles, when thoughtfully applied to employment policy, can lead to more humane, effective, and sustainable labour systems. In response to rising dissatisfaction, burnout, and institutional rigidity in modern employment structures, particularly within Malaysia, the research underscores the need for a structural shift from bureaucratic excess toward clarity, purpose, and human dignity. Drawing insights from progressive models in Denmark, Germany, and the Netherlands, the study reveals that

minimalist approaches are not synonymous with reduction but with intentional simplification, where every element of work design serves a meaningful function aligned with human psychological and social needs.

The analysis demonstrates that minimalist employment reforms must go beyond surface-level flexibility and procedural adjustments. Policies such as Denmark's flexicurity model, Germany's dual vocational education and co-determination frameworks, and the Netherlands' inclusive part-time legislation illustrate how labour systems can be reimagined to balance autonomy, protection, and productivity. However, even among these advanced models, gaps remain when reforms fail to address job architecture itself, where task fragmentation, cognitive overload, and organisational ambiguity continue to challenge the worker's sense of coherence and purpose.

Malaysia's current trajectory reflects the global pattern of adopting reactive and procedural reforms without dismantling the underlying power structures that inhibit genuine worker agency. The codification of flexible work arrangements and recent legislative amendments are steps forward, but remain inadequate without a deliberate rethinking of how jobs are designed, experienced, and governed. As such, this research argues that minimalist employment reform must extend to the very structure of work, where it clarifies responsibilities, reduces unnecessary mental burdens, and embeds worker autonomy within the core of organisational and legal systems.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This publication stems from a group project undertaken by students of the Faculty of Law, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), and we gratefully acknowledge their collective effort, research commitment and dedication in developing the foundational analysis that shaped this work. We also extend our appreciation to the Faculty of Law, UiTM, for providing an enriching academic environment that fosters rigorous inquiry and meaningful engagement with real-world industrial relations issues. Finally, we acknowledge the valuable industrial linkages supporting this publication, particularly the contribution of A. Razak & Co. PLT and its Managing Partner, Dato' Abd Razak, in the publication of this article.

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