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How much work is enough?

Millions have used the past three years to re-evaluate the trade-off between time and money. And it's kick-starting a revolution in the labour market

The Covid-19 pandemic might be officially over, but much like a railway switchyard, it has already diverted countless lives onto wildly different paths. Millions of individuals will never revert to their pre-pandemic work routines, compelling both employers and employees to establish new models that cater to their evolving needs. But amid the ongoing experiments with hybrid models, we find ourselves confronting a deeper question: how much work is enough?

At least in developed countries, these post-pandemic shifts and experiments could trigger a labour-market revolution as profound as the changes in workplaces, schedules, and compensation that marked the transition from the agricultural age to the industrial era.

These changes can be viewed on two levels. At the macro level, the legally mandated eight-hour workday and 40-hour workweek are gradually giving way to a new equilibrium. This will likely be a long process, given that it took half a century of labour struggles, union action and corporate experimentation to reduce daily working hours in the United States from 14 to eight and workweeks from seven days to five.

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In 1914, the Ford Motor Company stunned its competitors by shortening the factory workday to eight hours while paying its workers a minimum wage of $5 per day. Congress codified this innovative practice in 1938 through the Fair Labor Standards Act, creating what cultural historian Fred Turner calls the ‘industrial-era social compact.’ Similarly, recent experiments with a 32-hour workweek resulted in less fatigue, improved mental health, and enhanced life satisfaction. In fact, most participants say they will not revert to the old model.

At the micro level, millions of individuals have used the past three years to re-evaluate the trade-off between time and money. During the pandemic lockdowns, many workers adjusted to new working habits and relished the ability to pause, spend more time with their loved ones, or exercise and pursue leisure activities without the stress of commutes and office environments. These experiences later contributed to the so-called Great Resignation and the increase in 'quiet quitting.'

Considering paid and unpaid work

So, when companies began to demand that workers return to the pre-pandemic status quo, the question, 'how much work is enough?' prompted another: 'enough for what?' To earn a living? To meet our employers' productivity expectations? To support our pursuit of happiness, or perhaps to retire? The answers vary, depending on who asks and who responds. For millions of low-income workers, the answer is simple: 'enough' means earning a living wage that enables them to support themselves and their families.

Among those privileged enough to be able to consider the trade-offs between time and money, two groups of workers have, through their words and their actions, emerged as key players in the broader discussion about what constitutes an adequate amount of work.

The first group consists of caregivers, a sector still dominated by women but gradually attracting more men. In labour economics, 'work' traditionally refers to paid labour involving the production of goods and services in return for monetary compensation. But following the integration of women into the workforce (including the workforce of labour economists), the field has expanded its focus to encompass unpaid work. This includes raising a family, making a home and meeting the needs of those who cannot care for themselves. This care work, as activist Ai-jen Poo reminds us, is the 'work that makes all other work possible.' For many, this form of labour holds as much meaning as their formal employment, or even more.

Suppose we expand the question 'how much work is enough?' to encompass both paid and unpaid work. In that case, it becomes apparent that millions of people with caregiving responsibilities and paid jobs often find themselves working well beyond the conventional eight-hour workday. It should come as little surprise, then, that given the opportunity, many would opt to reduce their paid working hours in order to care for others. Given the social importance of care work, economic statistics and government benefit programs must recognise and

account for this critical but unpaid form of labour.

The role of a critical youth

Another significant group of workers asking, 'how much work is enough?' comprises young people, particularly younger Millennials and Gen Z workers, many of whom entered the workforce during the pandemic. Just as many young people in the 1960s 'turned on, tuned in, and dropped out,' embraced the counterculture, and rejected what they saw as the conformist striving of their parents' generation, many Gen Z'ers are now questioning and rejecting 'hustle culture' as yet another toxic Silicon Valley export.

Gen Z'ers were raised during two tumultuous decades marked by the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the introduction of the smartphone and social media, the 2008 financial crisis, and the pandemic. Today, they face downward social mobility, democratic backsliding amid intensifying political polarisation and a looming climate catastrophe. Given this historical backdrop, it is natural for them to question their parents' habits and focus on maintaining their own mental and physical health.

But by rejecting the notion that their self-worth hinges on meeting others' expectations of them, they demonstrated a profound understanding that personal well-being should not be sacrificed for external validation.

Gen Z icons like Simone Biles and Naomi Osaka, who withdrew from major sporting events to protect their mental health, embody the drive, grit and grind necessary to excel at the highest levels of their fields. But by rejecting the notion that their self-worth – particularly as trailblazing women of colour – hinges on meeting others' expectations of them, they demonstrated a profound understanding that personal well-being should not be sacrificed for external validation. Their insistence that life must be about more than producing and winning is an act of defiance against capitalism itself.

Since the emergence of ChatGPT and its competitors, discussions about the future of work have revolved around the extent to which human labour will remain necessary. To be sure, the integration of generative artificial intelligence into the labour market will bring about significant disruption, rendering traditional industrial-era work and workplaces obsolete. But regardless of what lies ahead, we cannot address the questions of where and how long we work without first answering the fundamental question of *why* we work.

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