WIRC
Worker Identity Research Collaboration

Landscape of change:

Perspectives on work and identity

How people think and feel about the work they do every day

The world of work is rapidly evolving. How people work, where they work, why they work, when they work and what they believe about work are questions with many different and dynamic meanings. Over the past several years, people have reflected deeply on the role of work in their lives within the shadow of social unrest and a global health crisis.

We know people have been unequally impacted. We know that many continued to go to a physical place of work with all the risks and anxieties this produced, while others were able to experience the benefits and burdens of working remotely. Hybrid work is now a buzzword, but also a reality that applies to some and not others.

What do we know about the ways workers navigate and reflect upon "the world of work?"

What is this world? What is work?

This report is for anyone interested in gaining a deeper understanding of the social and cultural forces shaping workers, work and livelihoods.

Based on conversations with a diverse range of people, each of whom has graciously shared how they think and feel about work in their lives, we've identified four territories we believe are worth mapping.

It is our hope that the following provides you with new perspectives on an age-old topic.

Team WIRC

Some context

When a cultural anthropologist and an applied business ethnographer get together to collaborate on a research topic around work and identity, it's not easy to know where to begin. First, it's a huge topic. Second, it can be approached in many ways and from many angles. How do we find out more about the ways people think and feel about work?

It all begins with identifying the questions we think are most germane to the topic and to people who have interesting perspectives they are willing to share with us.

It is within the spirit of this tradition as participant-observers that we attempt to make sense of the cultural dimensions shaping work and workers' attitudes towards it. We have been rewarded with perspectives both profound and quotidian. Over time, and as these conversations continue and new patterns emerge, it is our hope to share this growing body of knowledge.

Martha and Shelley

We found that people want to work and deeply value working but are **rethinking their relationships with employers and jobs.**

We understand that **change at the policy level is not easy** for decision makers in organizations.

The place to start is discovering the broader cultural trends that show how and why **our relationship with work is changing.**
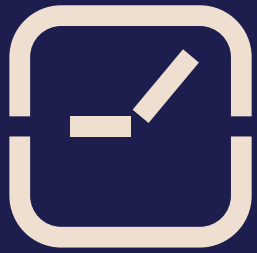
- Time
- Risk
- Humanity
- Relevance

Time

Who owns our days?

What we heard

As Americans, our ways of seeing work are rooted in our history.

Work is deeply tied to ideas around hardship and "a calling," with overwork as a sign of commitment and a way of life. The sociologist Max Weber, in "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism" (1905), argued that the spirit of modern capitalism and the ethics of ascetic Protestantism were deeply comingled and intertwined. Religious concepts like "worldly calling," "material success as a sign of heavenly pre-election," "wealth as evidence of God's favor" and "hard work as morally true and good" found oxygen in the spirit of capitalism and vice versa.

Today, there is a clear and intensified search for a new relationship to work. Some of this is about the loss and grief and pause of COVID-19 and the awareness that time is finite. Some of it is about the impacts of industrialism on the planet, and some of it is about broadening popular consciousness with deep divisions on issues of race, gender and diversity. What matters to us as humans has changed. People are reprioritizing how much time they are willing to devote to work and how much to "everything else."

Today, people want far more ownership of their time than our past approaches to work have afforded.

At the most intimate scale, when we lose a job, when we lose our grandmother, when we lose the ability to go to a friend's birthday party, when our child's graduation takes place on a conference call, the value we place on time changes. And as it changes, we are reminded of the multiplicity of who we are as individuals: employee, grandchild, friend, parent.

As part of our identity and what matters most, work is being rightsized. Whether or not we are good at this is another story.

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" I feel like one of the things that I constantly try to practice in my brain is just to force a bit of a gap between me and work, like, to let work be work and me be me."

Marnie, senior global executive

" I don't let work be an excuse anymore to not lean into other parts of my life."

Ally, owner, media company

" As perfectionists, we ruin joy for ourselves. So much of my career has been a practice of perfectionism. If you would've come up to me in my 30s, my job was the only form of worth I had in life."

Niraj, computational scientist

" "I'm very much the frog in the water, and the heat got turned up over six years. And by the time I left six years later, it took a lot of unwinding of parts of myself. I'd become the person who isn't present in a conversation because they're always on their phone, and that really hurt my family. I became the kind of person who wouldn't enjoy actual vacation time. I was always working. I just remember so many holidays, Christmases, Thanksgivings, where we were working around the clock on a project, and I couldn't unplug."

Lara, executive coach

Reappropriating locus of purpose

It is through the living of life and the choices we make along the way that our sense of purpose shapes how we show up in the world and how we wish to be remembered. While work can have purpose and be purposeful, it isn't, in and of itself, "my purpose in life."

When we asked people about their purposes in life, we heard: to provide for my family, to take better care of the environment, to be kinder to others, to take time to appreciate the here and now, to prioritize what is most important and to fix these priorities at the center of all I do. The ultimate purpose is to lead a life that one feels good about and can be proud of.

In the context of work, we heard that even when people love what they do, "**My work is my work, and my job is my job. My job is not my purpose in life**." Companies don't define my purpose, I do. Companies don't own my time, I do. I want to work hard and add value when I'm doing my job, but I don't want my job to work me. People are practicing setting better boundaries between their personal lives and work lives. They are also revaluating the relationship between identity and how they earn a living.

Do you distinguish between work and a job?

" I always say, like, 'day job' in quotes. No matter if it's something that I'm passionate about or not, if it's something that has the conventional clock-in type of situation, I consider it a 'job.' My 'work' [as an artist] is integrated it into everything I do, but … for me it's important to separate [them]. Especially when your job relates to the core of the work you do as a person, I think it's very easy for that to become wearing. And so, for me, it's about setting boundaries. If I see it as a job, I can set clear boundaries so that I have energy for all the parts of my work."

Ariana, artist

Ariana

Ariana is a 29-year-old working artist. In our conversation, she told us that, even as a young child, she knew she was an artist. It never crossed her mind that she was anything else. "Are you an artist, or do you do art?" captures the distinction. Ariana is an artist.

She explained that many people hold misconceptions about the life of an artist. The reality is far from the solitary individual covered in paint and working feverishly on the next masterpiece. There is a lot of administrative work: submitting detailed applications for prestigious juried competitions, selling and marketing, writing grants, maintaining networks of art professionals, keeping the bio and CV up to date and figuring out personal finances.

This is not the stuff we typically associate with being an "artist." As with many things, it's much messier and more complex than our idealized notions.

For one thing, Ariana has figured out ways to nurture her identity as an artist while also ensuring she's able to pay the bills; artists typically don't operate on a bi-weekly pay schedule.

Part curator, part artist retreat host, part death doula, part art therapist, Ariana keeps art at the very center of all she does. While she admits there are times when she feels some of her activities feel more "job-like" than "work-like," she has learned the art of boundary setting. Boundaries allow her to exercise direct control over her life's many parts and how her energy is metered while maintaining her center as an artist.

> "It's about finding ways to meaningfully integrate my art into everything I do for the most impact on creative problem-solving around enriching experiences, around meaningful dialogue, around just embedding the essence of that creative calling into what I bring to the world."

Marnie

Marnie is a senior executive who operates in a completely different sphere of work than Ariana, who is in the arts. But they have some important qualities in common. Like Ariana's, Marnie's work is demanding and pulls her in many directions. Both are recognized as experts in their fields. Both are ambitious. And both identify deeply with their chosen, life-long professions.

However, Marnie has recently begun to actively drive a wedge between what she sees as "herself" and "her work." This is a considerable step-change for someone who began her career explicitly in the spirit of finding a "day job that had meaning."

In her work now, Marnie feels constantly exhausted and a pervasive feeling of malaise around work. "I have energy for the day but no energy for the work."

After years of building a successful career as a leader, company partner and global executive marked by several important promotions, Marnie now finds herself drawing lines in the sand that she previously would never have found important to draw — not working on vacations, not working on weekends, taking Friday afternoons for herself. When asked why she's distancing herself from her work, she's unable at first to give a crisp answer.

After deeper discussion, we learned the root of her exhaustion lies in the core requirement of her job. In her current role, she's required to seek out her own projects and charge-abilty. While she's very good at it, she explains: "It's like driving the train and laying the tracks at the same time. It's exhausting." On paper, in her late 50s, Marnie has "made it", but the experience of her work feels like a never-ending hustle that begins at 6 a.m. and continues with 18–20 back-to-back Zoom calls.

This is where Marnie gives herself permission to question where she is spending, and has spent, so much of her time.

> " I feel like I'm tethered to my laptop, and I wanna break free from it. I keep saying, 'Is it the job, or is it me, or is it the pandemic?' Like, am I just getting old, and I can't work as hard as I used to? I mean, like, I'm just in my brain. I'm trying to figure out what it is."

We learned that, for Dana, it was always important not to feel her work was "menial" or that she was in a position of "subservience."

She views her work as providing a "service," a dedication of her energy into making someone else's day that much easier. In rideshare, this means instilling the feeling that she knows exactly where she is going, that she will charge a fair price and that she is there to open the door at the end of the ride. It can also mean carrying bottles of water up flights of stairs for elderly passengers who need the extra hand.

As she told us, if she can give people 15 minutes a day of ease, she feels it's a job well done, a service.

Dana

Dana is 65 and works for a rideshare company as a driver. Over the years, she has worked on the docks and in kitchens. She's driven a cab and was a taxi dispatcher for 30 years. In each of these jobs, she's actively sought to take charge of her own sense of purpose and independence. That purpose comes from being of service to others rather than "being under someone's thumb."

While some might view Dana's work history through the lens of "menial labor," she doesn't see it that way. For her, it is about helping others while being independent. Work only becomes "menial" when someone treats her like a resource to be monitored, monetized and forced to "grind it out."

Dana is an independent spirit who understands that ownership of her time is deeply intertwined with her sense of agency and, ultimately, her sense of service-oriented purpose.

Whole self vs. authentic self

Whole self and authentic self are both articulations of wanting to be seen as three-dimensional. While bringing your whole self to work seems like a great idea, bringing your authentic self means you have agency over which parts of yourself you are willing to give.

Technology has enlarged the understanding of our multi-dimensions. We now have channels where we find expression for our "professional selves," our "creative selves," our "community selves," "our political selves" and our "friend selves."

It's not that people want to limit work for its own sake. Rather, people need space to be who they are and become who they want to be. We want our lives to have a kind of kaleidoscopic dynamism where we have agency.

The concept of work as all-encompassing allows no room for fully being and becoming, causing people to become increasingly protective of how and where they spend their time.

"I really latched onto the identity of student, you know, grad school student or whatever it was at the time. And as you get older, consultant, right? Like, that was big. I felt very professional [at my] first consulting job and latched onto that identity. But I think, as you grow older, like, your identities, they do have to exist together in this kaleidoscope, and you do have to have the bandwidth to allow them to adjust as you get older and go through different seasons.

Why is the kaleidoscope important?

Humans are well rounded, three-dimensional, dynamic and [subject to] change. To reduce people to one identity is like a caricature.

Do you think your parents thought of themselves as kaleidoscopes?

Oh no! [Laughs]."

Ally, co-founder, media company

Ally

This dedication to a fuller expression of self is a new thing that many of our parents didn't have the opportunity to pursue. We heard repeatedly that people want to be able to be who they are at work and decide which parts they were bringing and when.

As a business owner, Ally has taken tangible steps to support her employees' "kaleidoscopic" selves. She understands that different people have different work styles for getting work done. She also is mindful of her employees' time. If she sees her team "burning the midnight oil" on a regular basis, she will step in to draw boundaries. Ally's especially aware of those situations where things that could have been done ahead of time become a "fire drill" due to client inefficiencies.

She understands that different people have different pulls and pressures on their time. She also understands that work life isn't most people's top priority, even when they work hard at it. Ally wants her employees to feel they can be fully present in their lives as parents, partners, family and community members. She works on modeling this behavior and has created an atmosphere where being a well-rounded human is not only permissible; it is preferred.

Ally understands the value of time flexibility to the creative process. And she knows that, as the leader, she is accountable for implementing the policies that support this mind shift.

Ally represents a new form of leader. She is fully invested in growing her business and understands she must recalibrate expectations around time to fit the needs of the multifaceted individuals who ultimately make this happen. She does so intentionally through company-wide policies around time, flexibility and what counts as value.

" I think we are trending away from the nine-to-five … I don't care if people aren't working 40 hours a week. I really don't. If the work is getting done, and it's balanced across the team, and we're profitable, and everybody's making a living wage, I could care less how many hours you put in. And sure, you're managing people's behavior within that. But managing people is just never a good approach. I manage the thing that you're trying to get done and not the people and how they do it."

Designing for oxygen

People are realizing they need more headspace, which includes down time. Many are exhausted from fire drills at work and in the world that keep them on high alert. Some have taken their own burnout seriously and are finding ways to help themselves better deal with it. Others are consciously designing a career or workday to ward off burnout. We're recognizing that fire drills are more about drills than fire. Yet still we burn.

Many of us are bad at modulating our energy around a never-ending sense of pressure to produce, whether on the job, in our home or within our relationships. People are taking mental wellness much more seriously and have begun to realize that, when you focus your energy too tightly on work, the cost is too great to the other parts of self. It's about the luxury of headspace and a recognition that our sense of self and time are essential to our own well-being.

Lara

Lara, an executive coach, relies on her grandfather's farming wisdom. **"If you farm too much, all the nutrients are gone, and then you get bad crops."**

After spending years in a toxic workplace with her co-founder, whose ego eclipsed his creativity, Lara came away depleted and drained. She had thrown herself into the business completely and loved her work. Once she was out of that environment, she realized she needed to design her life for oxygen. She needed time to "lay fallow and return the nutrients to my soil."

Now, her career allows for other parts of her life to flourish. Occasionally, she takes what she describes as "micro retirements," where she carves out the time to reappraise how well she's taking care of her mental and physical health.

She's experimenting with a personal calculus around how much she can work without burning out. She's unique but perhaps not as rare as one might suspect. While she misses the intensity and glamour of her former life, work was all-consuming. Now, her focus is on opening space and time where she can breathe, think and rest.

" Especially in the last two years, my work has defined me less and less and less. And I'm really trying to open up space in my mind to be thinking more broadly just about the world, ideas, people. I look after my sister, my family, the family I might wanna have. I've gotta create bandwidth for that. And before, my brain was only cycling for work, and that was important, and I did a lot of great things, but it also meant there was no slack in the system. I guess now I've been pushing things away so that I can create that slack in the system that I'm proud of."

Daisy

Daisy loves her work and describes it as her "purpose," where everything she has done thus far has led to her current "calling."

She is a teacher working within the juvenile detention system. Daisy's creative approaches to teaching have earned her accolades from her professional community and the respect and admiration of her students.

Daisy's role is "to bring hope to those whose lives may feel hopeless, to bring encouragement to those who may never have received any." She does this by showing care and paying attention to her students as individual people, not "detainees."

While she can't imagine doing anything else, she has learned through the pandemic that, to effectively do what she loves, she needs to take better care of herself. She is learning to set boundaries around her time, leaving clearings for self-care and more oxygen.

> I did a vision board for myself for 2022 of things that I need to do better, like taking care of myself mentally, emotionally, physically, to continue to do that because there are other people who are depending on me. But I also owe it to myself. I'm more than Daisy, the mother, Daisy, the wife, Daisy, the teacher. Like, who was I before that? And so, I'm learning to take the time and do things for myself and take time for myself. It's very necessary. I've neglected myself for a long time ... I have to remind myself 'no' is a complete sentence, and it's okay."

Insights to consider

In March 2020, organizations learned they could do things in new ways, including some they didn't think were possible. Workers learned that, too.

Many of us realized that work is not a place; we could work wherever we are. For those of us who continued to work onsite, we learned how vulnerable we are. All of us began to reevaluate what it means to feel safe and whose job it is to protect us.

What we're seeing is a shift in the relationship between work and workers. When it turns out we don't really have to keep doing something because that's how we've always done it, all sorts of things are possible.

While the temptation is always to return to "normal," that's really our human desire to feel comfortable and know what to expect. Humans are also creative, curious and adaptable. It's time to apply that to how we work.

This is a unique opportunity for organizations to question how they do everything.

Work is fundamentally about creation, value and exchange. How do we design our organizations to optimize the human experience?

Conversation starters

Time

- Are we paying people for their time or something else?
- Is time the best measure of value? What do we do or require that takes up people's time, and why do we do it that way?
- Are there ways to give people more control over when and how they work? Have we asked the people doing the work if there is a better approach?
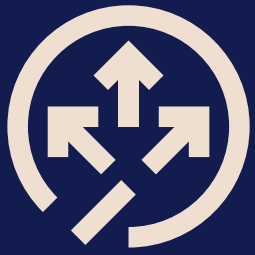- Do we know what people want?

Purpose

- Do people understand how their work makes a difference for the organization and our customers?
- Do we encourage people to do more of what they love and are good at?
- Do we reward making a difference or mostly efficiency and productivity?
- Do we let people know that they matter? How can we reduce stress for people at work or through policies or benefits?

Authentic self

- Do we value and appreciate people for who they are, no matter how they look, sound, believe and love?
- Do we understand that there can be many ways of doing something well?
- Do we really know what it's like to work here beyond our own observations and experience?
- What can we do that would make people feel more comfortable being themselves?

Oxygen

- What do we do to encourage people to rest and enjoy time outside of work? What can we do?
- When people take time off, can they shut off work?
- Are people burned out? How can we find out?
- How can we reduce stress for people at work or through policies or benefits?
- Are we using technology to make things better and easier, or does it mostly create more process and work?

Risk

Why embracing it feels like the better option for some

" I talk to some people who work the nine-to-five thing, and they're like, 'How could you possibly not know where your next paycheck is coming from? … Doesn't that bring you so much stress and anxiety?' And I was like, 'Well, how could you put all of your eggs in one basket? You know exactly where your thing is coming. Your whole thing, your whole career, your whole day-to-day is in the hands of somebody [else].'"

Georgina

What we heard

Career choices are often tied to financial security. But we've matured in our understanding that nothing is certain. The business world moves in more agile ways, often at the expense of employee security. Knowing this, people are redefining what job risk really means. Is it a greater risk to be employed in one place rather than three? Is it riskier to work for someone else or for yourself? Is there more risk in staying in one place or switching jobs every few years? These questions are all being asked in earnest by workers today.

Things are different now.

As children, we entertained ideas about "what we wanted to be when we grew up." When we imagined being a doctor or a firefighter or a teacher, we didn't have to worry about life's interdependencies and practical necessities — a roof over our head, clothes on our back and food in our bellies. Instead, we imagined helping people and being courageous, admired or rich.

As adults, our choices are often more limited. People lose jobs, become ill, can't afford education and are denied access.

For most of us, what we wanted to be when we grew up has changed — perhaps several times — often for reasons beyond our control. Change has a way of underscoring the fragility of our best-laid plans. And while work can be a route to identity and security, it can also be a source of disillusionment and risk. This is especially true for those who have put "all their eggs in one basket."

Within this context, our understandings of personal freedom and what it's worth continue to evolve.

The value of cultural capital is shifting.

What we do for work also signals to others our social standing. It's part of what French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu called "cultural capital." Social assets, like profession, education, even how we speak and dress enable social mobility for some and are barriers for others.

How people conceive of work in relation to status and "worth" have changed in the past, and it seems to be changing now.

The illusion of retirement

Many of us were advised to "work now, play later." Work and achieve now so you can retire and "be free."

Yet many people don't see retirement as an option, because they don't have the resources, despite the hard work. Others are finding it difficult to remain doing what they are doing until they retire because their priorities have changed. Still, others are considering "mini retirements" as they shift focus, learn new skills or change careers entirely.

The commitment to linear career progression as the only path to financial freedom is being called into question.

We've watched our parents. We see that, for many, retirement isn't a thing. They may not be able to afford it. Poor health and disability can drastically restrict what's possible. For others, "play" is not as enjoyable as they expected. People generally like having something to do and somewhere to go. It's an expression of self.

Our attitudes toward material gain are also changing. If we've been chasing the proverbial "gold watch," to the exclusion of all else, what do we do when we realize the gold watch isn't there? Meanwhile, the desire for the certainty and security the watch symbolizes limits our life choices.

Living a full life right now becomes essential when the future seems risky and uncertain.

Commitment without loyalty

Several of our research participants believed that loyalty was a relic of another era. They expressed the opinion that it was always one-sided. Few employers are loyal to employees. For these people, this became especially clear during the pandemic. Now that we can name it, we are rethinking our relationships with our employers. But we can still love our jobs, bosses and teams. It's simply imagining a different contract, one where we can be dedicated to our work without the expectation that a job or career will get us through all seasons of life.

"Loyalty" as a measure of employee engagement is considered an artifact of another time. While we still are encouraged to pursue the American Dream, of working hard work and demonstrating loyalty to an organization, that dream is no longer a practical reality for most of us.

We are operating under a very different set of social, technical and economic conditions than our parents and grandparents. It makes sense that we are reconsidering how "risk" and "reward" factor into making a living.

Dana

Dana, who is 65, never missed a shift during her 30 years as a dispatcher for a taxi company. She would always work anytime someone asked her to cover for them. The day she got word that her father died, she was forced to power through because no one, not even her boss, would cover for her.

While employed by the taxi company, Dana wrote all their training manuals based on 50 years of meeting minutes — for the joy in the service of it — without asking to be paid extra. When COVID-19 hit, the company furloughed everyone without pay, including Dana. When they brought her back a year and a half later, they did so at lower pay and less favorable shifts even though they were understaffed. Finally, Dana left during her shift. Reflecting on her experience, she told us: **"I didn't walk out on them. They walked out on me."**

To her, the assumption that her hard work and loyalty would have figured heavily into the calculus of her value after three decades was not a far-fetched idea. But even after feeling betrayed by management, she stayed.

"I'm gonna say what people want [as] they work is respect. They want respect for what they do, regardless of what it is. And they want to feel a sense of purpose."

For Dana, it comes down to being of service to others, where her expertise and practical know-how make someone else's life that much easier, where a person can close their eyes in the back of her cab and get some rest, knowing they will arrive where they need to be.

> **"** I'm gonna say what people want [as] they work is respect. They want respect for what they do, regardless of what it is. And they want to feel a sense of purpose."

Ally

As a business owner in a fast-paced industry, Ally knows that, to attract great people, she needs to understand what matters most to them as individuals. She takes the time to find out. What she has learned is that employees today do not take a job believing it is their last stop. In her experience, this holds true for people, regardless of life stage.

Ally is clear that there will be employees who stay with the company for a long time, and others will use it as **"part of their journey, and they will go on to do something else."** She believes both are important and values the different approaches.

In response to this understanding, Ally has taken an active role in designing and implementing a customized approach to her employees' work experience.

For Ally, the expectation that employees owe her something because the company has made an investment in them is "unhealthy" and, ultimately, a mindset that will impact her employees' overall commitment to their work.

" Companies have to change the way that they're doing things to be attractive to job seekers. At the same time, what people expect from a workplace is no longer the 40-year gold watch. It's, 'What does this job do to serve me right now in this season of life? What can I get out of it? Who am I gonna be coming out of this job? What can it provide for me on my trajectory?'"

For Ally, it comes down to building a place where people can thrive wherever they are in life.

Ally cares more about community-building than just her business. In this spirit, she and her business partner are involved in incubating a school to grow young professionals. Ally readily admits that this is one way to cultivate new talent for employment with her own company. But she wants them to grow and develop, even if that means moving on to work somewhere else. Care and helping others are the heart of the matter for everything Ally does.

As a leader, Ally is there to manage projects, not people. Employers don't need to assert "rights" over employees. Instead, Ally believes it is her responsibility to create an environment where everyone can grow and thrive diversely.

" I want to help them in that journey, whether or not they stay with our team. There have been people who have gone on and moved on from our team. [They] go do awesome things in the world. And I recognize they're not mine, and I don't hold possessiveness over my employees. During the time we're together, it should be pleasant and that I can be part of their journey."

" Dedicating yourself fully to one place might come back to bite you. One thing I've picked up on is just the fallacy of stability that companies say they're going to provide. I say that from the perspective of my mom [in the nursing field], who has done a lot of fighting hospital administrations over the years for very basic things, like very small raises. I think the most egregious one is patient-to-nurse ratios and safety standards. It feels like it shouldn't even really be a conversation. If someone says, 'I don't think I can take care of three people simultaneously in the ICU,' then you say, 'Okay, let's hire more people because that's lives on the line.'"

Ellis, writer

Ellis

Ellis is 29 and a writer living in Chicago. She grew up in a middle-class family in New England and graduated from a prestigious private college there.

Ellis shared that she's a "recovering perfectionist," due in part to years of intensive ballet training, straight A's in school and attending an elite college. Although Ellis had access and privilege, her achievements also required a lot of hard work and a high degree of commitment and support from her parents. She is a classic case of "high potential."

And yet, having watched as her then-55-year-old dad was laid off from the company he was devoted to, Ellis was skeptical about whether any company was truly loyal. Her dad was unable to find "good," stable work after the layoff and now does contract and gig work.

While it may not be her father's preference to have multiple jobs, Ellis feels that it is far too risky to place one's fate in the hands of a single company or institution.

" I have never made more than, like, $26,000 in a year. And that was even when I was working four jobs at the same time.
My debt situation is also interesting. So, I think there's a level of resentment there, you know, regarding elite education, the false promises [that] you need to get the degree in order to get jobs. But then the jobs that you get might not be able to pay back the thing that you needed to do … It's just that sort of closed loop.
I'm not necessarily gonna go into all of the details there, but my student debt situation is actually deeper than I knew. My family's not always great about communicating things with each other. And so, that has definitely impacted my feelings around work and just what my relationship with labor is and the place that [work] should hold in people's lives."

The disaggregation of work and income

As we saw in the Time section, the locus of personal value is increasingly defined by one's ability to author their own time. But this is also about financial resilience. We're deeply aware of our fungibility and financial vulnerability.

One possible approach is finding and building new streams of revenue.

Our ideas about the relationship between work and income are deeply rooted in older economic systems where physical labor was exchanged for pay. It's a "struggle mindset" based on a life of endless laboring, like Sisyphus, whom Zeus condemned to push a rock up a mountain, only to have it roll back down to the bottom each time Sisyphus reached the top, for eternity. Many of us can relate to Sisyphus. Why does it have to feel so pointless and exhausting?

Katherine

Like several in our study, Katherine, 25, questions whether earning a living must involve the struggle and suffering of "real work." She is exploring options, such as day trading and creating a digital coloring book, while currently working as a tutor.

She enjoys day trading in pajamas from her sofa but also feels conflicted. She has watched her parents "drill themselves into the ground," holding multiple jobs, earning modest wages and working long hours. Meanwhile, Katherine was able to earn in one afternoon more than both her parents earned for the entire week. She continues to explore technology-enabled income streams in search of what she calls "freeing tools."

Katherine feels guilty that she's earning a living in ways that starkly contrast to her parents' long hours and hard work. At the same time, she's trying to free herself from her own self-limiting "struggle mindset," which is that we must suffer to be good and valuable as humans.

Katherine's interest in earning a living detached from the customary markers of work — hours and effort — represents a trend. Some are calling this trend "anti-work," while others prefer "pro-leisure."

For Katherine, it sometimes feels counterintuitive, and even morally wrong, to earn an income without doing 'real work.' Katherine's feelings attest to the enduring strength of deeply ingrained beliefs about work ethic and the value of struggle associated with work. And these are changing.

> "I don't want a nine-to-five, but I still want financial stability. Like, if my dad wanted to just stop working, even though he's 65, he really can't, you know? And I'm like, 'I don't want that to be my reality.' So, I feel like ... I'll find the freeing tool first and then work backwards. If I decide, for some reason, I am just going to get a nine-to-five, at least I tried everything else first."

" An asset is something that puts money into your pocket every month. So, the rich basically buy more assets and try to limit their liabilities. And that's it. That's the game. I'm like, 'Oh, okay, well, that's simple enough ...'

You can buy businesses. You can buy financial instruments. You can buy real estate. There's probably some other things on that list."

Asa, small investor

Asa

Asa's views on passive income as an approach to disambiguating money from work were intentional and developed over a long period of time.

Asa is designing a different financial path through multiple small, residential real estate holdings he has purchased over the last decade. Asa's drive toward financial independence was philosophical — why would you leave your financial fate in the hands of someone else if you could create it yourself? As a meaningful benefit, rent from the properties has given him the freedom to spend most of his time with his wife and infant son.

Asa has also begun dabbling in cryptocurrencies and DAOs (decentralized autonomous organizations, organizations that live on the blockchain). He consults on DAOs and is delving into the relationship between incentives and work. Often, his incentives do not equate to money. They are sometimes money-like, such as crypto tokens. But they can also be simply curiosity about emerging philosophies of money and societal structure. Asa is an example of both "workless income" from his real estate holdings and work where money is not the central or explicit goal.

Through multiple revenue streams, he has aligned his sense of community-driven purpose with his desire for more time with his family and his self-identification as a lifelong learner.

> " Honestly, you know, right now, I'm retired from the corporate world. My time at that is done. I am retired from that, so now I'm an investor. I'm starting up a nonprofit. Do I retire from that at some point? Or does that just become shaped in such a way that I can kind of slowly pass that off to somebody else and then ramp up on something else? That's interesting to me."

Navigating webs vs. climbing ladders

The new model for career movement is a web instead of a ladder.

A ladder is unidirectional and has narrowing options as we move up the rungs. Implicit in the ladder is the myth of a reward in social standing and financial security that we may or may not achieve, or even desire. Success on the ladder, many have concluded, exists for few, and there is very little control of the progress and outcomes. Instead of a career with a narrow upward trajectory and pressure to always be climbing, people are rethinking their paths.

In a web, we can see our lives and choices more broadly and go in many directions. We are experimenting with more organic and autonomous approaches to navigating work, where lateral moves, self-direction and trying things offer routes to both financial resilience and personal fulfillment.

Until recently, we lacked the language necessary to design our careers in ways that veer from the traditional script. A new vocabulary is emerging. At the heart of it is a shift from pursuing a "career path" to creating your "career portfolio."

Lara

The idea of the "portfolio career" is an alternative to more traditional employment models. Lara explains:

"The portfolio career term was given to me more recently by a friend. And I like it. I like it from a diversifying and giving optionality. I've always felt that optionality gives me agency … I've had a few moments in my career where I've had backup plans for things that fall through. And it's worked in my favor because, at the end of the day, the company is gonna do what they need to do for their own gain. So, right now, I do have a lot of optionality because I could go back into the agency world and continue to do creative marketing work and also lead that and also sell that. Or I could coach, [or] I can stay in the innovation consulting world. And at some point, I could go in and be an internal incubator, or I could take one of those companies that I really believe in and be part of the spin out and actually go run it. So, right now, I have a couple bets here and there, and I don't have to jump on any one, [of them], but if one of them excites me or if one of them kind of starts draining me, then I can cut it."

For Lara, this form of diversified employment gives her the ability to broaden her professional identity beyond the terms that any one place of employment can offer.

When we hear terms like "gig work" and "side hustle," many of us imagine an unpredictable and precarious catch-as-catch-can. Lara's "portfolio approach" is all about the reassertion of her agency. It is both the philosophical and practical expression of her desire for greater personal control over her choices of how she works, where she works and for whom.

Lian

Lian is a recent college graduate working full-time for a large technology company. She also manages an online community that is seeking funding for a start-up in a space that helps broaden access to jobs for people of color.

Lian is not alone in viewing her career as more of a web of interrelated interests that complement each other.

She is learning what she can from her experiences so she can take them forward into her next possible future.

Lian is focused on developing her career to reflect a range of personal interests informed by her experiences as a second-generation immigrant growing up in a low-income household. While it's difficult to know if her approach will change as she moves through different life stages, it's clear that, for now, Lian is motivated by the desire to expand her skills and networks outwards. Ultimately, she wants to apply what she has learned to managing her own business.

" I don't think of my career path as linear. I wanna bounce back and forth between different things. I really care about the work behind it rather than the title.

My mentors said to me, 'You are going to live many lives in your one life.' And I've had conversations with folks who are in different generations, older than me, who have told me that I need to be linear. It's an interesting time we are in right now where things are turning, but they're not fully there yet."

Choices, not titles

In our interviews, people explained that work is not just about financial freedom. It's also about the ability to move freely in the world through the choices people can cultivate for themselves. How they earn a living is more about being able to choose the quality of their lives.

Our participants spoke at length about having greater control over their story — who they are and strive to be. We heard stories of feeling financially vulnerable under the helm of one employer. Many also felt immobilized by incentive and promotion structures designed to limit rather than expand possibilities. Chasing titles does not guarantee financial security and is a less attractive narrative.

The notion of a life "best lived in chapters" arose frequently. Many have arrived at a new measure of success, which is having the tools to adapt and move freely through their working lives. Part of this is about financial resilience. Mostly, it's about feeling self determined and having an interesting, satisfying life.

It's not that people don't want to grow and achieve more; they do. But they also want to create a life less about a direct route to someone else's destination and more about a self-drawn map to an interesting and fulfilling life. Movement is becoming a new form of status.

"I've always felt that optionality gives me agency."

—Mike

Mike

Mike has started to look at opportunities for passive income and secondary revenue streams. For much of his career, he worked for a large global consultancy in data strategy and business intelligence. He has also run his own businesses and helped turn others around.

At 44 with a child in need of 24/7 care, Mike feels his current role as a full-time employee working remotely for a large retail conglomerate is where he needs to be for the time being. However, if things change and he's required to work onsite, he will need to make other choices offering him greater location flexibility and equally good medical benefits.

At this point in his career and given his life circumstances, Mike is not motivated to chase titles. He needs a career path that works with his life. For now, that means a stable income, a job he can contribute to without extending himself too much and a flexible work schedule that offers grace to his family's needs. Mike is also already working on his true career goals of business ownership and avenues of passive income.

While Mike appreciates the operational benefits of organizational hierarchies, he doesn't place much stock in titles, either his own or others'. His current management role is the person who fends off the fire drills created by more senior members of the organization. Mike sees the problem as poor leadership skills rather than as a call to action.

"Where I am in my career, I don't have a lot of time for jerks and the BS. I just don't care anymore."

> "Can I see myself doing this for 20 more years? No.
>
> I don't strive to be the CEO of a company that's not my own."

Katherine

When she was applying to colleges, Katherine's parents encouraged her to go into medicine or law. As first-generation Caribbean immigrants to the U.S., they wanted their daughter to pursue an occupation that would give her both financial stability and social standing, things they never had.

It was evident throughout our conversation that Katherine struggled with respecting her parents' hard work and their dreams for her while believing that wanting titles for status is an empty pursuit that will likely result in disillusionment. She told us her friends shared similar views.

Instead of the linear path associated with established and "esteemed" professions, many of which carry a prohibitively high educational cost to begin with, Katherine and her peer group are experimenting with ways to maximize their freedom — financial, moral and psychological. They are doing this powered by digital tools that make it possible to explore new options.

" My parents told me I could be a doctor or a nurse or lawyer, maybe, but it was mostly medicine. I was good enough at math in elementary and middle school that it seemed plausible.

But then, after that, it was clearly not an option. I'm quite squeamish anyways. I didn't have business being anyone's doctor. But then I was like, 'What am I supposed to do?' Cause that's what my parents thought success was.

And then I thought having any kind of desk job was success because, you know, like, the titles and the desk and whatever shows that [integration] into society, that you've been accepted."

Katherine spoke a lot about a pervasive fear of being "stuck" with bad choices that don't work. She talked about what that means to her in a few different ways. While the genesis of her fear is not clear, several observations she shared point to some contributing factors.

She remembers watching her dad work multiple jobs to support the family. Her mom worked the night shift as a nurse's assistant. As a second-generation American, Katherine was taught that hard work, dedication and a good education are the key to "not getting left behind" in America. She no longer believes it.

As a teenager during the 2008 recession, Katherine watched the news of layoffs and saw people losing everything they had worked so hard for — their homes, savings, job security. She realized how fragile jobs are when she was looking for a summer job. She went to a local sandwich shop to see if they needed help. When she got there, the line of applicants was out the door and down the sidewalk. She described how sad it was to see middle-aged people in business attire holding briefcases, waiting their turn to apply. This moment stayed with her.

Insights to consider

The people we spoke with had mixed feelings about the relationship between a job and its role in reducing risk and increasing security.

Instead, we heard people value agency, autonomy and freedom. For some, it means not putting all their eggs in one basket and always having options. Others are exploring new ways to make money with more flexibility, choice and control.

Some are redefining the role of work entirely. Work is no longer primarily about money or security. It's about creating or building something, serving others or finding more meaningful ways to spend time while still paying the bills.

This means rethinking the exchange of value. Instead of employers owning employee's time, organizations might intensify focus on what will give people more options, meaning, autonomy and flexibility.

It can look like providing training in new skills, offering career paths that have multiple directions and options or providing student loan repayment help, not only retirement savings.

Conversation starters

Risk

- Do we walk our talk? Do our actions reflect our promises to employees and their expectations of us?

- What assumptions do we have about loyalty and retention? How are those assumptions reflected in how we do things?

- Are the people we want to stay, staying and the people we want to leave, leaving? If not, what can we do differently?

Career paths

- Do we reward our great makers and doers with jobs in management? Is management the only option for advancement or more money?

- What are we doing to understand the skills that can transfer to different roles so there are more directions employees can go?

- How important are title and status here? How can we create roles that show people they matter?

Value

- Besides a paycheck, do we understand what employees want and need? Are we offering benefits and opportunities for different life stages and circumstances?

- Are we training people to develop skills and preparing them for their next role, even if it's not with us?

- Do people know how their work makes a difference to the organization and its customers? Do they understand the why's of their work or just the what's and how's?

Autonomy

- Do we really care where people work, or is this more about what to do with the real estate?

- Can we structure jobs around the work that needs doing rather than time so people have more control over their schedules?

- Do managers appreciate that the people doing the work are the experts on how to do it? Managers' jobs are to facilitate the work. Do we help them do that, or do we give them a lot of process and administrivia instead?

Humanity

Reinforcing its role and meaning in business

What we heard

People are thinking more critically about power and systems that serve the few over the many. Racial and gender bias, perceptions that companies value profit over people and slow response to environmental issues are all seen as structural problems, baked into the way we do business and run our companies today.

What stood out was how strongly workers have become less tolerant of cosmetic approaches to these challenges in the organizations they work with and for.

We observed people thinking quite deeply about the cultural and economic biases upon which our current organizational systems have been built.

At the heart of this are three ideas:

Improving equity, access and opportunity and how far we have to go

Increasing transparency and ethical conduct (not just the "ethical practices" described on companies' websites)

Organizing and being selective about where and under what conditions people are willing to work

Systems awareness

People are seeing organizations as a system, not just a set of arbitrary rules — and that is both interesting and remarkable. Employees are recognizing their place within the system and often don't like it. Whether it's because they're stuck in a career cul de sac or being asked to perpetuate unethical practices or inequity, employees are reevaluating the role of work in their lives and whether their employer operates with the same values they do.

As people are becoming increasingly aware of the deeper structures in society that produce economic inequities, racial injustice, environmental degradation, technological bias, educational, and health-related segregations, they are deeply questioning their individual place within these established systems.

Ana

We are seeing beyond our personal experiences as workers. And we've set our sights on the societal structures that intentionally limit the well-being of individuals — specifically groups of people — and the planet. What used to be the province of activism is now just a regular day on the job.

Ana is a practicing artist who has experienced the art world's system and corrosive structures that include well-funded artists who "pay to play," while others are excluded by fees. For some, art is a long-term investment vehicle, making it a commodity instead of art. The "who's who" lists and the politics of patronage and galleries are more about ego than art.

As a young child, Ana always knew, "**I am an artist.**" Art as a business is a different system.

Today, she experiments with new ways of "being an artist" that enable her to be less tethered to the traditional art market. Whether as a dance instructor, a curator, an art therapist or an artists' retreat host, Ana keeps her work personally rewarding, human-centered and, most importantly, in line with her sense of community and personal ethics. Her moral compass shows her where and how she will show up as an artist. She doesn't see this changing. If anything, Ana believes her ethical commitments will deepen.

> " The systems are working how they're supposed to. It's just not in your benefit but in the benefit of the person who created it. And they're functioning right on track … I accept it as a reality of a system that I'm a part of in different ways. And it's also why I invest my time and energy in efforts in the arts outside of it."

Sharon

Sharon feels the sting of being a person with no assets and of trying to move from worker to business owner.

Sharon and her husband have built careers in fine dining. Both are well recognized in their areas of expertise. Now in their mid-30s, they are ready to run their own small business. Instead of focusing on fine dining, they intend to create a café where local people and especially fellow restaurant workers can gather to enjoy conversation and community over exceptional "down-to-earth" food. Their vision is a place where those who serve can relax and be served.

Raising the funds to start the business hasn't been easy. Both have taken multiple jobs to save the money required. They each grew up in households where money was scarce, and there is no safety net. Instead, they are relying on their own ingenuity, talent and luck.

Sharon described her experience of applying for a small-business loan. When asked about the value of her home, she said she was a renter. The bank replied somewhat condescendingly, "You don't own your own home?" They were denied despite having excellent credit.

It was a humiliating experience that served to underscore the anger that Sharon already felt about feeling excluded from opportunities because "we were born poor, so we are going to be poor." She and her husband eventually did get funding from an outside investor to open their business.

"People that work jobs like my husband and I work and like my parents worked, this life kind of isn't for us. We've struggled really, really, really hard to get this restaurant open. We are barely making it by the skin of our teeth. It's really sad that it's about how much money you have. And it's not about how much skill you have."

As a Michelin-rated pastry chef whose parents didn't have wealth to "hand down," Sharon's lived experiences call into question the "pull yourself up by the bootstraps" origin story of the American Dream. As an individual, Sharon has pulled herself up as a chef. But she told us it takes far more than personal fortitude and grit to get ahead.

Nonetheless, people are actively trying to create opportunities for themselves on their own terms and tied to their personal systems of values.

Marnie

Marnie occupies an unusual position within her organization. She's considered a "master of her craft" and oversees a large global business unit. Despite her leadership and value to the organization, she still does not have a recognized or "official" place at the table. This is not what she thought her experience of climbing the ladder would look or feel like.

Marnie is stuck, but not because she hasn't progressed in her career. She has. She's "stuck" because, as a woman, she feels her voice is less valued.

She's dumbfounded that, although she has done everything right and worked extremely hard to get to where she is, it will never be enough. Marnie wonders how it is that she can be so valued, "so amazing" and celebrated and still not be "in the room where it happens." That room continues to be filled with men.

Marnie is disillusioned by the illusory promise that hard work, skills and talent are what matter. Instead, it's a Y chromosome.

Marnie has turned her focus toward imagining a work future where she is able to build her own table.

" Even though I feel like I'm getting powerful or important, a bunch of men are still making all the decisions. It's been sort of an exercise in resentment [and] anger."

Lara

Many workers, especially marginalized groups, have always had an increased awareness of the social dynamics behind lack of access. Now, they are also thinking more carefully about the moral and ethical consequences of economic systems they participate in.

There are inequities that people can't tolerate, either because it's happening to them or because the disparities seem to be so embedded and pervasive.

Lara and people like her understand they are part of much larger social and economic systems that perpetuate practices that run counter to their personal morals. This realization can be overwhelming.

One way that people are counteracting this "crisis of conscience" is by speaking up more frequently and with a louder voice.

Lara does this by carefully choosing the clients she works with. She won't work with companies or leaders if she feels they demonstrate disregard for people's welfare and the environment. Lara seeks companies that are trying to do better and have visible track records supporting these efforts with real action.

She also takes it as a personal responsibility to speak up when she feels something isn't right. In this way, her "words and deeds" become her ongoing contribution to enacting better systems with more humane outcomes.

> I get assigned something seemingly mild. But if you peel back layers of enough companies, you know, everybody's supply chain and every business is exploitative of some kind of labor and, you know, it's all rough.
>
> And so, the lesser of two evils, I guess, is where I end up landing. But from an ethics standpoint, I'm very clear on how I will treat people. And I'm very clear that, if people are not treating people well, I will call them out one-on-one. I won't do it in public, but I will go to them, and I will feel comfortable with that."

" And there are folks who strongly believe the American Dream and say they have the same opportunity as Elon Musk has. They say, if they both started at the same time, they could have been where Elon is now. Elon just worked harder or got lucky. But it's not true. If you look at Elon's background, he comes from generational wealth. He had a lot of money, [while] immigrants come here with nothing.

[This is] a comparison I turn to when talking about the American Dream and why it bothers me. [But] as a very real comparison and a very real example, I see massive holes."

Lian, 22

Moral burnout

As a term, moral injury has historically been applied to medical clinicians and military personnel. But it describes what many are feeling about work.

Unlike burnout, where the "problem" is thought to reside within the individual, moral injury results from structural pressures that force people to do things contrary to their value system and moral code of conduct. For health care workers, environmental pressures may run contrary to the Hippocratic Oath to, "First, do no harm."

In high-stakes work situations where people are expected to "toe the line," even if this means doing something against their moral grain, putting profit, policy or process over people can be morally injurious.

Doctor J.

Dr. J treated patients throughout the height of the pandemic. As an OBGYN, he confronted a great deal of vaccination pushback. It was difficult for him to come to terms with the fact that, while he believes people have the right to make their own choices, he saw these very same people back in the hospital struggling with critical illness.

Although Dr. J has learned to compartmentalize, he says the practice of medicine is starting to change. New physicians are working to process and address the ethical dilemmas they face.

"You're always gonna run into unpredictable, emotionally stricken, emotionally disturbing [situations]. It's always been stressed to the trainees or new doctors to make sure you remember the compartment. You have a job to do. Stay objective. Stay focused. Keep carrying on.

I think, especially in the recent past five years or so, things are changing. I think the newer generation of upcoming doctors and trainees are realizing things are gonna be different and we demand things to be different, and changed."

For Dr. J, a greater emphasis on ethics, support from colleagues and his own mindfulness practice have helped him find ways to better align his ethics to the field of medicine.

" You're always gonna run into unpredictable, emotionally stricken, emotionally disturbing [situations]. It's always been stressed to the trainees or new doctors to make sure you remember the compartment. You have a job to do. Stay objective. Stay focused. Keep carrying on.

I think, especially in the recent past five years or so, things are changing. I think the newer generation of upcoming doctors and trainees are realizing things are gonna be different, and we demand things to be different and changed."

Doctor J.

Asa

Asa is a real estate investor who is leveraging his expertise to help others. He is also rewriting the script about work, himself and how he wants to show up in the world.

Asa has always been interested in finding solutions to thorny challenges. He used to do this through his work in industrial design. He became concerned about how the things he was designing were affecting the environment and decided he could not continue in good conscience.

Today, he uses his problem-solving skills and collaborative energy to design ways to help historically marginalized communities find paths to home ownership and neighborhood renaissance.

"Gentrification is really about making a community wealthier ... but because of the barriers that have existed ... that population moved out. The only model of gentrification that we've seen in a lot of cities is displacement."

By turning his energy to helping effect positive change in his community and applying what he has learned to challenges that he finds professionally gratifying and morally compelling, Asa feels a greater sense of attunement between his identity and his work. While his work remains design-oriented, it's now about designing approaches that do more good than harm.

" People who are marginalized are at the receiving end of a lot of [unfairness]. You just can't ignore that.

People who are marginalized and at the receiving end of all of that can now be louder."

Lara

Lara is also focused on recalibrating her own moral compass. She does this, in part, by working with clients who operate with a system of values she can get behind.

Caught up in the frenetic energy of the media industry, Lara had lost touch with parts of herself she holds dear. Too busy to even "know what she was missing," she eventually hit a wall and was forced to step back and rethink.

It was difficult. Lara loved being a company co-founder. She loved the energy, the creativity, the creating a path and being recognized in her industry. Even with all that love, she realized she was overworked, undervalued and shut off from other aspects of her life. This self-knowledge led her to chart a different course.

Long-term exposure to a toxic co-founder, pandemic pause, life stage and a renewed commitment to broader cultural concerns were all a part of Lara's shift to working for herself.

Today, she works with people who can benefit from what she has learned and who are in positions to effect the positive changes that are more aligned with the world they wish to live in. She now coaches leaders on how to rethink policies to address inequities in pay and organizational culture. Respectfully acknowledging the diverse circumstances of people's lives is an area of practice she continues to deepen.

In the past, certain types of behaviors, expectations and demands would go unchecked. Today, Laura has no qualms about calling out unethical practices and encourages those she coaches to do the same.

> " I have much tighter filters now about the kind of people I will put up with or allow to be a part of my life or network. And similarly, when I look for a job, I'm very deliberate."

Disillusionment

Just because you do excellent work, go above and beyond and are willing to take on new challenges doesn't mean you will be recognized or rewarded for it.

For those of us who were taught "hard work pays off," it's deeply disillusioning to discover that this may not always be true.

Athena

Athena was excited for her new job with the janitorial team at a hip technology start-up focused on providing a "third space" for the growing remote workforce. The company got great press when it opened its first New York City co-working locations. When she arrived for her first day of work, the building was still under construction.

From the start, Athena found ways to improve processes. She worked hard, took initiative, wanted to grow. As she applied for roles with increasing responsibility and higher pay, her manager supported her efforts and said he was planning to promote her. But one day, she arrived for work, and he was gone. No promotion.

Her next manager was new to the company and did not know how valuable Athena was, so they did not champion her development and progress. The manager after that realized Athena was a great worker and didn't want to lose her. Still, no promotion. Finally, after more managers and many applications, Athena was promoted to the mailroom. Soon, she was the building receptionist and "daily community activities" organizer.

Then came the pandemic. The co-working spaces were empty. While most of the administrative staff shifted to remote work, Athena was an "essential worker" and had to work onsite. Meanwhile, her five kids were home doing remote learning. Her husband worked nights and could help with the kids on most days, especially if Athena was able to work remotely part of the time. Athena's co-workers said they could cover for her. So, Athena asked to either work a four-day week or work remotely the fifth day. The company denied her request.

Athena was there from day one. She started as a custodian and later took a desk job. Athena believed in hard work and had worked hard. She was always there for the company but felt that management wasn't there for her when she needed them most. The fact that her managers did not care enough to give her one day off was deeply disillusioning.

Hierarchy flattening

People are feeling more empowered to assert their value as individuals outside of traditional hierarchy. We heard that some hierarchies have come to feel increasingly arbitrary.

Increasingly, people are questioning the importance of hierarchies as we move toward organizations where equality, fairness and belonging are valued. People are looking for meaning and to be rewarded based on their contributions rather than their titles.

Asa

Asa continues to learn more about blockchain-enabled platforms called distributed autonomous organizations (DAOs). He is contributing his design skills to build out parts of his chosen collective.

One of the aspects of blockchain-enabled organizations that Asa appreciates is transparency in governance. Some blockchain groups operate under a one-token, one-vote policy, while others have "weighting algorithms" that allocate each person's share of say. Regardless, all decisions made are transparent to all members of the organization.

People like Asa want to devote their energy to more egalitarian endeavors. They are looking for transparency, direct community involvement and more balanced sharing of power and profits. Asa is hopeful that more equitable distribution mechanisms will address the inequities often found in traditional hierarchical organizations.

The very existence of these emergent, currently niche forms of organizing based on blockchain suggests an appetite for leaderless collectives where the decentralization of power is written into the code.

> " I think that what's different is that there's a lot more transparency. When you vote on something, you can see all the different wallet addresses that voted either for or against, and you could click on the wallet address, and you can see all the transactions that person has ever made. Everything happens on the blockchain."

Several executives we spoke with voiced a common question about whether hierarchies are still useful, given the changes in how and where many of us work. Hierarchies are often justified with the "organizing principles" of efficiency, distribution of resources and chain of command. Leaders make decisions, while everyone else makes what's needed for the product or service. Often, leaders could not do the actual work of their organizations — even if they know what the work is and how it's done.

Leaders who are unwilling to "get their hands dirty" risk losing the trust and respect of those who do. Worse are the leaders who pass work along to others, only to take credit for the effort later. Company leaders who allow this type of behavior to go unchecked are perpetuating a workplace culture where people learn to "hoard" their ideas, "sell out to move up" and covet their work product for fear of these being "reappropriated" by what Adam Grant describes as "takers."

This approach ignores both the complexity and collaborative nature of most work and the care, labor and creativity of the people who give.

> **"** We needed to prepare something for a meeting that was coming up the next day. I'm like, 'Okay, I'll do it.' And I got a note from one of the strategists saying, 'Wow, I've never worked with a managing director who makes slides.' It never occurred to me to delegate that to someone for me. If I'm not in the work, I don't even know how to function."
>
> **Marnie**

Structuring empathy

Workplaces that are going to be most successful are those that design with people, not just for people. They demonstrate empathy and awareness of what it's like to do the work and show concern for the people doing it. What does it take to affirm the role of empathy in business and in the workplace?

In some cases, it means building in empathy from the ground up, not as a plug-in or an overlay. It means meeting individuals where they are and acknowledging them as multidimensional. It means building freshly minted structures that account for the daily realities of workers, the planet and the diversity of experiences that comprise our shared humanity.

It calls for a new form of leadership seeking to humanize business and push past conventional lip service. But many organizations don't really know how to metabolize this "elusive human stuff." And it's difficult to measure.

"Empathy absolutely belongs in business. And when you see that business is stressful or terrible, or it goes real sour or is doing unethical things, it's because that empathy's lost."

—Ally

Empathy is a "hot topic." It shows up in corporate communications and marketing materials. It's the focus of trainings and company mission statements. But what does it mean? Or, to be more precise, what does it do?

As we explored this topic, people described what empathy wasn't as much as what it was. Like so many "loose" concepts, our understanding comes from the contrast between the two.

We heard about attempts to measure and quantify empathy. We learned about empathy training sessions. And we heard how these initiatives can register as another example of leaders' "tone deafness."

One example was a "collective wellness" exercise for physicians, who were required to go to an orchard and harvest apples.

The physicians, like many of the others we spoke to, were already feeling overworked, sleep-deprived and hard-pressed to find any space for self care.

The larger question for our resident physician in his last year of training became: How do you define what wellness looks like for others when wellness is likely to be quite personal and self-defined? The hospital never considered the true needs of its residents and physicians. Instead, they made people pick apples. They never considered that the time might be better spent sleeping or with family. One of the doctors expressed that it felt not only tone-deaf but also mean. It was certainly not empathetic.

"We'll have Friday lectures where we'll have required attendance to listen to a one-hour lecture about how to feel well and about what stress is, after a whole week of working a hundred hours, on a Friday afternoon at 4 p.m. Can you believe that? At that time, my 'wellness' is turning off everything, maybe taking a nap. I will feel so, so much better after an hour of that, than me listening to a lecture about feeling stressed."

Dr. J said that the days when training to be a doctor meant subjecting yourself to the unreasonable demands and sometimes abusive treatment of your attending physician instructor are waning. He attributes this change to the current generation of resident trainees, who are more willing to speak out against top-down abuses of power. He believes the opportunity to be able to share stories and vent frustrations on social media has accelerated the slow dismantling of this long-standing, top-down power dynamic.

Inherited practices along with the rituals and symbols that reinforce them are so taken for granted that they are unremarkable. They seem normal, even when they are harmful to everyone involved. Yet hierarchy and power structures also often require people not to speak out because of fear of retaliation or public ridicule.

Yet as we heard from Dr. J, once people start talking and begin to share their common experiences, it emboldens others to contribute their voice. In this way, people are coming together to call attention to their shared experiences and what needs to change.

" Medicine is a very toxic internal society. So, most of the public do not know this. But in the hospital, clinics, and in general, medicine has been very toxic, especially from the apprenticeship side. So, the teacher-to-the-learner relationship is oftentimes very toxic.

It's kinda like, 'This is how I learned it. This is how I was treated' … I think, when we hit this generation, at one point, we said that enough is enough."

Dr. J, OBGYN

Ellis

Ellis, who identifies as gender nonconforming, shared how they felt bound to a "cookie-cutter" identity that left no allowance for a more authentic expression of self. It was disillusioning and deeply corrosive to the trust in their workplace's stated values of inclusion.

They described editing a lengthy monograph and being asked to write a biography to include in a publication. When they used "they" as a pronoun to describe themselves, the employer insisted they pick an identity — male or female — to make it easier. Easier for whom? Not Ellis. Imagine being male and your employer asking you to use "she" pronouns in a biography for a professional publication.

This incident stuck with Ellis, who is now more committed than ever to work in gender-affirming environments where empathy is an unwavering core principle. They just want to work in an environment where they feel they belong and can be themself. Ellis is currently pursuing a master's degree in disability studies, in part, to help rewrite inaccurate and incomplete paradigms of normal.

Ally

During our conversation, Ally described her approach to creating an "empathy-first" culture in the company she co-founded. Her approach is based on building in the structures of empathy right from the start. It begins with all the choices she makes about how the company is managed day-to-day.

For example, if an employee experiences a personal tragedy or illness and needs to take time off to heal, they are encouraged to take as much time as they need. For Ally, it all comes down to building teams that operate out of trust and care before all else. **"A company's leadership, its true mettle, shows at times of challenge where every single decision is an opportunity to show your values."**

For Ally, it's about establishing policies premised on mutual trust and empathy. She operates from a place of knowing she has hired the right people and that, when things happen — as they do — they will make the right decisions for themselves and for the team.

Ally also provides a generous wellness stipend that people can use as they see fit. What wellness "feels" like is different for different people. Ally knows forced wellness doesn't help. So, she let's each person figure out how best to use the stipend.

" We take an individualistic approach to all our benefits. We want to support people for whatever they need in that moment. We don't have policies; we have hearts."

Insights to consider

People are trying to make sense of their place within larger social structures and are examining the structures themselves. This, in turn, invites new interpretations of our existing models of work, jobs, companies, power and leadership.

Those we spoke with are taking a deeper look at the systems that are the foundations of the work they do. They are seeking to understand what does harm and what has the capacity to lift people up. It's a renewed effort to reimagine the American Dream with a broader view of how our economic systems affect our days, lives, relationships, organizations and planet.

Listening deeply and reflecting on our own thoughts and feelings about work and identity and how the circumstances of our lives have shaped our understanding is a great starting point. Conversations with people different from ourselves open new ways of thinking and offer new perspectives. People want to feel truly heard.

Systems do exactly what they are designed to do. Most businesses are systems designed to make money, preferably profits.

Computers are great at many things. But they don't have the capacity to consider the broader picture, understand emotions or care about others.

Conversation starters

Systems

- What systems do we have, and what are they designed to do?

- Are our systems delivering the outcomes we want?

- Are there outcomes we want that have no systems or incentives to do them?

- What do we measure to determine progress or success? Are our measurements based on what we want or what is easy to measure?

- Do our KPIs reflect what matters to the work, the business and the humans performing the work?

Ethics

- Do we evaluate whether we are doing the right thing as a required part of our decision making? Do we understand what could possibly go wrong and how that would affect people?

- Have we asked for diverse perspectives to see beyond our own world view and identify issues and questions we might not have considered?

Disillusionment

- Do our words and our actions match?

- Are we more concerned about compliance and checking boxes than a culture where people are seen, heard and valued?

- What risks are we managing for, and are these concerns more important than helping our people thrive?

Hierarchy

- Why are we organized the way we are?

- Is it working for our purpose? Is that still the purpose we want?

- How does power work in our organization? Is it protected or used to benefit others and the work?

- Do our leaders understand the work, and do they ask people to do things they are not willing to do themselves?

Empathy

- What roles do compassion, care and empathy play in our decisions?

- Do we consider the interests of the people affected and whether the decisions will cause harm?

Relevance
Grappling with technology and platforms

What we heard

Machines are excellent at pattern recognition and following rules at scale. With the help of humans and increasingly with the help of other machines, they automate, operationalize, sort and categorize everything from people to pistons to press releases.

Machines can strip people of their dignity and alienate them from their work, and they can save lives and anticipate unforeseen dangers.

In our conversations, we asked people to reflect on the role of technology and machines in their lives. Unsurprisingly, people's thoughts and feelings about technology are, "It depends."

" [The rideshare company] doesn't care. I was working for them full-time last year. Now I'm not. You think anybody cares? … You don't hear from them. If, on your regular job, you don't show up and no one hears from you, normally, someone is gonna call and go, 'Well, what'd you do? Did you quit?'

When you work for them, they communicate with you all the time. How do you like driving for [the company]? What do you think? You work for something invisible. … I don't think anyone that works there ever sees a person behind the wheel."

Dana

The tangible and the abstract

The coexistence of information technology and humans, where functions are increasingly more automated, was a topic that resonated with several of our participant collaborators. Dana shared how, as a rideshare driver with nearly every function fully automated, she felt removed from authentic human connection when it came to the platform. The upside was she felt she could leave all feedback about her experience as a driver on the platform without fear of retaliation. The downside was she felt she was an expendable resource and easy to replace. As she explained, this is what people have come to expect when they "work for something invisible."

As an employee of a traditional taxi company, where she worked for 30 years as a dispatcher, Dana has deep knowledge of how the taxi business works. Based on her experiences, she's able to draw informed comparisons between the two experiences — analogue versus digital. In the traditional model, if she missed a day of work, her co-workers would call to check in to see if everything was okay. Working for the rideshare company, all interaction takes place on the screen.

For Dana, rideshare is an "investors game." "They pay their investors. . . . The services that they provide or the people that they use are kind of immaterial." Dana notes the hourly rate hasn't gone up in years, and the time between pick-ups has been shortened. "When you're working by the hour and using your own vehicle, the longer rides and additional wear and tear make it much less profitable."

So, what keeps her there? Being able to pay her bills while avoiding taking early retirement and social security penalties is one reason. The other is the satisfaction she gets from providing her riders with a worry-free service experience. In every job she's held, her sense of dignity and purpose has been deeply rooted in her service to the people most impacted by her work. She might be paid by an algorithm, but she's **working for people.**

Many of us orient to work as something tangible, as an activity with distinct physical properties. In a very real sense, work is a set of embodied practices. Whether it's mopping a floor, swinging a hammer, sitting in commuter traffic or writing a report, there is a definite physical and practical component to work. For many of us, it's quite literally how work gets done.

Sharon

In our conversations with Sharon, the fine-dining pastry chef turned café entrepreneur, work has always been about manual labor. As far back as she can remember, she thought of work as something you do with your hands.

"I honestly don't even know what people who work in offices do. I have no clue what that is. [For] me, work has always been a tangible thing. Like, it's you're cutting glass, or you're cooking.

Some people would look down upon them and say that they're unskilled labor, that anybody can do it. But that's what work is. It's producing a thing. It's your hands on something."

Fred

Sharon is far from alone in this orientation to work. We heard similar stories from Fred, a caretaker, and Georgina,

a maker. They each use their hands to produce something uniquely personalized for customers at a small scale. Work is both an activity and an outcome.

While Sharon and Georgina, both in their 30s, are finding different ways to use digital technologies in their work. Fred, in his late 60s, is not inclined to do so. For him, it's all about the tangible human connections made through physical effort and skill. In his words, technology is making people "too relaxed."

Fred explained, "Letting technology, letting machines do the work that you're supposed to be doing ... it's getting to the point where people are not [doing the work]. What are they going to do if that's all they know?"

He shared the example of his younger neighbors who rarely cook meals because they usually order food from delivery platforms. He finds this trend of technology dependency "scary." He very consciously continues to operate at a scale where person-to-person interactions are prioritized in the kind of work he does.

His sense of identity, like that of Dana's, remains deeply tied to his commitment to quality service. It is his personal philosophy that "simpler is better," both in terms of material and emotional rewards. As a result, Fred views his life as one of abundance.

Katherine

Others, like Katherine, struggle to come to terms with conflicting feelings around old and new ways of working.

In Katherine's case, a lot of it comes down to having watched as her dad worked multiple jobs while her mom worked the night shift as a nurse's assistant in order to support the family. As a second-generation American, she was taught that hard work, dedication and a good education would be the key to "not getting left behind" in America.

As a teenager around the time of the Great Recession, Katherine was aware from the news that lots of people were losing what they had worked so hard for — homes, savings and job security. That reality was driven home when she went to interview for a summer job at a local sandwich shop. When she got there, the line was out the door and down the sidewalk. She described how sad it was for her to see middle-aged people in business attire holding briefcases, waiting their turn to apply. The memory of this moment has stayed with her. And it continues to inform how she thinks about work in terms of tangibility and abstraction.

"So much of what [my dad] does is super, super physical and super manual and super laborious. And I don't know, there's something so cushy about sitting behind a computer and printing money." Katherine is referring to her foray into day trading. She describes how, while dressed in her pajamas at the computer, she was able to make many times over what her father was able to earn in a week of "hard labor." Did she really earn this money? Is it work when it's not physically demanding? Would making money successfully in this way cause a rift between her and her parents? Should she feel guilty about opting for a technology-enabled, more abstract way of making money, as opposed to her parents' more tangible approach?

These are the kinds of questions that run through Katherine's mind as she continues to experiment with different ways of working and making an income. Breaking with the conventions around work in which her parents participate — largely out of necessity — Katherine remains conflicted, however; she recently learned that her father had also begun to dabble in day trading, which helped to diffuse some, but not all, of her guilt about what is and is not work.

"As globalization happens, as workforce automation happens, as artificial intelligence becomes more and more prevalent, I think it's going to reshape the working world faster. The pace of change is just accelerating."

—Asa

Rapid obsolescence

People of all ages and occupations are feeling the pressure to remain relevant in the face of increased technical know-how, automation and the rapid digitized takeover of jobs, or parts of jobs, at scale.

Confronted by these realities, what it means to be human is cast into high relief.

Paul

Paul is a lifelong techie who believes that technology is essentially a good thing but that we aren't necessarily good stewards of it. Or, at the very least, as a society, we are not keeping pace with how to best manage technology for improving lives.

He describes the silicon chip as the "second wheel." He believes there is nothing more significant that humans have invented than the wheel. For him, it really comes down to how we chose to apply this new "wheel."

Paul is a technology optimist. While he's excited about the future of technology, especially blockchain technologies, he also believes that it's a young person's "game." Paul is approaching retirement after a successful career in technology entrepreneurship. Even with decades of experience, Paul doesn't feel he is still qualified to manage engineering teams because of how fast tech changes. While he doesn't plan to remove himself completely from the field, he believes he's more suited to an advisory role on a board.

> " It's not that the computing is reaching levels of advancement that maybe it shouldn't or something like that. It's that society is not keeping pace. So, I think it's more the effect of the lag than the effect of the advancement."

Like so many things, timing is everything.

For Paul, the past couple of years have been an ongoing learning experience. He's become aware that his skills as a grandfather are more meaningful than ever. He's working on his emotional intelligence as he expands his sense of identity into more than a "person in technology."

Paul attributes this realignment to the opportunity to share time with his young grandchild during the pandemic. Through this experience, he began to appreciate what he's been missing by devoting so much of his time to work. Instead of aspiring to produce the next great idea and bring it to market, he's focused on being a more well-rounded person, a person who is more present for his family while pursuing activities that he finds deeply rewarding.

"The best I can be is the best grandfather I can be. My sights have been changed completely about doing something that's larger than myself. Something that's more important is no longer equated with business or wanting to make my mark or to be known in history. I've completely changed those expectations to wanting to be known most warmly by my grandchildren rather than wanting to be known for something I did in business."

His sights have changed. What's most important to Paul is no longer his work. What he describes as a kind of obsolescent relationship to his professional expertise has freed him to be more relevant and present in other areas of his life.

Acting like machines

When it comes to deploying human expertise at scale through automation, we might ask ourselves:

- What is being optimized?

- What are the personal and social costs?

Doctor J.

Dr. J is finishing his OBGYN residency. We asked him about the impact of technology on his work. While he couldn't imagine that a mother would trust a robot to deliver a baby, he did know of colleagues whose fields of medicine are increasingly being automated. He specifically mentioned radiology, oncology and certain surgical procedures.

He also shared that, although the OBGYN field may not be directly impacted by robots and other high-tech machines, his day-to-day work is.

Dr. J describes being tethered to a tablet while seeing patients instead of spending meaningful time with people who need his care. The tablet is connected to insurance companies and billing codes, which then dictate what he and the hospital can bill and, ultimately, the treatments offered and how personalized the appointment will be.

As a professional who prides himself in a more "humanistic" approach to patient care, Dr. J is willing to sacrifice "time efficiency, maximum capacity, volume, volume, volume" and "becoming a machine," even when it means less billables.
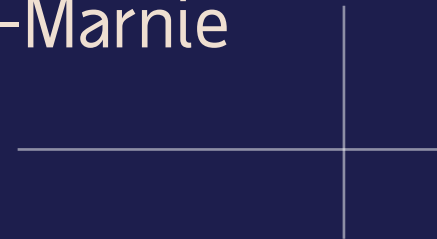
It's an ongoing balancing act between insurance codes, hospital policy, billing, and the patient-practitioner relationship. Instead of being completely at the mercy of systems — technological and institutional — Dr. J is pushing back by reasserting himself as a "thinking, feeling person."

And he told us he is not alone. Social media has provided the opportunity to build communities for doctors like him to challenge being made to "act like machines." He is hopeful that, the more people give voice to their experiences working in healthcare, the more pressure will be added to the system to change.

For Dr. J, human connection is essential to practicing medicine.

"[A] very senior leader, part of the company, asked me how much of this [empathy-based] methodology could we automate? And I was like, 'None of it!'"

—Marnie

Athena

Athena's experience of getting lost in the "endless loop" of a system designed to "promote" honest employee feedback is just one example of the potential for automation to create disconnects.

The corporate values encourage employees to "do the right thing" and "be human, be kind." But during the height of the pandemic and with no members coming to the workspace, Athena asked to work from home one day a week to care for her three young children. Her employer said no. Then she was invited to share her feedback. She got lost in an automated feedback loop.

From the earliest days of working for this company, Athena was told that she mattered, that the company culture fully supported human connection and that her thoughts were valued. But when she tried to offer those thoughts, there were no humans to receive them. With no way to escape the endless interface runaround, Athena left feeling deeply disrespected and demoralized.
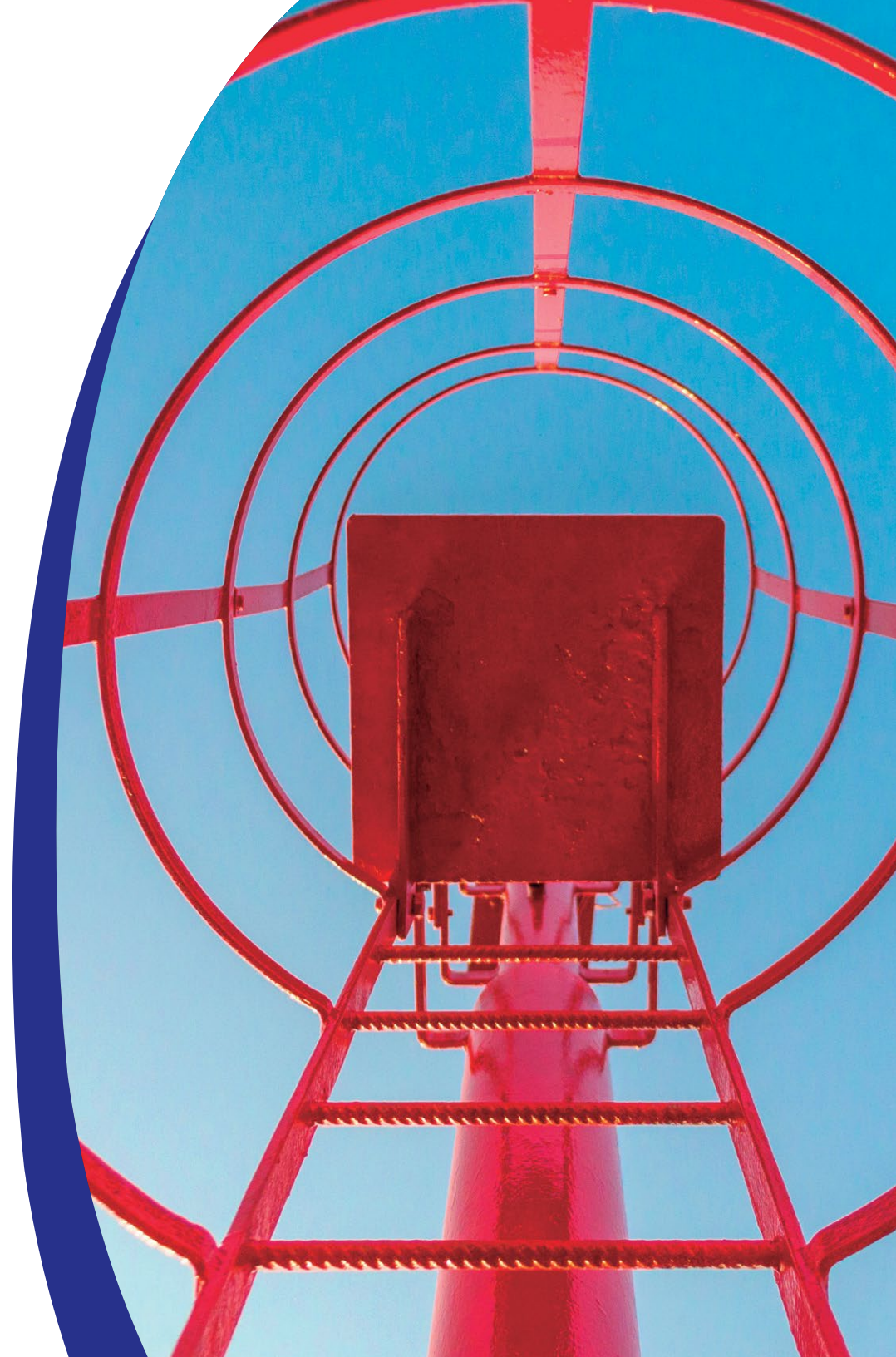
" Please refer to our connect page, which is found here, and it's a little link, and you click on it, and it tells you the same BS that you've been sent an email about. And I was just like, 'Nobody's gonna hear me out on this.'"

Self-platforming

The exponential growth of digital technologies supporting creators as producers is significant.

For those relying on social media as engagement and selling channels, the question of how to present yourself in the digital world is essential.

For some, it's a deep dive into new forms of technology and relationships, while for others, it feels like being thrown off the deep end.

Curated self-exposure is part of many people's work, along with the posts, likes, followers, views, customers, haters and fans that come with it. We will continue to explore performance of self and a set of work practices in upcoming research.

For this inaugural research on work and identity, we spoke to several small-business owners who use social media as the primary channels to showcase their wares and drive sales. For some, it's magic. For others, it's a game. And still, others view social media as a necessary evil.

Ariana

Ariana uses social media to bring attention to her art. Although she does make the effort to create posts instead of simply saying, "It's all on my website," she does it halfheartedly. Not quite 30, she feels that she isn't up to speed on all the techniques people use to generate greater engagement.

For Ariana, her art and the ways engagement is created must be aligned. Otherwise, she won't do them, even if they would help the overall performance of her platform.

" Overwhelmingly, I think self-platforming is something that I'm always gonna have to work on. It's never gonna be as strong as other things that I have been cultivating. It's less of my comfort zone, for sure."

Jayne

Jayne is trying to let go of her longing for the career she once had in television while working hard to build a presence on social media. She describes missing the predictability and routine of a broadcaster; she always knew what she needed to do next. And she was good at it. Now, she's confronted by constant multitasking between business administration, webcasting, promotions and business development. At times, she simply doesn't know what to do next, which she finds overwhelming and daunting.

Up until her late 30s, Jayne's career path was reasonably linear as she built a career in broadcasting. She started in a smaller market and focused on moving into progressively larger ones. Through dedication and hard work, she achieved what she had always wanted to be — a known television news personality with a national following.

But age, especially for women, was an important factor in her line of work. Eventually, she was laid off from her company.

Now, in her early 40s she's trying to use her skills reporting live to create a profitable online presence as a multimedia host.

She still is not sure what to say when someone asks, "What do you do?" In the past, she had a clear sense of her professional identity. She had a title with status and was working for an organization with standing. It was easy to say, "I'm a news anchor." Now, with so many different roles, she doesn't know how to describe her work and role. She's trying to figure it out as she goes and, in the process, find identities — work and personal — she can feel proud of.

> **"** You asked what I miss about TV. And aside from the actual act of doing it, I miss being in a studio … that workplace camaraderie, interactions with other people. I mean, it's nice that I have more control. But it's just a lot more work, a lot more brain power, just a lot more balls to juggle."

Georgina

In contrast to Jayne, who is grappling with her feelings around professional identity and relevance, Georgina is an artist who makes jewelry and sells it online. She feels liberated by the digital opportunities available to her because it gives her the freedom to make her own choices.

"I feel like I'm really grateful to be in a position right now where my career, the way that I make my living, is my dream situation. I just make stuff, and people purchase it from me. I can make a living in my house, which feels really kind of magical."

Georgina operates at a scale where she feels most comfortable. Her specialty is making one-of-a-kind, handcrafted jewelry. She also curates historical period clothing collections for sale. She has a robust and growing online following and still can't believe how "miraculous [it is] that I can make six grand in two minutes."

Georgina celebrates the freedom that digital platforms afford her to do what she loves and reach many people who would not otherwise see her work.

Georgina's experience selling online is different than Jayne's, partly because Georgina is selling things she has made, while Jayne is selling her skills. For Jayne, no matter how hard she works at building her online personal brand, she's yet to find the sense of elevated professional identity she previously enjoyed.

Georgina cares more about making a life with her partner, a cobbler. They both love their crafts and are thrilled to be able to make a living doing work that is meaningful for them. Being able to reach their customers online makes living their dreams possible.

Others see social media and other digital platforms as opportunities to be discovered and enjoyed by people who are interested in what they are doing. It's more about using a new tool effectively than trying to build a new identity.

Insights to consider

Technology changes faster than people do.

While the goal of most technology is to make things easier and better for people, the relentless focus on efficiency and productivity in techology needs to account for the people who use it. In the rush to create new tools that count, sort, categorize and rank, it's important to think about the people impacted.

Patients don't care about insurance codes. Passengers who use ride-sharing just want to feel safe and get to where they need to go. Even people who have worked in technology for years are rethinking whether they want to keep up with all the changes or spend more time connecting with the people they love.

People are not machines, and computers aren't sentient.

The fundamental things that make people happy are uniquely human and involve freedom, autonomy, relationships, learning and connection with other living things.

We will never automate empathy. But that doesn't mean that empathy, compassion, kindness and human connection are not essential to humans and how they interact with technology.

Conversation starters

Technology and humans

- What is it like to use the technology we ask people to use at work?

- How often does the technology change, and how are the users and work affected?

- Who has control over how technology impacts the work? What aspects of our products and services are handled solely by technology?

- Do we trust technology over humans? Why and under what circumstances does that make sense?

- When is it essential for humans to be involved and make decisions?

Humans and work

- Have we considered how to make a more human-friendly workplace? Or have we been focused on allocating space and resources in the most effective manner?

- What is the difference between these approaches for the work we do here?

- Do we understand where our employees are experiencing stress or difficulty?

- What is causing it?

- Can we make a difference in the areas where people are feeling stressed? What would that look like?

- What is success here, and how do we measure it?

- Are we measuring what matters?

- What are the trade-offs?

- How do our policies and communications convey our expectations about the role of work in people's lives?

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Team WIRC credits

A collaboration

- Aileen Carper — External Communications

- Brett Daniel — Content Marketing, Editorial

- Darlene Leider — Contracts

- Hal Philips — Videography

- Heather Bussing — Editorial

- Ingrid Urquijo Bayter — Multimedia Consultant

- Jill Taksey — Content Marketing

- Martha Bird — Research

- Nick Manning — Graphic Design

- Shelley Sather — Research

- Susan Lodge — Content Marketing, Editorial

Methodology

Recruitment

Our participant collaborators were recruited using both online classifieds and a dedicated research platform connecting researchers with business professionals across industries.

Our 24 participants represent a range of ages, occupations, ethnicities and genders.

All reside in the U.S. All are currently working.

Research

Fieldwork consisted of three-to-four-hour in-depth interviews exploring how people think and feel about work. Just under half were conducted in person across four U.S. geographies, with the remainder taking place through video conferencing.

As is consistent with our anthropologically informed qualitative research methodology, we focused on developing questions intended to encourage spontaneous and open conversation and the sharing of stories.

Analysis

- Multiple workshops consisting of affinity mapping and data sorting exercises at regular intervals held over the three-month period of active research

- Team review of 90-plus hours of research video in combination with coding and pattern mapping to surface the themes with the strongest signal

- Third-party literature review and trends monitoring are ongoing

WIRC
Worker Identity
Research
Collaboration