



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.

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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 reevaluating 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-ability. 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?