

The Social Workplace

A Compendium

Edited by Brent Orrell

A M E R I C A N E N T E R P R I S E I N S T I T U T E

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Introduction

In an era marked by a decline in social capital across American institutions, the workplace has become a crucial arena for fostering social connections. Through their careers, Americans not only satisfy their economic needs but also find personal fulfillment, build social networks, and seek—and often discover—a sense of meaning and purpose that family, community, and religion once filled. Because of the workplace’s increasingly dominant role in social development and expression, AEI sponsored “The Social Worker,” a three-volume survey-report series on worker attitudes that explores the interconnectedness between economic and noneconomic aspects of work and its role in meeting workers’ material and social-emotional needs.

This report is a compendium of survey data and analysis developed as part of a multiyear project looking at the social dimension of work and the economic, psychological, and emotional experience of American workers. Each of the reports is available online and combined here for ease of access.

Volume I addresses the social dimensions of the workplace at the individual level and its pivotal role in building connections and strengthening social capital. This exploration highlights how college-educated women increasingly drive, benefit from, and bear the consequences of the strong tilt toward social-emotional skills in the workplace. Women, in our telling, are the new careerists; they are the most likely to invest in their workplaces in sharp distinction to non-college-educated men, who engage the least—revealing how the cultural and political divisions between college-educated women and non-college-educated men play out in the workplace. This volume also discusses the barriers to healthy workplace socialization

such as remote work, burnout, and imposter syndrome, which can undermine the benefits of social capital.

Volume II expands on the first volume’s findings, addressing workplace trends by industry and reviewing how workers think about financial issues—such as pay and benefits—along with nonfinancial matters such as workplace mentoring and development, job fit, flexibility, and the role of meaning and purpose at work. Education level is the most salient feature when it comes to individual levels of social integration and satisfaction at work, often heightening some of the gender and education divides identified in Volume I.

Volume III seeks to blend our quantitative survey findings with the “voices” of young American workers gleaned through qualitative interviews with survey participants. Our objective was to look beyond the numbers to how Americans understand and explain themselves on issues relating to education, jobs, careers, and economics. We found that the overarching emphasis workers place on job flexibility expresses itself in many different ways depending on workers’ needs and life circumstances. Interviewee responses show how education, job satisfaction, and economic-security issues work together in determining whether work is a positive, mission-oriented experience or a day-to-day struggle. The interviews also show that weak social supports outside of work—a shortage of friends, spouses, or families—tend to exacerbate economic worries.

These volumes collectively provide a nuanced understanding of the workplace’s evolving role in American life, emphasizing the importance of material and social aspects of work in fostering a dignified and connected society.

The Social Workplace

Social Capital, Human Dignity, and Work in America

Brent Orrell, Daniel A. Cox, and Jessie Wall

Work, more often than not, is the center of life for Americans in a way that sometimes mystifies workers in other developed countries. According to Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development data, Americans work on average hundreds of hours more than their European counterparts do.¹ On top of that, close to one in four US workers do not take paid vacation or paid holidays.² American parents also take less family leave after the birth or adoption of a child.³ But what do Americans expect *from* work, are they getting it, and how do they prioritize the economic aspects of jobs relative to other types of personal and social benefits work provides?

This is the first of three reports that will examine these questions. In this report, we explore the social dimension of work life and the role it plays in building human connections and strengthening social capital. The second report will explore the relationship between strictly economic considerations such as pay and benefits and the noneconomic needs that work helps meet. The third report will be based on in-depth interviews with survey participants examining how women and men think differently about work, what they value in their jobs, and how they approach the social aspects of work life and culture.

Work as a Social Behavior

The premise of these reports is that work's primary function is not limited to purely economic factors. Rather, work and economic exchange are part of the broader human propensity for social exchange and healthy economies. Likewise, a healthy economy depends on healthy societies.

From kids trading baseball cards to multibillion-dollar-leveraged buyouts, economic exchange is also social exchange, a product of our tendency to work together as a matter of survival *and* companionship. The "invisible hand" of the market is, in reality, made up of countless actual hands acting out of our innate tendency to "truck, barter, and exchange" with one another. The social nature of economic exchange is the hidden-in-plain-sight aspect of work. Adam Smith likens work to family but in a commercial form, leading "colleagues in office, partners in trade, [to] call one another brother [or sister!]; and frequently feel towards one another as if they really were so."⁴

One study shows that social capital in the workplace explains almost 30 percent in variation in job satisfaction.⁵ Workplace social connections are shown to not only increase job performance but reduce mental health issues such as depression.⁶ Likewise, when the social workplace is less engaging and workers are less engaged, they also suffer in other domains of life.

Over the past two decades, American social and civic life has been on an undeniable downward trajectory.⁷ Americans are participating in social activities less often than they once did. They spend less time socializing with their neighbors, many of whom are now strangers, and devote less time to traditional institutions. Religious attendance, once a mainstay of American social and community life, has collapsed in many parts of the country.

In our June 2022 American Perspectives Survey, regular social and civic participation is rare across a range of different activities. Close to one in three (29 percent) Americans report attending religious services at least once a month. Fewer than one in five (18 percent) Americans say they participate in a prayer or religious study group at least once a month. Thirteen percent of Americans say they regularly—at least once or twice a month—participate in a sports league or workout group. An identical number (13 percent) report volunteering in their community this often; roughly half (47 percent) of Americans say they never do this. Approximately one in five (18 percent) Americans regularly attend a hobby or activity group, such as gardening or a book club.

The decline in civic and associational life has been well-documented. Robert Putnam identified the civic slide more than two decades ago, focusing on America's social decline extending beyond bowling leagues and social clubs.⁸ American social circles are contracting rapidly. Americans—particularly men—have fewer close friends than they did a few decades earlier.

But as traditional ways of gathering have fallen out of favor, few replacements have been established to meet the need. Online social networks have been shown to be poor substitutes for regular in-person contact, and key “third places” such as coffee shops, bars, and public parks, while serving important social functions, are limited in their ability to create community and foster connection.⁹

While social capital at work is both obvious and hidden in plain sight, it is also often taken for granted. When COVID-19 hit, six in 10 Americans lost touch with friends.¹⁰ When workplaces went remote, paychecks and workplace social networks were harmed. Workplaces top any other place of social capital generation including places of worship, schools, and neighborhoods, with more than half of Americans reporting that they have made a close friend through their workplace or a spouse's or partner's workplace.

COVID-19 has rapidly accelerated a host of other workforce trends that are stressing workers and employers. Labor shortages that had been somewhere in the distance before the pandemic are now fully present, driven by early

retirements and shifts in market demand. High levels of people quitting their jobs, called the Great Resignation, have driven home the point that workers believe greener pastures await them elsewhere.¹¹ Other workers may have dialed back their effort or reduced the hours they spend working, a phenomenon called “quiet quitting.”¹² Some of workplace dissatisfaction is purely monetary, but a lot of it stems from dissatisfaction with workplace relationships or the lack of them.

Overview of Findings

To understand better the social nature of the American workplace, we surveyed 5,037 American adults in June 2022. We asked them about workplace friendships, relationships with supervisors, workplace social capital investments, and feelings of satisfaction, appreciation, and loneliness. The answers to these questions help highlight and clarify work as a *social* environment and activity and what that environment and activity mean for workers, employers, and managers.

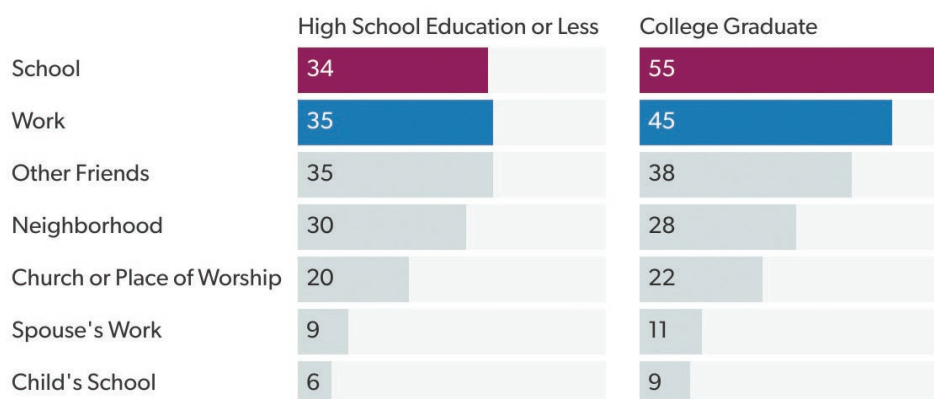
Our data suggest the workplace is an important generator of social capital, with spillover effects for personal, family, and community life. More than half of Americans have met a close friend through their work or a spouse's work, and those who have strong relationships at work tend to have strong social connections with their family and people in their community. However, not everyone contributes to or benefits from workplace social capital equally, with disparities arising along gender and educational lines. College-educated women and men with no college education represent the positive and negative poles of workplace social capital.

These findings mirror recent research that has identified a growing social disparity in the lives of Americans with and without a college degree. On nearly every metric, the college-educated are reporting more sustained engagement across a wide variety of social outlets. As a previous AEI report said, “College graduates live increasingly different lives than those without a college degree. They are more socially connected, civically engaged, and active in their communities than those without a degree.”¹³ It seems this disparity exists on the job as well.

Educational disparities are also associated with different outcomes in social capital development between workers and supervisors. College-educated workers are most able to take advantage of rich networks of relationships to access opportunities on the job, from mentoring to skill building to personal support.

Figure 1. College-Educated Americans Make More Close Friends at Work and School

Percentage of respondents who have met close friends at the following places . . .



Note: Survey of US adults (N = 5,037).

Source: American Perspectives Survey, June 2022.

Americans with close workplace friends are generally more satisfied with their job, more often feel engaged and excited about their work, and are less likely to be looking for new career opportunities. They are also more invested in and satisfied with their community *outside* of work. Where social capital at work is missing, which is the case especially for noncollege-educated men, loneliness and dissatisfaction prevail.

However, increasing investments at work also appear to be associated with a preoccupation with work that can become “workism.” The college-educated population, and women in particular, reap benefits from being the social capital catalysts, but they also report increased anxiety, stress, and dependence on work for personal identity. The close of this report discusses barriers to social capital development in the workplace, including imposter syndrome, crude or insensitive humor, code-switching, workplace tenure, and remote work.

Social Capital in the Workplace

Given the amount of time Americans spend on the job, it is perhaps unsurprising that the workplace occupies a central place in forming social relationships. More than half of Americans report that they have made a close friend through their workplace (42 percent) or a spouse’s or partner’s workplace (10 percent). Meanwhile, 44 percent of Americans report making a close friend at school. Three in 10 (30 percent) Americans report that they have

become close friends with a neighbor. Fewer Americans report making a close friend at their place of worship (21 percent), through clubs or social organizations they belong to (17 percent), their children’s school (8 percent), or online (6 percent).

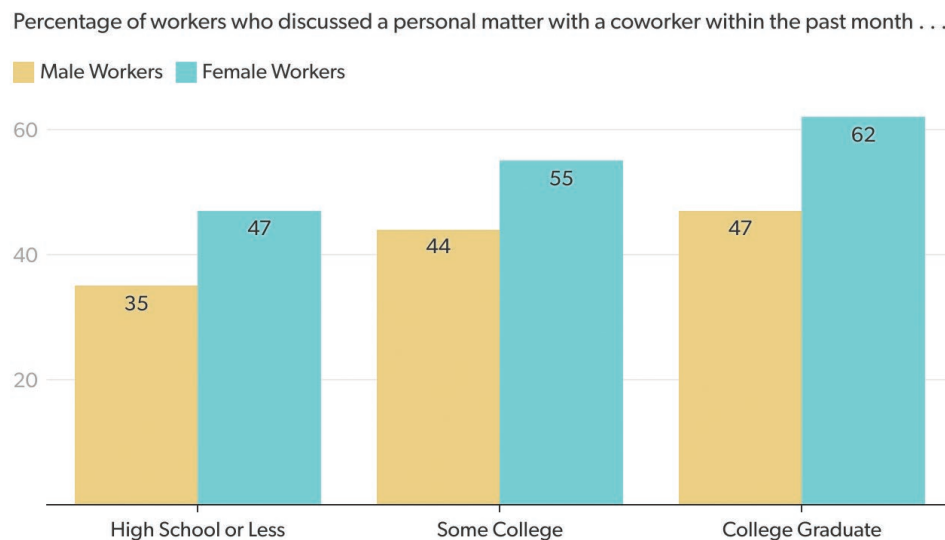
There are notable differences in the places Americans make close friends. College-educated Americans are much more likely than those without a degree to have fostered a close friendship in their workplace (45 percent vs. 35 percent, respectively). (See Figure 1.)

The only places that rival work as a potential source of friendship are postsecondary education institutions. College is an important place Americans make close friends. A majority (55 percent) of college-educated Americans say they first met at least one of their close friends at school, compared to only 34 percent of Americans without a college degree. But this benefit is conferred only to the minority (40 percent) of Americans who attend a four-year college or university.¹⁴

Workplace Friendships and Socializing

Social engagement is a key feature of American work. Most workers report having friends at their places of employment. One in four (26 percent) workers say they have at least one “close friend” at work, while more than half (52 percent) report having friends where they work even if none of them are close friends. Only 15 percent of workers say they are not friends with anyone they work

Figure 2. College-Educated Female Workers Are More Likely to Discuss Personal Issues with Coworkers



Note: "Some College" represents workers with some college education or an associate degree. Survey of US adults (N = 5,037).
Source: American Perspectives Survey, June 2022.

with. Six percent of workers report having no colleagues or coworkers.

Regularly socializing with colleagues outside the workplace is less common. Just over one-quarter (27 percent) of workers report that they see coworkers outside of work at least once a month. Eighteen percent say they participate in social activities with coworkers a few times a year. More than half (54 percent) of American workers say they seldom or never socialize with the people they work with outside working hours.

People with more years of formal education are most likely to invest in, build, and benefit from socializing with colleagues outside of work. More than half of workers with a postgraduate degree (54 percent) say they socialize with their colleagues at least a few times a year. Only 38 percent of workers without a college education say the same.

College-educated women are the most invested in socializing with coworkers. A majority (55 percent) of college-educated women say they socialize with coworkers at least a few times a year or more. By contrast, less than half (47 percent) of college-educated men and only 36 percent of women with a high school degree or less say the same.

When it comes to making close friends at work, college-educated women are also significantly more likely than men to report developing these relationships

on the job. One in five college-educated men have at least one close friend at work, while nearly three in 10 (29 percent) college-educated women are close friends with their coworkers.

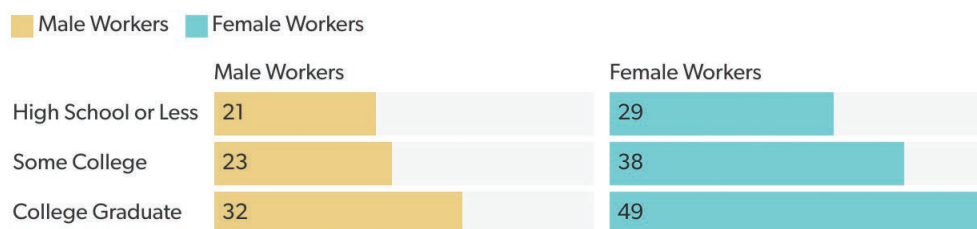
Sharing Personal Issues with Colleagues. Discussing personal issues with coworkers indicates the depth of workplace relationships. Sixty-nine percent of Americans discuss personal issues with coworkers at some point in their careers. Nearly half (48 percent) of current workers report having done so in the past month.

Women are far more likely than men to confide in their coworkers, perhaps due to their greater comfort with discussing personal matters with people they know in general.¹⁵ (See Figure 2.) More than half (55 percent) of women in the workforce said they talked about a personal issue with one of their colleagues in the past month. In contrast, only 41 percent of male workers said they did this.

College-educated workers are also more likely to confide in their coworkers than are those with fewer years of formal education. A majority (54 percent) of workers with a college degree say they have shared a personal issue with a coworker in the past month, compared to 41 percent of workers with a high school education or less. There is a gender gap among college-educated workers when it comes to discussing personal issues with coworkers.

Figure 3. Women Spend More Time Planning Social Activities at Work

Percentage of workers who planned a social event at work in the past 12 months . . .



Note: "Some College" represents workers with some college education or an associate degree. Survey of US adults (N = 5,037).
Source: American Perspectives Survey, June 2022.

More than six in 10 (62 percent) college-educated women and less than half (47 percent) of college-educated men say they have discussed a personal issue with someone at work in the past month.

Women as Social Capital "Catalysts." The higher number of social connections women have in the workplace and the depth of these relationships may be due to women investing more of their time and energy into developing connections at work.

Women dedicate significantly more time and effort to organizing and participating in social activities in the workplace. (See Figure 3.) Overall, about one in three (34 percent) workers say they have helped organize a social activity, such as a birthday, happy hour, or holiday celebration, at work within the past 12 months. But women are more often involved than men are. More than four in 10 (42 percent) female workers say they have helped in the past 12 months. Meanwhile, only one-quarter (25 percent) of men report having helped organize these types of activities in the past 12 months. Fifty-eight percent of men report having never participated in planning or organizing a social activity at their place of work.

College-educated women in particular stand out for their commitment to planning and organizing social activities at work. Nearly half (49 percent) of college-educated women have planned a workplace social event in the past 12 months, compared to 32 percent of college-educated men, 29 percent of noncollege-educated women, and 21 percent of noncollege-educated men.

Trade-Offs in Workplace Sociability. Social planning has obvious costs in terms of time, but what about the rewards? Do workers benefit from their social efforts?

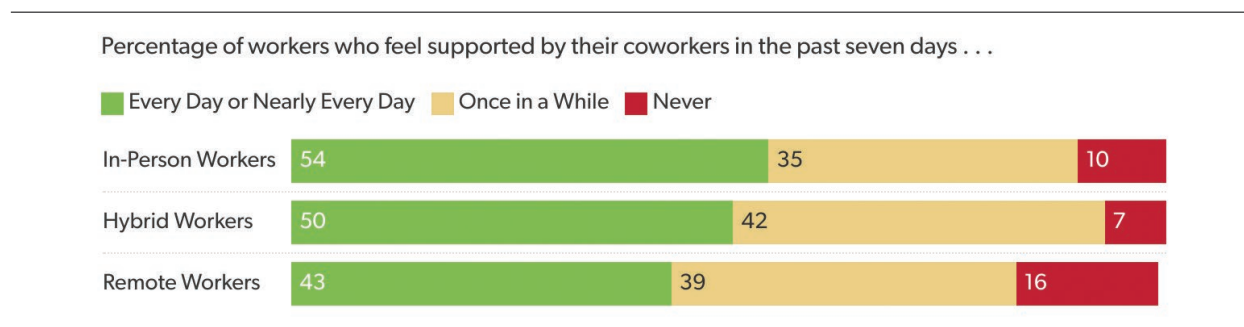
American workers who have helped organize a workplace social event in the past month are much more likely to feel regularly supported by their coworkers than are those who have never done so. Nearly two-thirds (66 percent) of workers who recently helped organize a social event at work say they feel supported by their coworkers every day or almost every day. In contrast, less than half (45 percent) of workers who say they have never contributed to planning a social activity at work feel supported by their colleagues as often.

At the same time, workers who planned workplace social engagements report higher levels of stress than those who did not. Nearly half (47 percent) of workers who have recently helped organize a social event for their colleagues say they have felt stressed out or overwhelmed at work at least a few times in the past week. Among workers who never participate in planning social activities at work, fewer than four in 10 (38 percent) report feeling stressed at work this often.

Coworker Camaraderie. Even if workers do not spend a substantial amount of time socializing with their colleagues outside of normal working hours, most American workers feel like they are part of a team. Eight in 10 American workers say that being part of a team characterizes their work "very well" (38 percent) or "somewhat well" (42 percent). (See Figure 4.)

Most workers also report feeling supported by their coworkers. Roughly three-quarters (76 percent) of workers report that in the past week they have felt supported by their colleagues at least a few times. About half (51 percent) of workers report having this feeling every day or almost every day.

College-educated women are significantly more likely than men to report feeling supported by their colleagues.

Figure 4. Remote Workers Report Less Coworker Support

Note: Figures may not total to 100 percent due to rounding. Survey of US adults (N = 5,037).
Source: American Perspectives Survey, June 2022.

Fifty-seven percent of college-educated women say they feel their colleagues support them every day or nearly every day. Fewer than half (48 percent) of college-educated men say the same.

Notably, fully remote workers are almost as likely as those working full-time in person to say they feel like they are part of a team (75 percent vs. 81 percent). However, remote workers are somewhat less likely to say they feel supported by their colleagues nearly every day or every day (43 percent vs. 54 percent).

Having friends at work increases the likelihood of feeling part of a team at work. Workers who are close friends with their coworkers are much more likely to report that feeling like part of a team describes their workplace experience “very well” (49 percent), compared to 18 percent of those who are not friends with their coworkers.

Bosses, Supervisors, and Mentors

Despite pervasive caricatures of micromanaging, credit-claiming supervisors, workers report feeling reasonably satisfied with their current boss, manager, or supervisor. Six in 10 (60 percent) Americans currently employed in a full-time or part-time position report that they are very or completely satisfied with their relationship with their boss.¹⁶ Thirty percent say they are somewhat satisfied, and fewer than one in 10 (9 percent) are not satisfied with their supervisory relationship.

Most American workers report feeling respected and trusted by their workplace higher-ups as well. Roughly eight in 10 (79 percent) Americans say they often feel trusted by their supervisor or boss, and about six in 10 (61 percent) say that they often feel treated fairly by their boss.

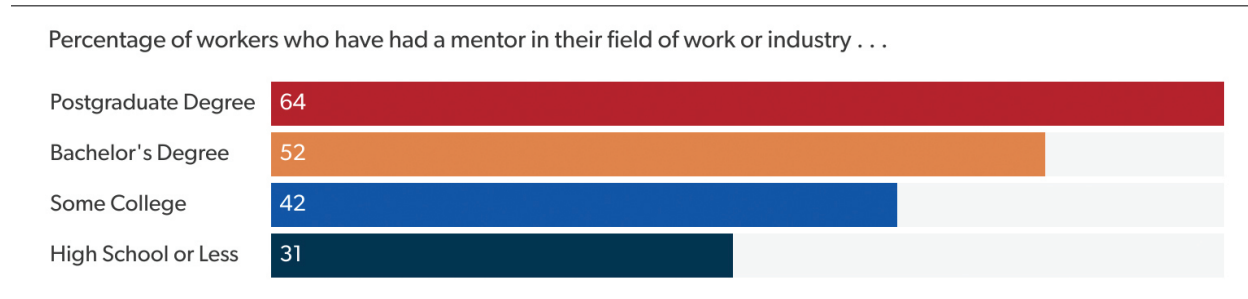
Still, many workers say they do not feel their boss appreciates them, and this feeling is even more common among younger workers. Close to half (48 percent) of workers overall report that they often feel appreciated by their supervisor or boss. Among younger workers (age 18–29), only about four in 10 (41 percent) say they often feel appreciated.

College-educated women are among the most likely workers to regularly feel appreciated by their boss or supervisor. A majority (55 percent) of college-educated women say they often feel appreciated by their boss, compared to 38 percent of men without a college degree, 50 percent of college-educated men, and 48 percent of high school-educated women.

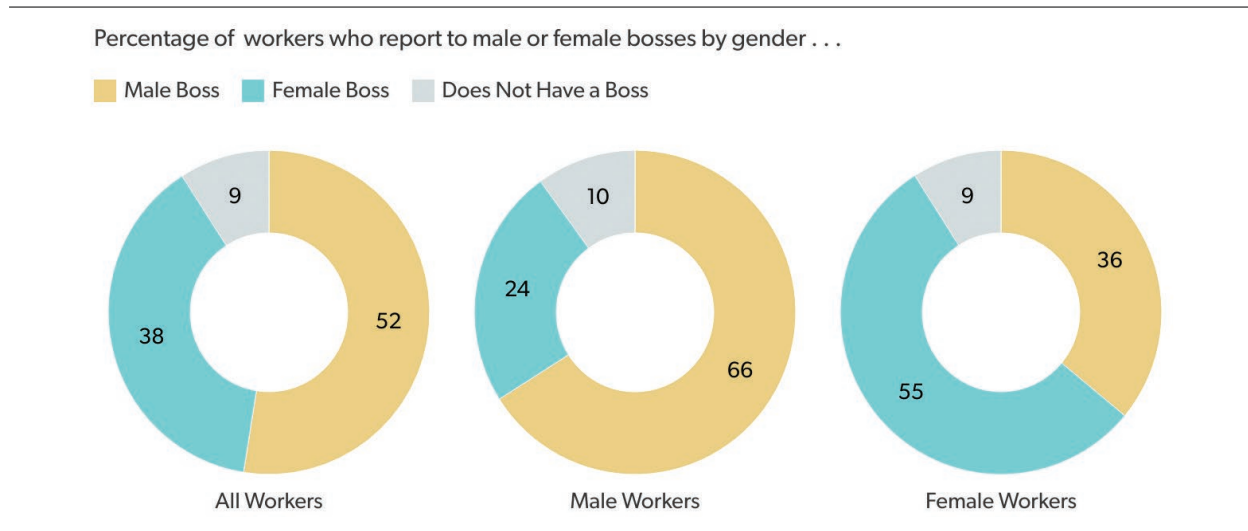
Having a healthy supervisor relationship is important to workplace satisfaction. Seventy percent of workers who report they often feel appreciated by their boss say they are very or completely satisfied with their employment situation. Less than half (48 percent) of those who sometimes feel appreciated say they are satisfied, and only 27 percent of workers who say their boss never expresses appreciation for their work are satisfied.

Mentoring and Career Guidance. Even though Americans are generally satisfied with their immediate supervisor, many workers report they do not receive regular career guidance from them. Roughly half the workers who have an immediate supervisor or boss (53 percent) say they talk with their boss about career goals and opportunities often (19 percent) or occasionally (34 percent). However, close to half (46 percent) of workers say they seldom or never discuss these topics.

When it comes to career guidance and mentoring, there is a massive educational divide. More than six in 10 (62 percent) college graduates report that they check in with their boss or supervisor about their career trajectory

Figure 5. Highly Educated Americans Are More Likely to Be Mentored

Note: "Some College" represents workers with some college education or an associate degree. Survey of US adults (N = 5,037).
Source: American Perspectives Survey, June 2022.

Figure 6. Most American Workers Report to a Boss of the Same Gender

Note: Figures may not total 100 percent due to rounding. Survey of US adults (N = 5,037).
Source: American Perspectives Survey, June 2022.

at least occasionally. In contrast, less than half (44 percent) of American workers without any college education say they discuss these topics with their boss or supervisor at least occasionally.

College-educated workers are also far more likely to have a mentor at work. (See Figure 5.) A majority (57 percent) of college-educated workers report ever having a mentor defined as "someone in your field of work or industry who gave you advice and helped guide you in your job or career." Only 43 percent of workers overall and less than one-third (31 percent) of American workers with a high school education report they have had a mentor at some point in their career or working years.

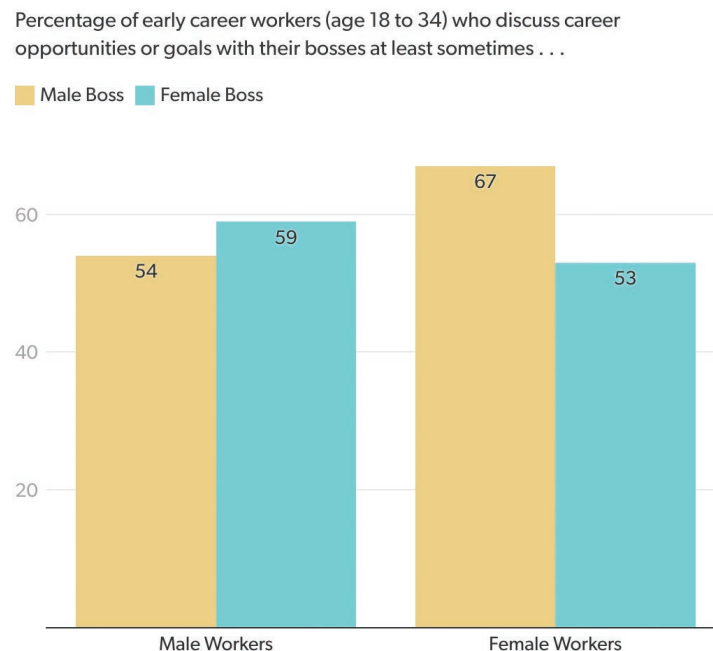
Men and women with a college degree are about equally likely to report having a mentor (56 percent vs. 57 percent, respectively). However, there is a significant gender divide among workers without a four-year

degree. Working men without a college education are 10 percentage points more likely to have a mentor than are women with similar levels of education (36 percent vs. 26 percent).

The Supervisory Gender Divide. Most Americans work for men. American workers are much more likely to report to a man than a woman, which reflects the existing gender divide in managerial positions across most industries and sectors of the economy. More than half (52 percent) of working Americans report that their boss is a man, 38 percent say they report to a woman, and roughly one in 10 (9 percent) report that they do not have a boss or supervisor. (See Figure 6.)

However, most American workers have a boss who is the same gender as they are. Women are more likely to have a female boss, and men similarly are more likely to

Figure 7. Young Women with Male Bosses Discuss Career Goals More Often



Note: Early career (under the age of 34) male workers with female bosses includes 88 respondents.
Source: American Perspectives Survey, June 2022.

have a male boss or supervisor. Two-thirds (66 percent) of men report that they have a male boss, compared to only 36 percent of women. Most women (55 percent) say they have a female boss or supervisor.

Notably, the gender of American bosses and supervisors does not vary much by age, and only modest differences are evident in education. Young women are about as likely as older women to have a female boss, and there are few differences among men reporting to female bosses. College-educated men are more likely than men without any college education to have a female boss (28 percent vs. 18 percent), but education does not appear to make any difference for women.

Does the Boss's Gender Matter? The gender of a boss or immediate supervisor does not appear to have much bearing on the relationship between workers and supervisors. Men who have female supervisors are as likely to report being very or completely satisfied with the relationship as those who have a male boss (60 percent vs. 58 percent, respectively). The same is true for women.

Similarly, for American workers, their boss's gender does not seem to greatly affect the degree to which they feel trusted, treated fairly, and appreciated.

However, when it comes to talking about career opportunities, early career women (age 18 to 34) who report to

men have these conversations more often than do those with female bosses. Two-thirds (67 percent) of early career female workers with a male boss and 53 percent of those with a female boss say they discuss career opportunities or goals at least once in a while. Early career men with a female boss (59 percent) are not significantly more likely to discuss career opportunities than are those with a male boss (54 percent). (See Figure 7.)

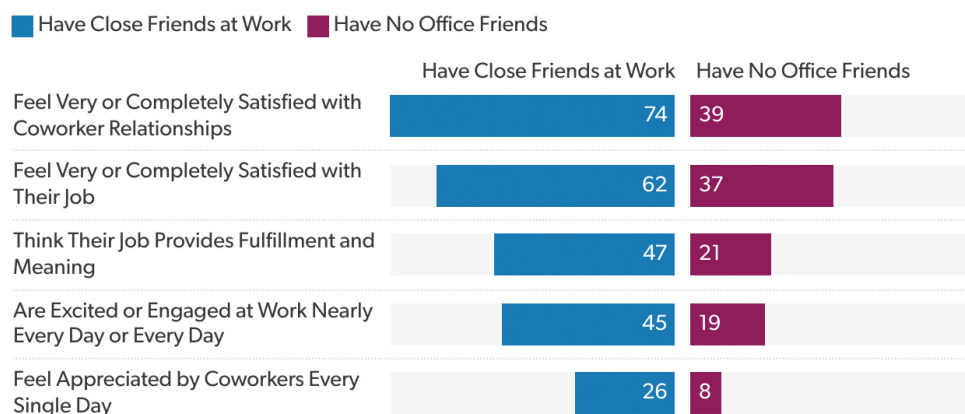
Women with male bosses also stand out when it comes to having the flexibility to attend to personal matters during the workday. Female workers with male bosses are the most likely to say that they often feel that they can take care of personal matters during the workday (53 percent). All other groups are roughly 10 points lower: male workers with male bosses (43 percent), male workers with female bosses (41 percent), and female workers with female bosses (40 percent).

The Benefits of Workplace Social Capital

Past research has shown that having an office friend is important in making work more enjoyable and rewarding, and even more so during the pandemic.¹⁷ Most workers do not have a close friend at work, but many would count at least some of their colleagues as friends,

Figure 8. The Benefits of Workplace Friendships

Percentage of workers with and without close friends at work who report the following . . .



Note: Survey of US adults (N = 5,037).

Source: American Perspectives Survey, June 2022.

and few workers report having no friends in the office. Overall, American workers who have colleagues are satisfied with their coworker relationships, with 61 percent reporting being completely or very satisfied with their relationships with their coworkers. However, this isn't true of everyone. There are benefits to social capital at work, and there are consequences when it is lacking.

American workers who have a close friend at work are generally more satisfied with their workplace relationships. Nearly three-quarters (74 percent) of workers who have a close work friend report being very or completely satisfied with their coworker relationships generally. Among those without a close friend at work, only 39 percent of workers say they are very or completely satisfied with their workplace relationships.

Good relationships at work may also contribute to greater overall job satisfaction. More than six in 10 (62 percent) workers with close office friends say they feel completely or very satisfied with their current job. Fifty-eight percent of workers who have friends at work but no close friends there say the same. But only 37 percent of workers who do not have friends at work say they are satisfied with their work situation.

Americans with close workplace friends also report feeling more connected to their work and valued by their colleagues. Close to half (45 percent) of workers with a close friend say they feel excited or engaged with their work every day or nearly every day. In contrast, only 19 percent of workers who have no office friends say they feel energized by work most every day.

Workers with close friends in the office also find more meaning in their work than do those who do not have friends in the office. Close to half (47 percent) of workers who have a close friend in their workplace say their current job provides a great deal of fulfillment and meaning. Thirty-five percent of workers with some friends in the office say they find a great deal of meaning in what they do, while only 21 percent of those with no close workplace relationships say the same.

Workers who have a close office friend are more likely to have discussed personal issues with a colleague or coworker. Nearly half (49 percent) of workers who have a close connection with a colleague say they have talked about a personal matter with someone at work in the past week. Far fewer workers who have friends at the office but no close friends there (32 percent) and workers without any friends at work (16 percent) have shared personal matters with a coworker or colleague in the past week. (See Figure 8.)

Feelings of appreciation at work also are related to workplace friendships. A majority (56 percent) of workers with a close friend in their workplace say they feel appreciated and valued by the people around them every day or almost every day. Of workers without any friends in the office, only 27 percent report feeling appreciated and valued at work this often.

Not only are Americans with close friends more satisfied with their current employment situation, but they are also less likely to be looking for different opportunities. Having close friendships at work appears to significantly reduce workforce churn. Americans who have close

Figure 9. Postgraduate Degree-Holders Are More Preoccupied with Work



Note: "Some College" represents workers with some college education or an associate degree. Survey of US adults (N = 5,037).
Source: American Perspectives Survey, June 2022.

friends at their place of work are significantly less likely than those without close relationships to be looking for a new position (16 percent vs. 27 percent, respectively).

A lack of social connection at work tends to track closely with greater feelings of loneliness and isolation among American workers. More than one in three (36 percent) workers who do not have any friends at work report feeling lonely at least a few times in the past week. In contrast, workers with at least one close friend feel lonely less often; only 20 percent say they feel lonely at least a few times a week.

Spillover Effects: Benefits of Workplace Relationships Outside Work

Are positive relationships with colleagues and coworkers associated with strong relationships elsewhere? Or does investing at work tend to mean people are less likely to invest in other social areas? Workers who have close relationships with their colleagues tend to have more friends overall, perhaps suggesting a greater propensity for social connections generally.

More than two-thirds (68 percent) of workers with close friends where they work have at least four or more close friends in their lives. In contrast, only 38 percent of those with no friends at all in their workplace have four or more close friendships in general. What's more, workers who report having at least one close friend at the office are more satisfied with their social situation generally. Of those who report that they are close friends with their coworkers, nearly two-thirds (65 percent) are completely or very satisfied with the overall number of friends they have. That number drops to 43 percent for those who are not friends with their coworkers at all.

In short, people who benefit from social capital at work also tend to be benefiting from social capital more

broadly, and people who are socially connected professionally also tend to be socially connected outside of work.

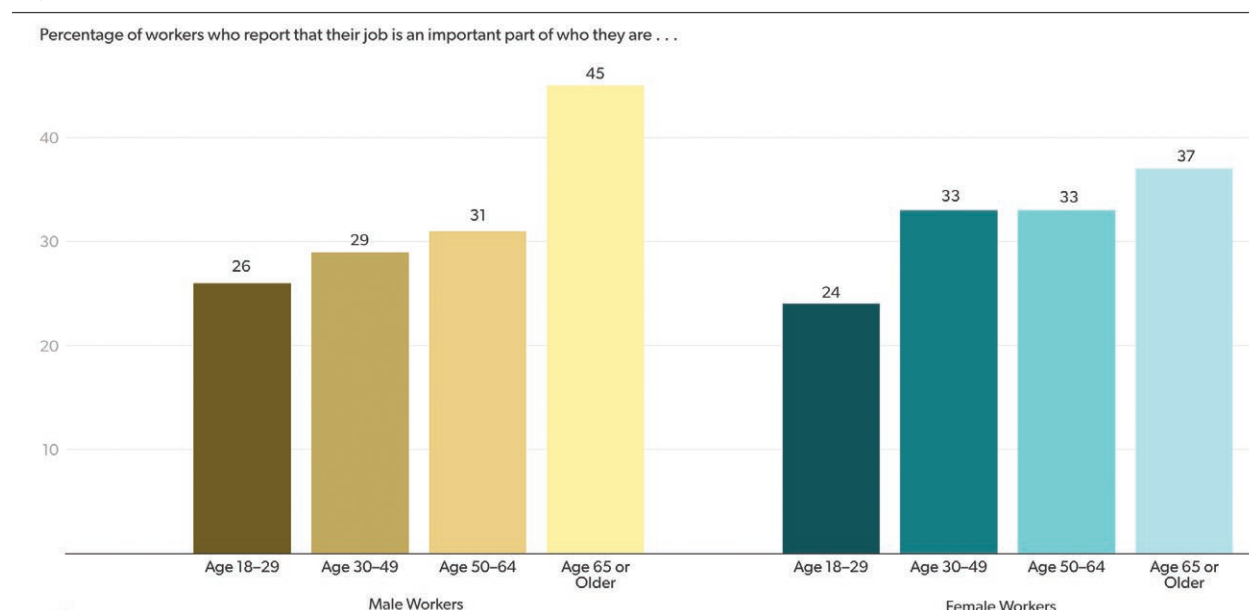
The Downside of Investing in Workplace Social Capital

Although workplace social capital offers significant benefits, there's a potential downside to the workplace becoming the center of American social life and socialization including "workism" and workplace identity overshadowing other aspects of life.

"Workism." Americans work a lot compared to workers in other developed economies. They also think about work even when they aren't working. Sixty percent of Americans say that the phrase "Even when I'm not working I often think about work" describes them either "very well" or "somewhat well." (See Figure 9.)

Americans with higher educational levels tend to think more about work outside the workplace. Almost three-quarters (73 percent) of workers with postgraduate education report that thinking about work outside the workplace describes them at least somewhat well, compared to 60 percent of those with bachelor's degrees, 57 percent of respondents with some college, and 56 percent of respondents with a high school education or less.

Hybrid workers who split their time between remote and in-person work tend to think about work more often. Workers on hybrid schedules disproportionately report that thinking about work outside business hours describes them at least "somewhat well" (72 percent), compared to fully in-person workers (57 percent) and fully remote workers (59 percent).

Figure 10. Workplace Identity Is Most Important for Older Men

Note: Survey of US adults (N = 5,037).

Source: American Perspectives Survey, June 2022.

A preoccupation with work tends to correlate with increased feelings of anxiety. Workers who spend more time thinking about work outside normal business hours report higher levels of anxiety generally. Among workers who say that thinking about their job outside of work describes them very well, 23 percent report being anxious every day or nearly every day. That drops to 9 percent for respondents who report that the statement does not describe them well at all.

Do Our Jobs Define Us? Most workers say their work is an important part of their identity. A strong majority of workers (71 percent) say that what they do for a living is an important part of who they are.

Respondents with postgraduate degrees are most likely to say that their work is important to who they are (80 percent), compared to 68 percent of bachelor's degree-holders, 69 percent of respondents with some college education, and 70 percent of respondents with high school education or less.

Full-time working women are slightly more likely than full-time working men to derive identity from their work (35 percent vs. 29 percent). For men, work becomes a more important aspect of identity as they age. Forty-five percent of working men over age 65 say their work is an important part of who they are, compared to 26 percent of men age 18–29. Women's perspective on work as

part of their identity does not vary as much with age. (See Figure 10.)

Other Barriers to Workplace Social Capital

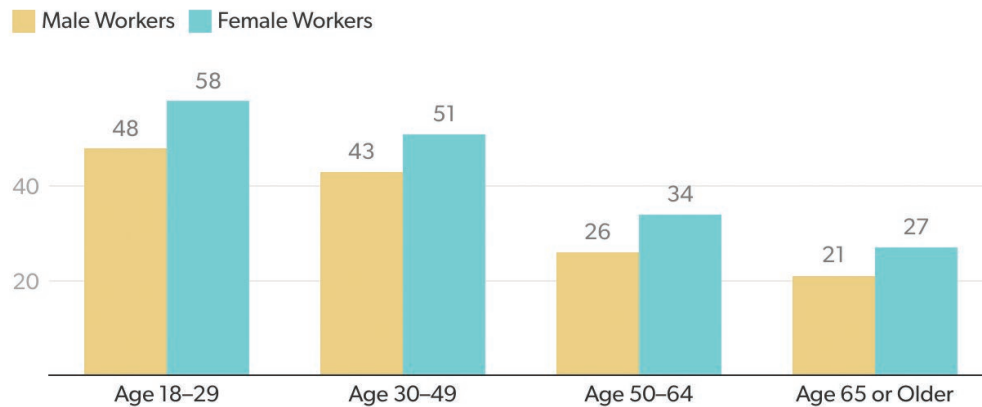
Americans face various barriers to building social capital in the workplace including code-switching, frequent job turnover, and imposter syndrome (i.e., strong, unwarranted feelings of inadequacy on the job).

Code-Switching. The perception that workers need to alter some aspect of their appearance or personality at work is common. More than four in 10 (43 percent) workers say they feel the “need to change certain aspects of who you are in terms of how you look, speak or act” in minor or major ways.

Americans with higher levels of education are substantially more likely to report feeling like they need to alter their self-presentation at work. Nearly half (49 percent) of workers with a college degree say they need to make major or minor changes in how they act, talk, or look when they come to work. In contrast, 37 percent of workers with no college education say the same. College-educated women are most likely to feel the need to attend to their self-presentation in the workplace. More than half (52 percent) of college-educated

Figure 11. Young Women Are Most Likely to Experience Imposter Syndrome

Percentage of workers who reported feeling like they are "not good at their job" at some point in the past seven days . . .



Note: Survey of US adults (N = 5,037).

Source: American Perspectives Survey, June 2022.

women report feeling the need to make minor or major changes to aspects of who they are in their workplaces.

Younger workers (age 18 to 29) are far more likely than older workers to feel the need to make changes to their appearance or presentation. Nearly half of young men (49 percent) and a majority of young women (54 percent) say they have to make major or minor changes. In contrast, older workers are far less likely to feel this way. Among workers age 50–64, fewer than four in 10 women (39 percent) and men (32 percent) say they need to alter aspects of who they are.

While differences between white and black workers who feel the need to make major or minor changes are minimal (44 and 40 percent, respectively), Hispanic workers are the least likely to code-switch at some point (39 percent), and Asian workers are the most likely (54 percent).

Workplace Longevity. Establishing strong ties with coworkers may encourage workers to remain at the same company or employer longer. However, it's equally plausible that workplace relationships take time to develop. Workers who remain at the same employer have more opportunities to build meaningful relationships with their colleagues.

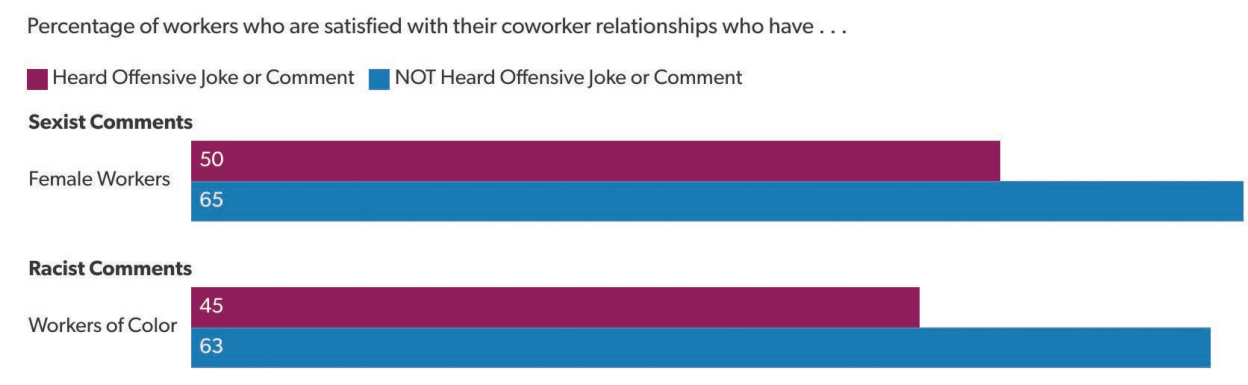
Unsurprisingly, newer workers have fewer close relationships with their colleagues. Only 15 percent of workers who have been with their current employer less than

one year say they have close friends where they work. Workers who have been with the same company for at least 20 years are nearly three times more likely to report having close relationships with their colleagues. Thirty-seven percent of workers who have been with their employer for at least 20 years say they have close friends at work.

Imposter Syndrome. Another hindrance to workplace social capital development is professional doubt, commonly known as imposter syndrome. One in three (33 percent) workers agreed with the statement "I often doubt my professional abilities or achievements." An even higher number of Americans report feeling they are not good at their job at least from time to time. Four in 10 (40 percent) workers say they have felt this way at some point in the past week.

Overall, young women are most likely to experience imposter syndrome. (See Figure 11.) A majority (55 percent) of female workers under age 30 say they feel like they are not good at their jobs at least sometimes. Less than half (46 percent) of young male workers feel this way. Older workers, particularly men, are least likely to feel this way, although some still do. Among workers age 50–64, roughly one-quarter of men (26 percent) and over one-third of women (34 percent) say they felt they are not good at their job at least once or twice in the past seven days.

Figure 12. Workers Who Hear Insensitive Jokes Are Likely Less Satisfied with Their Coworker Relationships



Note: Survey of US adults (N = 5,037).

Source: American Perspectives Survey, June 2022.

Interestingly, the gender gap in feelings of professional self-doubt is almost entirely among white workers. Close to half (46 percent) of white female workers say that at least once or twice in the past week they have felt like they are not good at their job, compared to 37 percent of working white men. The gender gap is modest among black workers and not significant among Hispanic workers.

Sexist and Racist Comments and Jokes in the Workplace. Workplace social atmospheres can also have negative characteristics and features. Ten percent of Americans have heard a coworker make a sexist joke in the past week, and 8 percent have heard a racist joke or comment in the past week.

Hearing offensive jokes or comments tends to correlate with gender. Men are about twice as likely as women to have heard a racially insensitive comment in the past month (18 percent vs. 11 percent) or a sexist comment in the past month (21 percent vs. 13 percent).

For female workers, hearing sexist comments is associated with lower levels of satisfaction with coworker relationships. Just under half of women (49 percent) who report having heard a sexist joke or comment in the past month say they are completely or very satisfied with the relationship they have with their colleagues. In contrast, nearly two-thirds (65 percent) of women who report never having heard a sexist comment at work report feeling completely or very satisfied. Women who report having heard sexist comments recently also report lower overall levels of employment satisfaction than those who never do (45 percent vs. 57 percent).

A similar pattern is evident in the experiences of workers of color. Workers of color—a group that includes respondents who identify as black, Asian, Hispanic, or multi-race—express lower levels of workplace satisfaction when they have heard a racist joke or comment being made in the workplace. Less than half (47 percent) of workers of color who have heard a racist comment say they feel very or completely satisfied with their employment situation, compared to 60 percent of those who never have.

Workplace relationships may be even more affected. Only 45 percent of workers of color who have recently heard a racist comment or joke in the office report being very or completely satisfied with their relationships with their colleagues. In contrast, 63 percent of those who have never heard such comments report feeling satisfied. (See Figure 12.)

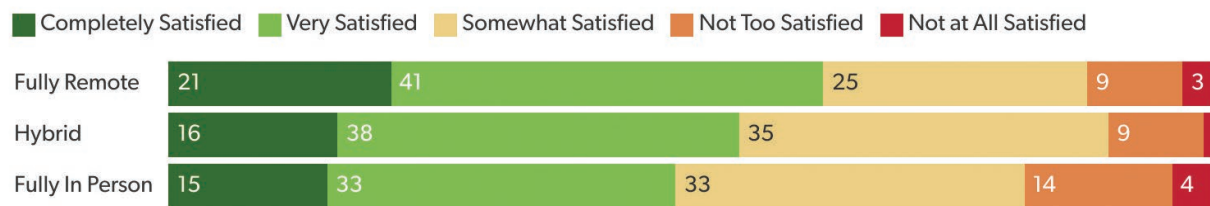
Remote Work and Social Capital Development.

After workers spent significant time working remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic, concerns have arisen about the impact of remote-work social interaction. Over half (52 percent) of remote workers do not work closely with anyone, and 6 percent say this is because they do not have coworkers at all. Hybrid (21 percent) and in-person (11 percent) workers are much less likely to report not working closely with anyone or having no coworkers.

Remote workers are significantly less likely than hybrid and in-person workers to maintain close relationships with coworkers (16 percent compared to 24 percent and 30 percent, respectively) and to have discussed

Figure 13. Remote Workers Are More Satisfied with the Amount of Family Time They Have

Percentage of American workers who report feeling satisfied with the amount of time they spend with family . . .



Note: Figures may not total to 100 percent due to rounding. Survey of US adults (N = 5,037).
Source: American Perspectives Survey, June 2022.

personal issues with colleagues in the past week (22 percent vs. 33 percent and 34 percent, respectively).

At the same time, remote workers seem satisfied with their level of work-related social engagement. There is little difference among in-person (60 percent), hybrid (62 percent), and remote workers (61 percent) in reporting that they are completely or very satisfied in their relationships with their coworkers. Similarly, nearly two-thirds (65 percent) of remote workers, the same amount of hybrid workers, and 67 percent of in-person workers feel content enough in their jobs to not be searching for new work now or considering a job search in the next six months, which is comparable to levels of contentment for hybrid and in-person workers.

Meanwhile, hybrid work appears conducive to developing work-related friendships. At work, hybrid workers are the most likely to spend time with coworkers outside of work (81 percent), compared to remote workers (67 percent) and in-person workers (72 percent).

Remote work also seems to benefit nonwork relationships. Remote workers report feeling very or completely satisfied with the amount of time spent with their family (62 percent), compared to 54 percent of hybrid workers and 48 percent of in-person workers. They are also somewhat more likely to have made a close friend in their neighborhood than are fully in-person workers (28 percent vs. 22 percent).

Perhaps one of the most obvious benefits of remote and hybrid workplace arrangements is that they provide flexibility to take care of personal matters during normal work hours. (See Figure 13.) More than six in 10

(62 percent) remote workers and slightly fewer hybrid workers (57 percent) say they often feel free to take care of a personal matter during the workday. Only 35 percent of full-time in-person workers say they often feel free to address a personal issue during normal work hours.

Conclusion

While it may come as no surprise that Americans develop social capital at work, this perspective on the role of work is often underappreciated when designing workplace environments. With workers and employers preoccupied with questions about salaries, wages, and benefits, many often miss the benefits of healthy workplace social capital and experience the drawbacks associated with its absence, including feelings of alienation and rapid turnover.

These data also suggest that social capital imbalances at work (e.g., variances associated with education and gender) present certain risks to social and economic opportunity and equity. Strong social capital may compound other social and economic advantages for the more advantaged and likewise add to other preexisting disadvantages among those with less social capital.

In our next report in this series, we will explore how workers think about the social nature of their jobs, the importance they place on social engagement on the job, and what role a healthy workplace plays in employment decisions and business productivity.

About the Authors

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The Social Workplace

Social Capital, Human Dignity, and Work in America, Volume II

Daniel A. Cox, Brent Orrell, Kyle Gray, and Jessie Wall

The American workplace is remarkable in its reputation for the demands it places on American workers. As a country, America has enjoyed unrivaled economic success and prosperity, but at a cost non-Americans often have trouble understanding. Americans work more days, work longer hours, and take less time away, paid or unpaid, than most of their peers around the world.¹ Does all of this “hard-core” work actually yield greater satisfaction with and commitment to work, or are we exhausting ourselves at the expense of our own happiness?

Part of answering this question requires delving into the noneconomic returns of work. In this report, we wanted to explore how Americans think about the role work plays in meeting psychological and self-esteem needs—how it enhances self-worth, personal confidence, and a sense of purpose, identity, and making meaningful contributions to the world. Conversely, we also wanted to know whether work is failing to help meet these needs or adding to dissatisfaction and stress, contributing to both workforce turnover and declines in perceived social and emotional well-being.

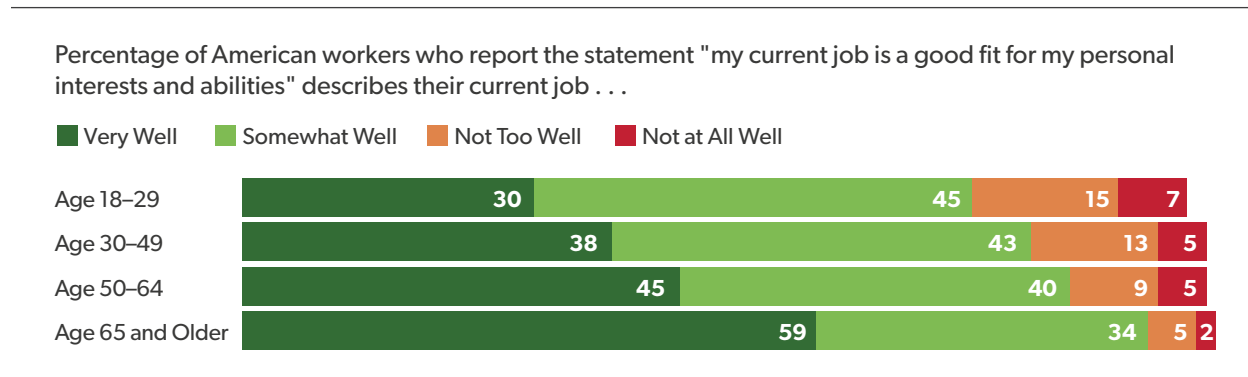
Overview of Findings

This report is based on a survey of 5,037 American adults conducted in June 2022, in which we asked respondents

a series of questions relating to work identity, relationships with peers and superiors, social and professional investment, and the prevalence of satisfaction, anxiety, and stress at work.

Our data reveal just how varied workplace priorities can be depending on educational attainment, age, industry, race, and gender. A majority of Americans receive non-economic benefits through work, but at differing levels. While many take pride in their work, a significant number of people are reluctant to ascribe a major part of their identity to their job. Responses concerning opportunities for professional development and relationships between workers and managers reveal a similar dichotomy: Most Americans agree their bosses appreciate their work, but far fewer report regularly discussing career goals or professional development with their managers.

A consistent through line in this survey is the association between educational attainment and measures of social engagement and job satisfaction across a number of dimensions, including pay, work-sponsored social activities, support and engagement from managers and supervisors, and a sense of personal connection to work. This nexus between education and work-based social support is worth paying close attention to. Those who have a lot of education and skills going into jobs tend to receive more engagement and development, while those who have lower levels of education receive less

Figure 1. Job Fit Increases with Age

Note: Survey of US adults (N = 5,037).

Source: American Perspectives Survey, June 2022.

attention and support, thus reinforcing relative advantages and disadvantages.

At one level, this is easy to understand, an expression of how successes (and failures) can build on one another. At another level, it suggests that work can be yet another way that those who begin with less can struggle to catch up in the workplace regardless of how hard they try. It is also a caution to those who are tempted to devalue college degrees and other forms of postsecondary education that often define access to good jobs and on-the-job advancement opportunities.

Workplace Experiences, Identity, and Fit

The vast majority of American workers feel their current job aligns at least somewhat well with their aptitude and interests. When asked whether their current work is a good fit for their personal interests and abilities, 81 percent of Americans think this describes their situation very (39 percent) or somewhat (42 percent) well.

Workplace fit tends to increase with age (Figure 1). Only 30 percent of younger workers (age 18 to 29) report their work is a good fit, compared to 38 percent of workers age 30 to 49 and 45 percent of workers age 50 to 64. Workers 65 and older (59 percent) are nearly twice as likely as young workers to report high levels of job fit.

Job fit also increases with education level. However, this is concentrated among advanced-degree holders. Workers with a college degree are only somewhat more likely than those with a high school education or less to report that their work is a good fit (40 percent vs. 35 percent). Nearly half (47 percent) of workers with a postgraduate degree say job fit describes their current occupation very well.

Identity. Most Americans feel their job at least somewhat reflects who they are. When asked how well "my work is an important part of who I am" describes them, more than seven in 10 American workers responded that this statement describes them somewhat (41 percent) or very (30 percent) well. More than one in four (27 percent) say this statement does not describe them too or at all well.

Younger workers who may still be searching for the right job or career are less likely to say their work defines them. Retirement-age workers (42 percent) are most likely to report that this statement describes them very well, compared to only one in four (25 percent) young workers.

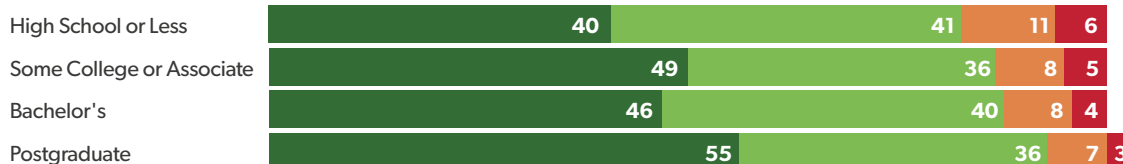
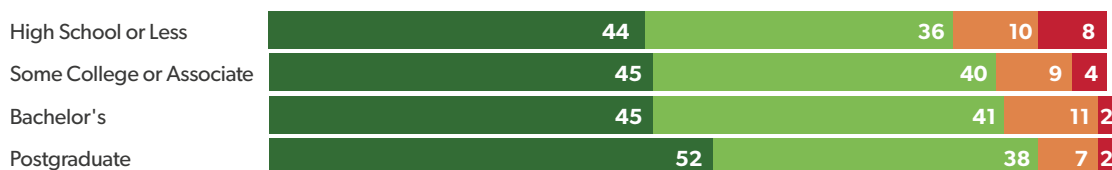
Pride in Work. In general, Americans are proud to tell people about their work. More than eight in 10 (85 percent) say that the statement "I'm generally proud to tell people where I work or what I do for a living" describes them very (46 percent) or somewhat (39 percent) well. Pride in work increases with age. Among workers age 18 to 29, 39 percent report that the statement describes them very well, compared to 45 percent of workers age 30 to 49, 51 percent of workers age 50 to 64, and 61 percent of workers age 65 and older.

Male and female workers overall did not differ in how proud they are of their work, but women of varying education levels differ significantly. Half (50 percent) of female workers with a college degree say being proud about where they work and what they do describes their situation very well, compared to 40 percent of female workers with a high school education or less. On the other hand, college-educated men appear slightly more likely than noncollege-educated men to say they are proud to tell others where they work (48 percent vs. 44 percent). (See Figure 2.)

Figure 2. Pride in Employment Increases with Education

Percentage of American workers who report the statement "I'm generally proud to tell people where I work or what I do for a living" describes their current job . . .

Very Well Somewhat Well Not Too Well Not at All Well

Men**Women**

Note: Survey of US adults (N = 5,037).

Source: American Perspectives Survey, June 2022.

Supervisor Relationships

When asked about positive feedback on their work, 48 percent of American workers said their boss often expresses appreciation for their work. An additional 32 percent said this is true sometimes. A minority of workers say their boss sometimes (13 percent) or never (6 percent) expresses appreciation for their work.

College-educated workers report receiving more positive feedback about their work than do workers with less formal education. More than half (52 percent) of workers with a college degree report that their boss expresses appreciation "often," compared to 42 percent of workers with a high school education or less. College-educated women are slightly, but not significantly, more likely than college-educated men (55 percent vs. 50 percent) to report receiving positive feedback from their boss, but there is a much larger gender gap among those with less formal education. Nearly half (48 percent) of female workers with a high school education or less say their boss often expresses appreciation, compared to only 38 percent of men with a high school education or less.

Being Treated Fairly by Your Boss or Supervisor.

Most Americans say that they receive fair treatment at work. More than six in 10 (61 percent) American workers report that their manager or supervisor often treats them fairly. Twenty-seven percent of workers say they are

treated fairly some of the time. Roughly one in 10 (11 percent) workers say they are seldom (7 percent) or never (4 percent) treated fairly by their supervisor.

College-educated workers appear to have more positive work environments. Two-thirds (67 percent) of workers with a bachelor's degree or higher report that they are "often" treated fairly, compared to 55 percent of workers with a high school education or less.

Overall, 63 percent of women and 60 percent of men report fair treatment at work. This modest gender gap rises to the level of significance only after education is factored in. (See Figure 3.) Seventy percent of college-educated women report they are often treated fairly, compared to 64 percent of college-educated men. In contrast, only about half (52 percent) of male workers with a high school degree or less say they are often treated fairly by their boss or supervisor, while 58 percent of female workers without a degree say the same. The trend inverts for workers with some college or an associate degree: 63 percent of men with some college report fair treatment often, compared to 55 percent of similarly educated women.

Most Workers Say Their Boss Trusts Them. Trusting relationships are conducive to worker development and growth and integral to fostering dignity on the job. Overall, trust levels between American workers and supervisors appear high. Seventy-nine percent of American workers say their boss "often" trusts them to do their job, and

Figure 3. College-Educated Men Are the Most Likely to Feel Treated Well by Their Boss

Percentage of American workers who report the statement "you feel that you are treated fairly by your boss" describes their relationship with their current supervisor . . .

■ Often ■ Sometimes ■ Seldom ■ Never

Men



Women



Note: Survey of US adults (N = 5,037).

Source: American Perspectives Survey, June 2022.

another 14 percent say their boss sometimes trusts them to do a good job. Only 6 percent say they feel their boss or supervisor seldom or never trusts their work.

There are no significant differences in reported feelings of trust among fully remote workers, those working full-time in person, and those working in hybrid workplaces. Among fully remote workers, 82 percent say their boss often trusts them to do their job, compared to 79 percent of in-person and 78 percent of hybrid workers.

Discussing Career Goals. Few workers report regularly discussing their career goals with their boss or supervisor. Fewer than one in five (19 percent) Americans report these discussions happen often. Another 34 percent report that these discussions happen sometimes. Close to half (46 percent) of workers report that they seldom (25 percent) or never (21 percent) have these conversations with their boss.

While there is no variation by gender, there are large differences across educational lines. Forty-four percent of workers with a high school degree or less report discussing career goals with supervisors at least some of the time. In contrast, more than six in 10 (62 percent) workers with a college education report the same.

Investment in Workers: Compensation, Flexibility, and Culture

To understand how companies invest in workers, promote satisfaction, and incentivize retention, we asked about the nature and frequency of company-level investments

in workers over the past 12 months. These include company-organized social activities, celebrations of company achievements, across-the-board salary increases, educational reimbursements, skill development, and work-from-home policies. We supplement this analysis by comparing workers across several major sectors of the economy, which are defined in Table 1.

Company-Organized Social Activities. More than one-third (36 percent) of workers reported that their employer organized a company-sponsored social activity, such as a happy hour, in the past 12 months. There are stark educational divisions in company-organized social outlets. Close to half (49 percent) of workers with at least a college degree report their workplace sponsored a social event in the past 12 months, compared to only about one in four (24 percent) workers with a high school degree or less.

The knowledge economy stands out when it comes to social investment. More than half (51 percent) of the current workers in the knowledge industry report their workplace hosted a company-sponsored social activity at least once in the past 12 months. This is far more often than in any other industry. Fewer than four in 10 workers in intangible services (36 percent), the resources industry (33 percent), government (33 percent), or commercial sales or tangible services (26 percent) report that their place of work hosted a social activity in the past 12 months.

Salary Increases. Even as inflation spiked, most companies did not offer onetime across-the-board salary

Table 1. Industry Breakdown

Resources	Commercial Sales and Tangible Services	Knowledge Economy	Intangible Services	Government
Farming, Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing and Hunting, and Animal Production	Retail, Stores, and Shopping (Including Online Retail)	Information (Including Publishing, Media, Telecom, Internet Search, and Social Networking)	Education and Tutoring	Armed Forces
Mining, Quarrying, and Oil and Gas Extraction	Delivery Services, Warehousing, and Transportation (Including Air, Rail, Water, Truck, and Passenger)	Finance, Banking, and Insurance	Education and Tutoring	Armed Forces
Factory, Manufacturing, and Woodworking	Wholesale Trade	Professional, Scientific, Technical, and Business Services	Health Care (Including Elder Care and Home Health Care)	Utilities, Waste Management, and Remediation Services
Construction and Specialty Contractors (Such as Plumbing and Electrical)	Real Estate and Property Management	Management of Companies and Enterprises	Personal Services (Including Beauty, Pet Care, and Household)	Community and Non-Profit Organizations (Including Religious and Political Organizations)
			Administrative and Support Services (Such as Call Centers, Security, Landscaping, and Janitorial)	
			Child Day Care Services	
			Repairs and Maintenance	
			Accommodation and Food Services	

Source: Authors.

increases or bonuses, although experiences vary significantly across industry type and educational background. Less than half (42 percent) of American workers report their workplace offered an across-the-board salary increase in the past 12 months.

Workers' experiences varied across education levels. Forty-five percent of college-educated workers report having received a salary increase in the past 12 months, compared to 37 percent of workers with a high school degree or less.

The survey showed no pronounced differences across different sectors of the economy except among those working in commercial sales or tangible services. Close to half of government (47 percent), resources (46 percent), and knowledge-economy (45 percent) workers report having received a salary increase in the past 12 months. Forty-two percent of intangible-services workers and 37 percent of workers in commercial sales or tangible services reported the same.

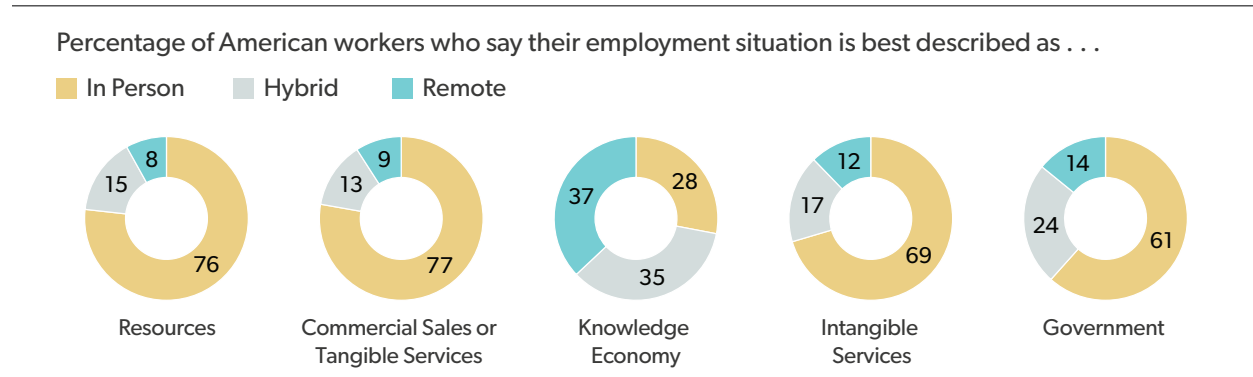
Celebrating Company Achievements. American workers report that marking company achievements and celebrating success are common. About half (51 percent)

of American workers report their company had celebrated an achievement or milestone at least once in the past 12 months.

College-educated workers are far more likely to report that their company or workplace took time to celebrate an achievement or success. More than six in 10 (62 percent) college-educated workers say their workplace did this, compared to only 35 percent of workers with a high school degree or less.

Workers employed in the knowledge economy are also more likely to work at places that celebrate company achievements. Sixty-five percent of workers in the knowledge economy, including workers in finance, real estate, and management, report their company celebrated achievements in the past year. In comparison, 53 percent of government workers, 48 percent of intangible-services workers, 45 percent of commercial-sales or tangible-services workers, and 46 percent of resources-industry workers said the same.

Job Training and Education. Only 30 percent of all workers report that their company provided education or training reimbursement in the past 12 months.

Figure 4. Knowledge Workers Are the Most Likely to Work Remotely

Note: Survey of US adults (N = 5,037).

Source: American Perspectives Survey, June 2022.

Workers with more years of formal education tend to have jobs that provide greater support to pursue advanced training and educational opportunities on the job. Workers holding postgraduate degrees (44 percent) were most likely to receive such benefits, followed by workers with bachelor's degrees (34 percent), workers with some college or associate degrees (31 percent), and finally workers with a high school education or less (19 percent).

Fewer companies and workplaces introduced on-the-job training programs. Less than a quarter (24 percent) of workers report that their employer introduced a formal on-the-job training program for workers in the past 12 months. This share was consistent across all industries.

Educational differences are fairly muted when it comes to job-training opportunities for workers. College graduates are only slightly more likely than those without a degree to report their employer introduced a formal job-training program in the past 12 months (26 percent vs. 21 percent).

Remote Work. One-quarter (25 percent) of all workers report their company offered a permanent, flexible work-from-home schedule. Workers' experiences with remote-work opportunities varied considerably across industry type and education level.

Knowledge-economy businesses were most likely to offer flexible or remote-work arrangements (Figure 4). Fifty percent of knowledge-economy workers were offered a flexible remote-work policy, compared to 28 percent of government workers, 18 percent of resource-industry workers, 17 percent of services-industry workers, and 13 percent of commercial-sales or tangible-services workers.

Perhaps reflecting the divergence between service-oriented jobs and knowledge or creative work, there was a significant educational disparity in remote-work opportunities. Thirty-seven percent of workers with a college degree said their place of work offers flexible work-from-home policies, compared to 12 percent of workers with a high school education or less.

Workers' Values and Priorities

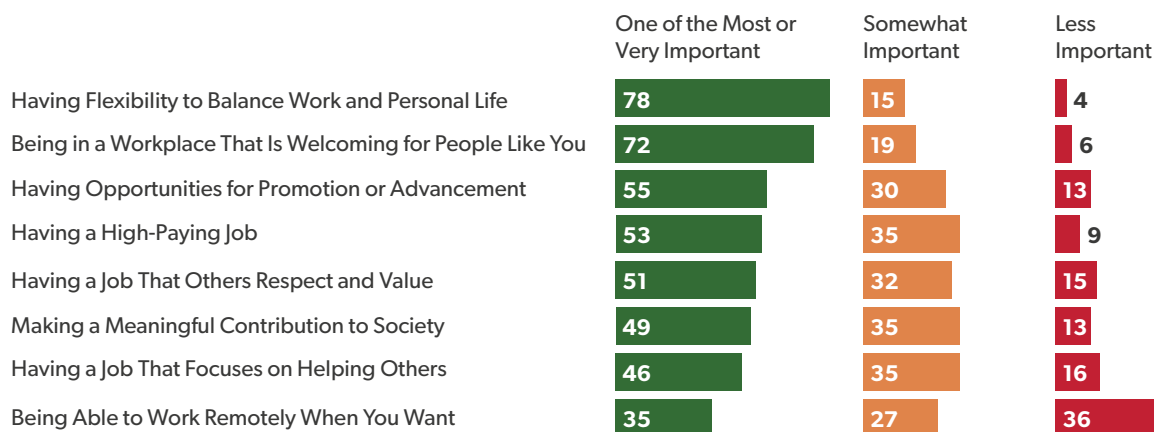
There is nothing Americans value more in their job or career than flexibility (Figure 5). Nearly eight in 10 (78 percent) workers say that flexibility is the most important or very important to them. More than half (53 percent) of workers say having a high-paying job is the most important or a very important priority. Similarly, 55 percent say that opportunities for advancement are important to them in a job or career.

Roughly half of Americans (51 percent) say that prestige—having a job others respect and value—is at least very important to them. Less than half say that being able to make a meaningful contribution to society (49 percent) or having an opportunity that focuses on helping others (46 percent) is the most important or very important to them. About one-third (35 percent) of Americans say that being able to work remotely is the most important or very important to them.

Work-Life Balance. Achieving work-life balance is the biggest priority for Americans when it comes to their jobs. Seventy-eight percent of American workers respond that work-life balance is one of the most important factors or a very important factor in choosing a job. Fewer than one in

Figure 5. Workers Value Flexibility and Welcoming Workplaces

Percentage of American workers who say the following are personally important when choosing a job



Note: Survey of US adults (N = 5,037).

Source: American Perspectives Survey, June 2022.

five (19 percent) workers report that this is only somewhat or less important.

Early and midcareer workers (82 percent and 83 percent, respectively) are most likely to report that work-life balance is one of the most important or a very important employment consideration. Older workers are less likely to emphasize work-life balance. Among late-career workers (age 50 to 64), 79 percent cited work-life balance as an important factor, while just 68 percent of post-retirement-age workers (age 65 and older) said the same.

Women are slightly more likely to report a preference for work-life balance (80 percent vs. 76 percent) compared to men. This gender gap is present across educational attainment levels.

Unsurprisingly, parents with children under age 18 are more interested in flexibility. Eighty-five percent of parents cite work-life balance as one of the most important or a very important aspect of selecting a job, compared to 77 percent of workers without children. Mothers in particular drive this trend. Nine in 10 (90 percent) mothers say that work-life balance is one of the most important aspects of selecting a job, compared with 78 percent of women without children. The same gap is not evident among men. Men with children are only a bit more likely to value flexibility than are men who do not have children (79 percent vs. 75 percent).

Compensation. When it comes to pay, more than half (53 percent) of American workers say that having a high-paying job is one of the most important factors or a very important factor in choosing where to work. About one-third (35 percent) of workers say this is somewhat important, and just 11 percent say it is less important to them.

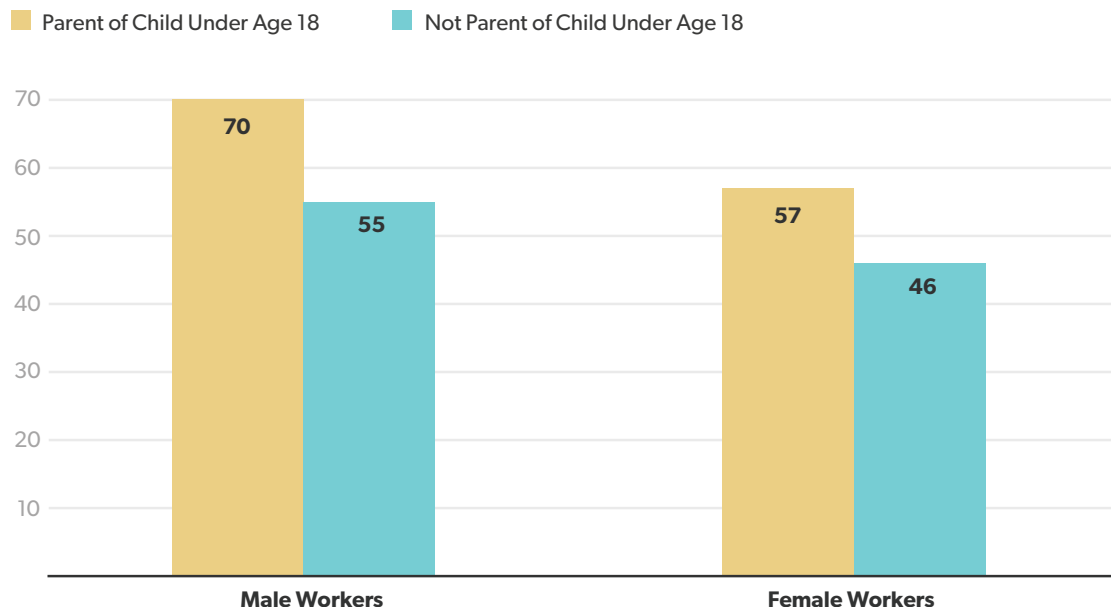
Generally, pay is consistently important in early and midcareer workers and wanes in late career. Among both workers age 18 to 29 and workers age 30 to 49, 62 percent say pay is one of the most important or a very important part of their job selection. In contrast, about half (52 percent) of workers age 50 to 64 and just 37 percent of workers age 65 and older say the same. Older workers are three times more likely to say pay is less important compared to younger workers (16 percent vs. 5 percent).

Men are more likely than women to report that pay is one of the most important factors or a very important factor in choosing a job (59 percent vs. 49 percent). This gender difference holds across age cohorts. Sixty-eight percent of midcareer men say compensation is important to them, compared to 55 percent of midcareer women.

Having a high-paying job appears to be more of a priority for parents, but this trend is concentrated among men (Figure 6). Among men with children under the age of 18, 78 percent say that pay is the most important part of job selection, compared to 55 percent of men without children under age 18. The trend also holds true among

Figure 6. High Pay Is More Important to Parents

Percentage of American workers who say that pay is the most or a very important part of job selection



Note: Survey of US adults (N = 5,037).

Source: American Perspectives Survey, June 2022.

women. Fifty-seven percent of mothers with children under age 18 prioritize pay, compared to 46 percent of women without children.

Views on the importance of pay vary considerably along racial and ethnic lines. Hispanic and black men are the most likely to prioritize pay when considering employment opportunities: 70 percent of Hispanic men and 60 percent of black men say having a high-paying job is one of the most important parts of job selection. Fewer white men (54 percent) say that pay is one of the most important factors in job selection. Black and Hispanic women (64 percent and 65 percent, respectively) are nearly as likely as black and Hispanic men to prioritize pay. White women (40 percent) are the least likely to say pay is one of the most important things.

Promotion and Career Advancement. Opportunities for career advancement are another top consideration in taking a job. More than half (55 percent) of American workers say that promotion potential is one of the most important factors or a very important factor when choosing a job.

Similar to pay, prioritizing opportunities for promotion or advancement relates inversely to age. Sixty percent of workers age 18 to 29 report that promotions are one

of the most important parts or a very important part of choosing a job, compared to 47 percent of workers over the age of 65.

Overall, men (57 percent) are slightly more likely than women (52 percent) to say promotion and advancement are top priorities. This gender gap is most pronounced among workers without a college education (58 percent vs. 49 percent).

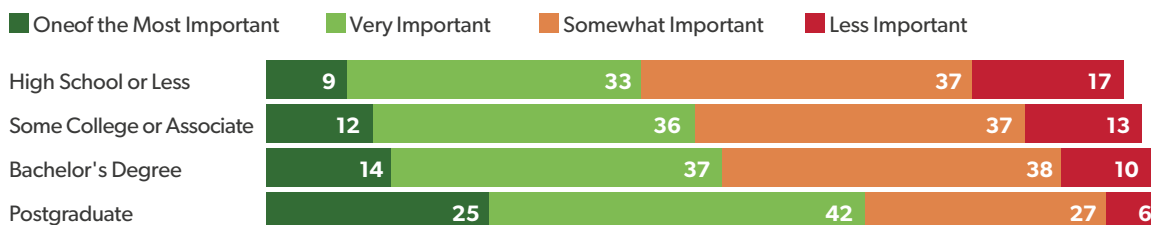
Altruism. For about half of Americans (49 percent), making a meaningful contribution to society is one of the most important or a very important factor in choosing a job. Thirty-five percent say it is somewhat important to them. Roughly one in 10 (13 percent) say it is less important.

The emphasis on contributing to society through work rises with educational attainment (Figure 7). Of workers with a high school degree or less, 42 percent say making a contribution is one of the most important or a very important aspect of job selection. In contrast, 51 percent of workers with a four-year college degree and more than two-thirds (67 percent) of postgraduate-degree holders say this is one of their top considerations.

Women are more likely than men to say that making a societal contribution is an important factor. Fifty-three percent of women say making a meaningful contribution is

Figure 7. Postgraduates Prioritize Societal Contributions in Their Work

Percentage of American workers who say making a meaningful contribution to society is personally important when choosing a job



Note: Survey of US adults (N = 5,037).

Source: American Perspectives Survey, June 2022.

one of the most important factors in choosing a job, 8 percentage points higher than men (45 percent).

Few Americans prioritize altruism in employment more than college-educated women do. Nearly two-thirds (64 percent) of college-educated women say making a contribution to society is an important factor, compared to 51 percent of college-educated men. Among those without a college education, gender differences are more muted (40 percent of men vs. 44 percent of women). This gender gap extends across racial groups as well, though the differences are small.

The importance of making a meaningful contribution varies by industry as well. Two-thirds (66 percent) of government workers say it is very important or one of the most important considerations. Over half (56 percent) of intangible-services workers and less than half of knowledge-economy workers (47 percent), resource-industry workers (43 percent), and commercial-sales and tangible-service workers (41 percent) also say that making a meaningful contribution to society is important to them.

Respect and Status. Working a job that others respect holds less value than America's work-hard culture might suggest. Fifty-one percent of American workers say that having a job others respect is one of the most important considerations. Thirty-two percent of workers say this is somewhat important to them when making employment decisions. Fifteen percent of workers say this is a less important consideration. There are only modest differences among workers across industries.

Women are more likely than men to say a job that others value and respect is most important to them (53 percent vs. 48 percent). This gender divide is true across racial lines.

Helping Others. Having a job that centers on helping others is a top priority for less than half (46 percent) of workers. Thirty-five percent say it is somewhat important, and 16 percent say it is less important.

Women (54 percent) are far more likely than men (39 percent) to prioritize having a job that focuses on helping others. Women of color are the most likely to say that helping others is one of the most important considerations. Sixty-two percent of black women and 60 percent of Hispanic women report that this is one of their most important considerations. (See Figure 8.)

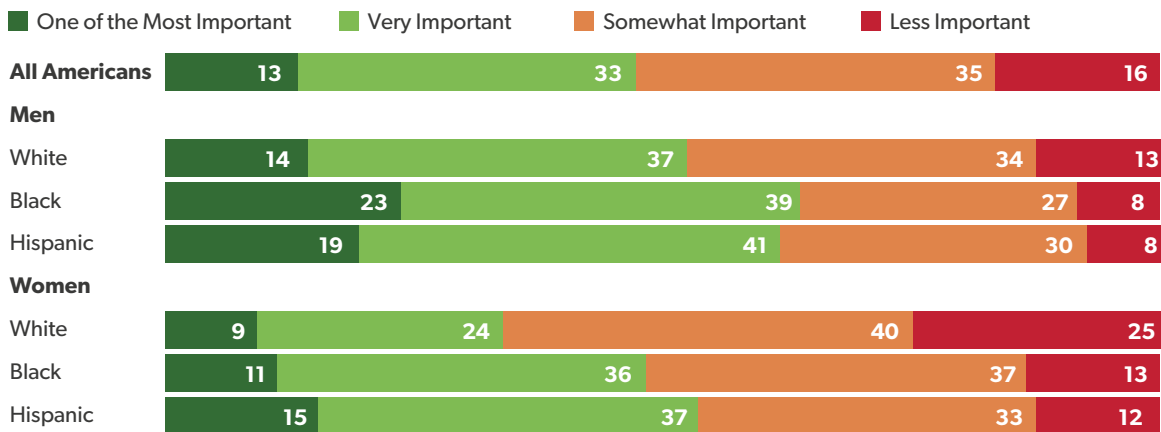
There are notable differences among workers across industry and employment sectors. A majority of intangible-service (59 percent) and government (57 percent) workers say having a job that helps others is one of the most important considerations or a very important consideration. By contrast, less than half of commercial-sales or tangible-services (42 percent), knowledge-economy (38 percent), or resources workers (38 percent) say that being able to help others is one of the most important parts or a very important part of choosing a job.

A Welcoming Workplace. Nearly three-quarters of Americans (72 percent) say a welcoming workplace is one of the most important parts of choosing a job. About one in five (19 percent) say this is somewhat important, and just 6 percent say this is less important.

Women (77 percent) are more likely than men (68 percent) to consider a welcoming workplace to be one of the most important considerations or a very important consideration. Young women (79 percent) are the most likely to say that a welcoming workplace is the most important consideration. Young men (71 percent) lag slightly in prioritizing this aspect of the work environment. This pattern holds for all age categories and reflects a broader

Figure 8. Black and Hispanic Workers Are More Likely to Value Helping Others

Percentage of American workers who say having a job that focuses on helping others is personally important when choosing a job



Note: Survey of US adults (N = 5,037).

Source: American Perspectives Survey, June 2022.

age trend: Older workers place less value on finding a welcoming workplace.

These gender differences persist across racial lines. Eighty-one percent of black women say having a welcoming workplace is one of the most important considerations, and 72 percent of black men say the same. There is also a significant divide between white women (75 percent) and white men (64 percent) on this question. However, this gender divide does not exist for Hispanic workers. Seventy-seven percent of Hispanic male workers and 76 percent of Hispanic female workers prioritize a welcoming workspace as one of the most important considerations in job choice.

Remote Work. A minority of workers say remote work is an important consideration. Only 35 percent of American workers say being able to work remotely when they want is an important factor for making job decisions. A comparable portion (36 percent) say this is less important to them. Twenty-seven percent fall in between and say this is somewhat important to them.

Midcareer workers place the highest importance on remote-work options. This priority fades with age. Forty-four percent of workers age 30 to 49 say being able to work remotely when they want is an important job consideration, compared to 37 percent of workers age 18 to 29 and 32 percent of workers age 50 to 64. Only 23 percent of workers age 65 or older report

that remote work is one of the most important factors of choosing a job.

Midcareer often corresponds with parenthood, and parents are significantly more likely to value remote work than nonparents are. Among parents with children under age 18, 44 percent say remote work is important, compared to 32 percent of nonparents. Mothers are more likely to place high importance on remote work than are fathers (48 percent vs. 39 percent).

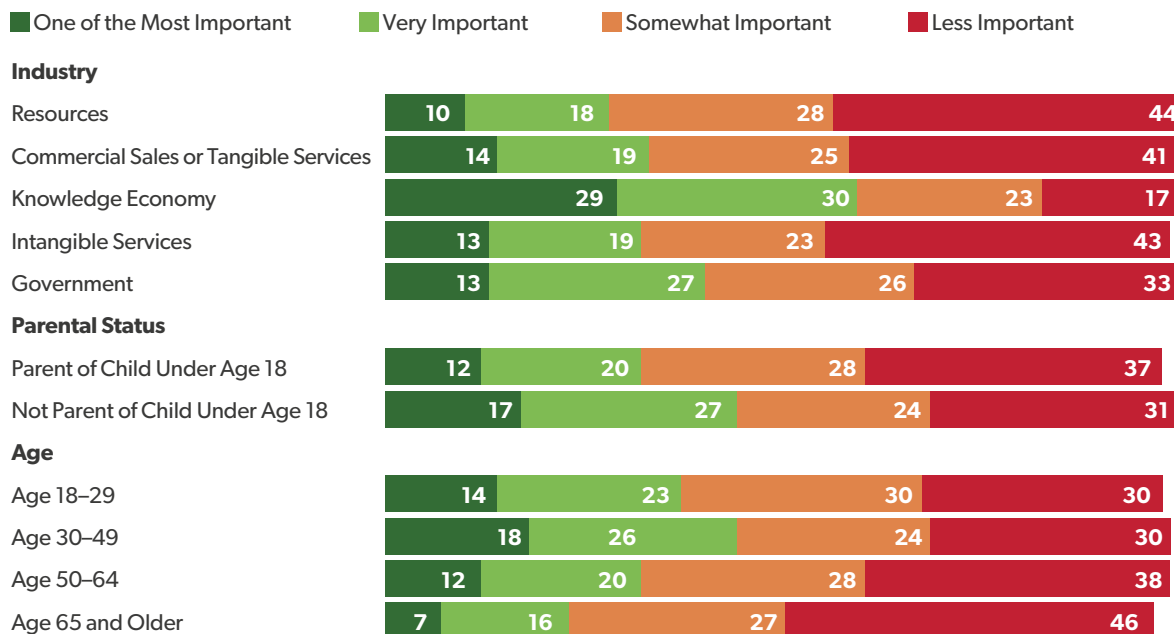
Knowledge-economy workers place the highest priority on remote work (Figure 9). Nearly six in 10 (59 percent) knowledge-economy workers say that being able to work remotely is one of the most important or a very important employment consideration. Only 40 percent of government workers and even fewer workers in commercial sales (33 percent), intangible services (32 percent), and resources (28 percent) say the same.

Worker Satisfaction and Retention

Workplace satisfaction is a complex picture influenced by cultural, social, and economic factors. Americans value, to differing degrees, pay, a welcoming environment, opportunities for advancement, work-life balance, and a sense that they are contributing to society. These factors carry varied importance for different segments of American workers.

Figure 9. Knowledge-Economy Workers Value Remote Work

Percentage of American workers who say being able to work remotely when they want is personally important when choosing a job



Note: Survey of US adults (N = 5,037).

Source: American Perspectives Survey, June 2022.

Who Is Satisfied with Their Job? Overall, the majority of American workers appear satisfied with their work. Most workers (56 percent) report being completely (19 percent) or very satisfied (37 percent) with their current work or employment situation. A further 31 percent of American workers report that they are somewhat satisfied. Only about one in 10 (13 percent) say they are not too or at all satisfied with their current employment situation.

Worker satisfaction appears to increase with age (Figure 10). Older workers (age 65 and older) are more than twice as likely as young workers (age 18 to 29) to report that they are completely satisfied (30 percent vs. 14 percent) and 9 percentage points more likely to report being very satisfied (44 percent vs. 35 percent). But age and experience are not the only factors that matter.

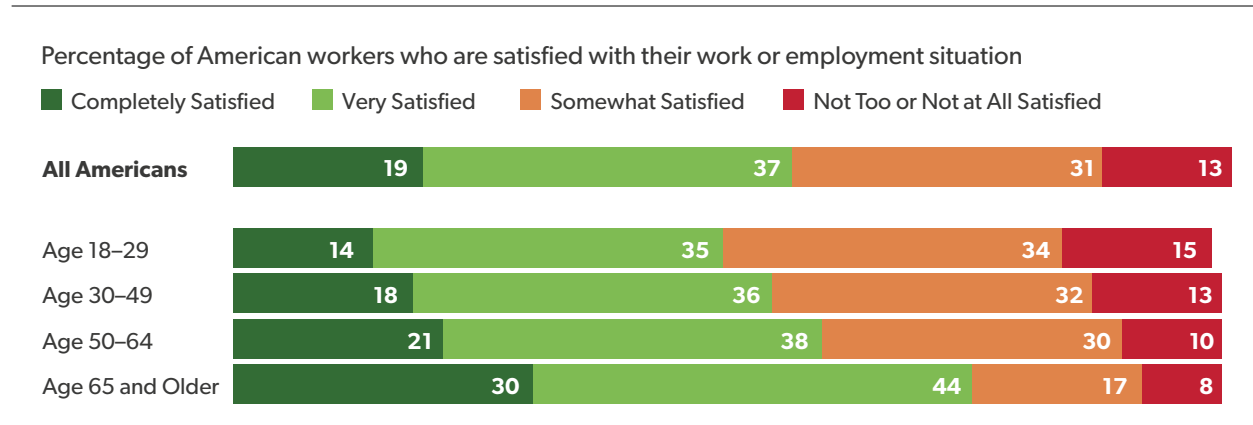
Slight satisfaction differences exist by remote-work status: 55 percent of in-person workers, 57 percent of hybrid workers, and 59 percent of remote workers report being completely or very satisfied. However, remote workers are significantly more likely to report being completely satisfied (23 percent) than are both hybrid workers (15 percent) and in-person workers (19 percent).

Worker Retention and Turnover. Despite the tight labor market, few workers report that they are currently exploring new job or career opportunities. Only 17 percent of workers say they are currently looking for a new position or role, and most job seekers (11 percent) are looking for a full-time position. Eleven percent of workers say they will likely be looking for a new opportunity in the next six months. Nearly seven in 10 (69 percent) workers are not currently looking or planning to look for new positions.

Notably, among unemployed workers who are looking for work, only half (50 percent) report they are looking for a full-time position. About one in three (31 percent) report they are looking for a part-time position.

Young workers are most likely to be looking for a new job or position. Three in 10 (30 percent) young workers (age 18 to 29) report they are currently seeking a new full-time (19 percent) or part-time (11 percent) role. About one in five (19 percent) report they will be looking for a new job in the next six months.

Correlates of Satisfaction. A number of company, individual, and interpersonal factors influence overall job

Figure 10. Older Workers Are Also the Most Satisfied

Note: Survey of US adults (N = 5,037).

Source: American Perspectives Survey, June 2022.

satisfaction. Among these, compensation and opportunities for development stand out as key correlates of satisfaction.

Compensation. Twenty-eight percent of workers report that being paid fairly for their labor describes their current workplace situation “very well,” while close to half (45 percent) say being fairly compensated describes their current job “somewhat well.” About one-third of workers say fair pay does not describe their current work situation well.

There is a modest gender gap in satisfaction with compensation levels. Men are more likely than women to report that being fairly compensated for their work describes their job “very well” (31 percent vs. 25 percent). The gender gap is larger among young workers (age 18 to 29). While 28 percent of young male workers say that fair pay describes their employment “very well,” the same is true of only 19 percent of young female workers. Satisfaction also varies slightly by educational attainment and gender (Figure 11). Roughly half of high school-educated male workers (48 percent) report being satisfied with their employment situation, compared to 63 percent of women with a postgraduate degree.

While differences in reports of fair pay do not vary significantly by education level, gender gaps are present regardless of educational background (Figure 12). Women with a high school degree or less are the least likely to report that being paid fairly describes their employment “very well” (22 percent), compared to 29 percent of men with the same education. On the other hand, men with a college degree are most likely to report that being paid fairly describes their employment

“very well” (32 percent), compared to 25 percent of college-educated women.

Attitudes toward compensation correlate with job satisfaction. Eighty percent of workers who say being paid fairly describes their work situation very well are very or completely satisfied with their job. This number falls to 55 percent among those who say fair pay describes their work situation somewhat well. As satisfaction with pay falls, so does the percentage of workers who say they are mostly satisfied with their work.

Opportunities for Development. In addition to recognition, opportunities for development on the job appear to contribute to overall feelings of worker satisfaction.

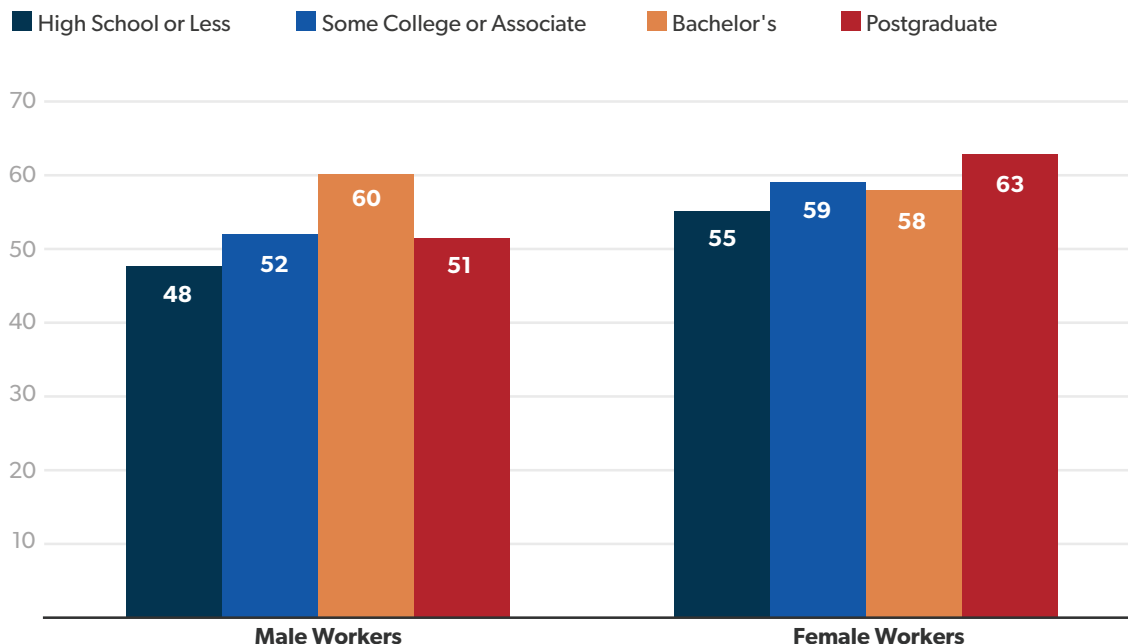
Most workers say there are at least some opportunities to expand their skill set on the job. Nearly three-quarters (73 percent) of workers report the statement “I have the opportunity to develop new skills” describes their job either very or somewhat well. Only one in four (25 percent) workers say this does not describe their current work experience well.

Opportunities for skill development appear abundant for early career workers and decline somewhat with age. Thirty-five percent of young workers (age 18 to 29) report that having opportunities to develop new skills describes their work situation very well, compared to 30 percent of midcareer workers and 25 percent of those late in their career.

Workers in the knowledge economy are most likely to report they have opportunities to develop new skills. Thirty-six percent of workers in the knowledge economy say development of new skills describes their work very well, which is higher than all other industries.

Figure 11. Job Satisfaction Varies by Gender and Education

Percentage of American workers who say they are very or completely satisfied with their work or employment situation



Note: Survey of US adults (N = 5,037).

Source: American Perspectives Survey, June 2022.

Remote work does not appear to hinder opportunities for skill development. Seventy percent of fully in-person workers report the statement describes their employment experience very or somewhat well, compared to 72 percent of fully remote workers. Further, remote (34 percent) and hybrid (33 percent) workers are more likely than in-person (27 percent) workers to say the statement describes their experience very well. This difference is statistically significant.

Satisfaction also correlates with developmental opportunities (Figure 13). More than three-quarters (77 percent) of workers who say that having opportunities to develop new skills describes their employment very well are very or completely satisfied. The percentage of those who are very or completely satisfied decreases to 55 percent among workers who say skill development describes their job somewhat well. A plurality (46 percent) of workers who say skill development describes their job not too well are somewhat satisfied with their job, and 21 percent of these workers say they are not too or at all satisfied. Workers who say skill development does not describe their job at all well

are even more likely to be dissatisfied: 37 percent say they are not too or at all satisfied.

Gig Workers

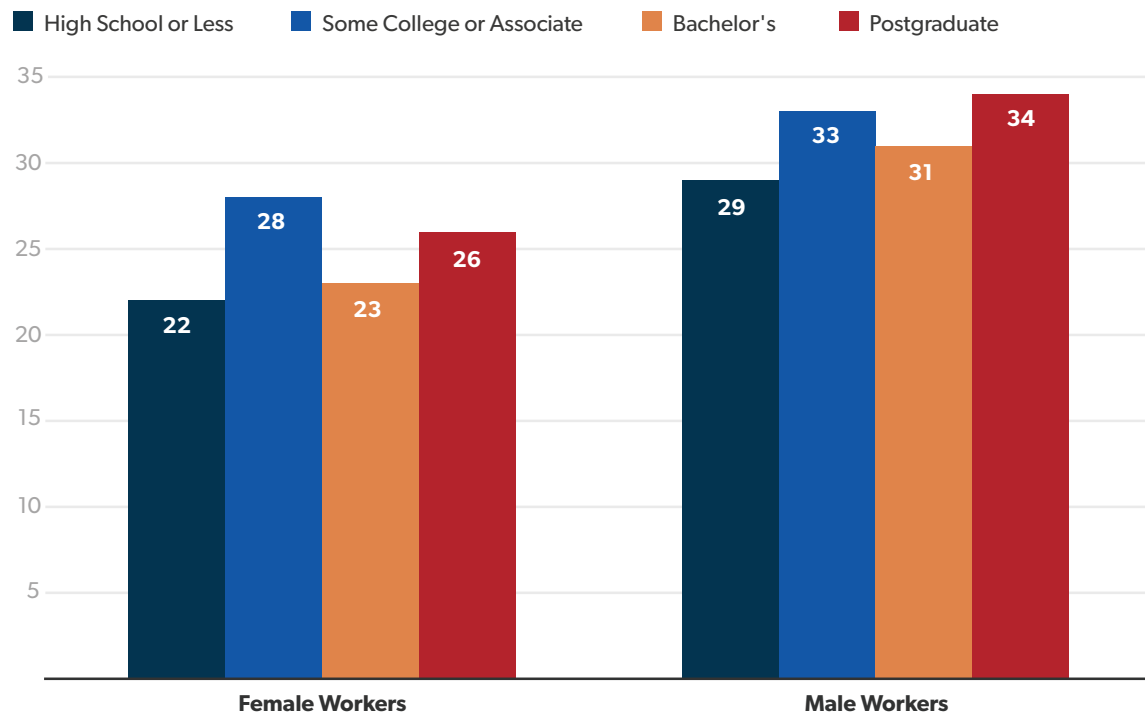
The gig economy is booming. Nearly one in 10 Americans (9 percent) have driven a rideshare, rented their home, delivered food through an app-based service, provided childcare, or done chores for others through an online service. Gig workers comprise 17 percent of all currently employed Americans.

One in four (25 percent) gig workers report driving for a rideshare company, such as Uber or Lyft. Three in 10 say they have rented a home or property (30 percent) or delivered food, such as for a service like DoorDash, Grubhub, or Seamless (31 percent). Fewer than one in 10 have performed home duties or maintenance tasks, such as through TaskRabbit, or provided childcare (6 percent and 7 percent, respectively).

Gig workers are more likely to be early career workers or retirement age. Nearly one in three gig workers are

Figure 12. Male Workers Are More Likely to Report Fair Pay

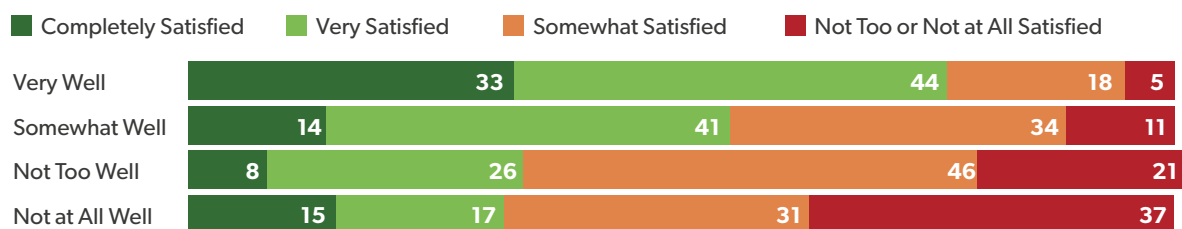
Percentage of American workers who say "I am paid fairly for the work that I do" describes their current job very well



Note: Survey of US adults (N = 5,037).
Source: American Perspectives Survey, June 2022.

Figure 13. Workers with Development Opportunities Are the Most Satisfied

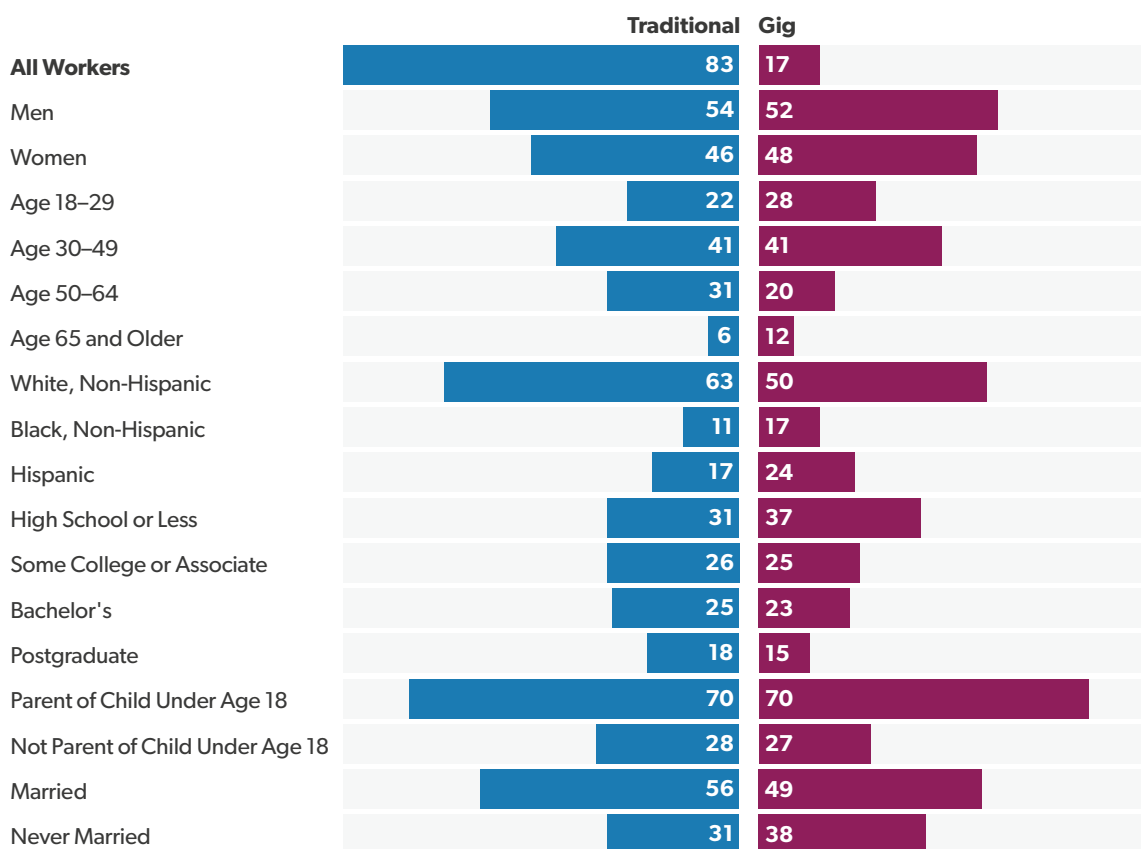
Percentage of American workers who say having opportunities to develop new skills describes their current job well and who are satisfied with their work or employment situation



Note: Survey of US adults (N = 5,037).
Source: American Perspectives Survey, June 2022.

Figure 14. The Demographic Profile of Workers in the Gig and Traditional Economies

Percentage of workers in the gig or traditional economy



Note: Survey of US adults (N = 5,037).

Source: American Perspectives Survey, June 2022.

age 18 to 29 (28 percent), compared to 22 percent of the traditional labor force. Midcareer workers comprise 41 percent of both the gig and traditional economy. Fewer late-career workers are in gig jobs. Retirement-age workers are overrepresented in the gig economy (12 percent of gig workers vs. 6 percent of the total workforce).

Men and women are about equally likely to engage in gig work. However, certain gig jobs have a strong gender bias. Sixty-three percent of workers who have ever driven rideshares are men. Men are also more likely to rent their homes (55 percent vs. 45 percent) but not to have delivered food (51 percent vs. 49 percent).

Gig workers also differ from the traditional worker population by race, with black and Hispanic workers making up a disproportionate share of the gig workforce. For comparison, these workers comprise 11 percent and 17 percent, respectively, of the traditional worker population.

While half of gig workers are white, white workers comprise 63 percent of the traditional worker population and so are underrepresented in the gig economy.

Though demographic differences do arise (Figure 14), few attitudinal differences exist between gig and traditional workers. Gig and traditional workers are equally likely to value flexibility (82 percent vs. 83 percent). They are equally likely to say that the statement “Work is an important part of who I am” describes them very or somewhat well (71 percent vs. 72 percent). They are also equally likely to say that the statement “My current job is a good fit for my personal interests and abilities” describes them very or somewhat well (80 percent vs. 82 percent).

Similarly, gig workers are equally likely to report being very or completely satisfied with their job as traditional workers are (56 percent vs. 55 percent). When it comes

to time spent with family, gig and traditional workers are equally likely to be very or completely satisfied (52 percent vs. 49 percent).

Conclusion

The American workplace, famous for increasing living standards, places high demands on workers compared to other countries. Well-structured and well-managed workplaces have much to contribute to workers' social, psychological, and emotional well-being by helping provide meaning, purpose, and a sense of social contribution. By attending to both sides of the workforce ledger—the financial and the social—we can help build our economy and our sense of connection.

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Note

1. G. E. Miller, "The U.S. Is the Most Overworked Developed Nation in the World," 20somethingfinance, January 10, 2023, <https://20somethingfinance.com/american-hours-worked-productivity-vacation>; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, "Average Annual Hours Actually Worked per Worker," October 11, 2022, <https://stats.oecd.org/index.aspx?DataSetCode=ANHRS>; and Adewale Maye, "No-Vacation Nation, Revised," Center for Economic and Policy Research, May 22, 2019, <https://cepr.net/report/no-vacation-nation-revised>.

The Social Workplace

Social Capital, Human Dignity, and Work in America Volume III

Brent Orrell and Hunter Dixon

In this third and final installment of our report series on the social dimensions of work, we turn to the workforce's future. Younger workers are fundamental to shaping the economic future, a reality driven by demographics and baby boomers' impending retirement. This transition raises crucial questions about those who will step into workplace leadership roles and how they will adapt to a workplace that is being reshaped continuously by technology and evolving social norms. Addressing these questions is essential for carving out strategies that align with the next generation of workers' aspirations and capabilities.

Our journey through this series drew inspiration from Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Smith's insight into the social nature of humans offers a framework for understanding today's workplace dynamics. He proposed that work is not just a necessity for survival but an expression of man's inherently social nature. From a Smithian viewpoint, markets are human sociality at scale. This sociality creates the impetus for exchange and leads to the norms, rules, and laws that govern it. The invisible hand may govern markets, but that hand is a human one, made up of the individual decisions that shape production, prices, and employment. Jobs and workplaces are important parts of this unfathomably complex mechanism. In the end, markets can thrive only to the degree to which the people who create them and work within them thrive.

To better understand how younger workers think about their jobs and workplaces, we commissioned follow-up interviews with a sample of the original survey participants. We discovered that flexibility, while universally valued, fluctuated in terms of its definition. Whether it means balancing work with family life, pursuing educational goals, or dedicating time to other interests, flexibility is a multifaceted concept that varies widely among young workers.

Purpose, too, is a deeply personal pursuit. Consistent with Smith's insights about work and sociality, our survey results show that young workers find meaning in making contributions that positively affect those around them—coworkers, customers, and society more broadly. This search for purpose reflects a related desire to engage in work that is economically rewarding and meaningful.

Another important finding of our research underscores the role of education in mitigating economic anxieties, both in the short and long term. A higher level of educational attainment not only opens more and better career opportunities but also instills a sense of security and confidence in navigating the contemporary labor market.

Investment in long-term economic security also surfaced as a central theme. Our findings suggest that young workers who actively engage in financial planning and investment strategies tend to feel more secure about their future.

Methodology

Our qualitative interview sample included 41 participants age 22–29. These participants were recontacted after participating in our original survey, consisting of 5,037 participants recruited through Ipsos’s Knowledge-Panel.¹ AEI’s vocation, career, and work team reviewed the transcripts and demographic data from the interviews to produce this analysis. Some key analytical themes emerged:

- **Flexibility.** The freedom to harmonize one’s job responsibilities with life’s competing demands, whether those be family, children, hobbies, exercise, or other priorities outside the workplace.
- **Purpose.** The extent to which one derives existential meaning from work.
- **Economic Anxiety.** Preoccupation with one’s current or future economic situation. This can be broken into two subcategories.
 - *Short-Term Economic Anxiety.* Focused on themes such as budgeting and emergency savings.
 - *Long-Term Economic Anxiety.* Focused on themes such as saving and investing for retirement, childcare funds, and broader concerns about politics and the economy.

We rated responses around these themes on Likert scales to measure the strength of responses (see the appendix for details) and then created a codebook to organize our participants according to key demographic markers such as age, educational attainment, and marital status. With this analysis in hand, we identified representative quotes to illustrate the key themes.

Overview

We begin this discussion of our findings with “flexibility,” as it was consistently the highest-rated factor for participants looking for work in our initial sample. We detail how education and family ties manifest among participants with flexible employment situations and how low-flexibility participants remain short on time and money.

Next, we turn to “economic anxiety” to discuss how participants navigate long-term financial planning and short-term monetary needs. Once again, those with education and family ties, as well as those with consistent pay or hours, fare well. Higher-anxiety participants expressed less clear or less developed financial goals and more worry about current events, such as high inflation.

Finally, we consider “purpose.” The goal of our research was to better understand how the social side of work affects performance and satisfaction. Those with high purpose ratings viewed their work as an identity marker, gave priority to civic engagement through work, and were motivated by provision for families or loved ones. Those with low purpose ratings tended to view work more as a method to pay the bills.

We conclude with the central idea that the social nature of work drives work as an activity and increases employees’ and employers’ productivity and satisfaction.

Flexibility Is Freedom

Above all other factors, workers in our survey cared most about flexibility. Our initial survey findings showed that 78 percent of participants rated flexibility as one of the most or the most important factor when choosing a job. Of the 18- to 29-year-old group, 82 percent valued flexibility in the same manner.² However, while workers value flexibility, our analysis revealed that participants have different definitions of flexibility depending on their employment situation, familial commitments, hobbies, and other activities outside work.

Education and Good Jobs. Our quantitative and qualitative findings suggest higher levels of education increase the likelihood of flexible employment. In our larger quantitative sample, workers with a high school education were more likely than workers with a college education to experience irregular work schedules (47 percent to 34 percent). High school-educated workers are also much less likely to feel free to take care of personal matters during the workday (34 percent to 53 percent).³

In our qualitative sample, among 23 participants who had high flexibility in their work, 15 had a bachelor’s degree or higher.⁴ Our college-educated participants emphasized similar themes, such as consistent work schedules, personal and professional boundaries, and caring for family, more regularly than our noncollege participants. One participant noted:

COVID has brought this idea that we can be a little more agile and creative in how we address things, understanding that we can't differentiate work and life and that by being able to bring them together better or, just being more adaptable in how we structure what a work day looks like and more tailored to people, I think could be really beneficial and really impactful.⁵

Echoing this theme of adaptability, another participant hoped to "intermix" chores and errands with work, since "running a dishwasher takes two seconds to press a button and I can continue with my work day."⁶ For some, like a 29-year-old accountant, flexibility means spending time with family, and others emphasized the importance of time with friends, pets, hobbies, and entertainment.⁷ A 27-year-old political consultant uses his remote and seasonal schedule to travel and visit his friends.⁸ A 28-year-old statistician at a state labor department told us her 7:30 a.m.–3:30 p.m. schedule enables her to dedicate the rest of her day to parenting.⁹

Most (16 of 23) of the higher-flexibility participants are working 40 hours or less, which affords more time for family, friends, and hobbies. One participant, who is working part-time while a student, said that a part-time schedule allowed for "relationships with friends and family . . . [which] are something I really treasure" in addition to focusing on mental and physical health to "reduce stress levels."¹⁰ Another participant, a part-time fashion model, can manage her chronic medical condition and spend time with family.¹¹

While working fewer hours is important for most, some find high levels of flexibility in a packed schedule. One participant works four 10-hour shifts per week in a warehouse while maintaining a side gig as an off-road driving instructor, for a total of 50–55 hours a week. When asked how he balances that with his relationships, he said:

The extra two hours a day is just a breeze. . . . I walk around and just check out . . . things that keep me awake. . . . I can get on the Internet, do some research about how to repair the fenders and my girlfriend's Jeep, but I'm still getting paid at work, so that's working out.¹²

This participant thus indicates that flexibility is not only about remote work or working fewer hours. Despite working longer hours, he finds ways to balance work with competing life demands, the definition of flexibility. One IT engineer paints the picture of flexibility achieved:

It's pretty nice with the current company because . . . if we need to stay longer, we do, but for the most part it's you come in whenever and you leave around the same time every day. . . . There's just so much time I have after work that I get all my stuff done. It's really relaxed. . . . I do personal stuff at work all the time or catch up on like paying bills. . . . I get to spend time with my friends and just strictly like, do fun stuff like go in the ocean and I travel . . . four to six times a year.¹³

Other participants build flexibility through tenure in a job, such as a 29-year-old attorney who told us, "The expectation is as long as I get things done, . . . I'm not being micromanaged."¹⁴ Employees in such situations have more flexibility to switch between work and personal tasks (such as everyday chores, cooking, and hobbies) during the standard nine-to-five workday, making it easier to build a balanced life. Such an arrangement is likely more common among salaried work, since clocking in and out is not a concern.

Of the remaining higher-flexibility participants who did not mention completing a college education, one works "10 hours a day" and enjoys watching movies or "dancing and singing and also hanging around with my friends" in the evening. She credits her lack of "children . . . [or] any interpersonal intimate relationships" as the source of her flexibility.¹⁵

Two participants are working stable jobs in IT support, which provide generous pay with a standard 40-hour week and plenty of time for friends and activities. The last remaining high-flexibility participant is the aforementioned model and is currently in college, with a goal to freelance as a software developer.

Family Flexibility and Income. Some workers enjoy the dual benefits of predictable schedules and the support of a spouse or parent who add to total financial resources, making it easier to navigate conflicting life demands. Our government statistician must maintain her flexible schedule because her husband "definitely has a more stressful job."¹⁶ Similarly, our most educated participant, a 29-year-old PhD engineer, noted that she's compensated well, enjoys her coworkers, and has "a lot of flexibility" in her current job because her husband works full-time and she works part-time.¹⁷ While she would not be able to work part-time and support her kids on her own, sharing income with her husband allows her to work less and still enjoy a high standard of living. Another participant, who works part-time at a community center, credited a stable, affluent family for enabling

such a flexible schedule: “I have the ability to work that few hours because I live with my parents right now and my dad has a high paying STEM job. . . . Being from a wealthy family” helps.¹⁸

However, most of our participants (28 of 41) did not have a spouse or kids. A slightly higher proportion of those with high flexibility scores had no spouse or children (18 of 23). What does flexibility mean for those with fewer family obligations? It mainly comprises entertainment and socializing. The attorney mentioned above, who was engaged at the time of the interview, summed this up succinctly: “Spending time on personal endeavors or with family and friends.”¹⁹ Another participant, a college student working part-time at a restaurant, noted that the pandemic taught him the importance of relationships with friends and family, as well as exercise, which he says “really kept me in check.”²⁰ Another participant who is working full-time in marketing noted that time outside work is spent with family, “binge watching series on Netflix or Hulu” or “listening to audiobooks.”²¹

Strapped for Time and Cash: Low-Flexibility Workers. Participants we scored as having low flexibility often found their work schedules left little time to pursue activities outside work, including hobbies, travel, and socializing. The lower the flexibility score, the more the participants had to sacrifice spending time with family and friends outside work.

One low-flexibility worker who worked two full-time jobs, including weekends, noted, “Friends are nonexistent. I’ve had to prioritize the little time that I do have and . . . spend it on family.”²² A college-educated applied behavior analysis therapist split time between school, work, and taking care of her 5-year-old. She noted, “I’ve reduced my hours at work . . . which was hard for me, but I’m glad I did that. . . . [F]amily comes first.”²³

A librarian who handles programming for children and teens noted that he enjoys playing piano for different churches and organizations and listening to podcasts outside of his work but that, due to his work schedule and commute, he wishes there were “30 hours in a day.”²⁴ One participant, who works at a bottled-water company, when asked how his work and life fit together, said that long hours at his work often kept him from his family and from hobbies like woodworking and video games.²⁵

Perhaps the most common frustration with work schedules among low-flexibility workers was the lack of time for family and friends. One participant, who works part-time while pursuing a graduate degree, voiced frustration that her work schedule did not permit her to see

her parents and old friends, who live far away.²⁶ Another part-time deli worker told us, “I really don’t get to socialize hardly at all.” When we asked him about the time he gets to spend with friends and family, he responded, “What time?”²⁷

A nanny found she devotes almost all her limited free time to her kids, leaving little for friends:

I feel like I have a lot of acquaintances and only two really good friends and one lives . . . over an hour away and the other one works night shifts. So we don’t really get to spend a lot of time together. . . . [Our contact is] limited to phone calls and sometimes I have a hard time maintaining friendships or creating new ones because . . . every ounce of my energy is invested in my kids right now.²⁸

A manual laborer at a large distribution center said that his life “revolves” around his work. While he enjoys spending time with friends, he finds that his work schedule, which “doesn’t . . . line up with the rest of the world,” makes it hard to be with others in his free time.²⁹

Another common theme among these participants was a general feeling of being overworked. A radiologist found that her job and school were so stressful that she needed to use most of her free time to simply relax.³⁰ A metal fabricator, for instance, found that working five days a week was exhausting him.³¹ And the manual laborer we met above lamented, “I work a lot of hours and then recuperate from that to go work again.”³²

Economic Anxiety

The discussion about the importance of job flexibility needs to be contextualized by other important considerations, chief among them the interaction between work and economics—and especially hopes and fears relating to the economic future. Economic anxiety—based in actual circumstances or unease about the future—strongly affects feelings about work. These challenges appear to have significant influence on the American workforce’s psychological well-being. In this section, we delve into how educational attainment, job stability, and political developments influence the American workforce’s short-term economic outlook.

Correlates of Low Anxiety. Job insecurity and lower levels of educational attainment are both associated with financial anxiety in the short and long term. Concerns

about national economic conditions relating to inflation are a common denominator that at least partially mediate the relationship between job insecurity, education, and short-term anxiety. Over half the interviewees (23) reported both short- and long-term fears, and many (15) reported high levels of anxiety.

Educational Attainment and Feelings of Economic Anxiety. College degrees remain a marker for economic mobility and security. However, our analysis of the sample group shows that a degree alone does not meaningfully decrease short- or long-term anxiety relative to those without college degrees. Respondent narrative responses help explain how college and noncollege workers experience economic anxiety, especially as those concerns relate to the long term.

We often talk about how degrees “signal” competence in the market place. It also seems that having the degree creates an internal “signal” of hope for the future. A 29-year-old near college graduate said,

I’m going to get the pay that I want once I get that diploma in my hand next Saturday. I’m going to be making more money, and I’m already financially stable. But I’m going to like it when I see something online, not for shopping but for trips, and I’m like “I just want to go there,” and just pay it right then and there and go. So that’s what I’m looking forward to.³³

A behavioral therapist similarly looked forward to a secure future: “It’s always nicer to have more money, but I feel we’re stable. . . . I’m not fearful or concerned about my financial situation. I’m always working to improve it and make more money, but I’m not worried.”³⁴

By contrast, feelings about the future are more tenuous for those without degrees. Participants who reported the highest levels of anxiety talked about low levels of retirement savings, uncertainty about the job market for people with their skills, and the difficulty of planning for major purchases like a home. One interviewee said, “The biggest ticket on the agenda is saving up for like a down payment or something, but that’s been a fleeing dream seeing the political nonsense that’s occurring at the moment.”³⁵ Others sense that education is the most important factor in their economic future:

I definitely don’t want to struggle in the future career that I have. That’s why school is so important to me. I really want to be able to provide . . . for myself and future kids if I have any.³⁶

Spouses, Partners, and Parents Reduce Economic Anxiety. Of the 10 participants who were married, only two showed higher levels of short-term anxiety and only one had higher levels of long-term anxiety. Just as spouses add to life flexibility, sharing the economic load with a spouse significantly decreases financial fears. “If I didn’t have a spouse who helped pay bills,” one said, “I would be doing terribly, I am very thankful I have a husband whose salary was able to cover me basically . . . slashing my income to one third of what I was making.”³⁷ Likewise, a community nonprofit manager said, “I’m thankful I have a partner that makes definitely double . . . what I currently make. . . . if [I] were solely dependent on myself, I would not be in good standing.”³⁸

Spouses and partners can also mitigate (or aggravate) financial anxiety. As one respondent put it,

To be honest, credit and finances always scared me because my parents were horrible with it. They were always in debt growing up. I feel like my partner really helped me with that. He’s really good with money, so he’s helped me figure out how to budget and save and not live beyond my means.³⁹

The opposite can also be true, however. As one interviewee said,

My partner, who I am hoping to have a future with, has a lot of debt and is not great with money. . . . I didn’t grow up in a suburb like he did. And so we’re often sort of butting heads a little bit.⁴⁰

Not every participant who shares income shares it with a spouse. Nine of 41 participants received supplemental income from a parent. Unsurprisingly, all but one of the nine were unmarried and childless, with the lone exception being a newlywed graduate student whose parents helped her buy a house.

One of our youngest participants, a 22-year-old who works at a rural, small-town library, quipped,

I make less money at the library than what I’d make working at the local gas station. . . . I’m living with my parents, which is nice because I’m able to put a lot of that away in savings.

He has plans to use his savings to fulfill his “dream . . . to be able to travel and play piano” around the country.⁴¹ If he wasn’t living with his parents, these long-term goals might be out of reach.

Other participants depend on external income for more than investments and savings. One mail clerk noted,

Financially wise, I feel so-so. The reason I say that is, I live with my parents right now. The reason I do that is because [the price of] everything keeps going up. Everything's super expensive . . . [and] it feels like my salary . . . isn't enough to cover everything. . . . [For] the next few months, I feel like they're my safety net. So as long as I'm with them, I'll be OK. But, let's say, 10 to fifteen years from now, I really don't know.⁴²

Consistent Pay and Hours Are Important and Linked to Education, Credentials, and Higher-Paying Jobs. Despite the seeming importance of a college education, we found that some noncollege workers in certain industries, such as real estate and IT, had similar levels of economic security as college-educated workers. Further, when we categorized survey participants by industry and the number of hours they worked, we found that approximately 10 of the 13 who didn't feel anxious about the short-term economic future worked 40 or more hours per week.

Those in our sample who worked multiple part-time jobs responded more like part-time workers than their full-time counterparts. To be clear, working 40 hours does not guarantee the benefits that typically accompany a full-time job. However, full-time jobs are more likely, compared to those characterized as part-time, to have good pay, benefits, and career advancement opportunities.⁴³

One interviewee, a real estate broker with some college background but no degree, said,

I feel pretty confident in my financial situation and my financial future. At the moment, you know, real estate does not really have a retirement plan, so this home is essentially my retirement plan. [It is] actually two homes, so I'm working on fixing up another unit. And eventually, maybe procuring some rental income on that.⁴⁴

She noted that she has been able to save money through her job to prepare for future economic downturns. The other participant, who works in IT, noted that his family is "right on track or ahead of schedule" financially and that he has met with financial planners to create a long-term savings, investment, and emergency fund.⁴⁵

Workers who expressed less anxiety tended to work in commercial firms, knowledge-economy jobs, and

other intangible services. These industries typically employ a higher concentration of college graduates or highly credentialed workers and offer higher-than-average earnings. Conversely, those working in the lower-wage sectors expressed far less confidence in their economic circumstances and prospects.

Consider the following comparison between an established clinical researcher and call-center worker (who is also in school part-time). The researcher said,

Being able to work . . . two jobs that pay well . . . I never really have to worry about where, you know paychecks are coming from, things like that. . . . Career earnings typically go up from where you're starting.⁴⁶

The call-center worker, by contrast, said,

It's almost scary . . . to see some of the situations that I see firsthand [of people who are on] Medicare and things like that and hearing their stories. . . . I don't want to be like that. I don't want to be that age and have to worry about finances and things and have worked like my whole life and then to just have nothing to show for that.⁴⁷

The first has education and the security of stable, gainful employment, while the second sees the difficult side of living with poverty and the peace that comes with a stable job.

Part-time workers or those who worked on an inconsistent basis were far less likely to feel confident in their security over the next two years. In fact, four of the nine participants who work less than 40 hours reported feeling at least somewhat or very anxious about the short-term future (compared to 10 of 41 of the whole sample). We attribute this to the fact that part-time jobs, such as nannying and social service jobs, typically offer relatively lower wage rates and benefits coverage and, perhaps more importantly, have more inconsistent and unpredictable work schedules. Workers in these positions also regularly hold multiple concurrent lower-wage jobs while struggling to plan for and tackle financial commitments such as rent. As a 27-year-old retail worker commented, "The schedule is never the same week to week, and hours vary depending on business needs."⁴⁸

Financial Planning Lessens Anxiety, but Inflation Worries Persist. Participants who prepared for the future by saving *and* investing tended to have lower anxiety. Most workers we spoke with commented on the rising difficulty

of both saving money and affording housing, food, and other essentials. Twenty-eight of 32 interviewees with 40 or more hours of employment per week saved regularly, while just six out of 10 of those reporting high levels of economic anxiety in the short term did the same.

For one 26-year-old soccer instructor, her “just in case” fund serves as the beginning of her life savings:

I’m paying my bills right now. . . . I would really want to start looking into putting more money into my savings account and having a cushion. . . . That would be one thing that I feel I would want to do or even starting to set aside money for a house, so whenever I am ready, it’s there.⁴⁹

After we scored our participants in terms of long- and short-run economic anxiety, we found that investing money was the clearest distinction between those with low and high levels of economic anxiety. No participants who mentioned investments articulated high levels of anxiety about their long-term futures. Only two participants who were investors had high anxiety in the short term. Both of these participants occupy low-wage jobs, one in a grocery store and one as a cashier and stocker.⁵⁰

Of the 14 participants with mixed feelings, those who invested their money had low levels of short-term anxiety. Those who merely saved money but did not invest did not see the same drop in short-term anxiety as those who invested. This suggests that investing in long-term economic security could also decrease stress in the short term for those with mixed feelings about their financials in the long term.

Among these 14 participants with mixed feelings was the aforementioned 28-year-old statistician, who felt that her family’s financial goals were feasible, including “higher salaries, . . . promotions,”⁵¹ and the promise of a pension, which keeps her employed with her state government.

One 25-year-old IT engineer, who hopes to manage a “real estate empire” eventually, enjoys the benefits of a car and house that are “paid off” so that remaining money funnels into a budget for travel.⁵² The same is true for a government-employed radiologist, whose investments will encourage care for an ill family member and more spontaneous travel. Another participant, who is not college educated, found a well-paying job in a distribution center and is close to paying off his house, which will allow his “substantial stock and investment portfolio” to grow.⁵³

Even with the relationship between education and economic anxiety, many of the investors in our sample span the educational spectrum, from those without college degrees to a 25-year-old PhD candidate who has “a couple of investing savings accounts that are very long-term focused.”⁵⁴

What Predicts High Economic Anxiety? Those with high economic anxiety parallel those with low flexibility, as time and money are finite resources. High economic anxiety comes down to instability, and our interview responses suggest that for those who can, investment is the surest bet toward securing one’s economic future and mitigating anxiety.

Fears of Inflation and Political Instability Chill Investment and Saving. Workers who tend to feel somewhat or very uncertain about the short-term economic future cite significant struggles in balancing living expenses and saving commitments with clear goals. Many who mentioned a desire to own a house in the future had no concrete strategies in place to achieve such financial goals, citing no “plans of . . . being able to get a new apartment anytime soon or purchasing a house or things like that in the near term.”⁵⁵

Most workers we spoke with commented on the increasing difficulty of saving while paying for housing and food. Voicing the struggle with long-term savings, a 27-year-old part-time student expressed, “I haven’t really had the funds to kind of put anything towards retirement. . . . I just don’t have the means to really put anything towards it right now.”⁵⁶

Of those who expressed low levels of economic anxiety for the short term, 22 of 23 were actively contributing to savings accounts enabled by strict and healthy spending habits, typically established, and continuously supported by parental figures or partners. By contrast, only six out of 10 of those who indicated feeling very anxious about the short-term economic future did the same.

The choice and ability to save often hinges on or is influenced by external factors, such as inflation and political dynamics. Among those very anxious about the long-term future, four out of eight mentioned politics in a negative light, with none mentioning positive views. One participant who works as a political consultant expressed a lack of preparedness: “Politics can be very fast moving and very sudden. I don’t feel yet ready to make a big financial decision such as buying property.” An attorney concurred, saying,

I think the political landscape in this country is always a point of concern. I'm not somebody who's, you know, fretting over politics on a daily basis, but I feel like there's a general looming worry that things could go in some horrible direction [suddenly].⁵⁷

Our call-center worker commented,

The economy right now is just in such awful shape. I just don't see things really getting any better that quickly, that soon. Like it is really, really hard right now to make ends meet . . . just to live, you know.⁵⁸

Political concerns are also tied into investments and interest rates, according to one participant, a 27-year-old broker:

I would maybe like to make other investments [in] other cities, but the rates are just far too high to really consider that right now. . . . When I think about my financial future, you know, it's very uncertain because of the nature of my work and the nature of my income is very sporadic and also quite reliant on next year's . . . election year. I have no idea what is gonna happen during an election year.⁵⁹

Another participant, a 25-year-old PhD student, invests "a couple thousand dollars here and there," but expresses the political situation as his main worry:

I'm really trying my best to not worry about anything. You know, I think if there was something that I had to pinpoint and say, this is something that concerns me, I would say that it's probably between the state of finances in our country and the direction of our country in general, you know there's this real push to dismantle the family. And you know, I feel like that's something that's dangerous for the future of our country.⁶⁰

These quotes illustrate how political uncertainty chills economic confidence and how a more stable society leads to a more prosperous, financially forward-looking populace.

The three participants who took or will take out student loans also focused on the surrounding economic climate. Interestingly, each of these participants expressed a moderate-to-high degree of long-term economic anxiety. Despite reporting above-average flexibility in their present situation, they all expressed feelings of uncertainty and struggle. One said:

I'm not super confident about getting the tenure track professor job that I know is gonna come with benefits and all those things just because of all these changes in higher ed. So I know that I'll be OK. I just don't know that I'll be OK doing exactly what I want to do. And so I'm sort of, like, torn between pursuing exactly what I want to do to the detriment of my long term finances, and doing what I know I can do to make a solid, decent living.⁶¹

Another said:

My financial situation is unique in that obviously I'm making just enough money to cover living expenses. Hence my two jobs. That and to chip away a little bit at my loans. . . . Obviously with inflation there are some uncertainties. So that's why . . . I can't say I feel completely confident. But . . . I can manage. I can modify and tweak certain things. I'm on my routines to minimize expenses, but I'm a little guarded.⁶²

And another said:

About a year ago I started really trying to build up my credit and spend more money essentially to get a higher credit score. So essentially the plan behind that was to get a higher credit score so that I can get a better rate on loans so that I wouldn't have to struggle like way too much and I can get better deals when I go to grad school.⁶³

These quotes show the difficult choices faced by young workers who want to gain skills and excel in their careers. Deciding between debt and savings, a house, or an education that may or may not deliver higher incomes in the context of an uncertain political future complicates already difficult decisions.

Purpose or Paycheck?

At the intersection of flexibility and financial confidence is finding the right balance between pay and purposeful work. That balance is subjective; it manifests differently depending on age, career stage, and individual objectives and priorities. However, the subjectivity of purpose does not negate its importance for shaping long-term happiness. For some, finding purpose at work can override core preferences for flexibility and encourage some short- and long-term trade-offs with pay and flexibility. Our analysis of responses to purpose-related questions

focused on a few key themes: impact, provision for children and family, and civic responsibility.

Notions of a Purposeful Career Are More Common in Human-Centric Industries. A key metric of purposeful work is a sense of making a difference or leaving a lasting mark. This desire to effect change can be proximate to individual relationships or the functioning of an organization. It can also be wide-ranging (such as the sentiment of “changing the country or world”). Most of the impact-related purpose we noticed in participants involved the people they worked with or around.

Unsurprisingly, strong feelings of impact are common in health care and human-services occupations. One participant, a 29-year-old radiologist for a prominent research hospital, was acutely aware of the impact of her work as the “last resort” for those with illnesses and diseases that are difficult to treat.

Often, purpose operates as an identity statement. A 29-year-old epidemiologist, who also works as a part-time mortician, found multiple ways to have an impact on his community. As a mortician, he provided closure for everyday folks dealing with grief:

Autopsies are basically . . . assessing people in a state of death, but it’s more so to provide answers for people who are still living. You can gain a lot of clarity and understanding from people in death that you don’t always discover when they’re alive. A lot of people based on our healthcare system here pass away without knowing any kind of genetic or inherited genetic issues that they have that we are able to catch and provide for the other family members as well as giving some sense of closure.⁶⁴

Referring to his day job, he expressed a sense of alignment between his personal gifts, interests, and daily work:

It’s a part of who I am. I’m an academic at heart and so work for me is just a part of my life. It’s hard for me to just exist in the environment or, exist in the world and not feel like a portion of that is spent working just because my background as an anatomist . . . and also an epidemiologist. Like, if I see somebody who is eating in a restaurant that I’m at and they have, you know, some kind of like weird walking gait or something. Then, like, I’m looking and I’m just like, OK, they probably have . . . some kind of genetic issue or maybe there’s something else going on.⁶⁵

This example goes to show how impactful work can be for an individual and a community when it aligns with identity markers to channel an individual’s motivation toward a goal.

Another participant, a 29-year-old who works two part-time jobs as a physical therapy tech and tutor while in school for physical therapy, finds immense purpose in his multiple endeavors:

I love to see the A-HA moments in the students. . . . It fills my heart up when you know I can hear from somebody who says, “Oh yeah they, I heard they were talking about you [in] this meeting because you know you had helped the student, or . . . this physical therapist can only say good things about you.” Because I do take pride in showing up on time, making sure to, you know, play by the rules. Be respectful of everybody.⁶⁶

Identification with one’s job doesn’t just exist as a privilege for the educated or educators. Take the realization of one participant, who works as a metal fabricator:

I’m real far leaning away from job being my identity, but I do like some of the skills and everything I’ve learned and some of the people I’ve met, so I can’t just fully discount it in that way either. . . . I like to think of myself as just my own person. I don’t wanna be just something, like, oh he’s the painter, or he’s . . . that’s just what they do, their whole life. . . . But I mean, I do like working with my hands and I like making things, so I guess I’m always a fabricator in some sort of way.⁶⁷

This quote epitomizes the idea that work is an expression of interests and abilities, and it shows how work that uses those gifts well can provide a grounding sense of self and purpose to propel everyday work into excellent work.

College-Educated Workers Rate Purpose in Work More Highly. Many college-educated workers tie their sense of purpose to their field of study or profession. A 24-year-old with an engineering degree noted that while her current job at a community center was more toward “the paycheck side” of the spectrum,

Overall, I’m pretty far towards the part of my identity thing. . . . In college it was really ingrained in me that you’re an engineer. . . . All of these different things we were learning were turned into parts of our identity.

She went on to discuss some of the ways she wanted to “undo values . . . I don’t agree with,” such as the “idea that you need to be able to function without direction and that’s what makes you a good engineer and a valuable employee. . . . I don’t need to feel like a failure every time I don’t.”⁶⁸

Participants did not focus on only personal forms of impact. One previously mentioned participant talked about engaging in important global challenges such as climate change once they received their environmental studies degree.⁶⁹ It is important to note that there were few comments relating to abstract matters. Overall, younger workers are preoccupied with the proximate and practical needs of bills, family and friends, and the social connection they feel to their employers and coworkers. As one participant put it, “Yes, things that would keep me working there is that I feel valued. That’s the first thing. I feel valued by my management, my, my higher ups. That they invest in me as much as I invest in them.”⁷⁰

Purposeful Provision for Family Is Not “Just a Paycheck.” Among the 10 participants who were parents, a near-universal theme was their desire to support their children.

While studies have indicated the equivalent economic value of nonworking parents is around \$17,000 per year, any person with a loving father, mother, or both knows this is an inadequate measure.⁷¹ Therefore, it’s no wonder many of our participants give priority to providing for their children when defining their work’s core purpose. Even those who have an otherwise engaging and fulfilling professional life have reprioritized after becoming parents.

This is true across the educational spectrum. A high school-educated mother of three noted that when she isn’t managing logistics for two offices, she’s spending time with her children and her husband. She noted that she “would love to grow into something that maybe would appreciate my skills more and pay me a lot more.”⁷² For now, though, her focus is on her children.

Likewise, the 27-year-old PhD researcher noted a swift change in her priorities once she had kids:

Just because I’m an educated woman doesn’t mean that I am obligated to my career, and I think there’s often an assumption when I’m around especially other educated women, that I’m going to prioritize my career and that isn’t an obvious choice for me. My choice is to prioritize my family and I will. My career will fit around that.⁷³

Finally, finding purpose in provision can also give meaning to jobs that function merely as a paycheck. A 29-year-old accountant put it most succinctly: “My wife and my dog. That’s what brings meaning to my life. That’s why I work; I work so I can spend time with them and provide for them.”⁷⁴ Additionally, our 25-year-old repairman enjoys his job but notes that it “is just to pay the bills”⁷⁵ and take care of his 2-year-old. Fortunately, learning how to repair equipment at work has helped him fix things around the house, allowing him to put more money toward his family.

Civic Responsibility. Similar to those who express purpose through helping others, many can find purpose through a shared civic obligation. Participants broadly defined this concept as a feeling of responsibility to nurture relationships with one’s surrounding community. Whether it be routine family gatherings or volunteering, many participants indicated an active civic life or a desire to create one—though priorities like their job or children often intervened.

Additionally, the data suggest that civic engagement significantly enhances a sense of purpose. Active involvement in community services and relationship-building activities provides a sense of belonging and fulfillment. For instance, a 29-year-old male who volunteers in youth programs and derives great purpose from his job explained,

I am acutely concerned with the community in which I live in, and so meaning for me is just being of service the best way I can to the community. Anytime I feel like I’m engaged with the community in some aspect of work . . . I find meaning in that.⁷⁶

In contrast, a 24-year-old male working at a bottled-water company, who does not find core life purpose in his job, expressed regret about his lack of community engagement: “I have hopes and dreams to be as involved . . . but I have to work myself up to that point of being a true member of the community.”⁷⁷

The aforementioned 22-year-old library worker, who is from a rural community, finds a sense of civic engagement in both his job and his outside interests: “I like going around and playing piano, so even that, it’s amazing cause it’s kind of the same thing as working the library. I’m still providing . . . a service.”⁷⁸ Being of service is a source of happiness for the participant. He gives more context:

I grew up visiting [the] library as a kid and then when I was a teen, I started volunteering at the library and it's a really special place. . . . The library is the hub in that community and just about everybody who walks through the door I know. And it was kind of nice because when I started, I really wasn't low man on the totem pole because I knew so many of the people already from, you know, years of coming in over the summers and volunteering.⁷⁹

This sort of active participation in “third places” can provide profound purpose for its members. When we think of trying to increase social connection and capital, it is individual commitments that add up to a stronger, healthier community. When businesses value and promote the flexibility required to sustain these commitments, they, too, are making small, significant contributions to the communities in which they operate.

Mutuality on the Job Builds Commitment. We've reviewed at length those who find their work purposeful, but what of those for whom work truly is just a paycheck? Are they missing key markers of identity? One 24-year-old fellow at a tech startup ranked themselves in the middle of purpose and paycheck and sees a lack of reciprocity from their employer:

[I] take pride in the work I do . . . but also at the same time especially in today's recent world where everybody's getting laid off, I don't view myself as devoting 100% to a company because they won't devote that to me.⁸⁰

Work as a paycheck can also function as a means to a future goal like education. The 27-year-old worker at a deli mentioned the job was mainly to pay bills while they get their degree.⁸¹ The same goes for a 24-year-old test grader preparing and saving for graduate school: “I would . . . get a lot more sentimental value out of the work I did if I did something I cared about.”⁸²

Conclusion

Our findings present a complex picture of work and life for young Americans, and they only scratch the surface of

each individual's nuanced experiences. The bottom line of this report and the entire series is that work satisfaction is neither fully transactional in economic terms nor only an expression of human sociality.

Businesses and workers that think of jobs as being only a transaction run the risk of tipping over into exploitation as part of a zero-sum game of who can get the most out of the other. Too little attention to transactions undermines business performance. What's needed is a recognition that people are simultaneously self-interested and other-interested.

This is one of the reasons—perhaps the most important reason—that we favor markets over centrally planned economies. Markets are human nature writ large and tend, over time, to promote human happiness and well-being for the greatest number. When all players—businesses and workers—see and recognize the duality of markets, we move closer to outcomes that meet the needs of all.

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Appendix A. Detailed Methodology

For a breakdown of the Likert scales, see Table A1.

Table A1. Key Analytical Themes in Detail

Themes	Likert Scale
Flexibility	1 Low flexibility, unsatisfied with work-life balance 2 Moderately low flexibility, mostly unsatisfied with work-life balance 3 Marginally satisfied with work-life balance, compartmentalized life 4 Moderately high flexibility, moderately satisfied with work-life balance 5 Ideal flexibility, fully satisfied with work-life balance
Purpose	1 Job is a paycheck 2 Job is mostly for pay 3 Job provides a mix of pay and purpose 4 Job provides core life purpose, but pay is still a factor 5 Job provides core life purpose, would enjoy with minimal pay
Short-Run and Long-Run Economic Anxiety	1 Not anxious about the future 2 Somewhat anxious about the future 3 Uncertain or mixed level of anxiety about the future 4 Moderately anxious about the future 5 Very anxious about the future

Source: Authors.

Once we developed scales to analyze our key themes, we organized and segmented relevant quotes from our interview transcripts as a shorthand for the writing process. We then created a codebook to organize our participants according to the following categories:

- Whether they were in school.
- Education level (noncollege and college).
 - Noncollege includes a high school diploma or less.
 - College includes any individual holding a bachelor's degree or higher. Those who were nearing completion of their bachelor's degree were coded as noncollege, but they were folded into a separate category of "in school."
- Industry, using the same categories as our previous reports (resources, commercial sales/tangible services, knowledge economy, intangible services, and government/paragovernment).
 - Hours worked (fewer than 40, 40 hours, or more than 40).
 - For part-time workers, we used data in the interview transcripts to determine whether total paid work hours added up to 40. If so, we added them to the 40-hour category.
 - Marital status (yes or no).⁸³
 - Parental status (yes or no).
 - Whether they were saving (yes or no).
 - Whether they invested in stocks or real estate or had another form of investment.
 - Whether they mentioned politics in their responses positively or negatively.
 - Whether they received income from an external source (government, spouse, or parent).

We then used these indicators to draw generalizations across participants.

Notes

1. Brent Orrell, Daniel A. Cox, and Jessie Wall, *The Social Workplace: Social Capital, Human Dignity, and Work in America*, American Enterprise Institute, October 25, 2022, <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/the-social-workplace-social-capital-human-dignity-and-work-in-america>.

2. These data are drawn from our original quantitative sample ($N = 5,037$). These specific percentages are drawn from the employed subset's responses ($N = 2,638$) to question 19b.

3. These data are drawn from our original quantitative sample ($N = 5,037$). These specific percentages are drawn from the employed subset's responses ($N = 2,638$) to questions 12c and 13a.

4. These data, along with any further breakdown of our qualitative respondent sample, are based on the authors' calculations. The full spreadsheet and dataset are available on request.

5. Participant #18, interview with Sarah Feldman (Ipsos), April 27, 2023.

6. Participant #18, interview.

7. Participant #36, interview with Johnny Sawyer (Ipsos), May 22, 2023.

8. Participant #33, interview with Sarah Feldman (Ipsos), May 16, 2023.

9. Participant #17, interview with Sarah Feldman (Ipsos), April 26, 2023.

10. Participant #2, interview with Mallory Newall (Ipsos), April 13, 2023.

11. Participant #3, interview with Sarah Feldman (Ipsos), April 13, 2023.

12. Participant #26, interview with Mallory Newall (Ipsos), May 3, 2023.

13. Participant #24, interview with Sarah Feldman (Ipsos), May 2, 2023.

14. Participant #23, interview with Mallory Newall (Ipsos), May 1, 2023.

15. Participant #29, interview with James Diamond (Ipsos), May 9, 2023.

16. Participant #17, interview.

17. Participant #8, interview with Annaleise Lohr (Ipsos), April 18, 2023.

18. Participant #7, interview with Sarah Feldman (Ipsos), April 18, 2023.

19. Participant #23, interview.

20. Participant #2, interview.

21. Participant #19, interview with Sarah Feldman (Ipsos), April 28, 2023.

22. Participant #30, interview with Sarah Feldman (Ipsos), May 9, 2023.

23. Participant #1, interview with Mallory Newall (Ipsos), April 13, 2023.

24. Participant #16, interview with Mallory Newall (Ipsos), April 25, 2023.

25. Participant #41, interview with James Diamond (Ipsos), June 1, 2023.

26. Participant #10, interview with Mallory Newall (Ipsos), April 19, 2023.

27. Participant #5, interview with Mallory Newall (Ipsos), April 17, 2023.

28. Participant #9, interview with Annaleise Lohr (Ipsos), April 19, 2023.

29. Participant #27, interview with Sarah Feldman (Ipsos), May 4, 2023.

30. Participant #38, interview with Johnny Sawyer (Ipsos), May 24, 2023.

31. Participant #28, interview with Mallory Newall (Ipsos), May 5, 2023.

32. Participant #27, interview.

33. Participant #38, interview.

34. Participant #1, interview.

35. Participant #30, interview.

36. Participant #3, interview with Sarah Feldman (Ipsos), April 13, 2023.

37. Participant #9, interview.

38. Participant #18, interview with Sarah Feldman (Ipsos), April 27, 2023.

39. Participant #3, interview.

40. Participant #21, interview with Mallory Newall (Ipsos), April 28, 2023.

41. Participant #16, interview.

42. Participant #35, interview with Johnny Sawyer (Ipsos), May 18, 2023.
43. Janelle Watson, "Full Time vs. Part Time Benefits: What's the Difference and Which Is Better?," Justworks, December 19, 2023, <https://www.justworks.com/blog/full-time-vs-part-time-benefits-in-the-us#what-benefits-do-full-time-and-part-time-employees-receive->.
44. Participant #6, interview.
45. Participant #12 (Ipsos), interview with Mallory Newall, April 21, 2023.
46. Participant #31, interview with Sarah Feldman (Ipsos), May 15, 2023.
47. Participant #10, interview.
48. Participant #5 (Ipsos), interview with Mallory Newall, April 17, 2023.
49. Participant #20 (Ipsos), interview with Sarah Feldman, April 28, 2023.
50. Participant #13, interview with Sarah Feldman (Ipsos), April 21, 2023; and Participant #34, interview with Johnny Sawyer (Ipsos), May 17, 2023.
51. Participant #17, interview with Sarah Feldman (Ipsos), April 26, 2023.
52. Participant #24, interview.
53. Participant #27, interview.
54. Participant #11, interview with Mallory Newall (Ipsos), April 20, 2023.
55. Participant #34, interview with Johnny Sawyer (Ipsos), May 17, 2023.
56. Participant #5, interview with Mallory Newall (Ipsos), April 17, 2023.
57. Participant #23, interview.
58. Participant #10, interview.
59. Participant #6, interview with Sarah Feldman (Ipsos), April 17, 2023.
60. Participant #11, interview.
61. Participant #21, interview.
62. Participant #4, interview with Mallory Newall (Ipsos), April 14, 2023.
63. Participant #32, interview with Mallory Newall (Ipsos), May 16, 2023.
64. Participant #31, interview.
65. Participant #31, interview.
66. Participant #4, interview.
67. Participant #28, interview.
68. Participant #7, interview with Sarah Feldman (Ipsos), April 18, 2023.
69. Participant #15, interview with Annaleise Lohr (Ipsos), April 25, 2023.
70. Participant #4, interview.
71. Cameron Huddleston, "Here's How Much Economists Say Stay-at-Home Moms Should Get Paid," December 1, 2021, <https://finance.yahoo.com/news/much-economists-stay-home-moms-010723606.html>.
72. Participant #37, interview with James Diamond (Ipsos), May 23, 2023.
73. Participant #8, interview.
74. Participant #36, interview.
75. Participant #26, interview.
76. Participant #31, interview.
77. Participant #41, interview.
78. Participant #16, interview.
79. Participant #16, interview.
80. Participant #25, interview with Sarah Feldman (Ipsos), May 2, 2023.
81. Participant #5, interview.
82. Participant #32, interview.
83. Participant #1 was engaged to be married the weekend after the interview. We marked her as married.

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