

Balancing Home & Work

In 1926, Henry Ford’s “archetypal model of job” was “a five-day, 40-work week with no loss in pay for having Saturdays off.” Stop. Breathe. We Can’t Keep Working Like This.” (a basic explanation of the concept of “the hyperactive hive mind” that plagues modern workplace structures) email from a lawyer Workers in the 21st century need a “new normal”—a four-day, 32-hour work week with no loss in pay/benefits, shared percentages of profit, and yes—paid family and medical leave to show respect for workers. After all, it’s only been a hundred years! In the early 20th century, 675,000 people died in the United States from the Spanish Flu. Worldwide, that pandemic was “the most severe pandemic in recorded history.”¹ In the middle of 2022, the CDC confirmed one million Americans were dead from Covid-19.² Two months later, 123,000 new cases of Covid variants were still being reported daily,³ and 6 million deaths were estimated worldwide.⁴ Covid fatigue—but even more so, political polarization—continued to grind us down... and apart. Not to be outdone by a mere virus, at the end of July, 2022, nature dumped unrelenting waters into Kentucky, leaving the state with disastrous flooding. Less than a year after Buchanan County had faced similar and serious damage from flooding in August of 2021, remnants of a hurricane hit along the northeast coast, and in Virginia, flooding again swept away homes. Virginia State Sen. Travis Hackworth commented, “It’s like déjà vu from ... last year.”⁵ A month later, torrential rains stormed across the southwest, and in drought-stricken states like Arizona, Utah, and New Mexico, fast-rising flood waters left 14 million people stranded.⁶ The worst flooding in nearly a century occurred in Dallas, Texas, where just outside the city, cars were drowning in seven inches of flash floods.⁷ A half year of rain fell in a single hour, and almost 13 inches of rain fell in 12 hours!⁸ Reflections on the pandemic’s scourge across the nation, the loss of so many human beings, and the pain of so much devastation from natural disasters threw into marked contrast the many acts of unbelievable heroism, most notably the selfless care from the entire medical community and volunteers.

Despite notable disparities in work conditions and the lives of the poor and minority communities, many risked their lives by continuing to work while many others, sheltering at home, struggled to stay safe and sane. The pandemic disrupted a right so basic that many had taken it for granted: the right to work...in particular, essential workers. For others, online work from home became a fortuitous alternative. For still others, the necessity for shut-downs and social distancing caused them to lose their ability to work in the small businesses they had set up. Some feel the pandemic did not so much lead to a labor shortage as to a labor shift due to persistent fears of being exposed to Covid-19, the loss of women in the work force, the mental health needs of the many who were traumatized, and the many who would no longer tolerate the value of their work not being respected. Regardless of causes and circumstances, the pandemic led to many of us looking more closely at how we spend our *time*—at work, our home lives, with families, ourselves. In turn, that caused many to rethink the value of the work we do. The onslaught of accumulated stress was funneling into dissatisfaction, not just with health concerns, politics, schools, and the environment, but in what has come to be known as “the Great Resignation.” More than 47 million people quit their jobs in 2021, and 4.5 million more people quit jobs in March, 2022.⁹ Many cited “fear of Covid, unsustainable workloads, exhaustion, feelings of not being valued or disengaged from their work, and women needing to be with children anxious about returning to in-person schooling for the first time in two years.”¹⁰ Throughout 2022, job vacancies nearly doubled. Employers in sectors like service industries and restaurants had difficulty finding people to work for pre-pandemic wages and conditions. Massive shortages of office and service workers and thousands of teacher shortages, lasted well into 2023.¹¹ A nationwide shortage of bus drivers remains. Better pay and working conditions were reasons most people gave for quitting jobs during these years. Many now rejected low pay, no benefits, lack of a voice at work—which showed in attitudes of corporations thinking they owned the lives of their workers.¹² In addition to an aging population and the retirements of many baby-boomers, a business model of maximizing profit and cost-cutting contributed to a crisis in labor supply chains for educators, nurses, doctors, hospital staff, police and firefighters, air pilots, hospitality and restaurants.

Those who continued at their jobs reported “feeling consistently burned out at work.”¹³ Men and women both spoke of feeling underpaid, undervalued, and employers not caring about worker safety. Some wanted higher wages, some more time with families, and some a better balance between work and home, such as a four day work week. Nearly a third quit to start their own business—a risk, but one that many found more rewarding than other options; others took early retirements.^{13a} The Federal Reserve “allows” for a yearly 2% increase in prices. So each year that wages do not rise enough to meet this built-in increased cost of living, families struggle that much more to maintain their standard of living and avoid slipping into poverty. As we now sought to free ourselves from the pandemic, four decades of flat wages and widening inequality in the workplace contributed to deep grievances.¹⁴ The COVID-19 Relief package had included a federal minimum wage of \$15/hour, an amount that would have raised 900 thousand people out of poverty! However, a parliamentary rule was used to block this raise when the overall package was passed. According to David Cooper of the Economic Policy Institute (EPI), \$15/hour in 2025 would have raised “the living standards of the lowest-wage workers above levels those workers experienced 50 years ago. Despite the doubling of labor production, minimum wage workers today are paid...less in real terms than their counterparts earned five decades ago!”¹⁵ This discrepancy seems *inexcusable* when we consider 60% of those who would be helped by a wage increase to \$15 are the same essential and front-line workers—men and women—who had been so reliable during the pandemic, who maintained movement of goods, and provided services for the rest of society.¹⁶ The ones we were so grateful to—or, so we had said. A living wage is the amount needed in order to meet basic food, housing, clothing, and transportation costs per month, either for one’s self or family. The current minimum wage of \$7.25 for a 40 hour work week yields \$1,160 per month—before taxes. Students made budgets to figure out how to make these amounts work. It’s not possible. Most people pay more than that for rent alone.

In 2022, 46% of Americans, ages 18-64, were not making a living wage, and 7 of every 10 workers in hospitality earned at or below minimum wage.¹⁷ Do we wonder why homelessness keeps increasing? The National Alliance to End Homelessness reports, “Fueled by a housing shortage, rising rent prices and the economic hangover from the pandemic, the number of homeless in a new federal government report is expected to be higher than the 580,000 unsheltered before the coronavirus outbreak.”¹⁸ At the other end of the spectrum, billionaires have increased 30% (2,755) worldwide since the pandemic began.¹⁹ During the Reagan era (1981-89), CEO’s made 30 times what their employees made. In 2020, CEO’s were making 380 times what their employees made, and in 2021, 299 times what their employees made! That difference might shock CEO’s ... with shame. These gains are not all merited; in 30 years, CEO’s did not become nearly 13 times more meritorious than the previous generation. Rather the fluke is due in part to AI technologies in the hands of a few private mega-corporations rather than a human-centric government regulating growth and curbing massive monopolies for the greater, common good. Consider that a Labor Department investigation found more than 100 children, ages 13-18, illegally working dangerous jobs for Packers Sanitation Services, Inc. (PSSI), “cleaning slaughterhouses in 13 locations across eight states.” Owned by the Blackstone private-equity firm, PSSI settled for a \$1.5 million slap on the wrist and appointed a new CEO to replace the CEO who retired—though he was responsible for oversight of the company’s workforce.²⁰ A more fair way to compensate both those at the top and employees would be to grant equal across-the-board increases to both. If the CEO is rewarded with a 5% bonus or salary increase, company workers should receive a 5% increase in their salaries. Technology has been increasingly used to squeeze more and more productivity out of workers’ time and efforts but without rewarding increased productivity with higher wages. Using cameras and other technology to monitor the time a call center, delivery service, reservation or postal clerk spends with any one consumer puts unrelenting pressure on the worker to operate as an efficient machine rather than a human being. That kind of stress is also likely to affect workers’ mental health. Even some hospitals have similar restrictions in place now, but I don’t recall a society of, for, and by the people agreeing to this change in how workplaces operate. Timing to complete tasks can be shortened incrementally via mechanized efforts to increase productivity—but at what point is the reduction in time no longer realistic, i.e., *beyond* human scale? And when did we cede the right to determine human workload and productivity to machines?

More women are affected than are men as AI technologies replace what are called repetitive, routine jobs. We should be alerted to this change we are told “we want” by companies selling AI technologies because already more women are needed back in the workforce, particularly in the service economy.²¹ Public health officials experienced depression and anxiety as hospital corporations and insurance companies moved to “normalize” a new work load based on what had been the heroic responses to pandemic figures—in other words, loads that had doubled, then tripled. Rather than being appreciated for their above-and-beyond responses, nurses now were expected to continue with triple patient loads without being reimbursed for the increased load! By October, 2021, an estimated 2.5 million health workers left jobs due to burnout; 8% of public health workers reported suicidal ideation.²² Hospitals warned of being overwhelmed and possibly shutting down.²³ When the Internet replaces human connections with digitized connections, the consequences are often not immediately perceived. In 2020, the trucking industry was an \$800 billion industry, and we were told automated trucks on the highways are here; “it’s just not much discussed.”²⁴ In October, 2021, 80,000 truckers were needed, but *CBS 60 Minutes* had already reported on new driverless trucks in place.²⁵ What motivation is there for someone to get a job when something is about to replace them? After businesses became concerned over a shrinking civilian labor force and millions of unfilled jobs, twenty-three states gave workers wage increases.²⁶ Employers such as Walmart and Target began paying for young people’s education even as they interned in jobs for which they were also paid.²⁷ Millennials (26-41 year olds), now the largest group in the work force, also seem intent on reexamining the relationship between work and their lives. Many were either not interested in work they were doing during the pandemic or did not find value in it, which led them to quit their jobs or find other opportunities, such as starting small businesses.²⁸ “Eighty-one percent of workers are saying that they want to find a workplace that supports mental health and well-being.” In addition, “a safe work environment, connection with others in a work community, work-life harmony, respect and a livable wage that shows we matter to an employer, and opportunities for growth” are conditions a new generation of workers say they want.²⁹ A “home-grown” version of this type of solution is provided by Second Harvest Culinary Training Providence in the South Carolina.

This 13-week program includes apprenticeship in the restaurant business while workers also get paid. Upon completing the program, workers are paid above minimum wage and receive a living wage. But recent strikes, especially in LA City, demonstrate that work issues are not going away anytime soon. In August 8, 2023, over eleven thousand workers—sanitation workers, traffic guards, trash collectors, lifeguards, airport staff, hotel workers—went on strike for the first time in forty years, saying they were tired of not being respected.³⁰ These strikes occurred in addition to writers and actors striking over disagreements about use of artificial intelligence (AI). Competitive pay is only one goal for teachers, who are also concerned about curriculum and work conditions. When questioned about the cliché that most American-born workers are not willing to do the work immigrants do,” some have pointed to different work attitudes. For example, Tonya Hicks at Power Solutions, Inc., an Atlanta electrical firm, suggests immigrants have already been “conditioned” to work in conditions less desirable.³¹ That may be accurate. However, during the pandemic, neither was it desirable to work in public spaces—it was safer to be at home—yet essential workers continued to work. In 2019, before the pandemic began, the number of immigrants in the country, both documented and undocumented, had been stagnant. Small businesses create 73% of jobs in the U.S.; recent unemployment has been at a 54 year low.³² Small businesses seem to agree their businesses are hurt by keeping immigrants out, particularly restaurants, hotels, nursing homes, laundries, delivery and other service industries that sustain much of our economy.³³ Researcher Jose Ivan Rodriguez-Sanchez of the Baker Institute estimates “stagnant immigration overall has been a drag on the whole economy, as measured by GDP.”³⁴ He states bluntly: “The impact of not having enough immigrant workers, it was around 1.1 percent per year in 2020 and 2021—roughly \$200 billion. If we do not have enough workers, we cannot produce. If we cannot produce, people cannot have access to goods and services.”³⁵And, reduced access to goods and services increases inflation. Chief economist at Zip Recruiter Julia Pollack called the final jobs report of 2022 “Goldilocks good news.” Four and a half million jobs were added, but “inflation moderated and wage growth moderated,” which is “what the Federal Reserve wanted to see” to reduce “the risk of a recession.”³⁶

Better pay was the reason about a third of Americans—and most men—gave for changing jobs in the years since the pandemic began. About a quarter—most women—said they wanted “better opportunities. Other reasons given were relocating, losing a previous job, and wanted more “flexible” or remote work.³⁷ “There were in excess of 1.1 million fewer women in the labor force in February 2022 than in February 2020.”³⁸ “Women are still paid 84 cents on the dollar compared with men and...the gap is even bigger for Black and Native American women and Latinas.”^{38a} As a result of being paid less, women receive about \$5,000 less in social security than do men.³⁹ In 2022, to mark Equal Pay Day at the White House, Vice-president Kamala Harris said, “Over the past two years, the pandemic has only deepened these inequities, as caregiving has become more expensive and more difficult to find.”⁴⁰ The recent landmark win by the US Women’s National Soccer Team (USWNST) for pay and prize money equal to that of the men’s soccer team is a victory for all women. Star midfielder Megan Rapinoe stated, “I think the more we connect our stories, the more we literally connect with each other...it’s all kind of the same thing because we’re all dealing with the same issue.”⁴¹ Rapinoe’s call for “connecting our stories” resonates with Rev. Barber’s call for different segments across the nation to come together in intersegmental movements to help each other’s efforts, such as solidifying our efforts to address the concerns of workers’ wages, the poor and/or minority populations. Perhaps the most important factor people gave for leaving their work places during the pandemic was a need for better work-life balances, or respect for the boundaries between employer and employees that AI technology continues to redraw, albeit mechanically. Before and during the pandemic, men and women willing to make exceptions, to work overtime, to meet deadlines, etc. were now exhausted by the pandemic’s relentless pressure on them. Workers began to resent excessive and uncompensated demands on their personal time. It took something like the pandemic to dislodge norms and come up with a hybrid model for a certain amount of office work to be done from home. Currently, this alternative for millions of people now working for global corporations shows that a person can be as productive working at home as they can be working in a company office, at least part time. During the pandemic, nearly 13% of employees were working from home, and 24% worked a hybrid model, with some time spent at home as well as in the office. ⁴²

Those numbers have since declined, and some employers are calling employees back to the office, at least two or three days of the week. But the hybrid model seems likely to continue because 49% of workers still find it easier to retain a work/life balance doing work remotely.⁴³ Workers may have hoped they would be more appreciated for remaining steadfast during the pandemic. In any new normal, workers now want their voices and input into work conditions taken seriously, and they want more respect for the value of their work—which is to say, they want fair exchanges to rebuild whatever trust might once have existed between employer and employee. When the president used bipartisan support to broker a deal averting a railroad strike and asked how the sides reached agreement, he remarked that they “finally figured out this is fair to both sides.”⁴⁴ Workers are now seeking family-friendly policies such as paid family leave in order to account for the changes to family life in a new century. The United States is one of only two countries that does not offer paid family and medical leave! How can that be?! The pandemic made it clear how difficult it is for 21st c. families that are sandwiched between care-giving for the increased needs of both the elderly and the young at home, and then in addition to caring for those at home, also trying to juggle work outside the home. In his 2023 State of the Union address, President Biden said he wanted “12 weeks of paid family and medical leave: “Let’s make sure working parents can afford to raise a family with sick days, paid family and medical leave, affordable childcare. That’s going to enable millions of more people to go and stay at work.”⁴⁵ A new bipartisan group in the House is said to want the same as changes that are needed for families working in the 21st century.⁴⁶ Being able having many financial burdens, 92% of small businesses employers say respecting workers with paid family leave has not hurt them. A third say it has helped productivity and helped retain workers.⁴⁷ In fact, in 2023, South Carolina adopted legislation for school district employees to get up to six weeks of paid parental leave, which the state saw as “an inexpensive way to help stem the teacher exodus.”⁴⁸ In her book *The Moment of Lift: How Empowering Women Changes the World*, Melinda French Gates pointed out “data isn’t fairly tracked.” Economists, which “in the beginning is a male-dominated field, measured productivity as ‘productive work,’ you did in the workplace.” They have not tracked “54 second shifts,” or “unpaid labor at home that women statistically do more of.”⁴⁹

Women caring for children and a home have never been paid for the work they do at home. The demands of the pandemic caught up with that inequality because the economy has become increasingly dependent on women both in the work force and at home. In 2020, a report by US Surgeon General Vivek Murthy called attention to the American workplace needing to change “to better support the emotional and physical well-being of employees” by encouraging “time off for emotional well-being,” providing “better wages for lower-paid workers,” and making employees feel “more valued on the job.”⁵⁰ Murthy said this is the first time the Office of the Surgeon General has put out a framework on workplace mental health and well-being because “businesses are realizing, especially through the course of the pandemic, that the mental health of their workers really matters, that it’s tied to their health as a company...right now, 81% of workers are saying that they want to find a workplace that supports mental health and well-being.”⁵¹ Mental health issues have multiplied exponentially and are being discussed openly and with less stigma. The number of women news reporters who reassessed their own values and then resigned or found other work than working “tragic stories through the pandemic” is telling.⁵² Sloane Heffernan, an Emmy award-winning reporter and weekend anchor at WRAL, wrote about her resignation on Facebook: “COVID has caused many of us to do some soul-searching. For me, it started as a whisper that grew increasing louder during the pandemic,” as it became “increasingly more difficult to cover tragedies.”⁵³ Colleen Quigley, a reporter at WNCN’s CBS 17, also wrote on Facebook: “Covering Covid 19 was unlike anything I’ve reported on. ... Several weeks ago I decided to take time off to focus on my mental health. What I intended as a ‘reset’ instead became a refocus that led me to a big decision. Last week I resigned from CBS 17, bringing my decade long career as an anchor and reporter to an end.”⁵⁴ So not only millennials, but also many other workers are going through a reckoning. They are asking themselves what they want from work and what they’re willing to sacrifice for work.

The surgeon general says, “When we invest in the mental health and well-being of our workers ... the outcome is a win-win: Our workers are better off, but, also, the organizations are better off. Their productivity, their retention, and creativity in the work force all go up.”⁵⁵ Pay and benefits are critical inclusions of the US Surgeon General’s Advisory on Mental Health in the workplace because adequate pay and a livable wage help us feel valued, but “also help us to support our family, to fulfill our responsibilities outside of work.”⁵⁶ The Industrial Revolution is often cited as the forerunner to the Information Age or AI Technological Revolution. In 1926, Henry Ford instituted the “archetypal model of job”—“a five-day, 40-work week with no loss in pay for having Saturdays off.” Today, nearly one hundred years after Ford’s historic change to the work week during the Industrial Revolution, more and more men and women are calling for a four-day, 32-hour work week with no loss in pay/benefits for a post-pandemic, new normal in the 21st century.⁵⁷ Why has it taken a hundred years to see a need for change? A new normal four-day, 32-hour work week would increase time to care for all members of a family. It would give people better control of their schedules, attend to mental as well as physical health needs, and help provide a much needed better balance between the work and the personal lives of a majority of American citizens. Laurie Santos, a cognitive scientist and psychology professor at Yale University, suggests, “I think that we just don’t have enough free time to connect with the people that we care about.”⁵⁸ An ad run by Pillsbury in 2019 mentioned having only 37 minutes a day of quality time for a family, and this was before the pandemic!⁵⁹ A four-day work week would provide time to connect with those we care about most—spouses, children, aging members of the family, neighbors and other relatives. This change is so much needed for workers in the 21st century that it is surprising it has taken a pandemic in addition to nearly a hundred years of last century work habits to shift our work conditions center stage. A compressed four-day week was also considered, but questions about how productive people might be in a 9th or 10th hour of work made it less desirable. Daniel Hamermesh, economist at the University of Texas, and Joe O’Connor, helped develop a four-day work week pilot program. ⁶⁰

When asked if there was loss in productivity or income, Hamermesh and O’Connor stated employers who tried a four-day, 32-hour week found productivity was either maintained or improved and plan to keep this new norm because revenue remained stable or increased. Both found “a shorter work for employees did not seem to undermine productivity and profits.”⁶¹ A second way of rethinking the work place for the 21st century was featured on a *CBS 60 Minutes* program May 5, 2024, as “Work to Own.”⁶² Jon Wertheim reports, “Today, roughly 12 million Americans are employed by companies owned by private equity.”⁶³ The goal now is for these private equity companies to buy the businesses—as KKR just did with Potter Global Technologies—to improve performance and then resell them for a profit—decisions, however, that can also include cuts and layoffs. ⁶⁴There is risk because workers need to perform for investors to buy the companies. Wertheim reports that employee ownership is “the right thing to do that also happens to be good business.”⁶⁵ The motivation for this type of employment improvement is explained as “Give rank-and-file workers a stake in their company on top of salary — plus a voice in how the business is run day-to-day. With skin in the game, those workers will be motivated to work smarter and harder.”⁶⁶ KKR executive Pete Stavros has been meeting with legislators, and although he concedes a model of “employee ownership” is not going to solve the wealth inequality problem, “changes to the tax code could incentivize employee ownership” of more businesses.⁶⁷ We now want greater fairness in the ways work and privilege are distributed, in the way decisions are made that affect the balance of work both in and outside home, and in bringing to the table what we value most—profits, productivity, and people—just not necessarily in that order. After years of the pandemic we may be rediscovering a need for the work that each person contributes to society—each of which warrants fair wages, humane work conditions, and concern for the other’s dignity. Although technology is capable of shielding us from one another, we are rediscovering a need to reconnect, not via screens or virtual “assistants,” but with each other—that is, to reconnect via our human bonds. Equal input into handshakes made fairly, with respect for the contributions each person makes and for the dignity of each individual’s contributions to society is a way we can rebuild trust. Trust is not only foundational for a human-centric society after years of division and the social fabric being nearly torn apart, but trust also reconnects us to being on the same team, i.e., that of humanity—on something resembling a more level playing field.