

Young People Are Going to Save Us All From Office Life

Gen Z-ers and millennials have been called lazy and entitled. Could they, instead, be among the first to understand the proper role of work in life?

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When Ariel Coleman, 28, quit her last job, as a project manager in the corporate office of a bank, it wasn't because her new employer offered her a raise, a different role or more seniority. "The work-life balance is just much better," she said.

At her new company, Omfgco, a branding and design firm in Portland, Ore., everyone works from home on Tuesdays and Thursdays at whichever hours they choose. Ms. Coleman can go for a run or walk her dog.

At the bank, she said, people judged her for taking all her paid time off. At Omfgco, it's encouraged, which is why she didn't mind answering work emails while sitting by the fire on a recent camping trip.

"It's: Get your work done, but don't worry about when those hours are," Ms. Coleman said. "A client calls me at 8 o'clock at night and I'm happy to talk to them, because that means the next day at 10 a.m., I can take my dog to the vet. It enables me to make my career more seamless with my life. It makes it feel more like people are human."

Many of her friends have chosen their jobs for similar reasons, she said. "That's how millennials and Gen Z-ers are playing the game — it's not about jumping up titles, but moving into better work environments," she said. "They're like silent fighters, rewriting policy under the nose of the boomers."

For many Americans, work has become [an obsession](#), and long hours and [endless striving](#) something to aspire to. It has caused [burnout](#), [unhappiness](#) and [gender inequity](#), as people struggle to find time for children or passions or pets or any sort of life besides what they do for a paycheck.

But increasingly, younger workers are pushing back. More of them expect and demand flexibility — paid leave for a new baby, and generous vacation time, along with daily things, like the ability to work remotely, come in late or leave early, or make time for exercise or meditation. The rest of their lives happens on their phones, not tied to a certain place or time — why should work be any different?

Today's young workers have been called lazy and entitled. Could they, instead, be among the first to understand the proper role of work in life — and end up remaking work for everyone else?

It's still rare for companies to operate this way, and the obstacles are bigger than any one company's H.R. policies. Some older employees may think new hires should suffer the way they did, and [employers benefit](#) from having always-on workers. Even those that are offering more flexibility might be [doing it because unemployment is so low](#) and they're competing for workers, which could change if there is an economic downturn.

Also, it's a luxury to be able to demand flexibility in the first place. Those who can tend to have college degrees and white-collar careers, and can afford to take a pay cut in exchange, or be highly selective about their jobs.

That's a kind of freedom that [people in vast sectors](#) of the economy [don't have](#) — and often, it's given to highly regarded employees on a one-off basis, but not to everyone at a firm.

Still, there are signs that things could change for more workers. Some large and influential companies, including Walmart and Apple, have recently [begun talking about the need](#) to shift from prioritizing shareholders above all else to taking care of their employees too. And as more millennials become bosses and more job seekers demand a saner way to work, companies will have no choice.

“They have proven the model that you don't need to be in the office 9 to 5 to be effective,” said Ana Recio, the executive vice president of global recruiting at Salesforce, the tech company. “This generation is single-handedly paving the way for the entire work force to do their jobs remotely and flexibly.”

When Your Office Is on a Mountain Trail

[A survey by PwC](#), an accounting and consulting firm, found that for millennials, work is a thing, not a place.

Flexibility no longer means what it did to older generations — the ability to work from home when a plumber is coming or a child is sick. But it's also not about 21st-century perks like free meals, on-site dry cleaning and Wi-Fi-equipped shuttles that help keep people at work longer.

Instead, it's about employees [shaping their jobs](#) in ways that fit with their daily lives. That could mean working remotely or shifting hours when needed. More companies are offering sabbaticals; free plane tickets for vacations; meditation rooms; exercise or therapy breaks; paid time off to volunteer; and extended paid family leave.

One firm has an employee who works mostly from places like Hawaii and Costa Rica. At another, someone worked remotely while living out of a van for three months, skiing in the mornings and working in the afternoons. One person goes to the office at midnight so he can surf in the morning, and another takes Fridays off to backpack.

“They're maybe not on the partner track, but they're not being penalized,” said Abby Engers, a strategist at Boly:Welch, an employment search firm in Portland, Ore. “People are burnt out. They're making a commitment to themselves to take time off. If they see you're doing the work and doing it well, it doesn't matter if you're doing it at 10 p.m. or 10 a.m.”

And it's no longer just mothers of young children who are [using flexible schedules](#). Women get [penalized](#) when that happens — social scientists call it [the flexibility stigma](#) — and their careers [often never recover](#) in terms of pay or promotions. But if more fathers and people who aren't parents ask for flexibility, the [stigma could lessen](#).

Jonathan Wong, 36, worked 80-hour weeks in management consulting when he became a father. His son would cry every time he saw his roller bag packed for another work trip, he said, and it was hard to take a break even to FaceTime his son before bedtime. So he moved to a job at RAND Corporation, the nonprofit policy research group — and took a 30 percent pay cut.

“I can bring my kid to preschool every morning,” he said. “If the overwork problem will ever be solved, guys need to be part of the solution.”

Some employers aren't comfortable giving people autonomy over where and when they work.

"When younger workers talk about balance, what they are saying is, 'I will work hard for you, but I also need a life,'" said Cali Williams Yost, the chief executive and founder of Flex Strategy Group, which helps organizations build flexible work cultures. "Unfortunately, what leaders hear is, 'I want to work less.'"

But employees say that when they're not forced to cleave life from work, they work more, and more efficiently. Melanie Neiman, 28, is a project manager at Breather, a work space rental company. Unlike at her former, more traditional job, she comes in later in the morning because she is more productive that way, and visits her family more often because she can work from where they live.

"When I'm on vacation, if my Slack pings on my phone, I'll probably answer it, so maybe I work more," she said. Yet she is happy to answer messages when traveling, she said, because it's on her terms. "I would never answer emails at my old job on vacation."

Taking Care of Employees, Too

Social scientists have found that not all young people are asking for these benefits, even if they want them, because they fear they will be perceived as lazy or disloyal. Even when they aspire to more balanced lives, [they often find](#) that traditional workplaces won't enable it.

But dozens of consulting and research [firms](#) that have [surveyed](#) young people [have found](#) that for them, flexibility is a job requirement.

When [Pew Research Center asked](#) which work arrangement would be most helpful to people, young people were more likely than older people to say the flexibility to choose when they worked. Of people 18 to 29, men were more likely than women to say it, and people without children at home were as likely as parents to say it.

In a survey of 11,000 workers and 6,500 business leaders by Harvard Business School and Boston Consulting Group, [the vast majority said](#) that among the new developments most urgently affecting their businesses were employees' expectations for flexible, autonomous work; better work-life balance; and remote working. (Just 30 percent, though, said their businesses were prepared.)

Technology is a big reason for the change. The youngest people entering the work force don't remember a time when people weren't always reachable, so they don't see why they would need to sit in an office to work. (They also say they are more practiced than older colleagues at setting boundaries on how much they use their phones, so it doesn't become overbearing.)

Another reason young people are asking for more flexibility is that they're marrying and having children later, so they're more invested in their careers by the time they do, and have more leverage to ask for what they need. Many are caring for aging parents too.

"Gen Z is so socially aware and so progressive, they're asking for things that older generations have been scared to ask for," Ms. Recio at Salesforce said.

Many have also seen their parents struggle with inflexible employers or unstable jobs. Millennials were the [first generation raised by women](#) who entered professions in big numbers. Many young adults saw their parents lose jobs and savings during the Great Recession. They no longer expect a lifetime of loyalty from an employer, so some say they don't want to give their whole life to work.

'Change the System So We Can All Succeed'

[Few people want](#) to work long, inflexible hours, yet many either work them anyway or [sneak out](#) without asking for permission, [research shows](#).

But more young people, recruiters say, are asking for flexibility upfront, and some prioritize it over pay or seniority. Recruiters who visit college campuses say new graduates no longer see it as something to negotiate for, said Marcee Harris Schwartz, the national director of diversity and inclusion at BDO, the accounting firm: "It's just assumed it's part of the deal."

"Years ago, the interview was, for lack of a better word, a test," said Kamaj Bailey, who works in recruiting at Con Edison, the power company. "Now it's a conversation. Yes, I want to show that I'm a good candidate, but I'm also seeing if I'm going to get what I expect."

John Paul Graff, 34, is a pathologist, as was his father, who worked in private practice at least 12 hours a day. Dr. Graff decided to work in academic medicine, and the No. 1 reason was for work-life balance. He estimated that he gave up about \$100,000 a year but said it's worth it to work 40 hours a week.

"What we settled on was that the most important thing was time," Dr. Graff said. "Money will come, it will go, but you're only given so much time."

"As boomers age, they too are looking for more workplace flexibility, but they seem to begrudge giving the same to younger workers when they didn't have it themselves at their ages and life stage," said Pamela Stone, a sociologist at Hunter College.

Ms. Coleman, who works at the design firm in Portland, said it comes down to this: The members of her generation are unwilling to settle for the way things have always been done. It's especially true of the women, she said, and she is hopeful that men will continue to join them.

"We are just fed up and fired up about asking for what we need," she said. "We're changing the rules. We're the ones tasked with: Let's change the system so we can all succeed."

Describe the ideal workplace for you.

Write an essay entitled "My Dream Workplace"

These questions can help you in your reflection, but you are not obliged to answer the questions.

Reflect on any work experiences you have had: What did you like most about your various jobs? What did you like the least?

Consider what you know about the work experience of your parents and family: What are their workplace priorities and values? What aspects of work do they find beneficial and what, do you think, do they wish they could change?

Next consider your own values: What qualities are most important to you; Salary? Schedule flexibility? A sense of fulfillment? Prestige? Having an opportunity to grow? How do you hope to address your work-life balance? Would you rather work from home or in an office? Would you rather work from 9 to 5 or be able to adjust your schedule to fit the needs of your daily life?

You can read the whole article at:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/17/style/generation-z-millennials-work-life-balance.html>