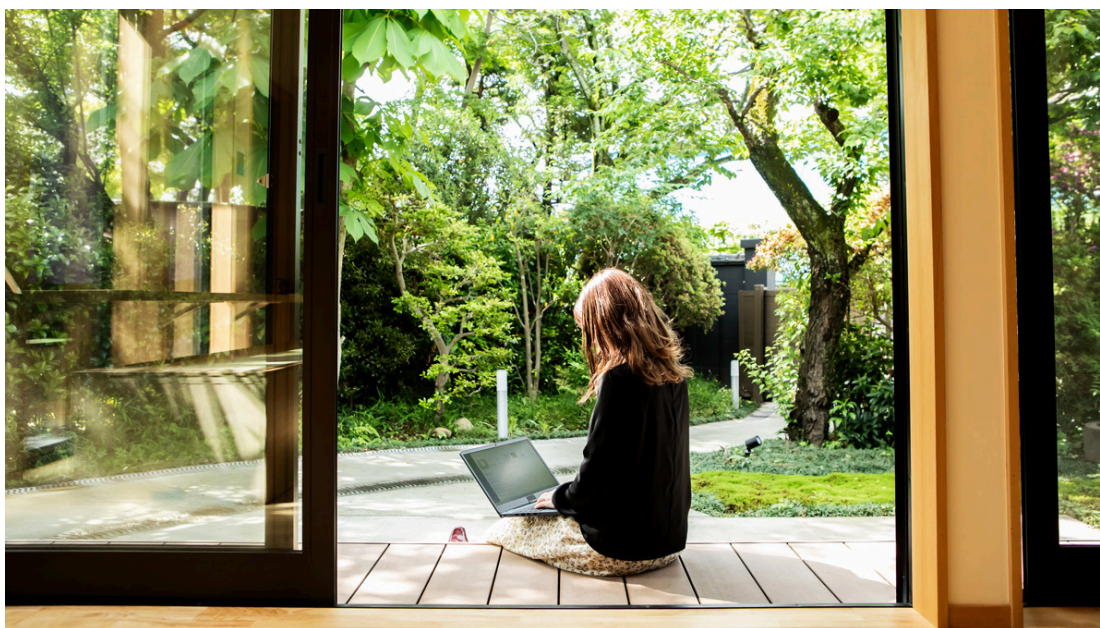


Remote Work

Research: People Still Want to Work. They Just Want Control Over Their Time.

by Stephanie Tepper and Neil Lewis, Jr.

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Summary. To better understand the role that control over one's time plays in job and life satisfaction, the authors analyzed survey data from a nationally representative sample. They found: 1) People who had greater control over their time had the highest job... [more](#)

Workers — particularly those considered “[knowledge workers](#)” who are able to do most if not all of their work with a laptop and an internet connection — have been fighting for the right to maintain control over their time for years. While working from home in 2020 and 2021, they demonstrated to their bosses that they are able to [maintain, or in some cases even increase](#), their productivity while working flexibly. Their bosses, on the other

hand, have been pulling them in the opposite direction; executives and managers have been fighting to get workers back into the offices that companies are paying a lot of money to lease. This struggle has affected workers and companies alike. Workers quit en masse during a period that became known as “[the Great Resignation](#),” and employers who instituted return-to-office mandates have [struggled to hire and retain top talent](#). Now, especially with [Gen Z making up an increasing share of the working population](#) and the conversations around hybrid work and returning to the office stagnating, demands for increased flexibility in work arrangements are still top of mind for many employees and job seekers.

Although many of these dynamics have been in the headlines since 2020, they are not actually new. According to data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, [resignations have been steadily increasing for more than a decade](#).

Part of the reason for this increase, it seems, is that workers have been contemplating the kinds of lives they want and reflecting on the role they want work to play in their lives. The reality is that people spend a lot of their lives working, and because of that, people’s day-to-day work experiences have a substantial impact on how satisfied they are with their lives. The relationship between work experience and life satisfaction has [long been established](#), but given the recent struggles between workers and employers, we wondered how factors related to work flexibility might affect that satisfaction.

Does having control over their time actually make workers happier — and more likely to stay in their jobs? To find out, we analyzed survey data from the [National Study of the Changing Workforce](#), a nationally representative sample of 1,516 workers in the United States. It contains measures like whether people feel like they have enough time, how much control they have over

their work schedule, and how satisfied they are at work and in life. These measures allow us to examine the relationship between how people experience their time and their well-being — both at work and overall.

Previous research has documented that how people experience time — and in particular, whether they feel they have control over their time — affects their motivation to work toward a variety of long-term goals. We wanted to know whether those dynamics operated in a similar way in the modern workforce. We also wanted to understand the difference between feeling like you don't have enough time to do the things you need to do (referred to in this line of research as a sense of time scarcity) and feeling like you don't have control over your time. These feelings can go hand in hand, but they don't always. For instance, you might feel a sense of time scarcity when your schedule is filled with tasks you don't have time to complete, even if you have total control over that schedule.

We found a few key patterns that can help us to collectively understand the tension between employees and employers in the conflict over whether (and how often) employees should be required to return to the office. First, people who had greater control over their time — that is, who had more flexibility in their work schedules — had the highest job satisfaction and overall satisfaction with their lives. Second, those who felt a sense of time scarcity had less satisfaction with their jobs and were less satisfied with their lives. These findings mean that feeling like you don't have enough time *and* feeling like you don't have control over the limited time you do have are both negative predictors of well-being.

The third key finding — which is particularly important in light of contemporary discourse — is that the number of hours people worked was *not* related to how satisfied people were with their

jobs. Finally, for those who had more control over their time, having scarce amounts of time — that is, feeling time scarcity — did not undermine their job satisfaction as much as it did for those who had less control over their time.

Taken together, these findings tell us a few key things about workers and their experiences in the modern workplace. First, job satisfaction is not just about how much work employees have to do. Some employers (and too many pundits) have recently been arguing that “nobody wants to work anymore.” Our analyses do not support that (cynical) view of contemporary workers. It is not the case that employees who work less are more satisfied than those who work more.

Instead, the driving factor behind worker satisfaction seems to be how much control over their time workers feel they have. Employees are not resisting the office because they don’t want to work or want to work less; instead, they want to be able to control their time — to do some chores between Zoom meetings, for instance, or get more regular exercise instead of spending 10 days per year (or almost a year of one’s life) commuting.

To meet employees’ diverse needs, employers should engage in continuous dialogue with workers to understand their desired degrees of structure and autonomy. Employers can institute workplace policies that create flexibility and control for workers, including remote, hybrid, or asynchronous work options and leave policies that afford employees more time with their loved ones. In addition to helping employees be more satisfied at work and potentially increasing retention, these types of policies can also help organizations become more accessible and equitable.

There are, of course, some limitations to our findings. Our analyses are correlational by nature — we did not randomly assign workers to different work arrangements and track changes

in their satisfaction over time. (We do think more experimentation of that sort would benefit the research literature on the future of work.) Another limitation that we mentioned earlier, but is worth repeating, is that the dynamics we have written about do not generalize to all types of work. Some jobs simply cannot be made flexible; there are essential jobs that require in-person work for those workplaces (and our society) to function. We have focused mostly on higher-wage jobs that can be made flexible; that flexibility matters for those employees. Finally, while we have generally discussed the benefits of flexible work arrangements, it is possible that there is such a thing as too much flexibility. Some employees benefit from more structured work arrangements and mentoring opportunities, suggesting a need for both flexibility and structured support even in remote work environments, as can be the case with employees starting their careers. As workplaces navigate future work arrangements, it will be important for them to ensure that their workers get all the support they need.

As many organizations continue to wrestle with how to structure work policies, now is the time to figure out how to grant employees control over their time in ways that can motivate them to do their best work, and experience greater satisfaction in both work and life. In our research we found that employees who have greater control over their time tend to be more satisfied with both their work and their lives. This suggests that work arrangements that grant employees more control and flexibility may not only improve employee well-being, but may also help employers retain the top talent they've been struggling to keep.

ST

Stephanie Tepper is a behavioral scientist who studies behavioral and policy

interventions to reduce economic inequality and promote economic opportunity. She is an Associate Fellow at the U.S. Office of Evaluation Sciences and a Postdoctoral Scholar at Jeb E. Brooks School of Public Policy at Cornell University.

NJ

Neil Lewis, Jr. Dr. Neil Lewis Jr is a behavioral scientist who studies the motivational, behavioral, and equity implications of social interventions and policies. He is a Nancy and Peter Meinig Family Investigator in the Life Sciences at Cornell University and Weill Cornell Medicine, where he is also associate professor of communication, medicine, and public policy.



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