



In Defense of Work

By Dev Patnaik

From burnout to quiet quitting, American workers have become disillusioned by the “work to live” mindset for many years. This article outlines how we can embrace the “live to work” mindset by reconnecting to a sense of personal purpose and making meaningful contributions to others.

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“How long am I going to do this?”

That’s the question on many people’s minds as they headed back to work this new year. I’ve heard the same sentiment from CEOs to frontline employees. All of a sudden, it seems like their careers may be time-dated.

It’s easy to blame this sentiment on exhaustion. Many of us have been pulled through an emotional wringer in the past few years, drained by a pandemic, economic uncertainty, geopolitical angst, and job changes. But weariness may be only part of the problem. We may be succumbing to groupthink.

A while back, I asked my friend and mentor Alan Webber what he thought was going on. Alan was the editor of the Harvard Business Review and co-founded *Fast Company* magazine. Today, he’s the Mayor of Santa Fe.

As he sees it, Americans’ attitudes about work tend to swing back and forth in a twenty-year cycle. We’ll go through a phase where we see work as our primary goal in life: the “live to work” mindset. We then spend a decade or two gradually shifting to see work as just a means to achieving other life goals: the “work to live” mindset.

Alan and his partner Bill Taylor founded Fast Company in the mid-nineties when America was in the throes of the first Internet boom and some people were bringing a sleeping bag to work and living on ramen in hopes of having an IPO. That “live to work” mindset may have peaked right around the time of the dot-com bubble and the 9/11 attacks.

Since then, the pendulum has been swinging back to a “work to live” mindset. Over the last 20 years, many of us have come to see work as a necessary evil we put up with in order to do other things. The anti-work mindset showed up in trends like gig-working, *The 4-Hour Workweek*, the FIRE (Financial Independence, Retire Early) movement and the recent spate of quiet quitting.

I think we probably reached peak “work to live” during the pandemic, when millions of workers retreated from the office to the world of Zoom calls and pajama-clad meetings. The cost of this transition has become increasingly apparent. It’s made work feel less meaningful—and ironically more exhausting—by diminishing that vital sense that we’re contributing to the tribe. One study found that prolonged videoconferencing triggered “concerning changes” in subjects’ nervous systems, indicating heightened fatigue, reduced attention and strain on the heart. Online meetings just can’t replicate the rich sensory feedback and social dynamic that comes from interacting with people in the same room.

In their book *Younger Next Year*, Chris Crowley and Henry S. Lodge examined why some people start to fall apart physically and mentally in their 60s while others enjoy healthy, active lives well into their 80s and beyond. Alongside regular exercise and sensible eating, the authors find that the difference comes down to the extent to which individuals make a meaningful contribution to others, whether that’s to their company, their family, or society at large. We need to be needed.

Evolutionary biologists have a chilling theory for why that’s the case: your brain doesn’t exist just to keep you alive. It exists to keep the *herd* alive. If you don’t keep moving and if you don’t keep contributing, your brain starts shutting you down. Because you’re a drag on the rest of the pack. Once we’re no longer helpful, our bodies and minds start to deteriorate.

To be sure, we needn’t descend into widespread workaholism. No one wants to emulate the Japanese phenomenon of *karoshi*, where people literally work themselves to death. But we are wired to feel fulfilled when we contribute to others in meaningful ways—and work is the most vital channel for doing that. It doesn’t really matter what kind of work, how many hours a week we do it or even if it’s paid. What’s critical is that our efforts contribute to something greater than ourselves.

Retiring without direction, or with a goal like “spending more time with the grandchildren” is unlikely to qualify as a meaningful contribution, however much joy it may bring. Leaving a job to become a caregiver for those grandchildren would absolutely pass the test. A busy executive who steps down to become a part-time board member or to relax on a sun-dappled beach is apt to go stir-crazy in a matter of months. If they wanted to escape corporate life, they’d be better off shifting to a leadership role in the nonprofit sector. Or running for Mayor of Santa Fe.

We’re about due for the pendulum to swing back again—and I think that’s a good thing. Work moves our lives forward. It can keep our brains active. Done well, it can bring a greater sense of purpose to your life. Hindus even consider righteous work to be Karma Yoga: an act of crafting the soul.

So, if you feel exhausted or checked out, there are some simple changes you can make: Start showing up in person more often. While surveys suggest that people are still reluctant to return to the office, you may be surprised by the positive psychological boost you get from having more actual face time with colleagues.

Second, make an effort to devote more of your day to the parts of your work that actually bring you joy. Diving into fun pet projects can help to remind you why you liked the job in the first place. And they can also offer unexpected opportunities for innovation and learning. A weird side project launched by Google's Larry Page turned into Android.

Third, if you really think you're in the wrong place, ensure you get the most out of your final months by creating a timeline for achieving goals that will both give you a sense of purpose and set you up for your next act. You don't need to have all the answers. Dividing an 18-month period into a series of six three-month sprints will make it feel far less like a marathon slog and far more productive.

These may seem like small steps, but don't be surprised if by trying them you start to feel less exhausted and more engaged and fulfilled again. We finally seem to be past the years of instability and struggle. I get the sense that 2024 will be all about reconnecting: to ourselves, to the people around us and to a greater sense of purpose. It's time to get back to work.

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