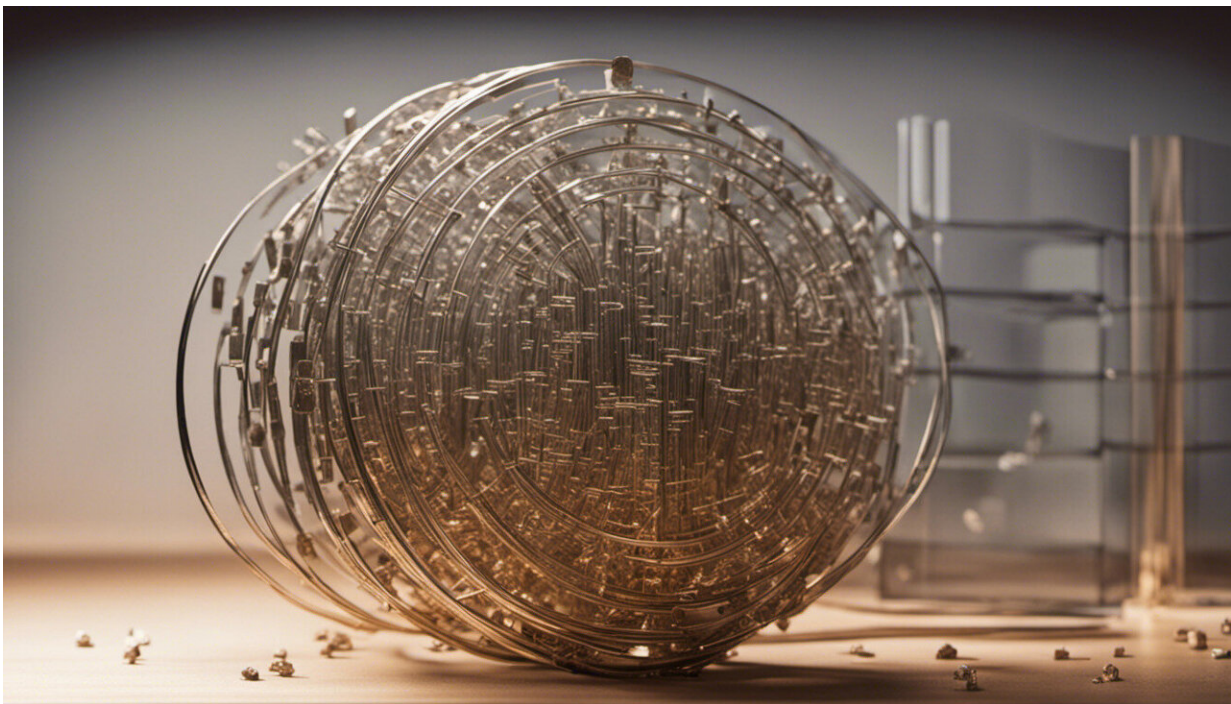


Busting the anti-work myth: Most people actually like their bosses

October 20 2022, by Scott Schieman



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Do you work for a five-star boss? If [quiet quitting](#)—a demonstration of work-to-rule where employees do no more than the minimum work required by their contract—is really a thing, I'd expect more employees to be vocal about disliking their bosses.

Some observers attribute this latest [so-called work trend](#) to the pervasiveness of [bad bosses](#). But as a sociologist who studies trends in the quality of worklife in Canada and the United States, I have my doubts.

Even if you haven't experienced a bad [boss](#), they're easy to spot in [popular culture](#). We love them as antagonists—Miranda Priestly in "The Devil Wears Prada," Franklin Hart Jr. in "9 to 5," Margaret Tate in "The Proposal," John Milton in "The Devil's Advocate" (who was literally Satan) and Darth Vader are all iconic film characters.

Watching a fictional bad boss on screen is one thing, but experiencing their dark side in real life is another. Having an unsupportive, unfair and incompetent boss can be infuriating.

Given all the [chatter about quiet quitting](#) and the [rise in anti-work rhetoric](#) these days, I wondered: Does anyone have a good boss? How were relations between employees and supervisors before the pandemic and have they since soured?

Is your boss good, bad or 'meh'?

With the help of the research firm Angus Reid Global, I led four [national surveys of Canadian workers](#). First, I established pre-pandemic data points with a survey in September 2019. Then, throughout the pandemic, I fielded similar comparable surveys in September 2020, 2021 and 2022 to track trends—roughly 13,500 study participants in total.

To measure employees' perceptions of their bosses, I asked respondents to rate their immediate supervisor or manager on three qualities—supportive, fair and competent—using a five-point scale.

To summarize the patterns in a digestible way, I classify a four or five rating as appraisals of a "good boss," a one or two rating as signifying a "bad boss" and a three rating as a mere "meh boss."

If horrible bosses are so ubiquitous, evidence of unsupportive, unfair and incompetent bosses should have shown up in the [survey results](#).

Supervisor ratings should have been unflattering before COVID-19 and deteriorated since. But that wasn't the case—in fact, it wasn't even close.

I like my boss—no, really!

In September 2019, most Canadians reported having a good boss, with 72 percent on average giving high marks to supportiveness, fairness and competence. Only 12 percent of respondents gave low marks based on these qualities; the remaining 16 percent had a "meh boss".

By September 2020, little had changed: 75 percent had a good boss, nine percent had a bad boss and 16 percent had a "meh boss." And, remarkably, the ratings in September 2021 and 2022 were almost identical to 2020.

Digging deeper, I dissected the good boss category and found an unexpected nuance: The percentage reporting a five-star boss increased to 47 percent in 2020 from 39 percent in 2019 and held steady in 2021 until softening only slightly to 45 percent in 2022. Most of that pandemic-related shift was at the upper end—shifting from good to great.

Have things gone south down south?

As a set, these data points challenge the [anti-work narrative](#) that most workers suffered under a malevolent boss before the pandemic and that

relations have since deteriorated. But these results are specific to Canada. Much of the anti-work rhetoric seems to emanate from the United States—are supervisor ratings worse there?

To find pre-pandemic data points, I use the gold standard for tracking Americans' attitudes and perceptions: the [General Social Survey](#). Then, to gage pandemic-related shifts, I partnered with Angus Reid Global to conduct my own national survey of 2,300 American workers in 2022.

Respondents were asked to rate each of the following statements as either very true, somewhat true, not too true or not at all true:

- **My supervisor treats me fairly:** In 2018, 93 percent said very/somewhat true; in 2022, it was 91 percent.
- **My supervisor is concerned about the welfare of those under them:** In 2018, 86 percent said very/somewhat true; in 2022, it was 87 percent.
- **My supervisor is helpful to me in getting the job done:** In 2018, 87 percent said very/somewhat true; in 2022, it was 83 percent.

These results make it clear that the anti-work narrative is a myth in Canada and the U.S. The prevalence of bad bosses is much lower than popular media suggests.

How to have fruitful conversations

To be clear, the impacts of working for a Miranda Priestly are [anything but glamorous](#). It can undermine the [benefits of job qualities](#), like autonomy, and degrade well-being. Even [good pay doesn't make up for being mistreated at work](#). Maybe that explains why the negativity resonates.

Catchy phrases like "quiet quitting" cue up a long line of what *The Atlantic's* Derek Thompson calls [anti-work neologisms](#) that proliferate the media landscape. [Incendiary claims](#) of widespread employee-management conflict, like "a lot of people realized during the pandemic that their boss doesn't really care if they die," rile up the [inner Marxist](#). Angry headlines like "[Welcome to the Take-This-Job-and-Shove-It Economy](#)" are more click-worthy than "I Like My Supervisor."

But unchecked sociological hyperbole about the dismal quality of worklife comes with costs. It creates a false impression that most things about work suck for most people. That dispiriting vision leads down a garden path—one that ultimately doesn't lead most of us anywhere fruitful.

While fantasizing about telling your boss to "take this job and shove it" might feel good, it doesn't do much to affect real change. Instead, the conversation should address the most significant issues affecting workers, like labour shortages, unfair wages and enhancing workers' collective voices about decisions that affect them. Moving the dials on any of these interrelated concerns would be an empowering upgrade to the workplace.

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