

New research debunks the 'unhappy worker' narrative, but finds most still believe it

February 12 2024, by Scott Schieman



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As a sociologist who studies how people think and feel about work, I've been struck by the unflattering cultural narrative that has intensified around work in recent years.

The so-called "[Great Resignation](#)" of 2021 and 2022 saw an increase in [anti-work rhetoric](#) and the [onset of the "quiet quitting" trend](#)—a variation on the "work to rule" concept where employees do no more than the bare minimum required by contract. Quitting was also described [as being fun and contagious](#).

A Wall Street Journal headline from November 2023 [summarized the sentiment aptly](#): "Why is Everyone So Unhappy at Work Right Now?"

We're told ["work won't love you back"](#) and that [loving your job is a "capitalist trap."](#) Long-suffering workers reached their [breaking point, according to some news commentators](#), in what has been called the [anti-work movement](#). Some interpreted the tumult in the labor market as evidence that workers were simultaneously fed up and empowered to seek better working conditions.

But not all commentators have bought into this narrative. Reflecting on the [Great Resignation](#), American journalist Derek Thompson found "workers are more satisfied than the internet would have you believe."

Thompson [based his argument on studies](#) that found consistently high levels of job satisfaction among American workers—a pattern I have discovered in my own research.

But I wondered about something else: could the adverse effects of anti-work rhetoric spread beyond one's own job [perception](#)? If the portrayal of the Great Resignation—especially its purported personal causes—tainted work attitudes, then widespread discontent should be apparent.

Americans' perception of work

In November 2023, with the help of the [research firm YouGov](#), I

conducted a national survey of 5,000 American workers to test my hunch. I call my study [the MESSI \(Measuring Employment Sentiments and Social Inequality\)](#). The MESSI sample is designed to broadly reflect the socio-demographic, socio-economic, and geographic characteristics of the American working population.

I asked participants five work-related questions. To ground the MESSI in well-established benchmarks, I modelled these questions after the [General Social Survey](#).

For each of the five questions, I identified "perception glitches" by comparing two [data points](#): what respondents reported about their own job versus what respondents *believe* most American workers think or feel about their jobs. The distance between the two represents the perception [glitch](#).

1. Satisfaction: All in all, how satisfied are you with your job? The MESSI finds that 79 percent of workers feel somewhat or very satisfied with their own job, but only 49 percent think that most Americans feel somewhat or very satisfied. That's a 30-point perception glitch.

2. Stressed out: How often do you find your work stressful? Thirty-two percent of workers describe their own work as highly stressful, but 69 percent believe that most Americans are in highly stressful jobs. That's a 37-point perception glitch.

3. Underpaid: When you think about the pay you get for your work, do you feel you are underpaid, paid about right, or overpaid? Sixty-two percent of workers feel underpaid, but 89 percent think that most Americans feel underpaid. That's a 27-point perception glitch.

4. Management-employee relations: In general, how would you describe relations in your workplace between management and employees? Fifty-

seven percent describe management-employees relations in their workplace as quite or very good, but only 22 percent believe that most Americans experience positive management-employee relations. That's a 35-point perception glitch.

5. Going above and beyond: How much effort do you put into your job beyond what is required? Fifty-two percent say they put a lot of effort into their job beyond what is required, but only 13 percent believe that most Americans go above and beyond. That's a 39-point perception glitch.

Collectively, my MESSI findings both challenge the "unhappy worker" narrative and confirm that most people believe it.

'Everything is terrible but I'm fine'

These perception glitches could reflect what Thompson calls the "[everything is terrible but I'm fine](#)" mindset, or what American economist Paul Krugman calls the "[yawning gulf](#)" between public perceptions of the economy and personal financial conditions.

They could also reflect a [cognitive bias](#) in which we pay attention to negative information about others, revealing our [tendency toward individual optimism but social pessimism](#).

My research with Paul Glavin, a sociologist at McMaster University, has started to measure the consequences of the "unhappy worker" narrative. [So far, we've discovered](#) that when Americans perceive widespread job dissatisfaction among the general public, they feel less committed to their own job and employer. Even if it's just an illusion, there's a misery spillover effect.

Moving the dials on these perception glitches might reduce the [collective](#)

"[bad vibes](#)." These days, [we seem resistant to good news](#)—and that extends to work as well. But a more accurate read on what most people think and feel about work might boost optimism.

That doesn't negate the fact that [many people are struggling financially](#). And yet, after years of negative rhetoric, a [mindset shift](#) towards believing work isn't a necessary evil couldn't hurt.

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Citation: New research debunks the 'unhappy worker' narrative, but finds most still believe it (2024, February 12) retrieved 10 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-02-debunks-unhappy-worker-narrative.html>

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