Changing Work Values: Beyond Hustle Culture

Francesca Bellini[1] – Vera Lomazzi[2]

Changing Work Values: Beyond Hustle Culture. For a long time, working culture has been associated with hustling aspects, stressing productivity, constant devotion, and presentialism. Recently, alternative tendencies valuing more personal satisfaction, well-being, and self-realization in different domains of life other than work have resulted in emerging phenomena in contrast to the dominant hustle culture. These phenomena include the Great Resignation, "boomerang employees," "quiet quitting", and "quiet thriving." While cultural changes were already in place, as suggested by data from the European Values Study (EVS), the Covid-19 pandemic served as a catalyst for the shift in values that drives workers to reassess the meaning of and satisfaction with their work. Building on Bauman's perspective on societal change, this contribution aims to offer a sociological interpretation of the ongoing dynamics underlying the change in work values.

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Introduction

While work ethics can vary across societies and workplaces, the emergence of the so-called "hustle culture" is common in many post-modern societies. Rozentals (2022) defined hustle culture as a workplace culture that "puts work at the center of life" and is characterized by long hours and excessive commitment to work, one wherein time off is seen as laziness and not hustling is considered a failure. Dynamics of expectations and an unspoken agreement between employers and employees regarding intensive dedication to work result in normative pressure that can lead to burnout. Hustle culture mandates hard work and an incisive and incessant approach to work, urging workers to pursue assiduously personal success and to make a constant effort to excel. Personal fulfillment is therefore only possible through a constant and almost uninterrupted commitment wherein productivity is crucially pursued. The demands of this cultural context are pressing to the point of challenging workers' well-being and mental health. Hustle culture has become predominant and remains largely undiscussed in most of the post-modern world where platform economy, gig work, and remote work seem to be particularly affected (Alles 2023; Munro 2022). The technological progress has enlarged opportunities for interconnection and digital communication but at the same time made workers potentially reachable anytime and anywhere, raising concerns. The debate on the right to disconnect became urgent to the point that in early 2021, the Euro-

[1] Correspondence: Francesca Bellini, Department of Sociology, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan, Italy.
[2] Correspondence: Vera Lomazzi, Department of Management, University of Bergamo, Via dei Caniana 2, 24127 Bergamo, Italy. E-mail: vera.lomazzi@unibg.it ORCID: 0000-0003-2699-2768

pean Parliament passed a resolution in favor of the right to disconnect, calling on the EU Commission to prepare a directive[3] "that enables those who work digitally to disconnect outside their working hours."

Recently, alternative approaches to work started to emerge, pointing to the relevance of workers' well-being in the digitalized world, work–life balance, and to a shift in work values, with a tendency to prioritize self-realization and the social meaning of work. These processes became more evident after the Covid-19 pandemic through phenomena such as the Great Resignation, boomerang employees, quiet quitting and quiet thriving. This contribution aims to offer a reflection on the current coexistence of different—and almost diametrically opposed—work ethics, exploring the role of the pandemic in the possible change in work values.

After providing a short introduction to hustle culture, an overview of other emerging phenomena is provided in the context of the general social change pushed by the pandemic. It will also appraise the ongoing value change using theoretical tools offered by Bauman's perspective on societal change. With a focus on Europe, work values will be explored using pre-pandemic data to consider whether changes in work ethics were already present before the pandemic.

Roots of hustle culture

Where does hustle culture come from? It is, of course, as old as the industrial revolutions and has endured due to the emphasis on capitalist productivity further supported by neoliberalism. Searching for the roots of hustle culture can bring us to the roots of sociological thinking, with Max Weber's contribution to Protestant work ethics.

Weber's reflection on the meaning and value of work provides a valuable critical framework for examining the complex dynamics of contemporary work and for critically assessing its effects on society and human well-being. In his pioneering analysis, significant parallels emerged with the contemporary culture of hustle culture. Weber (1905) described a work environment centered on a work ethic based on individual responsibility, diligence and the pursuit of perfection in one's profession, in which people were thus in an endless race toward success, driven by a sense of responsibility toward a divine order or a desire to demonstrate virtue and dedication. In this view, work is almost always the only element capable of giving deep meaning to an individual's life.

[3] Eurofound (2021), Right to disconnect, European Industrial Relations Dictionary, Dublin https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/en/european-industrial-relations-dictionary/right-disconnect

Even though it was a very different historical context, where dynamics related to the industrial revolutions were opposed to those of post-modern and digital society, the relationship between workers and their work evokes the obsessive and sometimes alienating traits of contemporary hustle culture, placing work and career at the center of a person's life, sometimes even sacrificing other aspects, such as private life and personal interests. Furthermore, the strong emphasis on rationalization as a key element of modernity progress is also a major driver of increased productivity over the centuries, fostering the belief that success and the achievement of professional goals are key elements for living a satisfying life. The concept of sacrificing leisure time for professional advancement can be seen as a sign of determination and dedication to one's career, reflecting the belief that constant commitment and demonstrating one's value in the workplace are essential to achieving ambitious goals. Therefore, total dedication and maximizing the investment of energy in work while sacrificing leisure time became not only socially legitimate but encouraged as a sign of valuable and desirable commitment. However, unlike Calvinist ethics, the motivation to work hard and with full commitment is driven not by devotion to God but by economic objectives, in line with neo-liberalism values. Also, while Protestant ethics precedes modern capitalism, in the current hustle culture, the role of digital technology is pivotal for the economic advancement but, by being connected and always reachable, it increases the exposure to challenges related to the worker's well-being and mental health (Hill 2020; Yuningsih et al. 2023).

Beyond the hustle?

Despite the enduring emphasis on hustle culture, there are signs of a growing awareness that success should not only be measured in terms of professional accomplishments but also in terms of balance, well-being and personal satisfaction. Alternative work ethics are emerging and their manifest examples can be seen in phenomena such as the highly debated Great Resignation, the boomerang employees, the quiet quitting, as well as job re-shuffling and the search for quiet thriving, combined with the growing awareness of "bullshit jobs", a term by Graeber (2018) to indicate jobs considered to be without added value or meaning that generate disaffection or alienation in workers, reflect a broader transformation in the way people view work and their relationships with it.

Great Resignation and Boomerang Employees

In recent times, the labor market has been disrupted by a phenomenon that exploded particularly in the US during the Covid-19 pandemic and that quickly spread globally: the Great Resignation. With this concept, we mean a trend that consists of the abandonment by a large number of workers of their workplace, sometimes even without having an alternative waiting for them, to devote themselves to the search for greater well-being, meaning and personal and professional realization. This development was christened the Great Resignation on 10 May 2021 by Anthony Klotz during an interview with Bloomberg entitled "How to Quit Your Job in the Great Post-Pandemic Resignation Boom." He stated that the high number of resignations in 2021 was linked to the low number of resignations in the previous year (in 2020, 1.5% of the US workforce in contrast to 2.3% in 2019). 2020 was a year of absolute uncertainty in which people, even those who would have liked to resign, remained in their jobs only to resign the following year due to the so-called "pandemic-related epiphanies", which may be due to family time, commuting or autonomy gained during lockdown and remote working. This led to a 3% turnover rate in mid-2022. Analyzing data provided by the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, Gittleman (2022) highlights that such turnover rates are not even the highest ever recorded, but what is striking is the surprisingly rapid rate of growth in resignations, which has exceeded predictions based solely on the contraction of the labor market. Therefore, explanations from different perspectives than the economic one can be helpful for a better understanding.

Psychological studies (e.g., Moon et al. 2023) have demonstrated that introversion/extraversion differences among employees influence burnout and voluntary turnover, phenomena that were heightened during the "Great Resignation." In general, extraversion is associated with a lower risk of burnout, thereby reducing turnover: extroverted individuals tend to adapt better to social and work-related changes. On the other hand, introverted individuals, who are less incline to handle these dynamics, may have adopted turnover as an adaptive coping strategy.

Sociology can offer lens to read changes in work ethics at a societal level as, for example, Bauman's work (1997; 2009) on the progressive narrowing of the role and significance of religion in human life in view of the profound transformations in people's living conditions and existential tasks. These transformations have generated an increasingly marked gap between the religious interpretation of the world and the daily experiences of individuals. In particular, Bauman points out that the rise of the prospect of human self-sufficiency is in stark contrast to the traditional mission of religion to ensure salvation and the Kingdom of Heaven. In the past, religion focused on the hope of afterlife salvation, with an emphasis on self-sacrifice, the mortification of the body and the rejection of earthly pleasures to ensure redemption and eternal salvation. How-

ever, over time, there has been a decline in interest in eternity as the ultimate goal, with a greater focus on earthly tasks and pleasures "here and now" supporting hedonist and self-realization values rather than self-transcendental and collectivistic orientations. This shift in perspective has led to a greater appreciation of immediate experiences and gratifications rather than focusing on spiritual concerns and the search for salvation in the afterlife. With the progressive decline of religious influence in the lives of individuals, work-related values have undergone a transformation. People have begun to evaluate work according to more worldly criteria, such as personal fulfillment, by also pursuing careers and employment opportunities that reflect their interests and passions, material well-being and professional satisfaction, rather than adhering to religious imperatives. In Inglehart's words (1997), post-materialist values became predominant in post-modern societies and people started to pursue emancipative values of self-realization and autonomy. This perspective offers a renewed lens through which to read "resignation." Often, the word resignation is understood as "surrender." However, in the case of the abandonment of work, perceived as sacrificing and mismatching one's deepest values, should resignment be seen as a process of surrender or as a positive process of affirmation of oneself in one's own life (Coin 2023)?

This reflects the emerging trend toward flexibility in the approach to work, whereby people embrace the possibility of leaving employment to pursue new opportunities that better adapt to their personal and professional needs, highlighting the need for workers to be agile and willing to explore new opportunities to maintain their well-being and realize their job potential.

Recent literature underlines how psychological and social well-being, the sense of belonging and of doing something meaningful, and working time arrangements suitable for healthy work-life balance became more and more relevant in workers' decisions about quitting and searching new jobs. In contrast to the media's narrative of the Great Resignation as based on salary dissatisfaction, Sull and colleagues (2022) revealed that, although compensation is a topic present in the debate, it is not as determining a factor as one might think, ranking only 16th among the various topics that influence employee turnover. The first significant predictor of turnover mentioned is the presence of a toxic culture within the workplace, which is 10.4 times more likely to contribute to turnover compared to salary issues. The studies by Parker and Horowitz (2022) and De Smet et al. (2021) both underline the multidimensional evaluation carried out by employees before resigning, considering the following aspects: low pay, lack of opportunities for advancement, feeling disrespected at work or not enough valued by the organization and managers, rigid work schedules. Varavallo et al. (2023) analyzed social media content related to work and posted between February 2020 and February 2022 work and em-

ployment, social justice and activism, and health, well-being, and lifestyle. The analysis revealed a well-developed vocabulary of motivations, including career flexibility, organizational meaning, social responsibility, and personal well-being.

Despite the big echo of the Great Resignation in public debate, its impact was moderated and reshaped by reshuffling (people resigned but are still in the labor market in substantially different occupations) or even returns to the job left (Rubino 2023). In Europe, where the Great Resignation took place with a minor emphasis than in the US, signals of changes in the meaning of work are more traceable in reshuffling. European workers became more selective about work conditions (Jeanneau 2023), and this appears more evident with younger workers who, when applying for jobs, always more scrutinize the company not only according to the tasks and salary offered but also to company values, benefits and options for flexible working arrangements.

In some cases, employees returned to the organizations they previously left; these employees are commonly called boomerang employees (Karadeniz – Şentürk 2023). In contrast to the past, when boomeranging was relatively rare because voluntary turnover was perceived as a kind of betrayal toward the organization – and therefore generally terminating any link between the employee and the organization itself (Holtom et al. 2008), after the pandemic boomering became more popular: 28% of "new hires" across organizations in a wide range of industries in the US were actually boomerang employees (Klotz et al. 2023).

Quiet Quitting and Quiet Thriving

Next to the Great Resignation, there was also a less noisy way of leaving one's work: quiet quitting, defined by the *Collins English Dictionary* as follows:

1. the practice of doing no more work than one is contractually obliged to do, especially in order to spend more time on personal activities;

2. the practice of doing little or no work while being present at one's place of employment.

The quiet quitter continues to carry out their work but consciously decides not to implement so-called organizational citizenship behaviors. These include "individual behaviors of discretionary type that are not directly and explicitly recognized by the formal system of rewards and that, on the whole, promote the efficiency and effectiveness of the organization" (Organ et al. 2005). They correspond to all voluntary and positive actions carried out by employees that go beyond their basic responsibilities, such as assistance to colleagues, partici-

pation in organized activities or events, including corporate parties or voluntary initiatives, and flexibility in tasks and schedules.

Quiet quitters do their duty, but they do so without any proactivity, active interest in improving their performance or working environment or proposing new ideas to improve business processes.

On superficial observation, the behavior of employees who merely perform the minimum required may not give rise to immediate concern. They do not shy away from basic tasks but rather choose to refrain from going beyond expectations. However, it is essential to recognize that for many companies, a workforce willing to exceed expectations is a crucial competitive advantage (Koltz – Bolino 2022). The modern working environment is characterized by increasing complexity and dynamism, so jobs increasingly require skills and abilities that go beyond what is specified in formal job descriptions or contracts.

While they may claim to be happy to do the bare minimum while waiting for better opportunities, such a compromise generates a subtle but persistent feeling of a lack of purpose (Ellera et al. 2023). Hence, it is likely that quiet quitting results in resignation or in quiet thriving, that is, in "quietly prospering." Quiet thriving is a term created by Lelsey Alderman (2022), an American psychotherapist, to indicate taking specific actions and making targeted mental changes to strengthen the sense of involvement and job satisfaction of a worker who does not feel completely satisfied by his own work. In this context, employees actively seek to improve their professional and personal experience rather than merely reacting passively to work dissatisfaction (Alderman 2022; Ellera et al. 2023). Quiet thriving can be interpreted as the idea of finding success, achievement and well-being in a sober or less explicit way. It suggests a kind of prosperity that may not be characterized by great achievements or visible signs of success but rather stems from internal satisfaction, personal growth and meaningful connections. In a world marked by rapid change and where traditional structures and certainties are constantly in motion, individuals can find resilience and contentment through more serene and introspective means, aiming at living more serenely and without stressing over the sound of the alarm to go to the office.

The role of the pandemic: sociological explanations to job quitting

According to Tessema et al. (2022), the Covid-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the "Great Resignation," identifying five main factors that contributed to this mass exodus from jobs. First, the period of isolation and uncertainty provided workers with a unique opportunity to reflect on their careers and priorities, pushing them towards jobs they perceived as more fulfilling or meaningful. Second, the growing concern for health and safety in the work-

place, particularly regarding the risk of infection, led many to reconsider their positions. A third factor was the increase in stress caused by economic uncertainties and personal difficulties, which prompted many people to quit their jobs in search of better balance. Additionally, the growing demand for hybrid or fully remote work led some to resign when these options were unavailable. Finally, the introduction of vaccine mandates prompted a portion of workers to leave their jobs to avoid complying with such requirements. This dynamic can also be interpreted in light of broader existential considerations.

The Covid-19 pandemic is one of the greatest global health crises in recent history, and its power to evoke in each of us an increased awareness of and anxiety about death seems quite evident because people instinctively aspire to life. Human beings can reflect on the past, anticipate the future and understand that death is inevitable. Everyone faces this existential anguish in different ways, including the implementation of constructive behaviors and self-transcendence, since one is motivated mostly by the desire to give meaning to one's life and to leave a lasting mark on the world (Grant – Wade-Benzoni 2009).

The anxiety about death, therefore, would trigger an urgent need to give your life a purpose through significant work. Immersed in the monotony of daily habits, human beings rarely find the mental space to explore the reasons and the destiny of existence itself. During the pandemic, with restrictions and the suspension of normal activities, time seemed to slow down, affording many a chance for personal reflection. This period diverted attention from daily habits, allowing people to examine themselves and their place in the world more closely. The pandemic that rocked the world in 2020 generated in some people a "sudden repulsion syndrome" (the ick) that has produced an important transformative effect, which is a force of creative destruction that pushes people to change one's own existence in moments of great difficulty (Coin 2023). Therefore, we speak of "a powerful mixture of traumas and desires of transformation that takes shape because of a suffering and illuminates the need to change" (ibid., p. 42).

People may therefore have decided to leave their jobs or stop fully engaging in work to seek a deeper sense of accomplishment in life and to pursue new opportunities that align better with their values, personal passions or aspirations, motivated by the search for a better balance between professional and personal lives.

Bauman's sociological analysis may be useful to better frame such phenomena as a response to the sudden and disruptive reminder of our mortality that the pandemic has left us. His thinking focuses on the human condition in modern liquid society characterized by uncertainty, precariousness and transience,

unlike the premodern life imbued with a feeling of permanence and stability (Bauman 2009).

Bauman (2009) argues that in a liquid society, where everything seems ephemeral and fleeting, the search for lasting meaning and impact beyond our short existence can become even more important. Making a mark can be interpreted in different ways: it could mean contributing to a positive social change, committing to a cause we consider important, or promoting justice, equality or emancipation. It could also mean leaving a footprint in the lives of those around us, offering support and inspiration or nurturing meaningful relationships. However, in a liquid society, making a mark can be challenging. Institutions and traditions that once provided a sense of continuity and stability are increasingly unstable, and social networks are often fragmented. This can make it difficult to make a lasting impact and build a legacy that resists time. Everything that takes on importance in our human experience attains relevance because we are aware of our finiteness, and it is precisely this awareness that gives meaning to our actions (Bauman 2009).

From this point of view, people could make the decision to leave a job or not devote more time and energy to it, to create a lasting impact and leave a significant legacy in a context of precarious life and uncertainty. Individuals may feel the need to find an occupation that resonates with their personal values (Formica – Sfodera 2022), which allows them to express their creativity and contribute significantly to society. In this way, they try to leave a lasting mark on their professional lives, creating an impact that goes beyond the simple work done. With the same objective, other workers prefer to invest more time and energy in leisure.

Before modernity, the dominant religious perspective tended to place emphasis on eternity and the afterlife as the supreme objective, prompting people to sacrifice earthly life for a possible reward in the afterlife. Bauman (2009) suggested that modernity has led to a crumbling of the pillars of religion, with a change of perspective that has shifted attention from the eternal future to the immediate present, the "here and now." The value and desire associated with eternity are then transferred to the dimension of the present moment (Bauman 1997; 2009).

Therefore, the human being is constantly looking for something that will allow him to enrich his individual biography and give meaning to his earthly life. This shift from eternity to here and now is undoubtedly also reflected in contemporary work dynamics in which workers are increasingly seeking satisfaction and fulfillment at the present time. Phenomena like those described above represent a direct response to a working environment that no longer offers a satisfactory meaning in the present. The workers who choose this route decide to reduce their commitment or to leave the job (through quiet quitting,

Great Resignation and boomerang employee). On the other hand, some workers choose quiet thriving that, similarly to job re-shuffling, represents a positive and proactive approach to the search for meaning in work.

Differences and changes in work values in Europe

Beliefs concerning work and its role in our lives depend, in addition to material needs and contingencies, on our values. Work values are expressions of basic values in the work setting; they are beliefs "pertaining to desirable end-states (e.g. high pay) or behavior (e.g. working with people)" … "and are ordered by their importance as guiding principles for evaluating work outcomes and settings, and for choosing among different work alternatives" (Ros et al. 1999: 54). People might prioritize intrinsic work values can be intrinsic, by giving importance to immaterial aspects of their jobs that allow for self-expression or to extrinsic work values, assigning more relevance to material or instrumental work aspects, such as salary and opportunity for promotion (Taris – Feij 2001). How people set their priorities in life and work depends on several factors, belonging to both individual and societal levels. For example, research on work values (De Witte 2004; Gesthuizen – Verbakel 2014) shows that workers in higher occupational classes and those with higher levels of education and family incomes place more value on personal development (intrinsic motivations), while those in lower classes give greater emphasis to material and comfortable working conditions (extrinsic values). Further, across European countries there are significant differences in work values across European countries (Halman 1999; Voicu 2008; Voicu 2022). For instance, in Northern European countries, where the welfare state is highly developed, there is greater emphasis on balancing work and private life. In these contexts, work is more often seen as a tool for ensuring social and personal well-being, with a strong emphasis on job security and leisure time. In contrast, in Southern European countries, with more traditional economies and a stronger emphasis on family networks, work tends to be viewed more as a necessity for sustenance and less as a means of self-fulfillment (Halman 1999). According to Gesthuizen and Verbakel (2014), modernization and institutionalization concur explaining such variability. More specifically, the importance attributed to material conditions (such as pay and job security) and comfortable working conditions (like working hours and holidays) is lower in countries with a greater presence of high-quality jobs, a higher GDP, and higher levels of social security spending, and in countries without a communist past.

As for other values domains, also work values are subject to change over time. When observing a social change, we identify turning points that in their crucial impact on several domains of societal life, make it possible to consider differences between "before" and "after." In this respect, the Covid-19 pande-

mic is often considered one of these turning points. As previously discussed, the pandemic brought to the fore the reconsideration of several aspects concerning individual existence and life priorities. Also, it created the conditions for new ways of organizing work, of which the extensive use of remote work and the challenges of flexibility represent some of the biggest changes. Therefore, it would be easy to attribute to that dramatic time the start of a new work ethics that challenges hustle culture and promotes a new self-realization and a well-being-oriented conceptualization of work. However, this approach would neglect the fact that social change moves along two main mechanisms related to two population processes. According to Ryder's perspective (1965), the first mechanism relates to demographic metabolism: the natural course of things in which older cohorts of the population die and are replaced by younger cohorts that have been socialized in different periods characterized by different economic, social and cultural contexts (also called "cohort effect"). In this mechanism, childhood learning, and socialization are key elements for slower, but at the same time stable, value change (Inglehart 1997; Ryder 1965). The second mechanism concerns intra-cohort change and places emphasis on the impact that structural changes have on individuals, regardless of the cohort to which they belong ("period effect"). These changes are due to exogenous factors that can disrupt the social context independently of one's life course. It might be the case of shocking events (e.g., natural disasters and terrorist attacks) or social crises due to abrupt changes in the economic conditions of society. The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic could be considered one of these disrupting events that caused value change. However, when the impact of these exogenous factors decreases and the conditions recover from the extraordinary order, the change observed during that period might weaken and reduce long-lasting effects.

The combination of these two mechanisms would produce social change as a consequence of aggregated individual life cycles and could explain the change in work values pushed by the pandemic (Ryder 1965). The pandemic is an exogenous factor impacting all generational cohorts in the same period, and it affects the socialization context, with relevant consequences for the mechanisms of change related to the succession of cohorts.

Instead of being the initiator of changes, the pandemic could therefore be more correctly seen as the catalyzer (Lomazzi 2022) of processes already in place. Changes in work values were in fact already discussed by value scholars as Halman (1999) and Voicu (2008) who, focusing on the European context, pointed out to the shift towards postmaterialist values leading to the greater relevance given to extrinsic work values. If in the post-war period work was often seen as a necessity for survival, tied to economic security, with the growth of the welfare state and the expansion of the economy during the boom

years, these needs became easier to meet, reducing the importance of work as a central value in life. People began to look for more than just sustenance in their work, seeking personal fulfillment, social status, and self-realization, and tended to place more importance on alternative activities such as leisure and social relationships. This evolution reflects the transformation of European society from a predominantly agricultural economy to an industrial one and, more recently, to a post-industrial economy based on knowledge and services. Beside earnings and economic security, in recent decades more and more people attribute intrinsic value to work, seeking not only pay but also personal satisfaction and a source of meaning in their employment (Halman 1999; Voicu 2008). This is particularly evident in professions related to the creative and innovation sectors, where passion and interest in one's craft become fundamental components of work identity. This change is correlated with the rise in education and the growing importance of academic training in building professional careers (Halman 1999).

This work values shift is also linked to broader societal changes, like the transformation of family models (e.g., from single-income households to dual-income or single-parent families) and the increased economic role of women, making more pressing to reconcile work and personal needs; the debate on well-being work in workplaces, with a paradigm shift in the context of work security; the demographic dynamics and generational differences; the development of digital technology that allow for new forms of working flexible arrangements (Voicu et al. 2023; Moon et al. 2023; van der Lippe – Lippenyi 2018).

Furthermore, generational differences cannot be neglected in their contribution to social change related to generational replacement (Ryder 1965). Older generations, raised in the context of the post-war economic boom and industrial development, tend to prioritize job security, union rights, and long-term benefits, which are considered fundamental pillars of economic and social stability. Younger generations, who have come of age in a context marked by recurring economic crises and growing uncertainty, express a different conception of work. For these generations, flexibility and the ability to balance professional and private life are central values. The precariousness of the labor market and the emergence of new contractual forms have made the idea of a stable, continuous career less attractive. Instead, the ability to quickly adapt to changing market conditions and pursue job opportunities that allow for greater autonomy and personal freedom has become a priority (Halman 1999).

Exploring work value change in Europe

Data from the European Values Study[4] can be used to describe changes in work values across generations in Europe. The EVS is a repeated, cross-national survey that has collected data in more than 35 countries since 1981 among representative samples of the national populations every nine years. The survey has a specific focus on values in several domains, including work values. The latest edition was conducted in 2017–2020, just before the outbreak of the pandemic, and its longitudinal data can help in understanding historical trends before this "turning point."

To answer our explorative aim, we consider those 22 among the EU28 countries for which the survey has been fielded in the last three EVS rounds (1999-2001; 2008-2010; 2017-2020). To simplify the complexity, we grouped these countries in European regions based on the average time dedicated to paid work in 2017 (year of reference for the most recent EVS data). The number of hours spent in paid work can be considered as a proxy of the centrality of work given in a certain society according to the intensity of paid work (Basso 2003; Voicu et al. 2023) and varies across European countries. As reported by Eurostat, in 2017 this indicator ranges from 33,4 working hours a week in the Netherlands to 40 hours a week in Bulgaria. It is relevant to note that, since 2017 weekly working hours decreased in almost all European countries, as possible sign of a general trend or diminished centrality of paid work, but considerable differences between countries are still present (in 2023: from 32,2 working hours in the Netherlands to highest level of 39,5 in Romania). Table 1 displays how regions are composed According the "intensity of work" criterion, measured as the average weekly working hours (wwh) in 2017, five regions can be defined as low-intensity (less than 36 wwh); mid-low intensity (36-36,9 wwh); mid intensity (37-37.9); (mid-high intensity (38-38.9 wwh); high intensity (39-40 wwh). Please note that no country fits in the range 37-37.9 wwh, so this region does not appear in Table 1 that reports the region composition.

While limiting the investigation of countries' specific dynamics, the regional approach allows for a preliminary observation of regional trends based on the idea that the level of structural centrality given to paid work might influence the cultural meaning given to work (and its potential change).

To consider varieties of opinions related to the generational belonging, we consider the so-called Silent generation (respondents born between 1928 and 1945), the Baby Boomers (1946 – 1964), Generation X (1965 – 1980), and the

[4] https://europeanvaluesstudy.eu/

Millennials (1981 – 1996)[5]. Sample sizes by intensity of work region, countries, year, and generations are provided in Appendix 1.

Table 1: **Regionalization by intensity of weekly working hours ranges.**

Region	Country	Weekly working hours (national average)
Low intensity: Less than 36 weekly working hours	Netherlands	33.4
	Austria	35.3
	Denmark	35.4
	Germany	35.4
Mid-Low intensity: 36-36,9 weekly working hours	France	36.0
	Sweden	36.1
	Finland	36.4
	United Kingdom	36.5
	Italy	36.6
	Spain	36.9
Mid-High intensity: 38-38,9 weekly working hours	Lithuania	38.0
	Slovenia	38.0
	Latvia	38.5
	Slovakia	38.5
	Estonia	38.6
	Hungary	38.6
	Portugal	38.6
High-intensity: 39-40 weekly working hours	Croatia	39.0
	Czechia	39.2
	Romania	39.3
	Poland	39.6
	Bulgaria	40.0

To observe possible changes in work ethics we refer to two specific questions asked in EVS since 1999. The first one concerns the priority given to work by the respondents, who are asked to express their agreement with the following statement: “Work should always come first, even if it means less spare

[5] Respondents belonging to Generation Z (1997 – 2012) are present only in the latest wave of EVS, so over-time observation of this generation is not possible.

time" (answer categories are: Strongly agree; Agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Disagree; Strongly disagree).

As displayed in Table 2, changes in the priority given to work in one's life do not reflect a unique trend. The "downsizing" of the work priority is greater in those areas of Europe where the average of paid weekly working hours is higher. Here, a shift in opinion can be observed in all the generations.

In regions where work intensity is lower, the decline is seen only among Millennials, while for the other generations (including Gen-Xers), the opinion is quite stable or there is even a slight increase in people supporting the priority of work. Countries belonging to the Low- and partially those to the Mid-Low work intensity regions are countries with higher GDP and more generous welfare, so these results seem to contrast previous findings (e.g., Gesthuizen – Verbakel 2014) and would need further investigation.

Despite the regions, distributions of support towards the prioritization of work generally varies across generations, with much smaller shares of Gen-Xers and Millennials endorsing this position than the older generation. For example, Millennials supporting the priority of work are less than half of those belonging to the Silent Generation in all the regions.

Table 2: **Percentage of people agreeing with the statement "Work should always come first, even if it means less spare time" (strongly agree + agree) by generation and regions, 1999-2020** (EVS, 2022; weighted data)

Region by intensity of weekly working hours ranges	EVS wave	Generation			
		Silent generation	Baby boomers	Gen X	Millenials
Low intensity: Less than 36 weekly working hours	1999-2001	60.0%	38.1%	35.0%	31.4%
	2008-2010	65.1%	47.9%	40.7%	39.5%
	2017-2020	58.7%	40.1%	32.1%	25.7%
Mid-Low intensity: 36-36,9 weekly working hours	1999-2001	57.1%	32.9%	27.4%	30.0%
	2008-2010	63.3%	38.8%	30.1%	29.3%
	2017-2020	60.3%	45.9%	33.5%	28.5%
Mid-High intensity: 38-38,9 weekly working hours	1999-2001	69.6%	58.8%	40.9%	41.5%
	2008-2010	62.1%	53.4%	39.5%	31.2%
	2017-2020	68.5%	53.3%	39.0%	30.3%
High-intensity: 39-40 weekly working hours	1999-2000	73.9%	62.0%	43.8%	37.6%
	2008-2010	61.9%	54.1%	46.4%	33.8%
	2017-2021	66.2%	58.2%	42.2%	31.9%

A second question fielded by the EVS and relevant to the aim of this study asks to express aspects considered important in a job among good pay, good hours, an opportunity to use initiative, generous holidays, a feeling that you can achieve something and a responsible job. Here we focus only to changes occurred in the share of people considering "good hours" and "achieving something", two elements that relate to the points emerged in the literature review as crucial for the shift beyond hustle culture and that are summarized in Table 3. While the increase of people indicating the importance of these two aspects in a job is generally a common trend across regions and generations, some specificities can be underlined, especially regarding the pace of the value shift.

The increase in people valuing "good hours" in a job is much more evident in societies where the average hours worked are higher and, even in lower work intensity regions, among Gen-Xers and Millennials than older generations. Furthermore, the bigger shift takes place in about all the cases, between 2008 and 2017, while it is less pronounced before the financial crisis of 2008. An exception to this trend is the mid-low work intensity region, where in 2008 the share of people indicating this aspect dropped. More generally, in regions with lower work intensity, the proportion of people favoring good hours is smaller than in higher- work intensity regions (and especially among Baby boomers, that display more stable views over time). This might be reasonably explained by considering that, in countries where workers have on average fewer weekly working hours, they might value other aspects more than this. The bigger change, concerning all the generations, is identifiable in the Mid-high work intensity region. Here, Baby boomers' view in 2017 (75,1% consider "good hours" important in a job) is more similar to the position hold by Millennials in the Low-work intensity region (71,3%) than to any of their generational fellows in other regions.

Trends related to the rise in the share of people identifying "achieving something" as a relevant aspect in job also indicate that the pace of change increased between 2008 and 2017, while it was almost stable before. Looking more closely at each region, the share of people mentioning "achieving something" in Low work intensity region is about stable over time and with no remarkable differences across generations, but the change after 2008 is much bigger for the younger ones. The situation in the Mid-low work intensity region is like the previous one, but a general drop in 2008 is registered in the region, as reported for "good hours". This might be due to the concern for national economic contingencies that might have pushed for valuing more material aspects of work (e.g., in Italy, Spain, Great Britain). In 2017, this region registers the highest rates of support among all the generations in contrast to other regions.

In the Mid-high work intensity region, the differences between generations are bigger than in other regions. The change over time is present among all of them and reaches the biggest share among European Millennials in 2017 (81,8%). Finally, in the High- work intensity region we register the smaller change over time compared to other regions, but this is also due to the larger share of people valuing this aspect already in 1999 and in all the generations in contrast to other regions (e.g., 66,3% of Baby Boomers in this region, while the average of other regions' Baby Boomers holding this view in 1999 is 57,4%). The generational gap here appears smaller than elsewhere, meaning that feeling that the job carried out is meaningful and oriented towards a purpose is a shared work value in this region.

Table 3: **Percentage of respondents mentioning "good hours" and "achieving something" as important aspects of a job by generation and regions, 1999-2020** (EVS, 2022; weighted data)

Region by intensity of weekly working hours ranges	EVS wave	"Good hours"				"Achieving something"			
		Silent gene-ration	Baby boomers	Gen X	Millenials	Silent gene-ration	Baby boo-mers	Gen X	Mille-nials
Low intensity: Less than 36 hours a week	1999-2001	31.0%	39.8%	40.5%	39.7%	45.6%	50.8%	57.1%	55.4%
	2008-2010	34.5%	39.3%	46.5%	41.6%	51.8%	52.5%	52.6%	58.6%
	2017-2021	43.5%	54.6%	69.6%	71.3%	62.4%	68.4%	67.6%	76.4%
Mid-Low intensity: 36-36,9 hours a week	1999-2001	48.1%	52.9%	56.7%	49.2%	54.0%	61.9%	63.0%	58.6%
	2008-2010	36.2%	43.7%	50.2%	51.9%	49.0%	53.3%	53.4%	59.7%
	2017-2021	46.9%	55.0%	68.0%	69.4%	70.6%	75.3%	77.4%	80.4%
Mid-High intensity: 38-38,9 weekly working hours	1999-2001	43.6%	50.0%	49.1%	48.2%	49.2%	59.5%	62.1%	62.0%
	2008-2010	54.8%	55.2%	57.0%	58.5%	56.1%	56.3%	60.9%	59.5%
	2017-2021	68.9%	75.1%	83.2%	87.1%	67.8%	70.2%	74.8%	81.8%
High-intensity: 39-40 weekly working hours	1999-2001	44.9%	51.8%	54.9%	51.6%	60.4%	66.3%	68.7%	72.5%
	2008-2010	57.7%	58.9%	62.6%	65.2%	62.7%	63.7%	65.8%	73.3%
	2017-2021	66.7%	69.2%	80.7%	81.3%	68.0%	66.5%	73.3%	79.1%

Despite specific regional dynamic, the preliminary overview offered in this paragraph shows trends pointing to the increased importance given to postmaterialist aspects of work, such as self-realization, satisfaction, and more feasible working hours, which are relatively common across European regions and

generations although with different emphasis and pace. These trends were already in place before the pandemic and new post-pandemic data will be relevant to understand the extent to which this "turning point" catalyzed a value shift.

In general, we can say that the new phenomena mentioned in this contribution have in common the underlying reconsideration of the value of work and its place in human life. While it keeps remaining a central aspect of individual and collective realization, more attention is paid to the quality of work and its role in our existence.

Conclusion

This article examined hustle culture and its implications in the post-modern and digitalized working context. It discussed alternative work ethics that became manifest through phenomena such as the Great Resignation, boomerang employees, quiet quitting, quiet thriving and job re-shuffling, offering sociological interpretations to them considering broader processes related to the ongoing social change rooted in modernization and post-modernization. The uncertainty given by the Covid-19 pandemic might have played a relevant role in the reinterpretation of life priorities.

Uncertainty can bring to light the awareness that happiness and well-being are not necessarily linked to traditional parameters so linked to hustle culture, such as professional success to be achieved with total dedication to work or the possession of material goods. Instead, more value is assigned to mental health, emotional well-being, meaningful relationships and connection with oneself and with others. Uncertainty can also have pushed people to reflect on their values and consider what is really important in life. With this increased awareness, the worker can make choices oriented toward a more authentic and satisfying life, to the point of taking hazard in leaving more paid and secure but likely more demanding jobs to achieve better work–life balance and personal well-being.

While it has pushed towards such change, the pandemic was not its only driver. Instead, it most likely acted as a catalyst for a general value shift, including work values, highlighting the increasingly widespread search for personal fulfillment and meaning in the present. This change reflects a growing awareness of the finitude of life and the need to live to the fullest, without regret. In this context, the right to "preferred work" emerges, which aligns with personal aspirations and individual well-being. These developments indicate a profound transformation in social, economic and cultural structures, with relevant implications for the future of work and post-modern society.

By providing a regional overview based on EVS data, the paper described changes in work values across generations showing that, regardless regional

areas and generational belonging, the importance given to postmaterialist dimensions of work in increasing although with different emphasis. The overview provided suffers from limitations given by the use of secondary data, which limits the depth of the analysis. For a richer and more nuanced understanding of workers' experiences, future research could consider integrating primary research, also based on qualitative approaches to incorporating direct and personal perspectives. Furthermore, more sophisticated analytical approaches could support accurate investigation of the general regional dynamics here only preliminarily described without any explanatory aims. For example, multilevel modeling could be helpful to account for the nested data structures of the EVS dataset (e.g., individuals within countries or within regions) allowing for random effects at the country level. This would make it possible to analyze the effect of generation on work values, controlling for individual-level covariates (e.g., education, income) and assess how generational differences vary across countries. Also, the lack of existing post-pandemic cross-national data prevents by assessing the actual catalyst role of the pandemic in such cultural change.

Nevertheless, it is clear that this cultural shift tends to prompt people to reflect on their career choices and look for jobs that are in line with their interests, passions and personal values and, as shown by EVS data, this is particularly true for the younger generations who are driven to look for jobs that are in line with their personal values, such as social impact, sustainability and equity, and are also less willing to sacrifice their happiness and personal fulfillment in favor of stable but unrewarding jobs. In a certain way, younger generations have been socialized so intensively to the neoliberalism imperative for personal growth and fulfillment (Adams et al. 2019) that by pursuing that, they are now rejecting hustle culture in favor of new approaches that pursue well-being and an idea of self-realization and satisfaction that is not fulfilled merely through work and success.

Such a broad cultural change can have implications for all the social actors in the work domain. For example, organizations will need to adapt to this new reality by reviewing their policies and practices to meet people's needs and expectations to attract and retain them. Unions will negotiate workers' rights to disconnection, access to flexible work arrangements, and having days of rest (Rubery et al. 2018). For employers, human resource officers, and policymakers to be able to address the changes presented in this contribution, a holistic approach is always more relevant. As previously discussed, the multidimensionality of work values, ambitions and needs is always more complex and to be managed properly it would require considering not only business and economic performance but also employees' well-being and happiness, not only the individual perspective but also the collective well-being of society.

The Covid-19 pandemic has played an important role as a cultural catalyst for questioning preexisting norms and values, highlighting existing inequalities and exposing the fragility of social and economic systems. This process of collective introspection has acted as an accelerator that has pushed societies to critically examine their functioning and pursue substantial changes. The immediate responses have resulted in pragmatic but much more volatile adaptations, while the deeper reflections have fueled a collective desire for a lasting transformation in social, economic and cultural structures. However, the presentification by itself can be risky for the future of society: if everyone lives only in the present, driven by neoliberalist pursuit of individual well-being, the vision of the future – and the collective future in particular – will keep becoming narrower.

Francesca Bellini *is a PhD. Student in Sociology, organizations, cultures at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore (Italy). She also works as administrative clerk in a public institution (Province of Bergamo) within the Secretariat and General Management Service where she collaborates in drafting and monitoring performance plans and transparency and anti-corruption plan, as well as internal control activities and support for the Evaluation Unit; she collaborates with the Department of Management University of Bergamo in sociological research projects, such as the project "Change of values in crisis-ridden Europe". Her research interests include work values, workers' well-being, European values. She supports the secretariat of the European Values Study.*

Vera Lomazzi *is assistant professor in Sociology at the Department of Management at the University of Bergamo (Italy). She is President of the European Survey Research Association (ESRA) and secretary of the Executive Committee of the European Values Study. Her substantive research mainly focuses on the cross-cultural study of gender equality and gender role attitudes, and values change. She has a specific interest in the quality of the instruments adopted by large cross-sectional survey programs and on their measurement equivalence. Among her recent publications: Lomazzi, V. (2022). A catalyst for social change? Work-life balance and the Covid-19 pandemic response policies: implications for gender equality. Autonomie locali e servizi sociali, 1/2022; Lomazzi, V. (2023). Gender Norms and Values in the Black Sea Region. In M. Voicu, K. Kizilova, & M. Zulean (A c. Di), Social Values and Identities in the Black Sea Region (pp. 195–218). Lexingotn Books; Lomazzi, V., & Soboleva, N. (2024). Polarization of gender role attitudes across Europe. Journal of Contemporary European Studies.*

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Appendix I – National samples by EVS wave and generation, organized by intensity of work region (N=95127)

Region by intensity of weekly working hours ranges	Country	EVS wave	Generation				
			Silent generation	Baby boomers	Gen X	Millenials	Total
Low intensity: Less than 36 weekly working hours	Austria	1999-2001	558	565	376	23	1522
		2008-2010	329	479	415	287	1510
		2017-2021	216	512	501	371	1600
	Denmark	1999-2001	322	385	309	7	1023
		2008-2010	387	552	396	172	1507
		2017-2021	508	1179	933	605	3225
	Germany	1999-2001	858	651	487	40	2036
		2008-2010	548	759	538	230	2075
		2017-2021	321	746	567	456	2090
	Netherlands	1999-2001	293	437	268	5	1003
		2008-2010	555	544	366	89	1554
		2017-2021	357	953	583	461	2354
Mid-Low intensity: 36-36,9 weekly working hours	Finland	1999-2001	275	374	341	48	1038
		2008-2010	167	471	348	148	1134
		2017-2021	231	483	225	214	1153
	France	1999-2001	498	603	497	17	1615
		2008-2010	396	501	416	188	1501
		2017-2021	281	636	447	431	1795
	Italy	1999-2001	689	632	674	5	2000
		2008-2010	331	500	416	272	1519
		2017-2021	315	747	635	467	2164
	Spain	1999-2001	435	343	399	23	1200
		2008-2010	402	361	499	238	1500
		2017-2021	173	348	391	263	1175
	Sweden	1999-2001	316	365	316	18	1015
		2008-2010	262	469	309	147	1187
		2017-2021	192	424	289	237	1142
	United Kingdom	1999-2001	313	334	334	19	1000
		2008-2010	494	483	381	203	1561
		2017-2021	295	612	483	352	1742

Mid-High intensity: 38-38,9 weekly working hours	Estonia	1999-2001	335	321	321	28	1005
		2008-2010	451	480	375	212	1518
		2017-2021	272	439	287	262	1260
	Hungary	1999-2001	358	355	276	11	1000
		2008-2010	263	486	452	312	1513
		2017-2021	216	458	400	347	1421
	Latvia	1999-2001	391	353	260	9	1013
		2008-2010	362	454	395	295	1506
		2017-2021	110	449	367	322	1248
	Lithuania	1999-2001	284	392	322	20	1018
		2008-2010	361	478	363	298	1500
		2017-2021	179	455	408	298	1340
	Portugal	1999-2001	419	277	282	22	1000
		2008-2010	553	438	407	155	1553
		2017-2021	225	449	259	217	1150
	Slovakia	1999-2001	361	508	423	39	1331
		2008-2010	478	609	309	113	1509
		2017-2021	167	556	363	291	1377
	Slovenia	1999-2001	289	372	335	10	1006
		2008-2010	328	462	365	211	1366
		2017-2021	155	365	266	249	1035
High-intensity: 39-40 weekly working hours	Bulgaria	1999-2001	413	356	223	8	1000
		2008-2010	429	525	342	204	1500
		2017-2021	248	588	408	269	1513
	Croatia	1999-2001	188	378	419	18	1003
		2008-2010	341	441	390	353	1525
		2017-2021	155	529	351	400	1435
	Czechia	1999-2001	760	615	488	45	1908
		2008-2010	489	574	471	287	1821
		2017-2021	299	605	500	354	1758
	Poland	1999-2001	366	468	259	2	1095
		2008-2010	274	523	394	319	1510
		2017-2021	140	514	313	335	1302
	Romania	1999-2001	391	403	330	22	1146
		2008-2010	320	562	365	242	1489
		2017-2021	201	526	440	346	1513