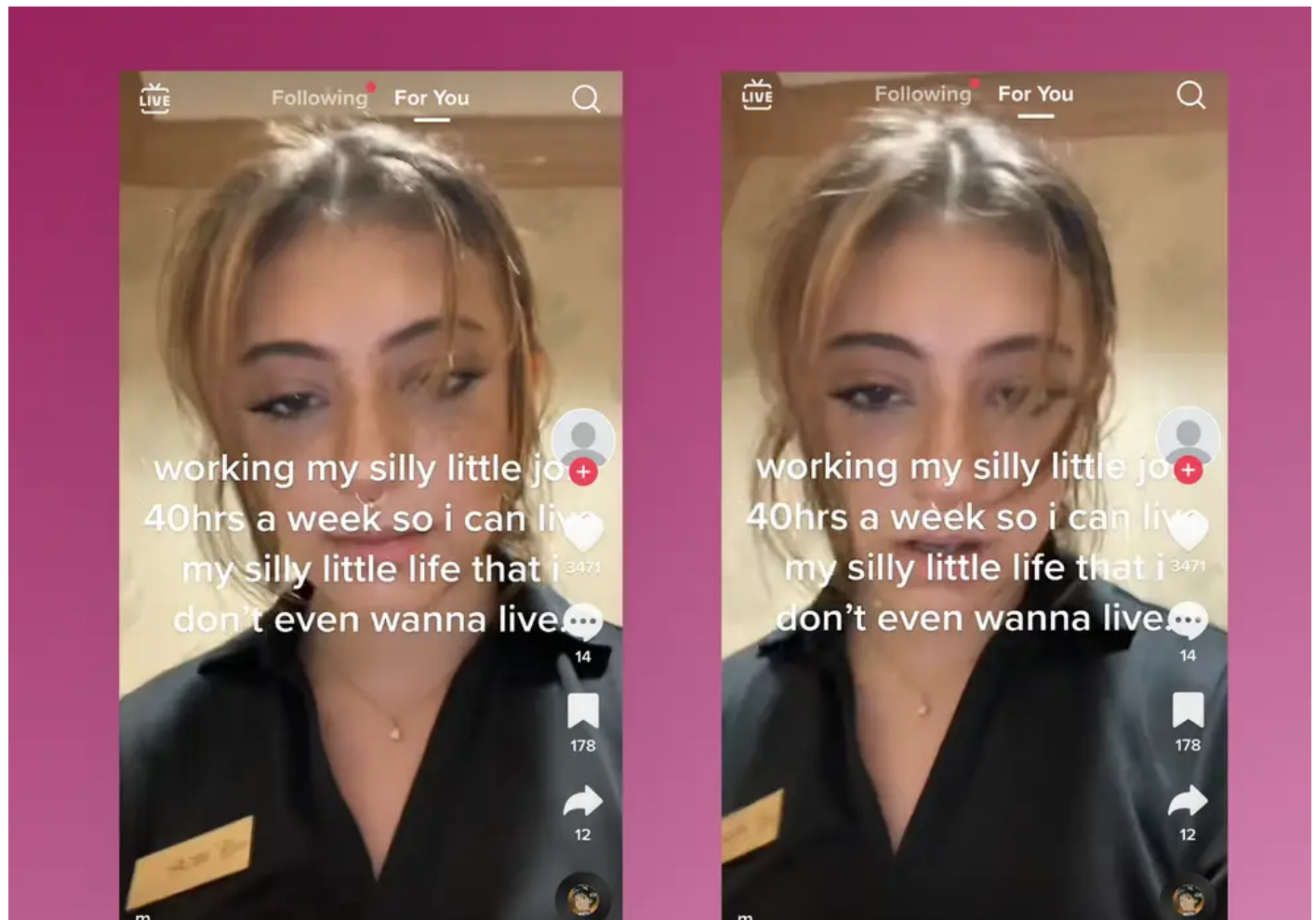


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2 years of pandemic, war, and climate crisis have made many Americans rethink work as just 'silly little jobs'

Juliana Kaplan

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The phrase "silly little job" has become a popular way to talk about work online.

The meme started right before the pandemic, but picked up popularity over the last two and a half years.

It shows how some Americans are recontextualizing and rethinking their work.

Alicia Wiersma is a 29-year-old single mother in North Carolina who works for the state. Like many parents and Americans, her day isn't done at 5 pm; she has to do "all this shit outside of work."

"Eight hours a day, my life is put on pause to do what I do and the whole world is on fire outside," she said. "So it just seems kind of insignificant when you think about it."

Wiersma is one of the many workers who has posted about going into a "silly little job." Micah Nadwodny, an 18-year-old in Texas, is another one; she coped with a bartending and serving job that was bad for her mental health by referring to it as a "silly little job."

"I kind of cope with bad situations through humor," Nadwodny told Insider. "I was like, wow, I'm just working this job that I don't like and living this life that I don't really want to live right now. So silly little job was just how I talked about it with friends."

Maybe you've encountered the phrase on TikTok, or on Twitter. It's one way that the people of the

It also represents a shift in how some Americans define themselves. Americans, [the French say](#), don't have jobs — they are their jobs. They've been [addicted to their long hours](#), with overwork a badge of honor and [even an indication of wealth](#).

That's a mindset that's abruptly shifted over the last few years, when work transformed from who you are into simply a silly little job. Americans are still undergoing their [own rethinking of work](#), especially as societal issues outside of the workplace — like a [mounting climate crisis](#), [war](#), and [inflation](#) — weigh heavily around them.

Alicia Wiersma. Courtesy of Alicia Wiersma

The pandemic changed the world, and people started looking at their 'silly little jobs' differently

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years on, people (and even brands) are still posting pretty frequently about their silly little jobs.

That's due to the pandemic, which amplified the phrase and lent it a lot of its meaning, according to Amanda Brennan, a meme librarian and senior director of trends at XX Artists.

"Early pandemic, everything felt like silly little X, as the world was so out of control around us," she told Insider. "It's like, how do you do your silly little tasks when it feels like life or death?"

The pandemic, Brennan said, made people lose their sense of reality — and the "silly little" phrasing took on a deeper meaning of "I am just like a speck of dust in the grand scheme of the world."

At the same time, Nadwodny said that with so many people unemployed for so long, the sudden jolt of going back to work "kind of put everyone into shock."

"You're in a routine, right, from 16 to however old, like you're working and you're used to it. But then going basically a full year without working like that, I think it really messes with your head and your whole body," she said. That sudden return might still be dragging on mental health, and making jobs feel silly and little.

Micah Nadwodny. Courtesy of Micah Nadwodny

The pandemic's reverberations across the workforce are still being felt, especially as [cases surge once more](#). That could explain some of the current resurgence of the silly little job meme, according to Brennan.

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something that sounds low stakes.

But "trying to decide where they answer their emails from might be a very hard, heavy lift of like, do I go to the office? Do I stay at home? Do I take public transit somewhere? Do I go coworking?



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Silly little jobs are also the jobs that the pandemic made people rethink

The rise of the "silly little job" also shows the deprioritizing of what Wiersma calls an "autopilot role." At an autopilot job, if someone makes a mistake, no one will die, and the biggest intrigue is office politics.

Then there's what economist Kathryn Anne Edwards [calls](#) "bleach-collar workers," people like software engineers who work in high-end services and are in the top 10% to 15% of the income scale.

What the pandemic made clear is how the American economy values autopilot and bleach-collar over essential workers. Suddenly, the lowest paid workers — the ones with the opposite of an autopilot job — [were on the frontlines](#). At the same time, the Great Resignation [came for the higher-income workforce](#).

Brennan thinks there's a larger reckoning of people realizing the point of what they're doing, and realizing it may indeed be silly and little. It comes as workers are [quiet quitting](#), paring their jobs down to their core responsibilities, and embracing work disengagement concepts like [antiwork](#) and [lying flat](#).

The silly little job posters might realize they "could be spending time doing something they're passionate about — or not even that, just something that makes the world better in a time where it needs it," Brennan said. But "silly little job" is ultimately a meme of futility.

"If something big happens on the outside world or something, whether it's mental health or whatever, we still have to show up and provide for our families," Wiersma said. "We're just kind of cogs in the machine, which is kind of depressing, but it's true."

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— on something you consider silly and little, the dark humor comes with the contrast of the serious and big issues knocking outside your door.

"The whole point about the silly little jobs is like, even if it's insignificant, even if it's hard, we still have to go and do it or face what — homelessness, not being able to feed your kids," Wiersma said.

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