

## HOW WE WORK

# Why young workers are putting in so much overtime



By Megan Tatum 29th May 2023

In the current economic climate, Gen Zers are pulling especially long hours – and pushing themselves to the brink of burnout.

J

asmin has always been a hard worker. While studying for her undergraduate degree in cultural and media studies at the University of Leeds, UK, she would routinely put in up to 30 hours per week at a part-time job to pay her rent. She then secured a full-time job at a PR agency

while midway through her master's degree.

Now a media-relations executive at that same company, Jasmin no longer works a part-time job in addition to a full-time role – but she's still putting in plenty of overtime.

"I often start my day very early reading what's breaking news in education, tech or the climate, as my job requires me to know what's going on across a very broad range of topics," says Jasmin, now 25. "Often in the evenings, I'll spend a couple of hours making sure I'm ready for the next day, and on a Sunday, I'll often head to Caffè Nero for a coffee and croissant to do admin and make sure I'm set up for the week ahead."

Her partner and friends of a similar age approach work in much the same way, she says, taking business on holiday; or cramming in extra hours in evenings, mornings and weekends.

Some statistics and experts alike say young people are the most likely to be putting in unpaid overtime. April data from ADP Research Institute's People at Work 2023 report, which surveyed 32,000 workers across 17 countries, showed people aged **18 to 24 tend to put in an extra eight hours and 30 minutes of 'free' work** per week by starting early, staying late or working during breaks and lunchtime. That compares to seven hours and 28 minutes for 45-to-54-year-olds, and just five hours 14 minutes for those 55 and older.

Gen Z workers have had to navigate a tough job environment from the start of their careers. Many started their jobs during the pandemic, and others have **experienced furloughs or layoffs for the first time** while still in their early 20s. Lots of these workers have also watched companies scale back on jobs, pay rises and promotions to survive the ongoing economic uncertainty.

Experts say this has left many of them insecure about both their jobs and their longer-term career prospects, feeling they need to prove their worth to an employer by piling on the extra hours. It's an effect that's left them toiling in overtime – and setting them up for stress and burnout down the line.

#### An exceptional career start

Job insecurity seems to be the biggest driver behind Gen Z's diligence, according to Nela Richardson, chief economist at the ADP Research Institute. In their People at Work research, half of respondents said they feel insecure in their roles, double the proportion of over-55s that said the same.

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ia platforms such as TikTok, young workers talk about fitting in side hustles alongside their full-time

While Richardson says this could be “a function of being young”, she also notes young people were among the workers who most acutely felt the effects of furloughs and layoffs, which has cast “a shadow of insecurity over the early start to their career”.

Additionally, in an unstable economic environment – one in which they are already **struggling to build wealth and hit milestones** – job security feels particularly elusive, and anxiety is sky-high. “[Young people] don’t have the type of security I assumed I had when I was coming out of university,” says executive careers coach Lara Holliday, who is in her late 40s. “I didn’t know if I’d get the job I wanted, but I knew I’d get a job and I know some day. If I worked hard, I’d be able to afford my own home. They’re coming into a very different world.”

To survive it, say experts, they feel obligated to put in extra hours.

Much of this chimes with Jasmin’s experiences. “I want to make sure I’m on it so that people know they’ve made the right choice in hiring me,” she says. “Obviously, it’s extremely competitive, and I feel really grateful just to have a job with everything that’s going on.” She adds that she and her peers are also keenly aware of the negative stereotypes around Gen Z workers. “Everyone thinks we’re lazy, and that we just want to work from home, so it’s also going above and beyond to challenge that.”

Notably, it’s not that they necessarily expect the hard work to translate into pay rises or promotions either, points out Richardson. “While most of the workforce feel they’re going to get a bonus or a pay increase, young people don’t,” she says. ADP’s research showed only 50% of Gen Z workers expect to get a pay rise in their current company in the next 12 months, whereas around two-thirds of most other age brackets anticipate one. Only a third think they’re in line for a bonus.

#### The ‘6-to-9’

Fear may not be the only motivator, however.

For her part, Jasmin says that exposure to hustle-culture-related social media content has affected her mindset. Across platforms such as TikTok, young workers talk about squeezing in a ‘6-to-9’ before their 9-to-5s, often **fitting in side hustles alongside their full-time jobs**. This trend of hyper-productivity contributes to Jasmin’s motivation to hit her desk at 0700.

“There is definitely a glamourisation of hyper-productivity, largely stemming from the fact that young people are recognising the potential of portfolio careers,” says Holliday. “Young people are stringing together side hustles, which feeds into this sense of the grind and the hustle being aspirational.”

*Everyone thinks we’re lazy, and that we just want to work from home, so it’s also going above and beyond to challenge that – Jasmin*

Another factor feeding into those extra hours could be their desire to work for ethical or purposeful employers, points out Richardson. Many in this generation cares deeply about topics like diversity and inclusion as well as gender pay equity, and they’re happy to work hard for companies that deliver on these expectations.

“Many are really optimistic about improvements in pay equality and DEI at the companies they work for,” she adds. So, while “they’re more than willing to walk” if companies fall short, they’re also passionate enough to put in lots of effort for the right employer. “There’s a sense of optimism from young people about progress that many companies are making,” adds Richardson.

#### Risking burnout

A willingness to put in overtime among Gen Z isn’t a trend Holliday expects to change anytime soon. “The world is going to continue to be an anxiety-ridden place,” she says. “While this generation see the merits of a better work-life balance, they’re also being raised in an age of anxiety, which translates into working overtime just in the hopes of getting ahead.”

The problem is that long hours without a break aren't sustainable, she adds. And rather than a prosperous career, Gen Z are setting themselves up for stress and burnout if they don't slow down.

(Gen Z often feel the need to prove themselves to an employer by working extra hours outside the office

For some workers, it's already happening. Research has shown **Gen Zers are particularly struggling in the workplace with anxiety** and **burnout**, a conclusion also reflected in ADP's research, which showed young workers are more likely to feel stressed than any other age group.

The data also showed young workers are the most likely group to feel their work is already suffering due to both high levels of stress and poor mental health. "The sense of optimism that young people typically have about work is accompanied by wariness and cautiousness," says Richardson. "How young people will fare as the economy decelerates after this big economic downturn too, that's going to invade their thoughts as well."

Ultimately, says Holliday, young workers will need to find a way to pull back if they want to avoid the detrimental effects. "But it takes time and a lot of self-awareness ... to ask, 'how am I going to retain my work ethic but work in a smarter way that doesn't lead to burnout over time?'"

Burnout is something Jasmin says she worries about, but she does feel she's getting better at finding a healthier work-life balance. She says the pressure she felt in the past to do so much work wore her down. "But now I have a really good relationship with my manager who says if I need to take time, I can. And if I'm approaching burnout, too I know the signs." But cutting out the Sundays spent in Caffè Nero completely? Well, she says, that still feels a way off.



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