

# The Performativity Spiral: Why Modern Work Feels So Hollow

How jobs became about looking busy instead of being human.



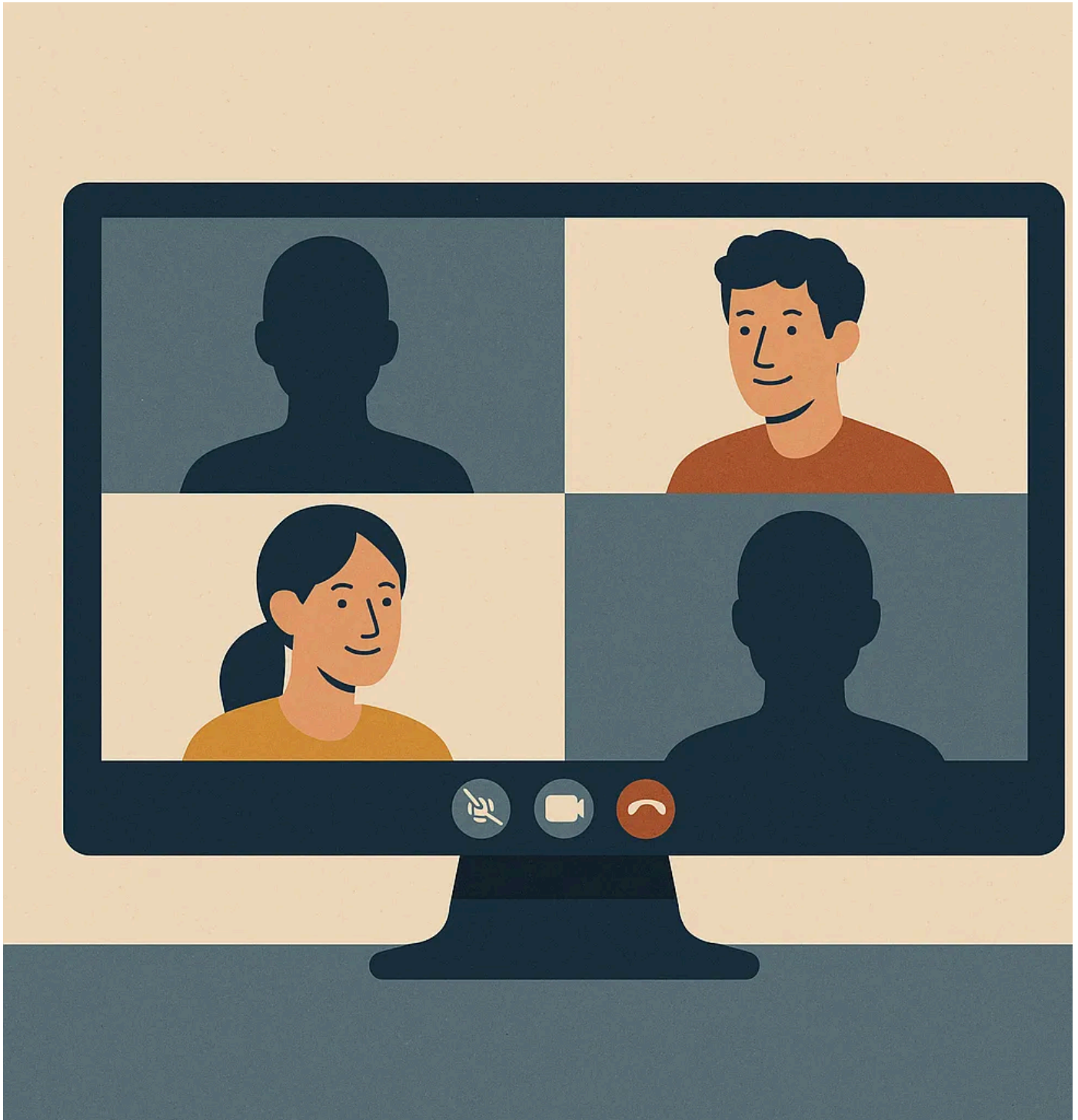
REALITY DRIFT

JUL 20, 2025



Share

*Join a growing community making sense of why modern life feels off and how to stay human through it. Weekly essays with sharp, unfiltered takes on work, culture, and technology.*



## Something's Off at Work

I just spent 45 minutes crafting the perfect "Thanks for the feedback!" response to sound grateful but not desperate, professional but not robotic, engaged but not nee

That's when I realized: I wasn't communicating, I was performing.

The modern workplace talks like a person but acts like a machine. The language is warm: authenticity, belonging, vulnerability. But the incentives are often cold. You're encouraged to "be yourself," but only in a way that makes sense in the HR handbook.

This is what I've started thinking of as the *performativity spiral*: a feedback loop where looking aligned becomes more important than being aligned. Where optics matter more than outcomes. And where the longer you play along, the more you forget who you were before the performance began.

## When Work Becomes Theater

Here's what I've noticed: in many workplaces today, the real work isn't just doing the job, it's looking like you're doing the job well. Teams sometimes spend as much time building slide decks about momentum as they do creating momentum itself. Leaders often get rewarded for narrating success, not just for delivering it.

It's like success theater, this polished performance of productivity that can sometimes outshine the actual results.

So people adapt. They keep their Slack green even when they're struggling. They post thoughtful LinkedIn updates that sound insightful but say nothing. They speak up in meetings, not because they have something urgent to say, but because silence can look like disengagement.

I mean, think about it: we've created an entire economy around the appearance of being engaged, enthusiastic, and culturally aligned, even when you're tired, disillusioned, or just trying to keep your head down.

## The Empathy Performance

Many modern workplaces are genuinely trying to show that they care. One-on-one check-ins. "Open dialogue" town halls. Company-wide mental health days. It all

sounds good, and sometimes it really is good, but it's also easy to feel like it's more about appearances than connection.

Your manager may genuinely care about you, but that concern now lives inside a system that tracks engagement, retention, and morale metrics. Vulnerability has become a leadership skill you can take courses on. Empathy has become a talking point in quarterly reviews.

It's this weird thing where closeness feels real, but you know it's being shaped by structure. It's not that anyone's being fake, it's just hard to tell where sincere care and strategy begins.

And over time, that uncertainty starts to mess with your head. You wonder if you're being disingenuous, just for playing along with what feels like performance art.

# NOT ALL CONTENT IS CREATED EQUAL

HERE'S WHY SOME STUFF FEELS FAKE.

WHY WAS WHY ← WHD CREATED IT?	HUMAN	<b>REAL LIFE</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Face-to-face conversations</li><li>• Handwritten letters</li><li>• Local community events</li><li>• Unfiltered emotions</li></ul>	<b>FEELS REAL, ISN'T</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• AI-generated art</li><li>• Curated news feeds</li><li>• Recommendation engines</li><li>• "Personalized" content</li></ul>
	AUTHENTIC	<b>PLAYING THE PART</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Social media posts</li><li>• LinkedIn thought leadership</li><li>• Networking events</li><li>• Personal branding</li></ul>	<b>DEEP FAKE LIVING</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Bot conversations</li><li>• Fake reviews</li><li>• Manufactured trends</li><li>• AI influencers</li></ul>
WHY WAS IT MADE?			

Not all connection is created equal. This chart explains why some interactions feel real. Even when they're not.

## The Compliance Ritual

If you've ever sat through hours of mandatory compliance training, repeating the same "ethics in the workplace" videos every quarter, you know exactly what I'm talking

about.

It's not just boring, it's spiritually deflating. It quietly reminds you how little trust actually exists in the system. It reinforces this message: your value isn't based on judgment or dignity. It's based on your ability to check the right boxes and repeat the right phrases back to a computer screen.

In environments like this, alienation hits harder than inequality. Because it's not just that you're underpaid or overlooked, it's that you're invisible. Reduced to an ID badge and a list of certifications. A warm body in a cold process.

## **The Generational Confusion**

Here's where this gets really interesting: this whole performance crisis hits differently across generations, and I think that's creating some real misunderstanding.

Boomers and Gen X often see younger workers' complaints about "authentic workplace culture" as soft or entitled. They survived actual hostile workplaces - harassment, discrimination, zero work-life balance. Why are Millennials and Gen Z sensitive about having to be "professional"?

But here's the thing: younger workers aren't just asking for basic respect. They're pointing out something more subtle and honestly more insidious. They were promised authenticity and given performance theater instead.

Previous generations knew work was transactional. You showed up, did your job, collected your paycheck, and lived your real life elsewhere. The boundaries were clear even if they sucked.

Today's workers were sold on this idea of "bringing their whole selves to work," on companies that "care about their values," on workplaces that would be "more than just a job." Instead, they got corporate empathy scripts and culture decks that demand

emotional labor while delivering none of the promised meaning. That's not entitlement. That's clarity about being sold a bill of goods.

## **When Performance Becomes Identity**

Over time, this stuff starts to shape your behavior in ways you don't even notice. And when behavior gets shaped by performance for long enough, your identity starts to shift too.

You might catch yourself speaking in work-safe language, even outside of work. You start thinking in bullet points and stakeholder optics. You feel guilty for not posting something "insightful" this week on LinkedIn.

Unfiltered expression starts to feel risky, even in your personal life. Honesty feels off-brand. So you adapt. You learn the cues. You polish the self. And quietly, without really noticing, you start to forget where the performance ends and you begin.

## **Breaking Out**

The thing is, this whole spiral thrives in environments where appearances are easier to manage than actual outcomes. But breaking it doesn't require some dramatic rebellion or career change.

Sometimes it just means reclaiming one small part of your behavior that isn't shaped by how it looks to other people. Maybe it's saying "I don't know" in a meeting instead of deflecting. Maybe it's making something that isn't meant to impress anyone. Maybe it's having one honest conversation that doesn't need to be on-brand.

These small moments of unpolished honesty, they're how you start to remember what dignity actually feels like. What it's like to be a person instead of a persona.

## **The Bigger Picture**

This isn't just about workplace culture, honestly. It's about this deeper blur that's happening between self and signal, human and brand. Between what feels real and what merely performs real.

But here's what I keep coming back to: we can hold on to something honest, even as the performance plays on around us. We can choose dignity over optimization, even in small moments.

That matters more than it might seem.

*Get future essays like this in your inbox.  
Subscribe to Reality Drift—your guide to staying  
human in an increasingly performative world.*

[← Previous](#)

[Next →](#)

## Discussion about this post

Comments   Restacks



Write a comment...



