

Vapor Work: The Hidden Economy Hollowing Out Work

Millennials aren't broken. The world is. And they are the first generation that can't preter otherwise.



REALITY DRIFT

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The theater of productivity: laptops humming, slides waiting, progress postponed.

Sarah sits in her third “alignment meeting” of the week, watching her manager present a deck about optimizing their Q3 roadmap optimization process. Slide 47 shows a flowchart of how they’ll create flowcharts. Everyone nods seriously.

Meanwhile, the actual product, the one customers are complaining about on Twitter right now, hasn’t been touched in weeks. Sarah knows exactly how to fix the core issue. She sketched the solution during a coffee break last month, tested it quietly on her local build, saw it work. But there’s no meeting for that. No dashboard that tracks “problems actually solved.” No metric for “customer pain eliminated.”

Instead, there’s a Slack thread about scheduling a workshop to identify the stakeholders needed to form a committee that will define the process for prioritizing which solutions to roadmap for potential Q4 consideration.

At 6 PM, Sarah closes her work laptop, opens a different one, and spends two hours building the app she actually cares about. The one where she can see her code running in real time, where users send her thank you messages, where every feature she ships immediately changes someone’s day.

She’s not lazy. She’s not disengaged. She’s just living in two economies: one that rewards the performance of work, and one that rewards work itself.

The Work That Counts, and the Work That Doesn’t

We’ve built a work culture that confuses visibility with value. If it can’t be tracked, scheduled, or packaged into a metric, it’s treated as if it doesn’t exist.

That’s why deep thought looks like laziness, reflection looks like disengagement, and real creativity gets buried under a mountain of performative busyness. We end up rewarding the performance of productivity rather than the substance of it.

This is *Vapor Work*: the illusion of labor that evaporates under scrutiny. Decks no one reads. Meetings that lead to more meetings. Rituals of efficiency that consume more

time than they save. All optics, no outcome.

The Optics Economy

The irony is that the kind of thinking organizations actually need, the slow, nonlinear connective work that leads to insight, is the very thing the system is designed to filter out. In chasing efficiency, the modern workplace quietly erases the conditions for recognition.

This is the optimization trap: a system so obsessed with measurable efficiency that it optimizes away the very conditions for progress. What looks like productivity is often just vapor: movement without momentum. And what looks like wasted time is often the only space where breakthroughs emerge.

This is why Alex McCann's recent viral Substack essay, [*The Death of the Corporate Job*](#), resonated so widely. He described people realizing their roles were "basically elaborate performance art." His point: the corporate job hasn't collapsed, it's simply lost belief like a religion that keeps its rituals long after the faith is gone.

That's exactly what vapor work names. The problem isn't just pretending; the problem is structural. The system is built to reward optics and filter out thinking.

The Silent Rebellion

And that's where the counterforce emerges. If vapor work is the system, *The Silent Rebellion* is the response.

Younger workers have stopped believing in the fiction of corporate purpose. They clock in for the paycheck and benefits, but they don't confuse the job with meaning. The meaning gets built elsewhere: side hustles, creative projects, small businesses, simply cultivating a life beyond the spreadsheet.

McCann calls it “corporate entrepreneurship.” I call it The silent rebellion: a generation performing vapor work by day while quietly reclaiming substance by night.

It isn’t loud. It isn’t dramatic. It’s subtle, pragmatic, and everywhere. A refusal to let optics be the only measure of value. A decision to use the corporate system as a subsidy for what’s real, rather than as an identity to inhabit.

Movement Without Momentum

The tragedy is that vapor work doesn’t just stay inside the office. It seeps into everything. Dashboards that glow but don’t guide. Corporate “alignment” rituals that generate more slides than solutions. The performance of progress consumes the space where actual progress might happen. It becomes *authenticity theater*, where workers rehearse the rituals of alignment and innovation without ever touching the real thing.

And meanwhile, the things that look like wasted time such as daydreaming, sketching, long walks, or scribbles in a notebook are dismissed as indulgence. Yet those are the very conditions where breakthroughs emerge.

The silent rebellion is simply the recognition of this truth: the system won’t make space for real work, so you have to carve that space out yourself.

The Human Cost

It doesn’t stop at work. Our nervous systems are wired to treat everything the same, whether it’s a Slack from your boss or a text from your friend. Connection arrives through the same channels as pressure, so the body doesn’t register it as comfort. It registers it as demand.

That’s why ghosting in relationships so often gets misread as indifference. More often it’s just overwhelm. The same dynamic plays out at work: the flood of signals isn’t proof of productivity. It’s proof of exhaustion.

We're drowning in optics while starving for meaning.

Closing the Gap

What vapor work reveals isn't just wasted time. It marks a collapse in how meaning is made at work. Representations drift away from what they describe until fidelity is lost. Actions lose the context that once gave them coherence, leaving dashboards that look like progress but no longer connect to reality. When fidelity and context erode, work slips into authenticity theater, and meaning unravels.

This is why vapor work feels so uncanny. It isn't just inefficiency. It's the erosion of the very conditions that once made work feel real.

And this is where the silent rebellion takes root. Younger workers aren't simply chasing side hustles or passion projects for extra cash. They are quietly building spaces where fidelity and context can be restored. A project that connects directly with its audience. A business where every decision has visible consequences. A community where contribution matters more than optics. These are meaning restoration projects, born out of necessity.

The real question isn't whether corporate work will survive. It's whether meaning can

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Further Resources:

[[Reality Drift Project Archive](#)] - OSF

[[Reality Drift Framework Repository](#)] - Github



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Avi D'Conte · Avi D'Conte · Sep 18

♥ Liked by Reality Drift

Thank you. This is a side of corporate life that everyone is aware of but, for some reason, either ignore or insist will get better. I truly do wonder how much people will put up with? Is it the promise of eventual retirement that makes us all so complacent to be treated with such contempt in the for another meeting?

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