**Hustle culture: Is this the end of rise-and-grind?**

The #grindset mentality has long endured – but some people are finding hustle culture is losing its lustre.

**W**

Waking at 0400, necking a Bulletproof coffee and a green juice, hooking into a multi-screen desk set-up for back-to-back calls and strategy sessions: you’re hustling to build a mission-driven empire, and harness the #grindset. Who needs sleep when you’re going to make trillions of dollars?

The hustle-culture narrative promotes the idea that there's always more to strive for: more money to make, a bigger title or promotion to secure and a higher ceiling to smash. Although not all entrepreneurs embrace these tropes, some experts say some people have still felt the pressure from the decades-long trickle-down effect of total immersion in work, often to the detriment of other facets of their lives. They point out this mindset stems largely from tech start-ups in Silicon Valley, and is perpetuated on social media.

But they also stress that overworking on purpose – and boasting about doing so – can have negative effects on workers’ mental and physical health, and subsequently may be losing its lustre, especially among some employees from marginalised groups and backgrounds.

In the pandemic era, many people are re-prioritising what they want out of work and life: they are quitting toxic workplaces, leaning out, strengthening boundaries and carving more time for personal lives and hobbies. Plus, experts say economic uncertainty and greater awareness of inequality can make both the ideas and language of the rise-and-grind mentality feel outdated and out of touch.

ADVERTISEMENT

**The rise of the rise-and-grind**

Experts say the entrepreneurial boom in the 1990s and early 2000s laid the foundation for the hustle-culture narrative. They note the rise of venture-capital financing helped build technology titans in Silicon Valley: companies including Google and Facebook, which rocketed to dominance. These high-profile successes – famous for their [**intense, all-consuming**](https://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/podcast/knowledge-at-wharton-podcast/silicon-valley-work-culture/) [**work cultures**](https://hbr.org/2016/06/managing-the-high-intensity-workplace) – cemented Northern California as a global hub for innovation and entrepreneurship.

“Silicon Valley had an image of being a paradigm of the economy, at the cutting edge of technology,” says Nick Srnicek, a lecturer in digital economy at King’s College London, and co-author of the upcoming book After Work. “That leading position means that whatever happens in Silicon Valley gets expressed and spread elsewhere.”

*Although not every entrepreneur subscribes to them, stereotypes of hustle culture abound (Credit: Getty Images)*

The culture of 24/7 work and hustling to win funding became an aspirational business model for many. “It all legitimised the idea that to be successful and get anything meaningful done, you have to be doing long hours,” says Srnicek. The [**secret to success**](https://garyvaynerchuk.com/this-is-the-straightest-road-to-success/), according to some founders? Work hard, and when you think you’ve worked your hardest, push harder.

“Hustle culture ideology says that people are overworking not because they’re economically driven to, but simply because this is the way go-getters get what they want,” adds Srnicek.

Heejung Chung, professor of sociology and social policy at the University of Kent, UK, who researches the labour market and welfare states, agrees. “People adhered to the idea that you must devote yourself only to work and sacrifice everything outside of it.”

Over time, too, they say the narrative grew: “With the rise of LinkedIn, Twitter, Instagram and TikTok, hustle culture narratives exploded,” says Dannielle Haig, principal psychologist at DH Consulting, a London-based boutique consultancy specialising in leadership development and wellbeing at work. “It was then able to feed off people’s insecurities about what they don’t have and what they’re not doing.”

**Time’s up for glorification of the hustle?**

Pandemic lockdowns provided many workers the time and space to [**re-evaluate work-life balance.**](https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20230227-what-does-work-life-balance-mean-in-a-changed-work-world) And because that time was coupled with the stress of financial uncertainty, experts say some people came to find hustle culture more exhausting than empowering.

*Hustle culture ideology says that people are overworking not because they’re economically driven to, but simply because this is the way go-getters get what they want – Nick Srnicek*

“Since Covid-19, people have started to reject hustle culture and pull back – they’re no longer willing to do the work that doesn’t matter, and they’re setting boundaries between themselves and toxic narratives,” says Brooks E Scott, a California-based executive coach and interpersonal communications expert. “They see that hustle culture is no longer working as the key to becoming successful.”

In 2022, a pulse survey of 2,000 US workers by insurance company Prudential showed 70% of US workers had prioritised, or were considering, [**prioritising their personal lives over their jobs and careers**](https://news.prudential.com/press_file.cfm?content_id=125248); 20% said they were willing to take pay cuts if it meant they could have a better work-life balance.

"One way of thinking about work is that it gives workers two rewards: the familiar one, pay; and a less familiar one, meaning and community," says Daniel Markovits, Professor of Law at Yale Law School, and author of The Meritocracy Trap. "A person who works exclusively for pay treats themselves as an asset rather than a person, and devotes much of their adult life to extracting income from this asset – that’s an alienating way to live, which can make a person wealthy but not well."

After the pandemic, more people are seeking work-life balance, in part, as a response to these thoughts, he says. "The responses go deeper than the name ‘work-life balance’ recognises. They aren’t just trying to devote more time and attention to things outside of work – they’re also prioritising meaning and community over pay within work."

*Hustle culture has commonly glorified long hours of work to succeed (Credit: Getty Images)*

Some data also shows employees are leaning out instead of going all in. After several years of trending upwards, employee engagement in the US saw its first annual decline in a decade – [**dropping from 36% engaged employees in 2020 to 34% in 2021**](https://www.gallup.com/workplace/468233/employee-engagement-needs-rebound-2023.aspx), according to Gallup’s research of approximately 15,000 U.S. full- and part-time employees. This pattern continued into 2022, as 32% of full- and part-time employees working for organisations are now engaged, while 18% are actively disengaged.

Plus, whereas hustle culture slogans like ‘[**rise and grind**](https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20190719-rise-and-grind)’ once dominated workplace culture, new buzzwords including [**'quiet quitting’**](https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20220825-why-quiet-quitting-is-nothing-new), ‘soft life’ and ‘Bare Minimum Mondays’ have emerged on social media.

“All these trends suggest employees are pushing back on hustle culture, stopping doing a bunch of work that doesn’t matter and instead prioritising their mental health in the workplace,” says Scott, who believes hustle culture will continue to erode in popularity. “I don’t think we’ll go back [to how things were before],” he says. “There’s a growing realisation that to get ahead, you also need some creative space to rest, iterate and ideate – and you can’t do any of those things if you’re always busy.”

**A meritocracy?**

Some experts further contend that some [**exposure of widespread inequality**](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/10564926221103480) during the pandemic challenged the idea of hustle culture as a meritocracy – the idea that anyone, from any background, who grinds can succeed at scale with the resources they already have.

For instance, lower-income and minority communities have [**faced high-profile economic barriers throughout the past several years**](https://jsri.msu.edu/publications/nexo/vol/no-2-spring-2021/the-covid-19-pandemics-socio-economic-impact-on-minority-racial-ethnic-groups), and [**caregivers, too, have struggled throughout the pandemic**](https://www.cdc.gov/women/caregivers-covid-19/index.html), putting additional strain on [**the difficulties of entrepreneurship**](https://www.forbes.com/sites/geristengel/2020/08/26/the-childcare-crisis-limits-women-entrepreneurs-potential/?sh=3cb92f167e8e). “Occupations and jobs requiring long hours systematically push out women and mothers,” says Chung.

*There’s a growing realisation that to get ahead, you also need some creative space to rest, iterate and ideate – and you can’t do any of those things if you’re always busy – Brooks E Scott*

Additionally, for start-ups raising money, some data indicates it’s much easier for white men to secure funding: one 2019 report showed women-led start-ups as well as those led by minority founders, such as Latinos and BAME individuals, [**receive far less funding**](https://news.crunchbase.com/venture/untapped-opportunity-minority-founders-still-being-overlooked/). Data from non-profit entrepreneurial research organisation DigitalUndivided shows Latina and black women founders in particular received just [**0.43% of all venture capital investment**](https://www.digitalundivided.com/reports/still-building-project-diane-2021-update) in 2020. And in the past few years, [**funding has dropped even more for some minority founders**](https://www.cnbc.com/2023/02/02/venture-capital-black-founders-plummeted.html), including black entrepreneurs.

Overall, says Markovits, "There’s greater recognition that individual effort can’t overcome these inequalities.” The pandemic, he explains, was a "pretty devastating empirical rejection of the idea that individual effort, enterprise and hard work explain who gets ahead, that everyone has a fair shot at success”.

**An evolution – not evaporation – of hustle culture**

Hustle culture hasn’t entirely faded, of course. There are still examples of people who subscribe to and promote the rise-and-grind approach – including ones with large platforms.

In March, Hardik Pandya, senior vice president of design at one of India’s largest educational-tech companies, Unacademy, posted a Tweet declaring that “those who say you shouldn't work weekends and all, have probably never tasted what amazing work is”. The post sparked [**major debate**](https://www.hindustantimes.com/trending/mans-post-on-hustle-culture-sparks-debate-on-twitter-what-do-you-think-about-it-101678279107662.html), and has had [**1.2 million views as of this writing**](https://twitter.com/hvpandya/status/1632629420589715456).

Yet overall, experts say constant work and the pursuit of one-size-fits all professional milestones have become less culturally aspirational for some people.

Chung believes home-working played a pivotal role in diluting the trend, as employees had [**greater control over their hours and routines**](https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/businessandindividualattitudestowardsthefutureofhomeworkinguk/apriltomay2021). “Workers identified that shorter hours or taking that one-hour lunch break walk helps them get things done,” she says. “They acknowledged that, yes, they wanted a promotion, but also wanted to spend time with their families.”

Long hours and hard-core working might have once been the ultimate status symbol for many, but following a tough few years – and more economic hardships and possible layoffs to come – some people appear to be prioritizing health and family over the hustle.