COMMENTARY

Antiwork highlights the need for humanism in I-O psychology

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Some antiwork proponents certainly believe that the nature of work itself is harmful. However, I argue that a large portion of antiwork supporters are simply drawing attention to increasingly bureaucratic and borderline inhumane work conditions. I also believe that the COVID-19 pandemic and how organizations responded specifically triggered a widespread reprioritization of what employees are seeking and what they are willing to endure, causing a huge boon to this movement. Supporting this viewpoint, the r/antiwork subreddit community consisted of 100,000 followers before March 2020 (Darmody, 2022), yet, as of September 2023, membership has ballooned to 2.8 million. I argue that the majority of antiwork supporters are not seeking to quit work altogether but are searching for humanistic management practices from which employers have strayed. I-O psychologists are in a unique position to instill humanistic practices in organizations and apply a humanistic lens to research to address antiwork beliefs.

Employee reprioritization

The antiwork movement certainly existed before COVID-19. However, the drastic change and uncertainty paired with the often-abysmal reaction from employers led many employees to reevaluate their priorities and employment circumstances (Kumar, 2021). Historically, times of upheaval such as economic downturns, layoffs, or major work changes have led employees to sharply reexamine the employer–employee relationship (Rousseau, 1998). The unique disruption of regular habits brought about by the pandemic drove many employees to realize that working conditions were unacceptable and unsustainable (Krugman, 2021).

During COVID-19, some employees were mandated to risk their lives while top management raked in large profits (O'Connor, 2022). Blue-collar workers were hit particularly hard, provided with little to no paid sick leave, inadequate safety measures, and low wages, and this population has historically reported low financial satisfaction and high work exhaustion (Kessler & Gutworth, 2022). In addition, the tumultuous experience of living through a pandemic exacerbated mental health issues and burnout among employees, and many employers have yet to properly address, accommodate for, or even acknowledge these issues.

The shift to work-from-home for some workers also served a large role in changing personal priorities. Some employees experienced greater work–life balance and autonomy when working from home, drawing more attention to how much time was spent at work and wasted on commuting (Mazur et al., 2023). Workers began to realize that workplace flexibility allowed them more time to enjoy other aspects of their lives. As many employers now push for a return to the office without sensible justification, employees feel that their needs are being ignored, drawing greater attention to the disconnect between employer profits and employee desires.

When looking at the r/antiwork subreddit, the most organized effort of the movement, many posts are about employees being unwilling and/or unable to stay at companies who have a clear disregard for employees on a basic human level. For example, stories of employers asking for "volunteer" hours without proper compensation, expecting employees to work while sick, laying off employees while top management earns record profits and pay increases, and disregarding employees struggling with mental health issues are rampant. Accounts of hard work going unrecognized and overworked employees are also commonplace (Telford, 2022).

These employer actions and working conditions have led to employees reprioritizing their effort, time, and commitment. One common reprioritization tactic is the "quiet quitting" phenomenon where employees are doing just enough work to keep their jobs but refusing to go above and beyond (Selyukh, 2022). When human needs and desires are so openly and blatantly ignored, why would employees be motivated to go the extra mile? Some employees have even started searching for more desirable working conditions, with one survey finding that 14% of employees quit due to toxic work environments or a lack of work–life balance (Piacenza et al., 2022). Taken together, a large portion of antiwork sentiment is essentially a call for humanism.

Antiwork as a call for humanism

As stated by Alliger and McEachern (2024), managerialism, which has dominated current employment practices, considers employees as secondary, focusing instead on productivity and profit. Human dignity is a driving force of humanistic management, however, and a balance of employer and employee interests is key (Pirson, 2017). Humanistic management is defined as, "Obtaining results through people, but also, and above all, toward people themselves, showing care for their flourishing and well-being" (Melé, 2016). Empathizing with employees' situations and listening to and encouraging their opinions are examples of humanistic management. One employee interviewed about antiwork stated, "It's the lack of empathy and human kindness. I'm not sure how that went missing" (O'Connor, 2022). Empathy and human kindness are some of the key tenets of humanistic management, and practices identified as *antihumanistic* are currently commonplace on antiwork forums such as employers exploiting workers, not meeting basic needs, providing unequal treatment, limiting employee freedom, and disrespecting employees' opinions (Kostera & Pirson, 2017). The need for humanism has also been recognized in past discussions within the I-O community (e.g., Lefkowitz, 2013; Zickar, 2010) as well as in related fields such as human resources (Sayer, 2007) and business management (Melé et al., 2011), yet few organizations have instilled humanistic practices or cultures.

Humanistic management is focused on creating a safe, healthy, challenging, and fulfilling work environment for employees (Lefkowitz, 2013), which directly opposes many antiwork beliefs. One of the main antiwork sentiments is that work environments consist of low trust and high suspicion (Alliger & McEachern, 2024). Humanistic management, however, calls for a culture of trust, so employees feel recognized and not only seen as a way for the organization to meet goals (McGuire et al., 2021; Spitzeck, 2011). Another antiwork complaint is that employers are constantly monitoring and coercing employees (Prole.info, 2006). With humanistic management, however, employees are given more freedom to decide how tasks are completed, and employees' ideas are considered when making decisions (Melé, 2016). Humanistic management dictates a shift from a culture of control to a culture of employee collaboration.

Humanistic management and I-O psychology
Implications for practice

A few practical implications in the focal article align with humanistic ideals (Alliger & McEarchern, 2024). Specifically, treating applicants with greater respect communicates that the

company values them as human beings. This culture can be continued through onboarding by asking for employee input during orientation and actually listening to ideas and suggestions. For current employees, humanistic management provides guidance on how to respect human dignity, such as encouraging managers to practice with empathy (Pirson, 2020). Employees have unique needs and desires, and management should consider an individual's personal situation when making decisions. For example, if an employee is facing sudden illness, humanistic management would advocate for allowing more flexibility to accommodate the employee's needs. Humanistic management states that managers should overall consider employee needs whenever possible (Melé, 2016). For example, during COVID-19, employers who prioritized employee health over profit demonstrated humanistic practices. Other humanistic suggestions include listening to and encouraging employees' opinions and inputs, recognizing employee contributions, creating open lines of communication between employees and management, and considering how management decisions might impact employees' lives (Melé, 2016).

Creating a culture of trust and respect is another humanistic management tenet, and many constructs previously studied in I-O psychology can be applied to create this culture. For example, Arnaud and Wasieleski (2014) suggest that providing recognition for employee work, encouraging regular communication during performance appraisals, and creating a fair and just compensation system can instill a culture of trust and respect. Humanistic practices also align with many I-O motivational theories, such as need fulfillment, justice, and fairness (Kanfer, 1990), and humanistic practices are likely to result in more satisfied and motivated workers.

Implications for research

First, the concept of antiwork, how employees experience it, and how it can be addressed through interventions are poorly understood. Researchers are just beginning to create and validate measurements of antiwork orientation (e.g., Scruggs, 2023), and it would be useful for I-O psychologists to learn more about antecedents and outcomes of antiwork. Although Alliger and McEachern (2024) state that examining antiwork in this way may be problematic, it can at least serve as a starting point. In particular, research findings linking antiwork to poor work outcomes can help motivate organizations to address and reduce antiwork sentiments.

With a better understanding of the construct and its outcomes, I-O psychologists can explore whether humanistic practices can address antiwork concerns. Humanistic practices align with some existing I-O constructs. For example, participative leadership involves joint decision-making between leaders and followers (Koopman & Wierdsma, 1998). This leadership style can enable employees to feel more supported and have greater discretion over their work, which can possibly reduce antiwork sentiment (Nystrom, 1990). If this is the case, I-O psychologists can use research findings to better inform practitioners how to implement humanistic interventions.

Job autonomy is another construct often studied in I-O that aligns with humanistic principles. Job autonomy enables employees to have more control over their work, and I-O psychologists can test to see whether an increase in job autonomy leads to lower antiwork sentiments. Humanistic management also suggests that job enrichment, empowerment, and task variety can enable employees to feel as if the company relates to them as human beings and respects them enough to provide growth opportunities (Arnaud & Wasieleski, 2014). Future research can explore whether these humanistic practices influence antiwork beliefs and determine if positive outcomes result for both employees and employers.

With knowledge of organizational practices that can reduce antiwork orientation, organizations can better ensure that employees are more satisfied and fulfilled, which will likely lead to organizational benefits as well. Although humanism does not typically consider organizations' profits as consequential, a balance between profit and human needs is likely the path of least resistance. As identified by Zickar (2010), organizations are less likely to allow researchers access to employees unless they see financial benefit. Therefore, striving for a balance

between humanistic principles and organizational profit is more realistic and achievable for I-O psychologists looking to conduct research rather than solely focusing on employee needs.

Conclusion

Although there are some who question the value of work in its entirety, many antiwork supporters call for an overhaul of current working conditions and the extreme focus on managerialism. COVID-19 amplified this movement and led to employees reprioritizing their needs en masse. Humanistic management practices can directly address these issues and I-O psychology can benefit by gaining a clearer understanding of how these practices can return dignity and respect to the workplace.

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