

## THOUGHT PROVOKING IDEAS OF THE GLOBAL ESSAY COMPETITION 2023

### From “ideal” worker to “individual” worker: Embracing diversity in our narratives about work

Kai Krautter is one of the top 25 contributors to this year’s Global Essay Competition Award. He studies at Saarland University and attended the 52<sup>nd</sup> St. Gallen Symposium as a Leader of Tomorrow.

A hard-working man, devoted to his job, supported by his stay-at-home spouse – an “ideal worker” in our society. The way we work has dramatically changed over the last decades, yet our image of an ideal worker has stagnated. First introduced in the 1970s (Coser, 1974), we have passed on a remarkably similar image of an ideal worker from generation to generation. Even though this narrative has been problematic from the very beginning and has just gotten worse in recent years, the aspiration to behave like an ideal worker continues to be widespread. One underlying reason for that is that adhering to these norms is commonly associated with receiving greater material benefits and promotions in organizations (Michel, 2011). However, the prevailing ideal worker image is also at least partially responsible for why the implementation

of work-life policies in organizations (such as parental leave or elderly care) often fails, since employees often worry that by taking advantage of them, they will be penalized for infringing ideal worker norms. In this essay, I therefore propose that we need to break out of the “ideal worker” legacy and move towards an “individual worker” perspective, taking the heterogeneity and diversity of today’s workforce into account.

#### **Who is considered an “ideal worker”, and who is not?**

Traditionally, an ideal worker has been characterized by a complete devotion to work, a lack of domestic responsibilities, and a strong focus on time (Williams, 1989). That is, an ideal worker is willing to work long and unpredictable work hours,

because “toiling away far beyond the normal workweek is viewed as a badge of honor” (Fry & Cohen, 2009, p. 266). Over the last fifty years, we have unconsciously assimilated and strengthened this mental image in our society, viewing, for instance, an investment banker working 80 hours a week as an aspirational worker. Such workers are dedicated to pursuing organizational demands at any cost; any time spent in the non-work domain revolves around restoring resources that allow for more work to occur. Moreover, being an ideal worker also entails meeting around-the-clock demands and performing work at a fast pace (Cameron et al., 2021). Viewed through this lens, an ideal worker rises to any challenge required and goes the extra mile whenever and wherever is necessary to advance the organization’s goals.

Not surprisingly, the ideal worker image has often been personified as a family man with a stay-at-home spouse who provides backstage support and allows the man to prioritize work above all else, unencumbered by domestic responsibilities (Reid, 2015). Because men are traditionally expected to shoulder less childcare than women, they are more likely to “believe they have the right and the responsibility to perform as ideal workers” (Williams, 1989, p. 823). This gendered picture of the ideal worker suggests that the requirement to completely devote oneself to work and neglect all domains outside of work is not accessible to some, if not most, employees and may be responsible for various challenges in our current work culture.

However, I argue that the ideal worker narrative has even started to become worse in recent years, in that the fundamental characteristics have

remained the same, yet employees are now additionally expected to love adhering to ideal worker norms. That is, an ideal worker is now also passionate about their work, views their work as a calling, and does meaningful work (Jachimowicz & Weisman, 2022). An “ideal” investment banker may thus not justify an 80-hour workweek with financial or status-related motives anymore, but rather with the impact they have and the difference they are able to make. Indeed, “the mandate to love our work [...] is arguably becoming increasingly hegemonic as a cultural script and normative ideal” (Weeks, 2017, p. 40). These seemingly improved ideal worker norms, however, push employees to voluntarily invest a myriad of time, energy, and love into their work. Accompanied by a shift to virtual work, gig work, and pressure to be constantly available, workers increasingly feel like it is their own responsibility to act as ideal workers, leading to more burnout and depression in today’s workforce than ever before (Threlkeld, 2021).

### **How does the ideal worker image clash with today’s work culture?**

The outdated gender roles and the extreme working conditions that underlie the ideal worker image clearly conflict with the present-day reality experienced by most employees. Most saliently, women make up half of today’s workforce (Zippia, 2022), and dual-career couples have transitioned from the deviant in the 1970s to the new normal (Petriglieri & Obodaru, 2019). However, as mentioned before, ideal worker norms are still centered on a man receiving full-time domestic support from his wife. In our example, a female investment banker would be exposed to the same ideal worker expectations but is often additionally required to complete a

“second shift” (Hochschild, 1989) of domestic work at home. This makes it more challenging for women to meet ideal worker demands, often leading them to sacrifice parts of their careers, such as limiting travel, choosing a more flexible job, declining toward promotions, and reducing working hours (Ely, Stone, & Ammermann, 2014). In other words, while both male and female workers are subject to similar expectations of work devotion, female workers face an additional expectation of family devotion.

Increasingly, however, ideal worker norms may also start to impact men who when seemingly violating these ideals risk being penalized by their organizations. For instance, the pressure to be fully committed to work above all else can inhibit men from being the kinds of involved fathers they desire to be, and experience anxiety about being “bad dads” who are missing out on their children’s lives. Moreover, the extreme working conditions that ideal worker norms entail can ultimately strain employees’ personal relationships, independent of their gender, and lead them to feel “overworked” and “fried” (Padavic et al., 2020, p.83).

When additionally considering the proliferation of households that move beyond heterosexual marriage, such as single household and non-heterosexual relationships, the mismatches between the ideal worker image and lived reality become even more complex. For instance, singles cannot rely on their partner to take over their household tasks, and individuals in same-sex relationships do not divide their household tasks according to gendered social norms (Cudeville et al., 2020). Despite the many differences between these varying household structures, they have something in common: Few modern

employees can depend on a stay-at-home partner to fulfill all non-work time demands, which suggests that the struggles and conflicts experienced by women in heterosexual partnerships can generalize to employees with a diverse range of family structures. The pervasiveness of these challenges reveals a fundamental incompatibility between the ideal worker image and the modern way of life.

### **How can we resolve the problematic ideal worker legacy?**

We have inherited a legacy that has always been limiting and threatening for individuals with marginalized identities, but recent changes in how our work and family is structured have made the ideal worker image even more problematic. One could suggest that changing the characteristics of an ideal worker would resolve these challenges; however, by drawing on the recent emergence of the new “passionate” ideal worker, I argue that simply changing the “ideal” in ideal worker is not a desirable solution for two reasons. First, changes to the ideal worker image will most likely only reinforce the goals that come with this narrative (i.e., more work and less life), because organizations are usually interested in maintaining the hard-working ideal worker image to covertly exert control over their workforce (Jachimowicz & Weisman, 2022). Second, by having only one single image of an ideal worker, the heterogeneity and diversity of today’s society is artificially constrained.

Therefore, I propose that we need to rewrite our legacy and move from one single “ideal worker” towards multiple, more diverse “individual workers.” Instead of trying to find one person that fits a rigid and highly gendered image of

an ideal worker, organizations should aim to hire an individual that fits their position ideally – with all their skills and personality, their past, present, and future plans, and their individuality. There is not one “ideal” worker as much as there is not “one” typical, desirable, or prescribed way to live your life. Letting go of ideal worker norms and promoting diversity by having multiple images of individual workers would help create a more inclusive and equitable work environment that buoys individual well-being and organizational performance.

In order to achieve that, I suggest three areas where organizations need to make significant changes in their transition from an ideal to an individual worker narrative: hiring, work schedule, and promotions. With regard to recruitment, an emphasis on ideal worker norms disadvantages women and people of color during the entire hiring process. In addition, more and more people do not want to structure their lives according to ideal worker norms anymore (Ferriss, 2011), which increasingly prevents companies from recruiting new talents and high-performers. By employing an individual worker narrative, organizations may advertise these diverse images in their job ads, train their recruiters to reduce biases in job interviews, and enable applicants to show their full and authentic selves. Changing the recruitment strategy to a more inclusive one will ensure that the best and most talented people will apply for the organization’s jobs.

With regard to working hours, organizations need to acknowledge more that women still do the vast majority of unpaid care work at home (Lachance-Grzela & Bouchard, 2010), and that expectations for work schedules across industries currently make it challenging

for them to combine these roles with paid work. Through the transition from ideal to individual worker norms, implementing work-life policies should be more successful than in the past where they have often remained unused by employees. That is, employees will start worrying less about deviating from ideal worker norms and instead flexibly adapt their work schedule to their own needs and demands, leading them to be more motivated to perform high-quality work. For instance, recuperating activities (such as taking a vacation or switching off from work) would be viewed differently in organizations with an ideal versus individual worker narrative. When ideal worker norms prevail, many employees forego their vacation days; when individual worker norms prevail, employees will know that they can take time off when they need to and do not have to fear any negative consequences for doing so.

With regard to promotions, organizations should consider the full and individual picture of each employee. Unstructured evaluation processes can result in managers deferring to stereotypes when making decisions about who to promote (Clarke, 2020). Thus, managers need to have clear criteria in their decisions about who to promote, such as the quality of the work as a key criterion. However, the quality of the work should not be determined by rigid adherence to ideal worker norms. On the contrary, rather than exclusively rewarding “face time” in the office and hours put in the job, organizations should aim to take other factors into account (such as family structures, weekly time spent on childcare, etc.) In order to fully embrace the diversity of the multiple individual worker images, managers should therefore raise their awareness to these idiosyncratic factors, allow minority

groups to have substantive interactions with senior leaders about their work, and make the promotion candidate pool as heterogeneous as possible.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Diversity is one of the buzzwords of today's work culture, but many organizations still struggle to actually embrace diversity in practice. One reason for that is that we still hold onto a half-century old legacy of a single "ideal worker" in our society, which systematically disadvantages women and other people from minorities. In this essay, I presented arguments for why and

how organizations should shift their rigid and one-size-fits-all ideal worker image to multiple and individual image of diverse workers, spanning from the female entrepreneur to the employee who pursues his passion outside of work, from the part-time teacher to the full-time investment banker, from the volunteer in an NGO to the freelancer musician. In order to effectively advance organizational goals of diversity, I thus call for a renovation in organizational culture that directs our gaze to diverse individual workers rather than a single outdated ideal worker that everybody aims yet fails to aspire to.

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