

COMMENTARY

# Working against the current: What different groups can teach us about antiwork

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In their focal article, Alliger and McEachern (2024) provide a variety of potential research directions related to antiwork, focusing primarily on topics to be studied. We take their suggestions further and propose specific types of workers and organizations that would be worthwhile to study to better understand antiwork ideas and approaches. Specifically, we aim to highlight individuals and groups who are already living and working in ways that align with some antiwork tenets, contrary to our existing society, which takes work, as it currently is, as a given. Many of the groups that we discuss are ones that others in the field of industrial and organizational (I-O) psychology have already identified as being understudied (e.g., Bergman & Jean, 2016). Thus, we amplify the calls for more diverse and varied samples and more targeted and intentional samples based on research questions (e.g., Fisher & Sandell, 2015), and we do so by expanding upon Alliger and McEachern's call for more research on antiwork.

## Unemployed individuals

Related to the proposed research topic of “benefits of not working,” we first suggest that I-O psychologists study people who choose not to work. Much of the existing research on unemployment comes from the field of economics (e.g., Schmitz, 2011), and the research from I-O is typically focused on predictors of unemployment, how the unemployed search for jobs, and the negative effects of unemployment (e.g., Wanberg, 2012; Waters & Moore, 2002), which offers a somewhat limited perspective on the experience of unemployment. Another research stream examines the subgroup of people who are “unemployed” by way of retirement, with a primary focus on healthy retirement processes (e.g., Fisher et al., 2016; Wang & Shi, 2014; Wang & Shultz, 2010). We anticipate that studying the “unemployed by choice” group may present challenges, given that most individuals do not have the financial resources to be unemployed, even if they would choose not to work if that option was available to them. We also expect that studying unemployed individuals might be hard to convince I-O psychologists to pursue, given that we tend to focus more on *psychology in organizations* as opposed to the *psychology of working*, partially because we have historically been hired by organizations and have focused on topics most relevant to organizations (Baritz, 1960; Gerard, 2017). However, if we want to understand the latter (i.e., the psychology of working), it is important to also study the psychology of *not* working. Specifically, to study the “benefits of not working”—particularly in contrast to the consequences of halting work later in life (e.g., cognitive decline during the transition to retirement; Fisher et al., 2014)—conducting research with unemployed individuals would be a good place to start. It is possible that some of the negative effects associated with retirement occur due to an overemphasis

on work throughout one's life as opposed to the lack of work itself because individuals have relied heavily on work to maintain their cognitive, physical, and social functioning. People who are of working age and choose not to work perhaps derive meaning, skills, and engagement in other domains of life.

### **Small businesses, democratic organizations, and artists**

Next, we echo calls from others in the field to study small businesses and small business owners (e.g., Kurtessis et al., 2017; Labeledz Jr. & Berry, 2011). Specifically, individual or partner business owners are often characterized as pursuing a passion and choosing a career path that is uniquely challenging and risky compared to being an employee, which, on the surface, seems to counter the idea that work is inherently coercive. Further, the topics of “managerialism and leadership” as described by Alliger and McEachern (i.e., companies manipulating employees' attitudes and feelings) would likely show up differently for business owners. When people are their own bosses and can determine their work hours and job tasks independently, they are not exempt from the pressures of a capitalist and hierarchical society, but presumably, the autonomy protects them from some of the coercive forces to which other working people are more subject.

Some work environments can enable their members to carry out some of the values related to antiwork, and small businesses might be able to do so more readily than larger organizations. As mentioned in the focal article, unions, workplace democracy, and worker ownership can provide empowerment for workers and counteract the more hierarchical “managerialism.” Further, other scholars have already called for I-O psychologists to work with and study unions (e.g., Bergman & Jean, 2016; Zickar, 2004, 2014). For a slightly different perspective, we highlight one example of a small retail business started by Madeline Pendleton, who regularly shares information about her progressive business operations on social media and through her upcoming book. She acknowledges that being a business owner is contradictory to her socialist beliefs and values, and she details how everyone employed by her company makes the same take-home pay per day (including herself), the standard work week is four days and 28 hours, workers are provided with extensive benefits, including full-coverage healthcare and profit sharing, and decision making occurs democratically. It may be worthwhile for I-O psychologists to consider different methodological approaches, such as case studies, that would allow for an in-depth understanding of how and why small business owners design systems that support equity and well-being for their workers, in line with antiwork values.

Similar to small business owners, individuals who choose a career path in the arts (e.g., artists, musicians, performers) often follow a passion, lack the managerial relationships associated with other types of work, and do so at the risk of financial and job insecurity. In some ways, a career in the arts can be considered with other gig workers or freelancers, who have been studied in I-O psychology (e.g., Cropanzano et al., 2023), albeit not enough to reflect that 20–30% of the workforce works in gig arrangements (Dua et al., 2022; Kuhn, 2016). In other ways, the commitment to creative endeavors for employment (which would otherwise be pursued voluntarily) seems unique compared to other gig work. Artists have often found ways to incorporate elements of antiwork into the way they earn money to function in society, and studying them might help us understand alternative ways of working.

### **“Quiet quitters” and leavers in the “great resignation”**

We also suggest a focus on “quiet quitters” and people who quit jobs during the “Great Resignation,” not to figure out how to prevent such a mindset toward or approach to work (e.g., Formica & Sfodera, 2022), but rather to understand how the topics of antiwork arise for

people who have questioned the role of work in their lives. One author of this commentary recently conducted a qualitative study with people who had quit jobs during the “Great Resignation,” and a primary theme was that people had deprioritized work in relation to broader life (Wong, 2023). Although many of the participants were employed in new positions (i.e., participating in work), they spoke about tenets of antiwork (although not by name), including strong criticisms of capitalism. Thus, studying “quiet quitting” and the “Great Resignation” might provide greater insights into antiwork ideologies (Brossoit & Wong, 2023).

We appreciate Alliger and McEachern’s assertion that antiwork offers many important opportunities to I-O psychology. To expand upon *what* the focal article authors propose studying in this realm, we offer suggestions for *whom* could be studied to understand how antiwork may already be at play.

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