

**Art at Work: Enhancing Employee Well-Being Through Creativity**

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## **Art at Work: Enhancing Employee Well-Being Through Creativity**

As a member of Generation Z (Gen-Z), I am struck by the sheer volume of work-related content that circulates on social media humorously highlighting how miserable my generational peers are in their employment. Whether it's a first corporate job or a part-time gig, it's evident both through this anecdotal evidence and through actual data that many Gen-Zers are deeply dissatisfied with their work.<sup>1</sup> While humour serves as a coping mechanism for many, these online trends underscore a larger issue: employee dissatisfaction has reached unprecedented levels. But what is driving this widespread discontent, and more importantly, how can it be addressed?

This paper examines the rising levels of workplace dissatisfaction among Generation Z focusing in particular on the factors that contribute to widespread employment apathy and lack of engagement impacting this demographic and their contributions in formal office settings.<sup>2</sup> It aims to illustrate how issues such as a lack of belonging and fulfillment statistically reflect on workplace dissatisfaction. To contextualize this generational discontent, the paper analyzes shifts from the Baby Boomer era to today's workforce, which will soon be composed and led by a significant percentage of Gen-Z professionals. By investigating the key factors hindering workplace happiness for Gen-Z, this paper offers insights into the roots of their overall discontent

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<sup>1</sup> A Gallup poll conducted in 2022 found that Gen Z employees are simultaneously the most passively disengaged and least engaged overall when compared to Millennials, Gen X, and baby boomers. <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/404693/generation-disconnected-data-gen-workplace.aspx>

<sup>2</sup> Generation Z defined as those born between the years 1997 and 2012

with work as well as factors that need to be in place to ensure greater motivation and satisfaction. As a potential solution, it recommends incorporating the arts into the workplace to alleviate dissatisfaction, offering employees opportunities for agency and a strengthened sense of belonging. The paper culminates with current examples of workplace strategies that successfully integrate the arts and suggests practical ways businesses of any size can adapt and implement similar practices.

To complete this project, I relied extensively on current industry reports, demographic data, and polls from sources like Gallup. It is important to recognize that the impact of the arts in professional settings is an emerging area of research. Due to this, I explored and integrated insights from various fields to support my ideas and substantiate my arguments.

Although there is currently limited research on how incorporating the arts into the workplace can enhance employee well-being, this topic holds immense potential and is especially relevant today. As will be discussed throughout the paper, there is an ongoing employee engagement crisis. Addressing this crisis is crucial to creating and sustaining thriving businesses and organizations. A remedy to this problem requires employers and leaders looking beyond providing a steady paycheck, and adopting a more holistic approach to meeting employees' needs. Gen-Z is the population of focus, as they will soon make up the majority of the workforce.

## **Post-Covid Employee Retention Crisis and Impacts**

Many United States businesses and organizations are grappling with a significant challenge: maintaining a stable workforce. Dubbed “The Great Resignation”, this phenomenon has seen a significant surge in employee turnover since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. As highlighted in a 2023 Forbes article:

After the global pandemic hit in 2020, a lot of corporate employees resigned from their jobs and began to seek new employment opportunities for various reasons...One would assume that post-pandemic, a semblance of “business as usual ” would have returned to the workplace. However...organizations will need to lean into the “new normal” to surmount the unprecedented employee mobility. (Ayoade)

Supporting this narrative, findings from the 2022 Global Benefits Attitudes Survey further underscore the severity of the retention crisis. The survey revealed that 53% of American employees are either searching for new work opportunities or deemed “at risk of leaving.” (WTW) While this figure has decreased to 43% as of 2023, the percentage is still alarmingly high. Moreover, the research indicates a concerning trend, with 28% of employees definitively planning to depart and an additional 17% expressing contentment in their current roles but remaining open to alternative opportunities (Celestino). The employee retention crisis has detrimental impacts not only on businesses, but on the economy and the welfare of individuals.

When businesses have low employee retention and loyalty issues, employers are forced to devote significant resources such as time and money to recruitment, training and assimilating new workers. This process alone can cost up to 70% of an annual salary (Devane), and hinders company productivity as work flow is disrupted. Organizational productivity stands out as one of, if not the most critical factor for businesses to consider, as studies have shown that companies with stable employee retention rates outperform their competitors by 202% (Tenney). Productivity in the workplace is necessary for economic stability, as it essentially measures how efficiently a business can deliver their product or service to consumers, thereby maintaining a solid profit and reputation. High employee turnover rates also negatively impact company culture, as it becomes more difficult to foster stable bonds and loyalty between co-workers when employees are constantly coming and going (Taranjeet).

The constant turnover of personnel also results in a lack of genuine connections among colleagues, significantly compromising workplace contentment and well being. As per a study conducted by Betterup, individuals who lack a sense of connection with their co-workers experience 128% more loneliness and 107% more anxiety compared to those in a community-oriented work environment. This sense of isolation correlates with a staggering 176% increase in the likelihood of the individual seeking alternative employment, as also evidenced by the Betterup study. When organizations fail to prioritize the cultivation of connections, the well being of individuals is adversely affected, contributing to the dissatisfaction of today's workforce.

## **What is the Underlying Problem? Today's Workforce and Dissatisfaction**

Dissatisfaction surrounding work has remained a constant through the ages, often for good reason. The late 1800s, for example, was marked by intense labor and management conflicts. During a period when factories provided work to many Americans, these workplaces were often unsafe and uncomfortable, sometimes leading to injuries and fatalities. To make matters worse, it was common for a workday to last as long as twelve hours or longer. This widespread discontent and tension prompted workers to advocate for better workplace conditions, resulting in policies and support systems that still serve the workforce today, such as the eight hour workday, employee benefits, and unions. While work culture has certainly improved over the decades, workplace dissatisfaction and turnover rates remain high. Given these alarming statistics, it's important to consider the myriad of social and environmental factors that contribute to values and attitudes towards work.

### **Generational Shifts**

Work behaviors and attitudes have undergone significant evolution over the years, shaped by the socio-economic landscape that has varied from generation to generation. Baby Boomers, born between 1946 and 1964, experienced the aftermath of World War II during their formative years, exposing them to early hardships that instilled a desire for workplace stability, which they often prioritized over work-life balance. These circumstances instilled the "live to work" mentality among this generation (Gursoy *et al*). This mentality demonstrates itself in their core work values such as respecting authority, being staunch in the belief that hard work is the key to

success, and valuing the traditional 9-5 workday (Seemiller and Grace). The combination of growing up amidst economic uncertainty instilled a desire to save for the future and prioritize stability.

Following the Boomers, Gen-X (born between 1965-1980) grew up during a transitional era where dual income households were becoming commonplace. Consequently, Gen-Xers were often left home alone after school hours while their parents were at work. Due to this, Gen-X developed self-reliance, and are nicknamed the “Latchkey Generation”. Witnessing their parents’ dedication to long hours at work, often encroaching on family time, factors into Gen-Xers placing greater emphasis on achieving and maintaining a work-life balance and valuing family time.

Millennials (born between 1981-2000), make up roughly 40% of today’s workers (Kumar). Millennials faced the highest student loan burdens in history, driving them to seek stable employment while also prioritizing their personal lives outside of work (Kohl). While Millennials do value a work-life balance, they likewise appreciate collaboration and connection and want to feel as if they are a part of a team. Christina Janzer, Senior Director of research and analytics at Slack has observed through research that especially Millennials, in addition to people in general, are feeling “isolated”, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic shifted the norms in which office life operates. In a recent interview with Business News Daily, Janzer notes:

Their (Millennial workers’) sense of belonging has taken a hit. It’s not surprising. We’re used to being in the office with colleagues, catching up at your desk or at the water

cooler. That has been taken away. Companies have to figure out how to build a sense of community (Fuscaldò).

## **Gen-Z in the Workplace**

Considering Gen-Z will make up 30% of the workforce by 2025 (World Economic Forum), it is especially important to focus on their workplace engagement. Born between the years of 1995-2012, Gen-Z is officially the most diverse generation in U.S. history, with one in six gen-zers identifying as either transgender or queer, an unprecedented percentage. A slight majority of Gen-Z is non-Hispanic White, at 52%, with one in four Gen-Zers identifying as Hispanic, 14% as Black, and 6% as Asian. Gen-Z also views the country's increasing racial and ethnic diversity as a positive (Parker and Igielnik). Perhaps due to such diversity within this generation, 63% of Gen-Z workers would choose to work at a company that prioritizes diversity, equity, and inclusion over a company that does not. Furthermore, Gen-Z places less emphasis on salary than their predecessors, Millennials, and previous generations. When presented with a scenario of choosing between a job with a higher paying salary but "boring" work, or a lower paying job with more "interesting" work, Gen-Z's preferences were evenly split (Deloitte). This aligns with the sentiment expressed in *Positive Psychology*; "The old idea that everyone wants a job that pays a huge salary for doing minimal work is a myth; most people have a psychological need to feel competent and to believe that their efforts contribute in a meaningful way to their society" (Compton and Hoffman).

Where the Baby Boomer is traditional in their work attitudes, Gen-Z possesses a completely different mentality towards work. Data shows that while Gen-Z is career oriented and enjoys challenging assignments, they value a flexible schedule, want to feel fulfillment in their work and prefer to avoid meetings (Ortega *et al*; Avogino). While the latter may come across as anti-social, or even lazy, Gen-Z does value face to face interaction, and craves real life connection. Despite growing up among unprecedented digitalization, resulting in more than half of Gen-zers spending a minimum of ten hours a day on an electronic device, thirty-seven percent of Gen-Z expresses concern that technology may be impeding their ability to sustain relationships, a notable percentage. Along with this awareness regarding the positive and negative implications of technology, Gen-Z exhibits a mindfulness for the future. Their formative years have been shaped by events such as 9/11, an increasing prevalence of gun violence, the looming climate crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, which occurred right as Gen-Z was supposed to make their major debut into the workforce, which has contributed to a collective sense of anxiety. These compounding factors undoubtedly contribute to why the Society for Human Resource Management characterizes Gen-Z as experiencing higher levels of emotional distress, 25% of Gen-Z compared to only 8% of Baby Boomers (Avogino). This consciousness, combined with their aspiration to create a more equitable future, shapes Gen-Z's distinctive approach to and attitudes around work.

Unlike Baby Boomers, who were inclined to persist, Gen-Z is less willing to endure disappointment with current workplace realities. This has resulted in unprecedented levels of workplace apathy, with 54% of Gen-Z identifying as disengaged at work (Pendell and Vander Helm). This collective state of distress among Gen-Z negatively impacts workplace motivation

and retention, reflected in the 65% of Gen-Z employees who quit their jobs within twelve months of employment (Pell). If we take into consideration the universality of the pursuit of happiness, then it's no wonder why people continue to prioritize and seek happiness within the workplace.

### **Causes of Workplace Dissatisfaction among Gen-Z**

There are a plethora of factors that can contribute to workplace dissatisfaction. Among Gen-Z, the most notable of these factors include: feeling uninspired by their workplace role and responsibilities; a lack of support from and connection with leadership; and the current decline in mental well-being among Gen-Z.

#### ***Fulfillment Issues at Work***

Surveys suggest that Gen-Z place importance on feeling that the work that they do contributes to a greater good. A February 2024 study titled “The Ambitions of Gen Z: Balancing Happiness, Work, and Financial Goals” revealed that 37% of Gen-Z says that meaningful work is most important to them. Relevant to this, 26% of Gen-Zers say that not finding a job that excites them is one of their biggest worries (EduBirdie). Currently, fulfillment issues at work are the cause of more than half (59%) of young employees reporting that they are likely to leave their jobs (Segal). This disconnect to workplace responsibilities largely contributes to “quiet quitting”, a term used to describe when an employee does the bare minimum at work to get by while avoiding confrontation. In this vein, a new term by the name “resenteeism” [sic] is beginning to enter discourse (Johnson). In this case, dissatisfied employees feel stuck at their current role, therefore they do the bare minimum, but are resentful of their disengagement. This is a company

leader's worst nightmare, and this lack of enthusiasm for workplace responsibilities is becoming increasingly common among Gen-Z employees.

### ***Lack of community culture***

Another contributing factor to this apathy towards work is that employees are not feeling adequately connected to co-workers and leadership. This is most prevalent in workers under the age of 35, who, according to a Gallup study, report feeling less heard and cared about at work. In relation to this, that same Gallup study, conducted by chief workplace scientist Jim Harter, has concluded that fewer millennials and Gen-Zers have a mentor like relationship in the workplace, in which someone is encouraging their development and finding opportunities for them to progress. As Harter, author of this Gallup study succinctly puts it, "there's a growing disconnect between employee and employer" (Hsu). Not only is Gen-Z feeling a lack of support from leadership, but research demonstrates that Gen-Z feels disconnected from co-workers as well. This disconnect is evident in statistics such as the 54% of Gen-Z who are not engaged at work (Pendell and Vander Helm). According to Gallup, this disengagement derives from young workers not feeling connected to co-workers or leadership.

### ***Mental Health, Loneliness, and Burnout***

Further compounding the issue of workplace instability is the prevalence of mental distress among Gen-Z. It has been estimated that one third of 18-24 year olds experience symptoms of depression or anxiety disorder, an increase of 25% since 2000 (The Guardian). A whopping 42% of Gen-Z has been formally diagnosed with a mental health condition (Survey: 42% of Gen Z Diagnosed With a Mental Health Condition). While this number is likely due to

the increase of medicalization, there are elements that can be attributed to Gen-Z's rapid decline in mental health: such as COVID-19, the cost of living crisis, the climate crisis, and the rise of social media. It is therefore not a stretch to posit that the unprecedented levels of mental health instability among Gen-Z correlates to the unprecedented workplace disengagement being reported. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the collective mental state of young adults has been particularly fragile. In the U.S. alone, mental health conditions such as anxiety, affects 19.1% of U.S. adults, and depression affects 18.5% of adults (National Institute of Mental Health).

To contextualize why this hurts a business' bottom line, twelve billion workdays are lost annually to depression and anxiety alone. Consequently, the global economy suffers a \$1 trillion penalty each year due to reduced productivity stemming from these mental health challenges (WHO). Not only is inadequate mental health support an economic liability, but these conditions also impact an individual's confidence and inner dialogue and also hinder their ability to work productively. As a result, Gen-Z is using more sick days, often due to mental health. Recent research shows that Gen-Z employees are missing a day of work every week due to mental health challenges (Royle). This finding is deduced to be a consequence of the lack of mental health support being provided by employers. Addressing mental health challenges is becoming increasingly important considering that Gen-Z is reported to have the poorest mental health of any generation recorded thus far, with one third reporting that they lack love, support and genuine connection (Walton Family Foundation).

To top it off, Gen-Z's mental instability is being exacerbated by the workplace. A survey distributed by Gallup found that almost 50% of Gen-Z workers between the ages of 18-29 have

reported a decline in mental health as a result of their jobs (Witters and Agrawal). A second Gallup survey concluded that Gen-Z was the least engaged group in the workplace and the most burned-out from their jobs (Pandell and Vander Helm). The data reflects this, with 68% of Gen-Z reporting being stressed at work compared to 40% of Baby Boomers. Gen-Z's work-related anxiety prevents the development of meaningful workplace relationships, as shown by a OnePoll survey distributed to 2,000 Gen-Zers across the US and UK. An overwhelming 90% of Gen-Z reported avoiding in-person work events because of anxiety, and 25% reported that they felt uncomfortable sharing ideas or speaking during group meetings (Upton-Clark). Clearly Gen-Z is feeling out of their element in the workplace, which is contributing to stress and anxiety that is detrimental to their professional development and well-being. Thankfully, this collective unease among Gen-Z in professional settings is increasingly gaining widespread attention.

In a Forbes article written by Ron Carucci, the importance of prioritizing mental health in the workplace is front and center. Mike Kogan, assistant counselor at Care Counseling Center, emphasizes that “people need to feel like they belong - like they matter and like their organization values them.” Neglecting the mental wellbeing of employees not only impacts productivity, but also diminishes morale, transforming work into an isolating rather than invigorating and rewarding experience.

The combination of social and environmental factors, such as apathy towards work responsibility, lack of feeling demonstrated by supervisors, and a decrease in mental well-being prevents Gen-Z from being motivated by and thriving at work. Consequently, companies must adapt their strategy to meet the evolving needs of Generation Z employees. Traditional

transnational approaches to motivate employee performance such as financial incentives and promotions are no longer sufficient to maintain employee satisfaction or promote engagement. Gen-Z seeks a workplace environment that offers greater meaning, connection and fulfillment, highlighting the need for companies to address people in their entirety. With so many employees still unmotivated and disengaged at work, despite recent shifts in work culture that prioritize flexibility, leadership will need to take a people focused approach in their strategies and tactics in order to remedy the lack of enthusiasm.

Companies and organizations have implemented various solutions to address Gen-Z's disengaged attitude toward the workplace. One increasingly adopted approach, especially in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic is remote work, commonly referred to by Gen-Z as "WFH" (work from home). This strategy does have its appealing upsides, like avoiding a long, expensive commute. However, many young workers are still not satisfied with working remotely. According to an Axios survey, an overwhelming 74% of younger workers are concerned about missing out on community and camaraderie due to the impersonal nature of remote work (Pandey). Clearly, remote work is not solving the root cause of employee dissatisfaction. This statistic demonstrates that, if anything, Gen-Z wants to be in the office to accomplish that element of socialization that remote work lacks.

Many companies have also introduced on-site amenities like fitness centers or free lunches to address employee dissatisfaction. Some companies have focused on making their interiors feel "homier" in an attempt to cater to their workforce. While these perks can offer convenience and aesthetic appeal, they fall short of making employees feel truly seen, heard and

valued by leadership (Carucci). Rather than relying on peripheral solutions, leaders should instead focus on addressing employees as whole individuals and address people's cognitive and emotional needs.

### **Components Supporting Happiness at Work**

Workplace happiness isn't a one-size-fits-all concept, but there are key factors that contribute to employees feeling more motivated and inspired at work. Happiness, including happiness at work, is increasingly a focus of research and scholarship. Pioneers in this field include Hungarian-American psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi as well as writer and business consultant Ron Carucci. For the purpose of this paper, I will focus on three main factors that are intrinsic to employee well-being: autonomy, a sense of belonging, and purpose - feeling that your presence at work truly matters.

#### ***Autonomy***

Autonomy, or agency in the workplace, derives from employees feeling as if they can make their own decisions and make creative choices (Gouldsberry). This sense of ownership over their work which ultimately increases feeling valued. Research conducted by the University of Birmingham suggests that employees who experience autonomy in workplace settings result in higher levels of well-being.

### ***Belonging***

A sense of belonging is one of the inherent needs for human well-being. It is therefore no surprise that the desire for a sense of belonging applies to the workplace as well. When employees do not feel comforted and secure in their work environment, they avoid sharing their opinions, which causes productivity and engagement to suffer as a result (Sosa). This was demonstrated above in the section discussing how a lack of community culture in the workplace has culminated into 54% of Gen-Z employees feeling disengaged at work. In a study conducted by Harvard Business Review, employees who felt a sense of belonging in the workplace were correlated to a 56% increase in job performance (Carr et al.) . This data demonstrates how monumental belonging is for employee engagement and workplace wellness. Creating workplace environments that support individual expression is an important step toward fostering a sense of belonging among employees.

### ***Purpose***

Having a sense of purpose, or feeling that the work you wake up to do every day has a tangible impact, is also vital for employee engagement and well-being. As highlighted, Gen-Z is more likely to take a job that nurtures the spirit as opposed to a job that pays well but does not provide meaning. Meaning in the workplace not only benefits employee motivation, but can also contribute to a reduction in stress and burnout, resulting in increased well-being (Bedzow). For this reason, creating an environment in which employees feel valued and important is paramount, particularly for a workforce experiencing unprecedented mental health challenges like Gen-Z.

## **Extrinsic Benefits of Art Participation**

Oftentimes, managers generally consider structural and organizational processes and strategies to correct workplace disengagement. For instance, Google offices are celebrated for their extravagant perks such as basketball courts, nap pods and slides (McLaughlin). However, as previously mentioned above, Gen-Z in particular cares about feeling heard, seen and valued at work. An approach that consummately accounts for these needs is integrating arts into the workplace.

It has been proven that the arts offer a myriad of benefits for the human spirit. These benefits extend from economic and civic to educational, social and emotional (McCarthy et al). On a civic level, it has been determined that individuals who participate in the arts are more likely to participate in integral civic activities such as voting in elections and volunteering (Wali et al). A longitudinal study using data from more than 12,000 students concluded that individuals who participated in arts programs throughout middle and high school were more likely to vote in elections and engage in community service activities (Catterall). Based on this finding, one can surmise that the arts encourage a form of altruism, which is also associated with happiness and well-being (Rhoads and Marsh).

## **Arts and Personal Growth/Well-Being**

Research further shows that creative expression can enhance feelings of personal well-being (Zammit) and helps reduce stress (Adams-Price & Steinman). In a study focused on the benefits of poetry, it was noted that “it can be a useful tool to enhance flourishing, flow, a

sense of meaning, and general well-being” (Croom). When considering visual arts and museums, research has shown that museum visits can reduce stress, anxiety and depression, while also improving mood. Studies have also revealed that art cultivates deeper connections between individuals (Cotter & Pawelski; also Tay et al.), making it a powerful tool for developing meaningful workplace relationships.

Doctors in the United Kingdom, Canada and Europe have begun prescribing art based experiences to their patients, specifically museum visits and creative activities, aiming to connect patients to a community, with the aim of increasing health and well-being (Magsamen).

The city of Lille, France has become a pioneer in the field of “social prescribing.” The Palais des Beaux Arts, home to France’s second largest art collection, utilizes the museum space to treat patients from local hospitals using “museo-therapy.” In September 2023, this program became more official when the museum signed an agreement with the University Hospital Center of Lille to offer 140 museum therapy sessions to patients who have been prescribed museum visits by doctors. The program works with a diverse range of patients, from those with Alzheimer’s disease, to children with autism, to women suffering from endometriosis. Each session begins with a brief tour of the museum, followed by participants creating their own art projects. Initially launched over a decade ago to engage the public in the arts and adopt a more social role, the initiative has now evolved (Yeung). The museum’s involvement in providing a space for social prescriptions is being used to complement traditional medical treatments, offering patients an effective, fulfilling, and cost-efficient approach to care.

Beatrice, a participant in museo-therapy at The Palais des Beaux Arts shared that the experience helped her deal with burn-out, or chronic stress: “Normally, I don’t do art at all, I’m not talented like that. But each time, I’ve been very proud of what I did” (Yeung). Beatrice’s experience with museo-therapy and social prescribing reinforces the evidence that engagement in the arts enhances life satisfaction. This enhancement of happiness as a result of interacting with the arts can be applied to enhancing satisfaction in the workplace as well.

### ***Social Bonding and Empathy***

Art provides a bridge for people to connect. It has been evidenced that involvement in the arts and creative activities promotes social cohesion. Engaging in creativity with a cohort on a regular basis has also been shown to strengthen social bonds and cultivate trust (McCarthy et al.). A cross cultural study spanning eleven countries found that active engagement with music effectively enhances positive emotions, such as enjoyment, while also fostering connections between individuals, creating a sense of togetherness (Adams-Price & Steinman). A striking historical example of music’s impact on morale is seen during WWII, when French resistance fighters listened to Beethoven’s Fifth symphony to boost their spirits and commitment to resisting Nazi occupation. The symphony was even broadcast before the D-day invasion to uplift the mindset of the Allied forces (Croom). If music could build mental resilience during wartime, it surely has the potential to motivate employees and boost morale in workplace settings.

More recently, a long-term study of 23,660 participants conducted between 2010-2015 discovered that those involved in activities like choirs, book clubs, and amateur theater, or who engaged with the arts in other forms, experienced reduced levels in mental distress, along with

improved mental well-being and greater life satisfaction (Wang, S., et al.) As evidenced by this study, engagement and involvement in the arts can certainly enhance the sense of belonging that employees currently lack at work.

### ***Our Brains and the Arts***

Engaging in the arts has also proven to be beneficial for strengthening concentration in addition to assisting in stress reduction, as evidenced by the museo-therapy in Lille which resulted in reduced feelings of burnout. To understand why art has this effect on our well-being requires a bit of neuroscience. It has been shown that levels of cortisol, the hormone released when one is experiencing stress, decreases when we engage in the arts. The term “arts” here is meant to be all inclusive. From painting, to writing, to music, the benefits translate. This relationship is referred to in the medical realm as “neuroaesthetics,” which is a fairly new discipline that investigates “the biological basis of aesthetic experiences” (Chatterjee and Vartanian). In other words, the study of what happens in our brains when we engage in an aesthetic or creative experience.

Research has shown that “feel-good” chemicals in the brain, including oxytocin, dopamine and serotonin, are released in the brain when engaged in aesthetic experiences. This growing field of study aims to implement the benefits of art into healthcare, with the intention of using art as an alternative, more holistic treatment for chronic disease, pain, neurological issues and mental health (Magsamen).

## **Integrating Arts in the Workplace**

As highlighted in the first half of this paper, employers are facing an unprecedented challenge regarding employee satisfaction. To address this issue, leaders must explore unconventional solutions. While we discussed in the above sections that many workplace well-being interventions are highly focused on material needs and physical comforts, there is an increasing call to consider holistic strategies that support employee well-being, engagement, and social comfort in today's work environments. Potential interventions vary from revising traditional structures to enhance employee agency, to innovative programming strategies such as integrating active arts engagement in the workplace. The following will be an exploration of how arts integration can support happiness and increase motivation and engagement in professional settings with a focus on supporting employee agency, purpose and belonging.

### ***Agency & Creative Play***

As discussed previously, agency, or feeling as if we are in control of our actions is equally as important not only to achieve happiness in general, but also in the workplace. Studies have shown that employees who are allotted more autonomy at work tend to be more satisfied with their jobs (Padmanabhan). Considering this finding, implementing methods for employees to exercise their agency and autonomy in the workplace is a vital part of ensuring workplace well-being. This can be accomplished through introducing creativity and play, the importance of which for adults has been advocated by Stuart Brown, founder of the National Institute of Play. Brown argues that embracing playfulness is crucial for emotional, social and creative development in adults (Brown & Vaughn). Another study found that adult playfulness is

associated with higher levels of extroversion, openness to experience and agreeability (Mixer). Engaging in play, or creative activities such as painting or drawing can also increase the likelihood of experiencing a flow state, which has been postulated to play a key role in job satisfaction (Csikszentmihalyi). The celebration of art and aesthetics enriches the human experience and is essential for human flourishing. By prioritizing creative environments in the workplace, we can alleviate the everyday stresses that occupy our minds (Compton and Hoffman). This makes the inclusion of art into the workplace especially valuable.

As work/life balance writer Kate notes in her article “Why Creativity is Important in the Workplace;”

I started my career when I was 18 and I loved my job but I was doing the same type of work every year with long hours that left me burnt out... Now, if the company offered more autonomy and freedom to pursue different projects or tasks, I may have stayed for longer. (Kate)

This sentiment reflects the significant role that creativity can have on employee retention. Recognizing this, it is worthwhile to incorporate art and creative methods as a way to encourage a playful mindset and engagement in the workplace. The ability to embrace playfulness is a crucial factor for well-being and longevity, and I propose that a sense of playfulness in the workplace significantly influences employee well-being and ultimately, retention. Artful activities also require individual expression, addressing the need for autonomy in the workplace.

***Art & Belonging (A Strong Work Community - Empathy)***

As shown by the example of arts engagement being used as a “social prescription,” the arts can unite individuals, sparking connections through shared experiences. Offering employees the chance to explore these connections through art establishes a sense of commonality, evoking feelings of belonging and understanding. As we now know, this sense of belonging is crucial for employees to feel valued, acknowledged and fulfilled at work, and by extension, be more productive and remain at a company for longer periods of time.

At United Wholesale Mortgage, monthly in-office dance parties are arranged for employees as a method of boosting morale. These dance parties occur once a month, and will often be dedicated to celebrating events such as LGBTQ Pride in June or an end of summer dance for interns. These dance parties are not long, lasting roughly ten minutes, but provide employees with an opportunity to express themselves and bond with co-workers. According to Laura Lawson, chief people officer at United Wholesale Mortgage, “it has helped build camaraderie, enhance spirits and is a wellness benefit too” (Callahan). A simple yet effective idea, these dance parties enable employees to remove themselves from the daily stressors at work and take a few minutes to make their own creative choices while connecting with teammates, addressing the aspect of belonging and feeling valued as an individual that are crucial for employee satisfaction.

### ***Art & Feeling Valued as an Individual***

Not only can art add aesthetic value to a space, but opportunities for active engagement in art making can also enhance employees' feeling of personal value in the workplace. As previously emphasized, art can both reduce stress and positively influence an employee's outlook

and happiness in work spaces (Crawford). When art is thoughtfully implemented into an employees routine, their inner creative spirit will feel nurtured and seen, translating into said employee feeling valued as an individual rather than merely a means to an end.

One company who has begun to set this trend is Capital One via their Capital One Art Program. The program curates the art displayed in all North American offices, comprising over 70 exhibits per year, with a permanent collection totaling 8,000 pieces. Capital One collaborates with local artists relative to the location of their offices, providing a space for them to showcase their creativity (The Art of the Workplace: How Art Inspires Great Work). These exhibits also reserve space for Capital One associates to display their very own works of art. The core belief behind the program is that “when people are surrounded by thoughtful, detailed, beautiful work, they will create thoughtful, detailed, beautiful work.”

Raza Tulepbayeva, an associate at Capital One whose works are featured in the gallery shares her feelings about how the art program has impacted her: “I was really amazed and impressed that Capital One provided this opportunity to associates: we have SO many talented associates. Sharing about our lives is so important to being more inclusive and learning more about each other.” Raza also shared that she was “touched when her entire team went to see her pieces and recognized her work in their weekly meeting.” Capitol One’s art program is one example of how incorporating the arts into the workplace can not only positively influence employee morale, but can also boost team bonding and connections.

### *Arts and Mental Health in the Workplace*

As discussed, Gen-Z is facing a discernible mental health crisis. With increasing rates of anxiety, depression and record-high workplace dissatisfaction, businesses and organizations must begin to embrace creative approaches to support the new workforce and help them thrive. Engaging in the arts impacts the body and the mind positively, reducing cortisol levels, promoting relaxation, and offering a means to transcend daily stressors that contribute to the widespread burnout plaguing today's workforce.

For example, a literature review published by the National Institute of Health in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic concluded that visual arts interventions such as workshops and photography sessions remedied burn-out among clinicians and health care workers. Consequently, the well-being of practitioners improved as did empathy for patients (Forde et al). Engagement with art not only mitigated work-centered exhaustion but ultimately enhanced the quality of care that patients received from medics.

This same review included a 2011 study where the introduction of music-based therapy successfully elevated the mood and everyday functioning of law enforcement officers. An improvement in sleep quality was a significant result of this music-based therapy as well (DuRousseau et al.). Similar to the scenario mentioned above, exposure to the arts has beneficial impacts on the mental and physical state of employees in demanding roles.

One recommendation for implementing arts into the workplace that can be feasibly accomplished comes from Harvard Business Review. In an article addressing employee motivation, it was encouraged that managers implement morning poetry sessions (White). Dedicating a few minutes to creative introspection enables employees to disconnect from the stressors they have just endured while commuting and provides an opportunity to enter a state of elevation. Morning poetry sessions would require minimal supplies: a notepad and a writing implement, materials that are readily accessible in any office space. The simple nature of morning poetry sessions makes this creative exercise realistic for workplaces of all kinds with the potential to influence employee welfare in profound ways. The physiological benefits of engaging in the arts - along with the emotional and cognitive effects, such as increased agency and a sense of value and belonging- make integrating art into the workplace an accessible and effective strategy for enhancing employee mental health.

## **Conclusions**

Arts engagement in the workplace should not be considered as a panacea to remedy the current employee disengagement crisis. As detailed above, there are a myriad of external factors that contribute to dissatisfaction, malaise and disengagement of Gen-Z in workplace settings. Most notably, the current turbulence of the economic, social, and political landscape (e.g. extraordinary amounts of student loans and the looming climate crisis). These outside factors certainly contribute to mental and emotional duress. Some may argue that addressing employees' emotional needs shouldn't be the employer's responsibility. However, the data shows that when employees do not feel seen, productivity and efficiency decline. To remain competitive and successful, employers need a team that feels capable and motivated. Instead of constantly

replacing employees- a process that demands time and resources- it's far more rewarding in the long-term to invest in your own team's well-being. Art may be just one piece of a larger puzzle, but it's an effective, practical component that may be exactly what your office is missing.

Despite its potential, the integration of arts into the workplace remains a relatively underutilized and over-looked strategy for employee satisfaction and retention. While I have provided examples of how the arts benefit the human spirit and psyche, there is still much to explore regarding their long lasting impact on employee morale. As an undergraduate student, I have had the opportunity to take courses such as "Science of Happiness," which have deepened my understanding of what people need to feel content and supported at work. However, my perspective as an undergraduate is inherently limited.

Looking ahead, I recommend investment in future studies examining how arts integration in the workplace influences employee engagement, retention and overall happiness. This is an emerging field of study with significant potential. One day, it could even become a core component of business management curricula. The current employee retention crisis is a multifaceted issue with numerous contributing factors. Reshaping workplace culture by incorporating the arts into office life not only enhances our workplace experience, but our personal experience as well. Engaging in creative activities cultivates a sense of belonging and authenticity, addressing the disconnection and stress that often undermine employee satisfaction in today's workplace climate. For managers and leaders who strive to cultivate healthy and productive work environments, prioritizing employee well-being and satisfaction through art is a feasible and meaningful step in the right direction.

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