

Opinion

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The Meaning of Work

John Cohen, a glaucoma specialist at the Cincinnati Eye Institute, is well past the age when many people retire. Yet John continues to see patients and has done so even through the pandemic. “I could be doing a lot of things during the week, but what I love to do most is see patients,” he says. Like many ophthalmologists, John doesn’t just enjoy his work—he also derives deep satisfaction from doing something that is meaningful: working to improve and protect his patients’ vision.

I’ve long said that ophthalmologists are a joyful people. In its 2022 survey, Medscape reports that 88% of ophthalmologists were “very” or “somewhat happy” in their lives outside of work prior to the pandemic,¹ a percentage that is higher than for physicians overall. We have energy and optimism, and we are mostly satisfied with our work. Our purpose is clear, and often—especially for cataract surgeons, refractive surgeons, and pediatric ophthalmologists—our patients are thrilled with their surgical outcomes. Others of us, including retina, uveitis, and glaucoma specialists, develop long-term relationships with our patients, and seeing them often feels like encountering an old friend.

And yet, the pandemic made work less enjoyable for many ophthalmologists, with many of us experiencing burnout for the first time. The same 2022 Medscape report found that 35% of male ophthalmologists and 52% of female ophthalmologists are now burned out, a sharp increase from prepandemic levels (see “In Pursuit of Physician Wellness,” page 58).

The stresses of the pandemic, including the necessity of educating children at home, caused many of us, as well as our employees, to reevaluate the role of work in our lives. According to a McKinsey report, nearly two-thirds of employees said that COVID-19 caused them to reflect on their purpose in life.² This reassessment likely contributed to “the great resignation,” which has increased the workforce shortage affecting most industries, including ours.

Does our work provide great meaning to our lives, or does it overwhelm and lead to burnout? Carolyn Chen, a sociology professor at the University of California, Berkeley, writes about the central role of work in American culture and describes the “theocracy of work.” She doubts that the recently described antiwork sentiment will have lasting

effects on our attitudes toward work. Instead, she says that Americans, especially those of us who are professionals, “worship work—meaning we sacrifice for and surrender to it—because it gives us identity, belonging, and meaning, not to mention that it puts food on our tables.”³ Her description sounds a lot like a career in medicine. We have all sacrificed a lot, we find identity in being ophthalmic surgeons, we develop decades-long friendships with colleagues, and we have a sense of purpose. However, she suggests that there should be limits to relying on the workplace for purpose and community, and she recommends that we cultivate “communities of belonging.”

Recently, John hosted a casual evening event for the University of Cincinnati residents to meet with a visiting speaker (who was presenting this year’s John S. Cohen Lecture), and he bought a round of beer. The lively conversation ranged from the academic to the personal. This is community, and it contributes to a healthy work life.

And yet, after an hour (and an IPA), it was time to go home to children, spouses, and dogs. While valuable, the gathering was still work, and work should have its limits.

Sometimes it is our young ophthalmologists who are the teachers. They remind the rest of us that our work can have great meaning and bring tremendous satisfaction, but that balancing medicine with family, hobbies, religious practices, community activities, and sometimes simply taking a walk leads to a happier and more productive life.



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1 www.medscape.com/slideshow/2022-lifestyle-ophthalmologist-6014777#2.

2 Dhingra N et al. Help your employees find purpose—or watch them leave. www.McKinsey.com. April 5, 2021. Accessed June 21, 2022.

3 Chen C. What the antiwork discourse gets wrong. *The Atlantic*. March 22, 2022.