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Review

Hope and work: From the pandemic to possibility, purpose, and resilience

Angela Mouton^{1,2}**Abstract**

The global pandemic shifted the relationship between workers and workplaces. This paper explores the role that hope might be playing in phenomena like the Great Resignation. Peer reviewed literature on hope and work published since 2020 reveal two key themes (across cultures): (a) hope is a special ingredient in thriving workplaces, and (b) hope acts as an important source of resilience during crisis and challenge. Taken together, we suggest that the pandemic spurred more individuals to generate hope in their working lives by setting positive, personally meaningful, valued goals, by marshalling their willpower, and by generating multiple pathways to their goals, with too many organizations missing the opportunity to co-create hopeful workplaces where workers can perform as well as thrive.

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Introduction

Over the course of the last 100 years, significant shifts in the workplace seem to have taken place every decade or so [7]. A snapshot of the United States from 1950 to 2000 is illustrative. Women surged into the workforce in the post-World War II 1950s. However, the 1960s workplace typically involved corner offices for (men in) management, cubicles for their (female) secretaries, and a decade of “Mad Men” suits, swagger, and cigarettes.

Enter the 1970s and the women’s rights movement, when the term “sexual harassment” was coined, and challenges were made to objectionable attitudes and practices of the past. The 1980s were a decade of conservatism, capitalism, and increased reliance on technologies. Perhaps in response, conversations regarding human-centricity in the workplace began to gain steam in the 1990s, as we approached Y2K and contemplated our individual and collective future. Work environments and our attitudes to them have tended to ebb and flow (for colloquial discussions of these trends see for example [7,11,27,31,42,51]). As the late Ruth Bader Ginsberg noted, albeit in a different context, “A great man once said that the true symbol of the United States is ... the pendulum. And when the pendulum swings too far in one direction it will go back” [38]. Arguably, changing trends in the workplace over the last century have followed this principle. Each new trend has been significant but not altogether unpredictable, with each new trend appearing to counterbalance its predecessor and predict, at least to a degree, its successor.

However, this time seems different. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the working lives of millions around the world has been as dramatic as it was unforeseeable. Businesses shut down. People lost their jobs. Many battled the virus and grieved the loss of loved ones. Parents were forced to work from home while simultaneously trying to educate and care for their children. Essential workers risked their own physical and mental health to maintain some semblance of continuity in roles indispensable to the basic functioning of our societies. And yet, despite these very real hardships, we have not seen an enthusiastic return to pre-pandemic working environments. The pandemic appears to have disrupted the regular ebb and flow, the action-reaction pendulum swing of workplace trends that we have come to expect. We continue to experience the Great Resignation with workers leaving their jobs in record numbers [34,46,48]. We have seen record job growth [39], but companies are still struggling to fill open roles [9,30]. Applications to start new businesses have reached record highs over the last two years [47]. And lately we have begun to witness the rise of “quiet quitting”: Gallup reports that at least 50% of US workers are simply meeting the minimum requirements of their job descriptions rather than going above and beyond

expectations, with 18% of workers being *actively* disengaged [21].

Scholars and practitioners are working hard to understand the reasons why many workers are resisting a return to pre-pandemic work environments. Many explanations have been offered, for example low pay, lack of adequate childcare, long COVID health implications, and workers taking early retirement [30]. Others point to poor management and organizations failing to encourage engagement and belonging [21]. In 2021, MIT Sloan researchers analyzed key predictors of attrition in 500 of the largest firms in the US and found that toxic cultures (particularly those lacking support for diversity, equity, and inclusion, where workers felt disrespected, and/or where unethical behavior was observed) were 10 times more predictive of turnover compared to compensation [46].

In this paper we focus on another variable that may be partially responsible for recent changes in the relationship between workers and workplaces: hope. More specifically, we (a) highlight key findings regarding the role of hope in the workplace published in peer reviewed journals since 2020, (b) discuss the role that hope plays as a buffer against challenge and crisis, and (c) explore the role that hope may play in shaping work in the future. Until now, research on hope at work has been based on the workplaces we occupied pre-COVID. The world and workplaces have changed, perhaps fundamentally, and perhaps permanently. The question we seek to explore in this paper is, what can recent hope research tell us now, as we embark on this new frontier?

Hope in the pre-pandemic workplace

Hope has been variously defined in the Psychology literature (for reviews see [8,41,45]). Our review is limited to the dominant theory of hope – i.e., Snyder’s conceptualization of hope as goal directed thinking coupled with agency (“willpower”) and the generation of multiple pathways to one’s goal (“waypower”) [41,43–45].

Over the last three decades, a large body of research has linked hope to desirable outcomes in a wide variety of contexts, including the workplace (see [2,29] for pre-pandemic reviews). For example, previous studies have linked hope with employee performance, conscientiousness, helping attitudes, courteousness, goal clarity, pathways orientation, motivation in times of challenge, job satisfaction, health, well-being, and lower levels of burnout and stress [41,45]. In the past, hopeful leaders have been associated with outcomes such as increased profitability and positive impact on direct reports [32,36], while high-hope organizations have been linked to higher profits, a respectful and supportive work environment, open communication between employees and managers, effective delegation, inclusion of

employees in company goal setting, and enduring relationships with customers [35,45].

In addition, pre-pandemic research examined hope as a component of psychological capital (PsyCap), a higher order construct comprised of hope, self-efficacy, resilience, and optimism [24]. PsyCap has been positively associated with positive workplace outcomes such as performance, organizational commitment, organizational citizenship behaviors, job satisfaction, and psychological well-being, as well as negatively associated with work stress, anxiety, cynicism, workplace deviance, and turnover intentions [4,24,25].

However, this previous research was undertaken and published during the “old normal.” What does the peer reviewed literature since 2020 tell us about hope in the workplace in the context and wake of the global pandemic? Our review uncovered two key themes, which we discuss in turn.

Hope in the workplace since 2020

Theme 1: hope is a special ingredient in thriving workplaces

Research over the last two years continues to add to previous literature reporting positive relationships between desirable workplace outcomes and hope, both as a single construct and as a component of higher order constructs such as PsyCap (hope, self-efficacy, resilience, and optimism) [24], and the Cultural Wellbeing Index (hope, trust, and belonging) [23].

For example, positive relationships have recently been reported between PsyCap and female employee creativity in Indonesia [3], PsyCap and employee innovation behavior in high tech sectors in China [22,49], PsyCap and leader member exchange in China [22], hope and employee task performance in Turkish business sectors [33], PsyCap and team performance in advertising agencies in Jordan [5], PsyCap and job satisfaction and reduced turnover intention among employees in China [13], and the Cultural Wellbeing Index and employee health, retention, engagement, and job satisfaction amongst senior care employees in the United States [23].

Importantly, our review revealed that often times hope is not only a positive correlate or predictor of thriving workplaces, but a mediator/moderator of the relationships between other antecedents and positive workplace outcomes. For example.

- Agrawal investigated whether the subcomponents of PsyCap mediated the positive relationship between transformational leadership and employee engagement in the service sector in India, finding that hope was the only subconstruct to emerge as a mediator [1];

- Fazal and colleagues reported that hope mediated the relationship between Australian employees' preferences for green organizations and intention to stay [17];
- Goswami and Agrawal found that hope mediated the relationship between shared goals and knowledge sharing, and between shared goals and knowledge creation in the IT sector in India [19];
- Masale and colleagues established that hope, meaning in life, and work locus of control mediated the relationship between job satisfaction and organizational commitment in a local government institution in Botswana [26];
- Wang and Lei found that social support and hope (independently and sequentially) mediated the relationship between proactive personality and job satisfaction amongst workers in the petroleum mining sector in China [49]; and
- Bellamkonda and Pattusamy reported that employee intention to stay was positively related to happiness via engagement among IT workers in India, with this indirect relationship positively moderated by hope [6].

Given the historically WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic) bias in Psychology generally and Positive Psychology particularly [16,40], we are heartened to note that participants in the above cited examples came from Indonesia, China, Turkey, Jordan, India, Australia, Botswana as well as the United States. This suggests that hope may be a predictor of positive workplace outcomes that operates across cultures. Recently Donaldson and colleagues reported that PsyCap (which includes the subconstruct of hope) was a strong predictor of positive functioning at work across 15 nations, namely Australia, Brazil, China, France, Germany, Great Britain, India, Ireland, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, New Zealand, the Philippines, South Africa, and the United States) [16]. Positive outcomes in that study included proactivity, proficiency, adaptivity, and overall work performance (see also [15]). In short, the accumulating evidence continues to emphasize the important and powerful role that hope plays in building and sustaining thriving workplace, and this appears to be holding across diverse geographical regions and cultures around the world.

Theme 2: hope acts as an important source of resilience during crisis and challenge

The second key theme to emerge from recent research is that hope helps individuals weather the storms of life, like the global pandemic, more effectively.

Gallagher and colleagues' recent longitudinal study reported that hope was associated with greater emotional, social, and psychological well-being, lower anxiety, and lower COVID-19 perceived stress, with these relationships mediated by perceived emotional control. While

that study was not specifically focused on the workplace, the researchers suggest that "hope may be associated with resilience to the chronic stressors associated with the COVID-19 pandemic" [18] (p.g., 234).

A number of the papers summarized in Theme 1 (section 3.1) above, which investigated hope as an *antecedent* of positive workplace outcomes, situated their research and interpreted their findings in the context of the pandemic (e.g., [23,26]). For example, Lister and colleagues, in discussing their validated Cultural Wellbeing Index (comprised of hope, trust, and belonging) being predictive of employee health, retention, engagement, and job satisfaction state [23] (p.g., 32):

We believe that our resulting implications will be beneficial to businesses, researchers, and program administrators, especially in the aftermath of the current pandemic, as companies can better serve the health and wellbeing of their employees while simultaneously bolstering up cultures of inclusivity, diversity, and innovation.

Other recent papers investigated hope as an *outcome* variable, commenting on implications for post-pandemic workplaces. For example, Grobler and Flotman reported a positive relationship between servant leadership and the composite construct of hope and optimism (mediated by team-based learning) in 26 private and public organizations in South Africa [20]. The researchers note (p.g., 1):

"This is an era of unprecedented turbulence. The current coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid-19) global pandemic testifies to this turmoil as, daily, the unknown dynamically unfolds ... the future-mindedness and future-orientation of [hope and optimism] could stimulate adaptive responses during this time of uncertainty and turmoil. Thus, [hope and optimism], as potential resilience factors, could generate resilience by harnessing opportunities and setbacks both during the Covid-19 pandemic and in its aftermath.

Finally, we note that recent research has reported on the protective role of hope during situations of challenge and crisis that are not pandemic-specific. For example, Pharris and colleagues reported that hope and resilience (but particularly hope) act as protective factors against burnout among child welfare workers [37]. Wang and Lei suggest that since social support and hope (independently and sequentially) mediate the relationship between proactive personality and job satisfaction, these variables could help prevent employee burnout [49].

In summary, research over the last two years has often been motivated by and/or interpreted in the context of significant challenges such as the global pandemic, and provides evidence that hope acts as an important source of resilience during such troubling times.

Discussion

We began this chapter by suggesting that the global pandemic disrupted the action-reaction pendulum swing of workplace trends we had come to expect. Our aim was to explore what recent hope research can tell us about this shift in the relationship between workers and workplaces. Our review of the peer reviewed literature since 2020 revealed two primary themes – i.e., that hope is a special ingredient in thriving workplaces, and that hope acts as an important source of resilience during crisis and challenge. In addition, these positive contributions of hope to the workplace appear to apply across diverse geographical regions and cultures. Taken together, we argue that recent phenomena like the Great Resignation and quiet quitting may be explained (in part) by two intersecting factors.

First, perhaps the pandemic spurred more workers to generate and sustain hope in their working lives. Hope does not depend on external circumstances. In fact, hope often operates *in spite of* externalities. Faced with the unprecedented and unpredictable challenges of the global pandemic, perhaps more individuals were motivated (or forced) to set new goals, marshal their willpower, and generate multiple pathways to their goals – and not just any goals. Mouton and Montijo have previously argued that hope is predicated on individuals pursuing positively valenced, personally valued, meaningful goals [29]. Recent scholars have similarly suggested that “whypower” should be added to the “willpower” and “waypower” components of hope theory [12]. We propose that COVID-19 prompted many workers to question the *why* of their work, encouraged them to connect to more meaning and purpose, and forged hopeful, resilient individuals who were not only able to withstand the pressures of the pandemic, but make significant, lasting changes to their working lives. Some workers, where feasible, have taken proactive steps to improve their pre-pandemic workplaces. However, many others appear to have chosen a different path, whether finding a new position, entering the gig economy, starting a small business, taking early retirement or quietly quitting.

Second, and by contrast, perhaps too many organizations have been slow to realize the importance of hope in the workplace, thereby missing an opportunity to create the conditions required for workers to perform as well as thrive. With more hopeful individuals, too few hopeful workplaces, and plenty of options (due to record job growth as well as individuals generating possibilities for themselves), the supply-demand curve has bent in favor of workers.

Organizations and leaders, now more than ever, must strive to understand what is driving working people by paying attention to the willpower, waypower, and whypower of hope. This means acknowledging that

workers have agency, and will likely generate and explore multiple pathways to their goals. It means respecting that employees will pursue positive, personally meaningful, valued goals, and will assess whether the organization is aligned with the same. It means providing a degree of autonomy to workers to set and pursue goals that matter to the individual as well as to the organization (i.e., supporting job crafting [50]). It means paying attention to the widely valued (if not universal) goal of self-determination, which depends on a sense of autonomy, competence and relatedness [10,14,29].

In addition, organizations must do more to create the conditions necessary for hope to emerge in the workplace. Yoon and colleagues explored hundreds of interventions that could be used in career development during the COVID-19 pandemic employing the Hope-Action Theory (HAT) framework [52]. The researchers researched four types of employee groups specifically: essential workers, remote workers, outgoing workers, and displaced workers. The results revealed that hope (as an outcome variable) was associated with taking care of basic needs (through self-reflection), nurturing networks, and having a supportive, engaging work environment. Organizations would do well to heed these findings and, where feasible, develop and deploy effective interventions to increase hope in the workplace (see also [28]). Employers who take such steps are more likely to attract and retain top talent, which is good for workers and workplaces. Previous and recent research provides abundant evidence that hopeful employees are more effective, creative, innovative, committed, motivated, engaged, healthy, and resilient than those lower in hope. However, if organizations fail to co-create hopeful working environments with workers, we will likely see a continued resistance to workplaces of the past.

Finally, we note that the vast majority of hope research to date has focused on the individual rather than the group. If hope is a key ingredient in thriving workplaces and an important source of resilience during crisis and challenge, we suggest that the time is ripe to better understand how hope operates in a group, whether a team, organization, community or society. Does hope lend itself to a contagion effect as has been previously suggested [32]? Do other people matter in finding, developing, amplifying, and/or sustaining hope, particularly during times of challenge and crisis? And if so, how can workplaces organize themselves to promote group hope in good times and bad? These are some of the questions we urge future researchers to explore.

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Data availability

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- Using focus groups and a variation of grounded theory, and employing the Hope-Action Theory (HAT) framework, this study explores hundreds of interventions that could be used in career development of four employee groups affected by the pandemic: essential workers, remote workers, outgoing workers, and displaced workers. Results revealed that hope (as an outcome variable) was associated with taking care of basic needs (through self-reflection), nurturing networks, and having a supportive, engaging work environment.