Avoiding "Beige Cubicle Hell":
Emotions and Work–Life Spillover Among Adventure Workers

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Every job has tradeoffs. When choosing an occupation, individuals are faced with choices about pleasure, freedom, security, and financial gain. This case study invites readers to consider how workers manage emotions and work-life spillover by contrasting the experiences of white-collar workers with an example of nontraditional workers—adventure workers, or individuals who have short-term adventurous jobs or perform seasonal work to support an adventurous lifestyle. An understudied group in organizational communication scholarship, nontraditional workers do not fit into the white-collar, ideal worker identities commonly represented in organizational communication research. To examine this understudied group along with a range of different work-related emotions, Amy's story and work-life experiences as a seasonal adventure worker are contrasted with the experiences of her brother and his friend who are employed in what she views as "beige cubicle hell." These characters grapple with what makes work emotionally fulfilling and the tradeoffs they face in balancing security with freedom.

BACKGROUND

The experiences of nontraditional workers—an understudied group in organizational communication scholarship (Bochantin, 2016; Bochantin & Cowan, 2016)—contrast considerably with those of traditional workers. We differentiate nontraditional jobs from traditional jobs by the stability inherent for workers (e.g., steady income, benefits, long-term employment, consistent hours). Compared to *traditional workers* who work full-time hours with predictable schedules over the long term, *nontraditional workers* engage in work that is often transient, such as freelancing and contracting (also known as "gigging"; Met Life, 2019). While traditional workers can be fulfilled by their work, nontraditional workers often leave traditional jobs to fulfill higher-order needs such as work-life balance or a sense of self-worth or purpose. (MetLife, 2019). One example of a nontraditional worker is an adventure worker, an individual who has a short-term adventurous job or performs seasonal work to support an adventurous lifestyle.

As Millennials and Generation X workers prioritize flexibility over money as a motivation for work and a source of happiness (MetLife, 2019; Ruder & Riforgiate, 2019), this case study chapter is particularly relevant as it illustrates tensions individuals may face in their professional lives. By critically examining how emotion and work-life spillover shape career choices and work experiences, this case study provides individuals with an opportunity to make connections between communication concepts and future work experiences. This chapter begins with an overview of how emotions in organizational communication intersect with work-life spillover, followed by an introduction of adventure workers, the nontraditional workers highlighted in this case study. The chapter continues with the case study, a discussion of the highlighted concepts, discussion questions, and concludes with a list of references for further reading.

Emotions

Emotions are "a short-term response to a stimulus" (Riforgiate & Sepúlveda, 2021, p. 514) and can range in intensity and direction (Waldron, 2012). Emotions are valenced either negatively (e.g., anger, frustration, stress) or positively (e.g., fulfillment, joy, pride) (Waldron, 2012). Although emotions relate to physiological changes in the body, the ability to express emotions both verbally and nonverbally is learned (Riforgiate & Komarova, 2017). Importantly, the way individuals learn to express and respond to emotions shapes behavior and communication (Waldron, 2012). In this way, emotions are a social phenomenon that facilitates interpersonal connections and relationships (Riforgiate & Komarova, 2017).

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