



# THE FUTURE OF AMBITION

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AMERICANS REFOCUS ON PRIORITIZING  
HAPPINESS AND REDEFINING SUCCESS



## INTRODUCTION

Through our thought leadership research at Harris, we are in the ever-present business of understanding change. In the last 2 years, as the world and markets have changed in core ways, we have done countless studies to help businesses understand those changes and consumer mindsets. As we think about what's shaping the future, here are a few key shifts that will be fundamental to understanding the market.

The impact of stepping away from the daily realities of our pre-pandemic lives cannot be overstated. The way people talk about the last few years sounds as if they were awoken from a distorted reality and fundamentally shifting away from the hamster wheel of burnout culture. It is only amidst this societal upheaval that people have found the ability to cultivate a vision of the type of life that they believe will lead them down a more meaningful, joyful, and sustainable path.

As people start to rebuild their lives, we examined the lasting impact of these shifts. What does this well-lived life look and feel like today? Our research showed 3 key trends defining modern ambition. We hope you enjoy exploring them as much as we did.

Cheers,  
Libby & Abbey



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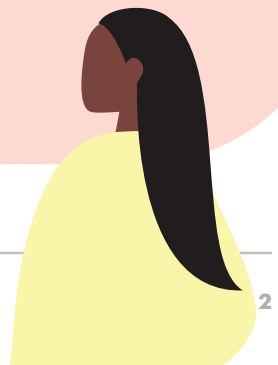
### **About Harris Poll Thought Leadership Practice**

Building on 50+ years of experience pulsing societal opinion, we design research that is credible, creative, and culturally relevant. Our practice drives thought leadership and unearths trends for today's biggest brands. We are focused on helping our clients get ahead of what's next.

### **Methodology**

This report is based on a custom survey that was conducted online within the United States by The Harris Poll between April 7-10, 2022, among 2,121 adults aged 18 and over. We also conducted salon sessions March 24-25, 2022, which focused on what it means to live a well-lived life.

**Learn how top brands rely on our insights**



## AMBITION 3.0

With the pandemic drastically reframing employee needs, wants, and goals, Americans are actively reimagining their identities away from burnout culture. En masse people are reassessing, resigning, and moving away from corporate culture altogether. Phrases associated with “work-as-identity” models like “what do you do for a living” are being mocked on TikTok for being out of touch by younger generations.

Similar to the ‘overview effect’ when astronauts return to earth and have new awareness of Earth as a tiny, fragile ball of life, we have experienced a cognitive shift that life is fragile and not guaranteed. In interviews, successful professionals talk about making the shift from a life absorbed by work to a life actively rebuilt around personal fulfillment. Even New York City, rampant with workaholics, the average office worker intends to reduce time in the office by 49%, according to [Bloomberg](#).

**77%**

of Americans agree, “I feel like people have more power to change the way we live our lives than before the pandemic.”

“I am rewiring myself around what makes me ‘ecstatic’ - that is the PO - my top priority.”

- THOUGHT LEADERSHIP SALON PARTICIPANT

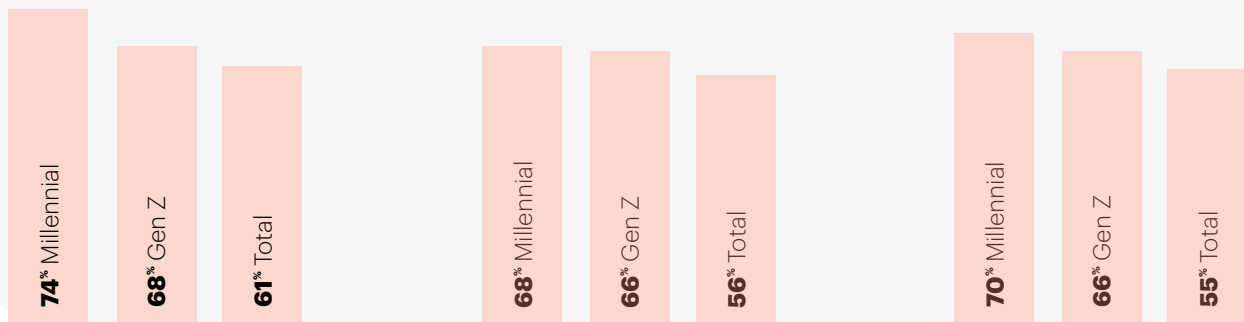


### FULFILLMENT GETS A FACELIFT

“The concept of what a **happy life** would mean for me has shifted during the pandemic.”

“The pandemic helped me realize the **goals I had for my life were not the ones that** would actually make me happy in the future.”

“I have been sold **false promises** around what will create happiness in life.”



## VALUES SHIFT: REDEFINING AMBITION

Understanding ambition is essential to understanding the future, as personal ambition drives people to visualize what their lives will look like in the coming years. In the Great Resignation, we are also seeing a Great Reorientation of ambition. This reorientation is actively focused on quality of life with consumers focusing on building more sustainable, supportive, and long-term plans to achieve personal happiness.

“My side hustle is relaxing, playing video games, going on runs - not starting a company.”

- THOUGHT LEADERSHIP SALON PARTICIPANT

**AMBITION PREVIOUSLY...  
DEFINED AROUND STATUS**  
(Return On Investment)

**Hustle culture:** Always be grinding ▶

**Work Identity:** I am what I do for a living ▶

**Extrinsic:** Beat the competition ▶

**Short-term:** Achieve a goal now ▶

**Scoreboard:** See where you rank ▶

**AMBITION TODAY...  
REFINED AROUND ROL**  
(Return On Lifestyle)

**Flow culture:** Allow things to come to you

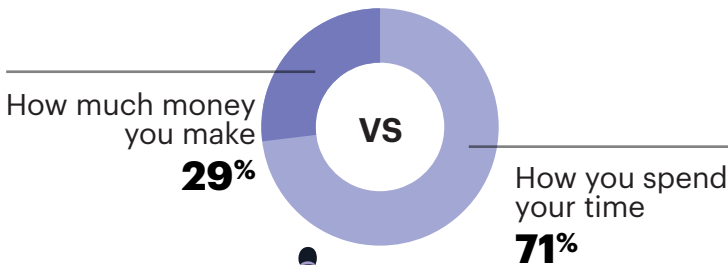
**Joy Identity:** I am what I love doing

**Intrinsic:** Beat your personal best

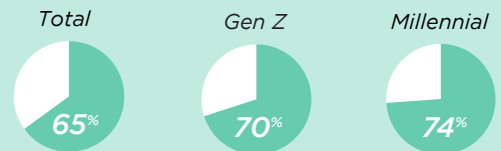
**Long-term:** Trust the process

**Journey:** Enjoy the unfolding

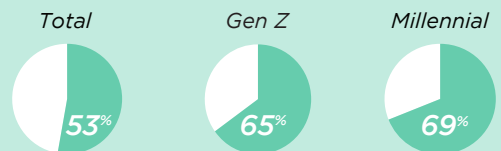
“QUALITY OF LIFE TODAY IS DETERMINED BY...”



“I am looking for evidence-based practices and strategies to increase my personal happiness.”



“I am actively seeking alternative lifestyles to create a happier life than I imagined pre-pandemic.”



### IMPLICATIONS FOR BRANDS

Consumers report that rewiring their entrenched mentality can be challenging. As they actively shift their life goals, they are looking for new brands and allies that support them in this process. As consumers reorient towards a new framework of ambition, there is a huge opportunity for brands to take the journey with them. Brands can show up by creating new signals, solutions, and supportive structures that reinforce consumers’ emerging return-on-lifestyle goals. For example, LinkedIn now offers a “career break” feature to allow space for non-linear and other diverse work patterns.

## ENERGY IS TODAY'S TOP CURRENCY

"It don't mean a thing if you ain't got that swing" is a sentiment Duke Ellington popularized in the 1930s that referred to the fact that songs mean nothing if they don't get people up and dancing. A similar sentiment is circulating today, as consumers increasingly acknowledge that you can have all the money and influence in the world, but without the energy to channel it, it's pointless. Consumers were already shifting their focus from money to time pre-pandemic, but now it's further evolved into **energy management**.

There is an understanding that more time isn't a cure-all solution. If you aren't physically or mentally where you need to be, you may lack the motivation to be present and enjoy life. Our society is in a new space where people are making more conscious decisions to deliberately cultivate, protect, and optimize their personal energy. Consumers are putting on their own oxygen masks first, they are prioritizing essentialism over urgency, and they are giving themselves permission to opt-out altogether.

### TOP GOALS IN IMPROVING QUALITY OF LIFE

Optimizing energy and time  
**64%**

vs

Optimizing money  
**36%**

# 75%

want to learn how to be more present in their day-to-day lives.

"I realized that by being more deliberate about how I spend my time, I can be more present at all times."

- THOUGHT LEADERSHIP SALON PARTICIPANT

### COMPARED TO PRE-PANDEMIC, AMERICANS ARE...

#### MORE LIKELY TO

Prioritize their energy where it can have the most impact

Seek things outside of work that give life meaning

Set boundaries to help conserve or restore energy

#### LESS LIKELY TO

Ask people "what they do for a living" as the first question they ask someone

Attach their personal identity to their work identity



## VALUES SHIFT: FROM INDEPENDENCE ➡ TO INTERDEPENDENCE

The pandemic made one thing clear: we cannot survive on our own in isolation. In fact, people can only thrive when we reach beyond ourselves to rely on others. We have witnessed an organic shift occur from the ideals of independence (“bootstrapping survival”) to the ideals of interdependence (“we will survive this together”). We saw pandemic pods create such deep bonds and reliance on others, that it radically transformed the way we value communal support.

Acknowledging and respecting our interdependence, created space for people to honor all of the contributors to our lives, community, and society. It’s the sentiment that we are dependent on each other that will continue driving towards trends like the reinvigoration of communal living arrangements and rising employee empowerment. In this new world, community is a top priority and we will continue to find new ways to foster, protect, and support it.

**Childcare costs have gone up a staggering 41%** over the course of the pandemic as families now spend an average of \$14,117 a year per child on care. As a result, parents are more reliant on their networks than ever before.



“My network has become smaller but closer during the pandemic.”

Parents  
**78%**

Total  
**66%**



### IMPLICATIONS FOR BRANDS

Brands should actively consider their community network effect: who are you building community with, why do they show up, who do you collaborate with, and how do you cultivate it? How do you frequently create space for your audience to build community with your brand? Is there an opportunity to reward people for getting together and connecting?

## LIFE IN BETA

For most Americans, the amount of change we've lived through in the last year is unprecedented. According to the futurist Jane Gonial, the word "unthinkable" was mentioned over three million times in the news reports in 2020 and 2021. This continuous shock and disruption has created a resilient consumer base who are more risk-forward, hypermobile, and willing to take bets on themselves.

Pre-pandemic, people expressed to us how they needed to plan ahead, to have clearly laid out options, and to have back up plans for their back up plans. But the pandemic had no rulebook, so people had to figure out what the future looked like moment by moment. Everyone had to be more flexible and open to change, and it trickled down into how they fundamentally continue to see their future personal, and work lives.

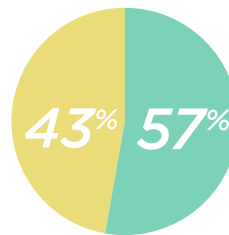
**The word "unthinkable" was mentioned over three million times in the news reports in 2020 and 2021.**

Americans are expanding their mindsets around what is possible and taking swings, jumping into unknowns, and moving across the country to create their own momentum in stagnant environments. **They are living a life in beta.** This ability to harness intuition, go with one's gut, live in the messy middle, and survive in less structure will be key to riding the waves of changes that will continue to arise over the next decade.

**60%** of Americans agree, "I am interested in living my life in 'beta mode' where I can experiment and try new things such as new careers, passions, locations, and more."

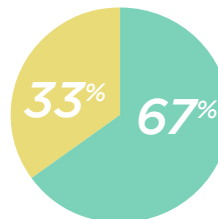
LatinX **75%**      Black **71%**

I am more likely to focus on long-term planning these days (e.g., next 4+ years)



I am more likely to focus on short-term planning these days (e.g., next 1-3 years)

I am less open to change than I was before the pandemic



I am more open to change than I was before the pandemic

**61%** of Americans agree, "I am **more comfortable now living between moments of uncertainty** than I was pre-pandemic."

**59%** of Americans agree, "Success today is more determined by **learning how to adapt to change** and learn new skills vs. building a skillset that can be useful for your whole life."

## RISE OF ROOTS + ANCHORS



While the world of hybrid work has essentially opened up all possibilities to workers, many report seeking anchor points in their lives to find a sense of stability and groundedness. Only from a sense of being deeply rooted in the things that matter to them are they ready for the change that is coming. This is where we see the role of personal boundaries, rituals and focus time hit the central stage. In fact, many consumers talk about the need to continue to focus on doing less, not more.

## VALUES SHIFT: THE CHANGING ROLE OF OPTIMISM

Optimism is still at the heart for most Americans, but it manifests differently when compared to the past. Optimism is less driven by blue sky innovation and more focused on a serious sense of personal responsibility. Rather than the notion that a better future can just happen, today's optimism driven by the ability to address reality, wrestle with discomfort, and act with integrity.

"Optimism shifted to be at peace with things that don't make me optimistic - a lot of beautiful joyful things can happen at same time as horrible things."

- THOUGHT LEADERSHIP SALON PARTICIPANT

Mirroring this shift in consumer mindsets, we see a return to more traditional brand values. Integrity, fairness, and humility now outrank flashiness, innovation, and creativity. Americans are looking to brands to drive meaningful change more than ever before.



Millennials are optimistic that there will be change now that they are in power. In the words of one salon participant, "**We're driving the societal questioning of norms.**" Three in four are bullish on their individual potential to create a better future, saying, "**I am more optimistic that I can create the change I want to see in the world, than my government creating that type of change.**" (74% Millennials, vs. 63% Total).

## OPTIMISM TODAY IS...

### Grounded in realism

76% "Optimism today is more about being realistic than idealistic."

Gen Z **83%**

72% "I would rather be labeled a skeptic if it means we can have a real discussion about change."

Millennial **80%**

### Driven by personal responsibility

Americans are most optimistic individuals (**64%**) will make decisions that create a better future for our country than companies (**47%**), activists (**47%**), or government (**41%**).

### Recalibrating brand values

Top brand values for 2022

1. Integrity (**58%**)
2. Quality (**58%**)
3. Fairness (**53%**)

Outpacing flashier values like Innovation (**45%**) and Creativity (**41%**)

## IMPLICATIONS FOR BRANDS

Injecting hope and optimism into a campaign without action will likely come across as tone-deaf to today's young Americans. Brands need to take a more active community-building role in creating a brighter future for all. The challenge for brands is in most cases this will shift brands from one-off campaigns to longer term CSR commitments, as young consumers also are quick to call out brands for being performative.



## OVERALL SHIFTS DEFINING A WELL-LIVED LIFE

**FOCUS:** ROI → ROL

**INPUT:** Control → Hyper Flex

**OUTPUT:** Money → Energy

**AMBITION:** Hustle → Flow

**OPTIMISM:** Blue sky → Personal Responsibility

**CORE DRIVER:** Independence → Interdependence



“At the core of change, visions are formed and relationships are solidified. There is a huge opportunity in the market for brands to understand their key audiences and build thought leadership around what the future of a well-lived life looks like, signaling support for consumers as they reimagine their lives, aspirations, and ambitions.”

- LIBBY RODNEY, CHIEF STRATEGY OFFICER, THE HARRIS POLL



“Out of the chaos the future emerges in harmony and beauty,” wrote Emma Goldman, referring to a profoundly different time in the early twentieth century. Today, we find ourselves emerging from the pandemic with more harmonious ambitions. As a society, our interconnectedness is making us stronger. Being able to move faster and roll with the punches is making us more agile. Our focus on our personal energy and mental health is making our lifestyles more sustainable. And the fact that our optimism is more inherently tied to our actions may just create the ripple effect of change we need to create a more equitable, sustainable, and beautiful future for all.

### LEARN HOW WORLD-CLASS THOUGHT LEADERSHIP TRANSLATES INTO TARGETED OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUR BRAND

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