Instant Gratification and Safety Fatality File

When Ariel Coleman, 28, quit her last job, as a project manager in the corporate office of a bank, it wasn’t because her new employer offered her a raise, a different role or more seniority. “The work-life balance is just much better,” she said.

At her new company, Omfgco, a branding and design firm in Portland, Ore., everyone works from home on Tuesdays and Thursdays at whichever hours they choose. Ms. Coleman can go for a run or walk her dog.

At the bank, she said, people judged her for taking all her paid time off. At Omfgco, it’s encouraged, which is why she didn’t mind answering work emails while sitting by the fire on a recent camping trip.

“It’s: Get your work done, but don’t worry about when those hours are,” Ms. Coleman said. “A client calls me at 8 o’clock at night and I’m happy to talk to them, because that means the next day at 10 a.m., I can take my dog to the vet. It enables me to make my career more seamless with my life. It makes it feel more like people are human.”

Many of her friends have chosen their jobs for similar reasons, she said. “That’s how millennials and Gen Z- ers are playing the game — it’s not about jumping up titles, but moving into better work environments,” she said. “They’re like silent fighters, rewriting policy under the nose of the boomers.”

For many Americans, work has become an obsession, and long hours and endless striving something to aspire to. It has caused burnout, unhappiness and gender inequity, as people struggle to find time for children or passions or pets or any sort of life besides what they do for a paycheck.

But increasingly, younger workers are pushing back. More of them expect and demand flexibility — paid leave for a new baby, say,

and generous vacation time, along with daily things, like the ability to work remotely, come in late or leave early, or make time for exercise or meditation. The rest of their lives happens on their phones, not tied to a certain place or time — why should work be any different?

Today's young workers have been called lazy and entitled. Could they, instead, be among the first to understand the proper role of work in life — and end up remaking work for everyone else?

It's still rare for companies to operate this way, and the obstacles are bigger than any one company's H.R. policies. Some older employees may think new hires should suffer the way they did, and employers benefit from having always-on workers. Even those that are offering more flexibility might be doing it because unemployment is so low and they're competing for workers, which could change if there is an economic downturn.