

# Nearly a third of U.S. workers under 40 considered changing careers during the pandemic

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## FULL TEXT

When Orlando Saenz was laid off at the end of January, he was devastated. For nearly a decade, he had worked as an executive assistant at an Austin law firm, and it was hard to envision his next steps. But then it dawned on him: This setback could be the kick he needed to finally finish his associate's degree and seek a better career.

A few days later, Saenz, 40, enrolled in community college. He plans to get a paralegal license. The enhanced unemployment aid gave him the financial cushion to "treat school as my job," he said, for a few months.

"If you come out of the pandemic the same as you were, you've missed an opportunity to evolve and grow as a person," Saenz said. "I just realized I needed to do better."

Saenz is not alone. Nearly 1 in 3 U.S. workers under 40 have thought about changing their occupation or field of work since the pandemic began, according to a Washington Post-Schar School poll, conducted July 6 to 21. About 1 in 5 workers overall have considered a professional shift, a signal that the pandemic has been a turning point for many, even those who did not contract the coronavirus.

Many people told The Post that the pandemic altered how they think about what is important in life and their careers. It has given them a heightened understanding that life is short and that now is the time to make the changes they have long dreamed of. The result is a great reassessment of work, as Americans fundamentally reimagine their relationships to their jobs.

It's playing out in record numbers of Americans quitting their jobs and a surge of retirements and people starting businesses.

Some, such as Saenz, seek a more meaningful or higher-paying career, while others want a new location that allows for a different lifestyle. Since the pandemic began, 28 percent of U.S. adults say they have seriously considered moving, the Post-Schar School of Policy and Government at George Mason University poll finds, and 17 percent say they have already moved, either temporarily or permanently. Adults under age 40 are the most likely to have considered moving or to have already relocated.

In parts of the country with easy access to hiking and outdoor activities, real estate prices are soaring. Austin; Boise, Idaho; Spokane, Wash.; and a Phoenix suburb called Sunrise saw the largest spike in prices, according to real estate website Redfin. These cities are more affordable than many big coastal cities and are places where it is easy to have a physically active lifestyle.

Saenz said he and his wife, a teacher, have also discussed leaving downtown Austin and moving to the countryside for a different pace of life and the chance to fish more —what he calls the "Cabela lifestyle," referring to the outdoor gear retailer. Nearly half of adults say it is "extremely" or "very" important to have easy access to hiking, fishing and camping, up from 34 percent in a 2019 survey conducted by the University of Chicago Harris School of Public Policy, the Associated Press and NORC.

Viktoria Pavic, 25, had the opposite reaction during the pandemic: She wanted to be in a bigger city and saw this as a chance to realize that dream. She moved from Poughkeepsie, N.Y., to Brooklyn, taking advantage of rent prices

that had fallen in the city as many young people temporarily left.

"Right before the pandemic, I was planning to make the move and travel more. I wanted to live my life as fully as I could," Pavic said. "The pandemic put a stop to a lot of travel, but at least I was able to move to Brooklyn. You can't put your life on hold forever."

Pavic is working as a host at a restaurant but says she's had a lot of time to think about her future. She started investing during the pandemic and envisions shifting into business or nonprofit work.

"I have done some journaling," she said. "I hope one day maybe I can start a nonprofit, something where I can do more for my community."

Applications for new businesses exploded in 2020 and 2021, census data shows, presumably fueled by people who were laid off or who wanted a change. In May, the share of workers voluntarily quitting their jobs hit the highest level the Labor Department has recorded, yet another sign that U.S. workers are rethinking what they want to do in their careers and are confident they can find something else. Retail workers have been quitting at an especially rapid pace this year; resignations in the retail industry hit an all-time high in June.

Recruiters say they are hearing over and over again that people want more flexibility. They say workers are hesitant to return to jobs in industries such as retail, restaurants and manufacturing that require a fixed schedule with in-person work, often at odd hours.

"People want work-life balance," said Angela Muhwezi-Hall, co-founder of QuickHire. "A woman I was speaking with yesterday said she worked at a restaurant and she would get home at 3 a.m. sometimes and she doesn't want to do that anymore. She wants to be able to see her kids, especially after having a year at home with her kids. She still really wants flexibility." Line cooks have been especially hard to hire, Muhwezi-Hall said.

The United States had a record 10.1 million job openings in June. Employers are raising pay, offering new benefits such as mental health care and allowing more workers to remain at least partly remote in an effort to lure people to their firms.

The Post-Schar School poll finds that a majority of workers 59 percent —say they want to return to their workplace all or most of the time after the pandemic is over. Just under 2 in 10 say they want to mostly (10 percent) or always (8 percent) work remotely, while 2 in 10 desire an even split between working at home and commuting occasionally. White men are more likely than other workers overall to want to return to the workplace. Remote work is more popular among workers who complete most of their job at a computer and those who have been teleworking in the past month. Both groups prefer fully or partially remote work to work taking place mostly outside the home.

Fully online jobs and schooling have been tough for some. Tais Davis of Richmond was halfway through college when the pandemic hit. She had planned to become a doctor but found the online-only courses much harder than in-person learning. She is now opting for a nursing degree with the hope of being able to have a more flexible schedule, including the opportunity to work as a "per diem" nurse who fills in at different medical facilities.

"The pandemic taught me that nothing is guaranteed now. Everything can change within months if not weeks," Davis said. "Just being able to spend time by myself made me realize what path I did and did not want to go down."

*The poll was conducted July 6 to 21 by The Washington Post and the Schar School of Policy and Government at George Mason University among a random national sample of 1,000 adults, with 75 percent reached on cellphones and 25 percent on landlines. Overall results have a margin of sampling error of plus or minus four percentage points.*

*Emily Guskin contributed to this report.*

## DETAILS

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