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# SERVANT LEADERSHIP AND STUDENT-WORKER SATISFACTION

Shweta Sinha

## ABSTRACT

*There are several studies that show that the COVID-19 pandemic has led to immense physical and mental health distress. Not only did it impact people's health but it posed a threat to their financial and professional security. The pandemic, in addition to the several socio-economic challenges, resulted in the restructuring of the corporate work environment. It gave rise to work-from-home culture which eventually became the preferred mode of work for many people. However, companies eventually started calling people back into work reducing the flexibility in schedule that was previously available to employees working from home. As a result, the post-pandemic corporate world has seen a rise in the phenomena such as the Great Resignation and Quiet Quitting across various sectors. However, one section of the working class that has yet to be studied extensively comprises of students who are also working full-time or part-time, alongside completing their educational degrees. The toll that the pandemic took on their ability to manage both education and professional work (in many cases, both taking place remotely) needs to be examined in greater detail.*

*This study looks at the need for flexibility and hands-off management style in the post-pandemic world for student workers who are managing their academic pursuits alongside their professional work requirements, and how this need may be best met through the servant leadership style of management.*

## INTRODUCTION

Leadership in an organizational setting has long been a major area of business research. One of the leadership philosophies that has been gaining prominence since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic is that of servant leadership (Piorun et al., 2021). The paradoxical notion of servant leadership was first developed and proposed by Robert K. Greenleaf (1970) in which he combined two seemingly contradictory terms to arrive at a theoretical framework for leadership that requires the leader to place the needs and interests of the employees above all else. As per Greenleaf, "A great leader is seen as a servant first..." (p. 19).

Greenleaf's servant leadership model has been extensively studied and refined by several scholars in the last two decades, including Sendjaya & Sarros (2002), Spears (2004), Laub (2010), Melcher & Bosco (2010), Mehta & Pillay (2011), and Kantharia (2012). The servant leadership model has also been applied in a wide variety of sectors: hospitality (Ozturk et al., 2021), education (Guillaume et al., 2013), libraries (Piorun et al., 2021), banking (Mujeeb et al., 2021), family-owned

businesses (McNeff & Irving, 2017), and rural community hospitals (McCann et al., 2014), to name a few.

In 2004, Spears further refined Greenleaf's philosophy of servant leadership and arrived at the following 10 characteristics of servant leaders:

1. **Listening:** The servant-leader is a receptive listener who actively seeks to identify the will of a group.
2. **Empathy:** The servant-leader assumes the good intentions of co-workers and strives to understand and empathize with them.
3. **Healing:** A servant-leader has the potential for healing one's self and others.
4. **Awareness:** A servant leader demonstrates a high level of general awareness, and especially self-awareness.
5. **Persuasion:** Servant-leaders primary rely on persuasion over positional authority when making professional decisions and are therefore effective at building group consensus.

6. **Conceptualization:** Servant-leaders are able to think beyond the day-to-day and are able to conceptualize problems from a broader perspective.
7. **Foresight:** Servant leaders are intuitive and can use lessons from the past, the realities of the present, to envision the consequences of a decision for the future.
8. **Stewardship:** Servant leadership emphasizes the use of openness and persuasion in developing stewardship or a commitment to serving the needs of others.
9. **Commitment to the growth of people:** Servant-leaders recognize the intrinsic value in people beyond their tangible contributions as workers and are deeply committed to the growth of every individual within the institution.
10. **Building community:** Servant-leaders seek to build a community among workers within an institution.

Employee-oriented leadership characteristics seem particularly pertinent in the post-COVID-19 world that has survived a traumatic global catastrophe (Hu, 2020, December 16). In the United States alone, COVID-19 affected over 33 million people, and over 600,000 people succumbed to the infection (Elflein, 2022, August 29). People have had to manage their professional lives and their employer's expectations while grappling with the collective trauma of the pandemic. A study had found that for over 75% of Americans, their immediate boss was the most stressful aspect of their job (Abbajay, 2018, September 7). The pandemic did not only claim lives and create job insecurity, but also resulted in a sharp increase in substance abuse and mental health issues (Panchal et al., 2021, February 10), with a four-fold increase in rates of anxiety and depression, as per reports from the National Center for Health Statistics (2022, August 17).

A study conducted at a large Asian IT services firm found a rise of 18% in the time spent working

outside normal business hours, with a fall in productivity by 8-19% (Gibbs et al., 2021). A recent survey conducted by FlexJobs and Mental Health America revealed that 75% of people experienced burnout at work, with 40% specifically mentioning the time period being the pandemic (Reynolds, 2021, September 15). Since the pandemic, about 1 in 4 workers is considering quitting their jobs for one which offers more flexibility. Half of the people currently working remotely claim to prefer remote-work options and are willing to look for a new job if their current company doesn't continue to offer remote-work options long-term (Liu, 2021, April 20).

Termed as the "Big Quit," or the "Great Resignation," this post-pandemic phenomenon refers to a large number of people in the workforce quitting their jobs en masse. A recorded 4 million people quit their jobs in April of 2021, many of whom were in low-paid, inflexible industries like retail. However, the trend started to catch up in industries with higher paid jobs as well. A study shows that nearly 40% of white-collar employees would prefer to quit their jobs than give up remote work forcing even some of the big names in the tech world to reconsider calling people back to office full-time (Melin & Egkolfopoulou, 2021, June 1). Given the importance that workplace flexibility has played in today's post-vaccine economy, remote work enabled many white-collar workers to feel like they no longer had to choose between their work, family, and well-being (Curtis, 2021, July 1).

Another term that has become a part of mainstream discourse in the corporate world is that of "quiet quitting." Quiet quitters are those employees who continue to perform all their regular work, but refuse to go above and beyond the call of duty and do not engage in what researchers refer to as 'citizenship behaviors' at work. They do the bare minimum required of them and refuse to put in any additional effort into their work. Quiet quitting hurts both the employer and employee. It keeps a company from getting the best out of an employee and also gets in the way of the

employee's professional growth (Klotz & Bolino, 2022, September 15).

Between the Great Resignation and Quiet Quitting, one thing seems apparent – the growing dissatisfaction amongst the working class regarding their professional lives. While this has been studied for employees across several industries, a group of workers that has gone largely unexamined is that of student workers who, post-pandemic, have had to manage both school and professional work from home.

As per a study by Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, about 70% of all college students work while enrolled (Kerr, 2020, December 30). The pandemic exerted a two-pronged pressure on the working student class who now had to navigate the strain of professional work and academic requirements simultaneously. In this study, I attempt to examine the expectations that the working-student-class has from their post-pandemic work environment and propose the effectiveness of servant leadership management style in addressing those expectations in order to improve the job-satisfaction for employees who are simultaneously attempting to complete their academic degrees.

Overall, the COVID-19 pandemic and the enforced restrictions harshly affected students and the educational sectors in 161 countries. It resulted in more than 1.6 billion students being away from regular school life and traditional academic in-person instruction and had a significant impact on the emotional health of students. A study was conducted that assessed the feelings of over 13,000 students at high school, undergraduate, and postgraduate levels across 36 campuses over 8 subsequent weeks from the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The results demonstrated the negative mental-health impact of the pandemic on students, where students indicated a general low energy level and dominance of negative feelings regardless of their academic level. The most frequently recorded responses of the reported feelings during

the lockdown were being anxious, stressed, overwhelmed, tired, and depressed. Overall, 14% of these students admitted to needing professional help in managing their feelings throughout the quarantine period (Camacho-Zuñiga et al., 2021).

Another study involving 110 working and non-working students demonstrated that while no significant difference was observed in depression between working and non-working students, working students displayed more anxiety than non-working counterparts and reported more stress and fewer buffers (Mounsey et al., 2013).

## **METHODOLOGY**

In this study, I research the relevance of servant leadership in the context of students who had to simultaneously balance school work and professional expectations during the pandemic. In order to examine the need for servant leadership in today's post-pandemic professional world, especially in regard to student workers, I used qualitative analysis to survey 28 graduate students from St. John's University, who have been studying as well as working (full time or part-time) during the pandemic.

The survey was conducted using Google forms., and for the purpose of maintaining complete confidentiality, the identities of the respondents were kept anonymous. The survey posed a total of 14 questions and utilised a nominal scale for answering in order to uncover the experience of managing school work and professional work while working from home during the pandemic, as well as the expectations that the students now have from their managers at work and their overall pattern of working.

## **RESULTS**

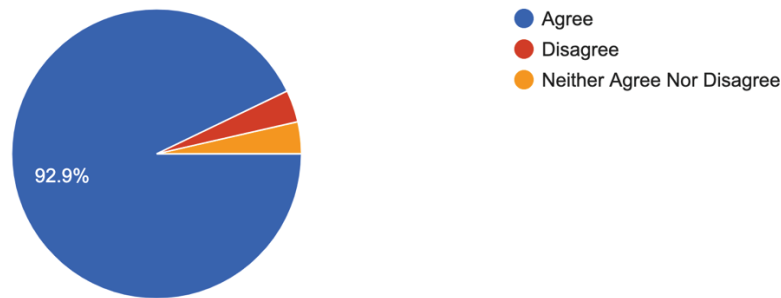
The results revealed that more than half of the respondents (about 53.6%) claimed that they were able to balance their job and studies better when they were working from home, as compared to when they had to work from the office. However,

about 39.3% of the respondents admitted to being unable to balance their job and studies well when working from home. The pandemic has also had an impact on people's mental health (Reynolds, 2021, September 15); however, about 53.6% of respondents agreed that working from home helped them manage their mental health better as compared to working from office. About 21.4% disagreed, and 25% neither agreed nor disagreed.

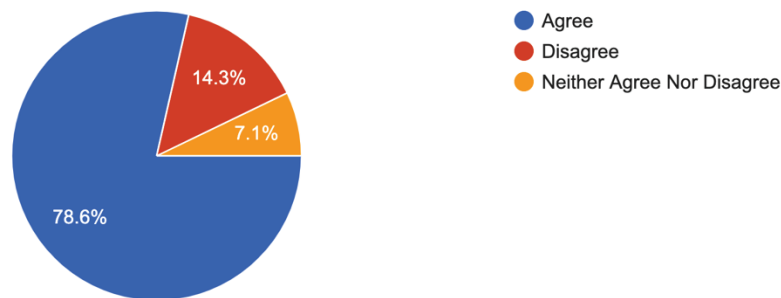
Based on the survey, the expectations of the students who are also working part-time or full-time alongside their degree courses are quite evident, as seen in the charts below. The demand for working-from-home was high as it allows for greater flexibility, which has become an important factor for worker satisfaction and retention since the pandemic (Liu, 2021, April).

Figure 1

Since the pandemic, I prefer having a more flexible work schedule  
28 responses

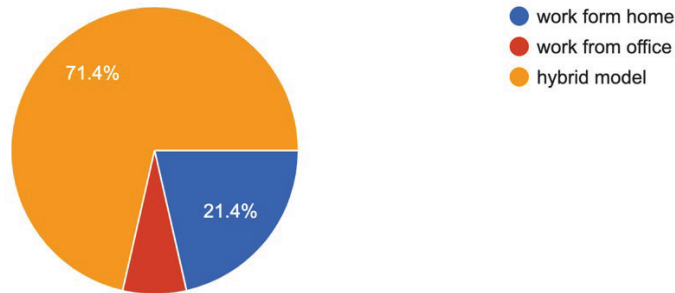


Working from home gives me more flexibility to plan my day as compared to working from office  
28 responses



### I like the following model of work the most

28 responses



An interesting contrast was also highlighted by the fact that while 71.4% admitted that their boss allowed them some flexibility in planning their work when working from home, about 57.1% neither agreed nor disagreed with the option that there had been a difference in their boss's leadership style after the pandemic. So while the working from home perhaps led to some work flexibility during the pandemic, the managers did not really change their leadership style to meet the needs and expectations of the hour.

One of most revelatory aspects of the survey was the fact that about 78.6% of participants admitted that

one of the key aspects of job satisfaction was their relationship with their manager. This, when seen in the context of the fact that 89.3% of respondents claimed that they needed to have laissez-faire leaders who are flexible and hands-off makes a case for the need of servant leadership for managers who have employees who are also students. It is important to note that none of the respondents selected the option of leaders who are indifferent and completely uninvolved. It indicates that students who are also working alongside their studies require managers who are involved but are also flexible and non-authoritarian.

Figure 2

### I believe that my boss allows me some flexibility in planning my work when I work from home

28 responses

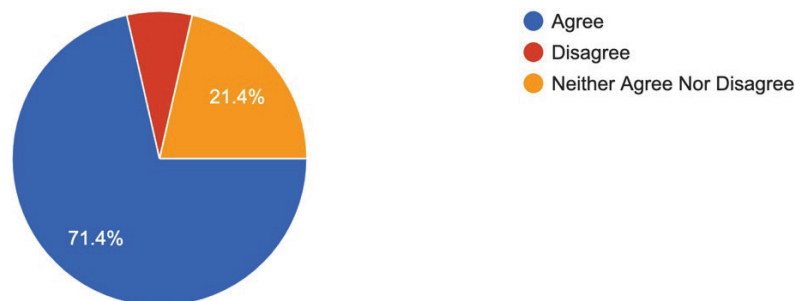
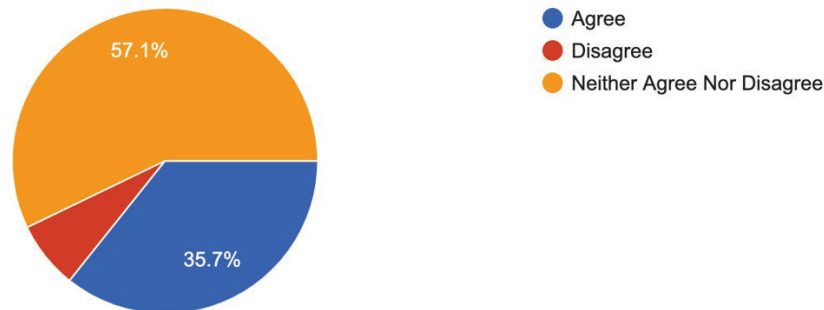


Figure 3

There has been a difference in my boss's leadership style before and after the pandemic  
28 responses



## CONCLUSION

Given the dual pressures experienced by students who had to balance work and academic expectations during the pandemic, there appears to have been a fundamental shift in the way working students now view their work environment. It is evident that the pandemic resulted in a shift to remote working and remote-studying. This shift, however, led to more flexibility in scheduling home-related, study-related, and work-related tasks for the students and resulted in a demand for a more hands-off, non-authoritarian management approach from employers. What is pertinent to note is that a majority of students (71.4%) preferred the hybrid mode of work, which implies that students do not wish to completely abandon the work-from-office paradigm, but prefer to work within the greater flexibility offered by the hybrid model of working a few days from home and a few days on site.

This corroborates with the fact that 92.9% of students claimed to prefer a more flexible working schedule since the pandemic. About 78.6% of the students agreed that their relationship with their manager greatly impacted their level of job satisfaction and about 89.3% agreed that the need of the hour was for there to be more hands-off, flexible, laissez-faire leaders. This ties-in to the proposed idea of the effectiveness of servant leadership as a management style in the post-pandemic world in order to increase the job satisfaction of student workers.

## DISCUSSION

In 1996, Larry Spears, Executive Director of the Robert K. Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, defined servant leadership as:

*...A new kind of leadership model – a model which puts serving others as the number one priority. Servant-leadership emphasizes increased service to others; a holistic approach to work; promoting a sense of community; and the sharing of power in decision-making.* (Spears, 1996, p. 33)

The idea of a servant leader implies that the manager will put the interests of her employees before profit-making and create a sense of community amongst her employees and herself. As per Spears (2004), a servant leader is a receptive and empathetic listener who strives to heal others and self. A servant leader is also intuitive and takes into account past lessons and present-realities while making plans for the future that involve a commitment to the growth of the employees. Considering the expectations of working students from their bosses and work environment, a manager who adopts the servant leadership management style is more likely to retain student employees and grant greater flexibility to schedule work, leading to a better relationship with employees and higher employee satisfaction.

It is also important to explore the relationship between servant leadership style and laissez-faire leadership style, since a majority of the respondents expressed their preference for a laissez-faire leadership style. Laissez-faire is a French phrase that means “let it be.” When applied to leadership, it describes managers who allow people to work on their own and make their own decisions. This points to the flexibility that can be offered by laissez-faire leaders to employees in managing their own work schedule while working from home. Laissez-faire leaders therefore usually give their subordinates the power to make decisions about their work and while they are there to provide their teams with resources and advice, if required, they otherwise do not get involved (Amanchukwu et al., 2015). If used in the context of servant leadership, a laissez-faire style can be sign of an empathetic manager who listens to the requirements of his/her/their employee and provides the autonomy for the employee to design their own work schedule.

Another leadership style whose principles can be incorporated within the servant leadership model is the democratic/participative leadership style. While democratic leaders make the final decisions, they are good listeners who listen to the employees and include team members in the decision-making process. Allowing employees to have a greater say in shaping their work and work environment is in line with the servant leadership model. Incorporating a democratic leadership style has been known to have benefits. Employees tend to have higher levels of job satisfaction and are more productive because of being more involved (Amanchukwu et al., 2015). It may be viewed as the opposite of quiet quitting where employees feel more invested because they feel like they are a part of something larger and meaningful and so are motivated by more than just a financial reward.

The survey highlighted the need for more democratic, laissez-faire leadership that allowed student workers greater flexibility in scheduling their work and other activities. Based on the 10 characteristics of servant leaders, upon

incorporating the tenets of Laissez-Faire and Democratic/Participative leadership styles, the servant leadership model could greatly enhance the job satisfaction of student workers in the following ways:

1. **Listening:** The servant-leader would actively listen to the needs of the student workers which includes the need for a hybrid model of work where the employees are allowed to work from home a few days of the week.
2. **Empathy:** The servant-leader would empathize with the dual pressures faced by working students in the form of academic and professional expectations.
3. **Healing:** A servant-leader would recognize and acknowledge the physical and emotional impact of the pandemic and allow student-workers the time and environment to heal from the collective trauma of COVID-19.
4. **Awareness:** A servant leader would have the awareness to recognize that different student workers have personally and professionally experienced the pandemic differently and are thus likely to have different need and requirements. The servant leader would be more laissez-faire in their leadership and allow for more flexibility in personalizing their approach and expectations with respect to different student workers.
5. **Persuasion:** Incorporating characteristics of democratic/participative leadership, servant-leaders will primary rely on persuasion over positional authority and allow for student-workers to participate in decision-making regarding their own work environment (allowing them to work from home on certain days of the week and having a flexible work schedule).
6. **Conceptualization:** Servant-leaders will have a broader perspective on the current post-pandemic scenario and design their management strategies taking into consideration the current realities in a way that is most favorable for the student workers in the longer run.



7. Foresight: Servant leaders are meant to be intuitive and would be able to respond appropriately to the needs of the hour. In the long run, their democratic and laissez-faire style is likely to contribute to greater employee satisfaction and retention.
8. Stewardship. A servant-leader will be open and persuasive in developing a stewardship that is committed to serving the needs of the student-workers.
9. Commitment to the growth of people: By being empathetic and giving the student workers freedom and flexibility with their work, the servant-leaders will not only recognize their intrinsic value but will also help the student workers manage their academic requirements better.
10. Building community: By encouraging participative decision-making, the servant-leaders will thus help build a community among their workers where the student workers feel safe to share their expectations and do not fear having their needs and grievances ignored.

While this study makes a case for the need of servant leadership as the suitable management style for greater student-worker satisfaction, it looks at just one side of the student worker's challenges, i.e., their challenges and expectations from their employer/manager. It does not look at the expectations that the student worker may have from their educational institute or their professors in order to help them manage their work and study better. It would be interesting to study a composite picture that involves both, the workplace environment as well as the place of the academic institution in a student worker's life. Since a student worker is faced with two potential bosses (academic professors and work manager), the interplay between the leadership styles of the two, and the collective impact on a student worker's overall life satisfaction would be a noteworthy study to carry forward from here.

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