

A New Angle

Episode 60

August 25, 2022

Justin Angle: This is A New Angle, a show about cool people doing awesome things in and around Montana. I'm your host, Justin Angle. This show is supported by First Security Bank, Blackfoot Communications and the University of Montana College of Business.

Justin Angle: Hey, folks, welcome back and thanks for tuning in. Today is our August edition of Incentives & Instincts, a recurring series in which I speak to economist and friend Bryce Ward about some of the broader challenges facing our society. Bryce, how are you today?

Bryce Ward: I'm great. Justin, how are you?

Justin Angle: Very good today, actually. So today we're going to talk about time, how we use it, how that use has changed, and in particular how little of our time we're spending with other people, especially friends. And to help us, we're joined by long

time friend of the show and Bryce's better half, Maggie Ward. Thanks for being here, Maggie.

Maggie Ward: Hey, Justin. Thanks for inviting me to join the team today.

Justin Angle: Joining the team. You are part of the team. I mean, you're not just joining. You've always been part of the team. And we had to subject to you to our opening question that everybody gets. Where did you grow up and what did your parents do?

Maggie Ward: I grew up actually here in Missoula, Montana. My dad was a teacher and a coach at Big Sky High School, men's basketball, and my mom was a librarian at Target Range Elementary School. So, I grew up here, parents, educators, so very fortunate.

Justin Angle: Home grown.

Maggie Ward: Home grown.

Justin Angle: Went away for a bit and now you're back.

Maggie Ward: I did, and I dragged this guy back with me. So good times.

Justin Angle: So, let's. Let's talk about this time thing. Bryce, I know you study the American Time Use Survey extensively. It's something you think about deeply. First, let's describe what the survey is like, how we know how people spend their time, and maybe give us some information about how those patterns have changed over the last few years.

Bryce Ward: Sure. So, the American Time Use Survey is part of the current population survey. It's you know, the survey that use to learn about, like the unemployment rate. They take a subsample of those people and then they say, okay, on this day, we're going to call you and we're going to ask you to describe in five-minute increments what you did yesterday. Right. So 4 a.m. to 4 a.m., and, you know, it's like, oh, sleeping, blah, blah, blah. And then, you know, where were you? And for at least certain categories, like who were you with? And in some years, for a random selection of the activities, well, how did you feel while you were doing that? How happy were you, how sad, how tired, you know, it's called the wellbeing module. We have not had enough data to talk about trends. The one we want to talk about today, the one that jumped out at me when these data release for 2021 a couple of weeks ago is time with others. Basically from 2003 to 2013, there were little ups and downs here and there kind of

around the Great Recession. But, you know, in terms of how much time are we spending with friends, with non-household family members? So, like if you don't live with your parents, I mean you see your parents, your aunts and uncles, whatever it is, people that don't, aren't already in your household all the time, coworkers, but not at work, right, so coworkers outside of work and then just other people like other people's kids or other adults. All of those things were roughly stable for ten years. In the last ten years or eight years, because we only go through 2021, they fell off a cliff. So as of 2021, time spent with friends is down 58%. It's basically an hour a day, a little slightly less than an hour a day, less with friends with our non-household family members not down as much but still down 22%, time with coworkers outside of work, also down about 50%. You know, basically all these other categories are about down 50%. So, when you add this all up in terms of how much time are we spending not with friends across the year, right. It's 200 fewer hours with friends.

Justin Angle: Per person, per year.

Bryce Ward: Per person per year.

Justin Angle: Wow.

80 fewer hours with non-household family, 40 fewer hours with coworkers outside of work, 45 fewer hours with non-household children and 90 fewer hours with other non-household adults. Now it's easy to say, well, that's the pandemic, right? Like, you know, it's 2021. That was the pandemic was still going on in 2021. But two thirds of these declines occurred by 2019.

Justin Angle: Right. So much of this had already happened before the pandemic even was a factor.

Bryce Ward: A lot of this had already come in before, so the pandemic, yeah, certainly made it worse. And hopefully we bounce back to whatever it was. But even if we just get back to 2019 levels, we have a problem, because we are spending massively less time in the presence of others.

Justin Angle: So, we'll talk about maybe some of the forces that would drive those changes in a moment. But, Maggie, let's bring you into this. So, first of all, we should talk a little bit about what you do, what your background is. I mean, you are an expert in social networks and how people interact. You're a mediator for various agencies. You work with teams. So, give us a little bit of your potted bio on how you think about this stuff.

Maggie Ward: Sure. I have worked in a variety, I'm kind of a jack of all trades when it comes to conflict resolution. I work for the Bureau of Land Management. I've done high level public engagement, collaboration, workplace mediation. I've been a workplace mediator for about 15 years, working with federal, state, local and county. In a different life I was a small claims court mediator and then I also work in the sports conflict kind of realm working on team cultures, team building, team assessments with the Sports Conflict Institute of Eugene, Oregon. So, a lot of different types of conflict and personality and team building all kind of mashed into the past 20 years.

Justin Angle: And not only as a professional, but you seem like you're master of it at the personal level, just connecting people in the community, keeping social ties strong and healthy.

Maggie Ward: Yes, I love connecting friends, relationships. It's, I do enjoy it. Bryce has observed that over our...

Bryce Ward: Literally on the drive here. She's like, you know, in this vein, we should be having more dinner parties and she's immediately like she's trying to match up sixth

graders, like, you know, those people should be friends, like, you know, let's have those people over and see if we can, you know, facilitate that relationship.

Justin Angle: So, given your immersion in this in the world of people being with other people and trying to be with other people better, how do you respond to these trends that Bryce just outlined?

Maggie Ward: I will say, COVID exacerbated what I think was already occurring. I think that it's, you know, I am not the data person, but that is something I've observed. And I think COVID, when we started moving into more of a Team's environment and Internet, Internet platform environment and less in person, I think it gave people the natural out that they don't need, but they started to use more and more. And now that we're transitioning back into more of a workplace environment in person, I am seeing a lot of challenges in that kind of dynamic.

Justin Angle: Those muscles have atrophied.

Maggie Ward: Those muscles of atrophied and some folks are coming back very excited and ready. Some are very nervous and uncertain. And so, there's this, the difference between those who naturally were socially engaged and comfortable and

those who weren't I think has extended over COVID. And so, trying to bring everybody back to a place where we can work together and communicate is interesting to observe.

Justin Angle: Yeah. And so, Bryce, you and I, over the past few months have had several conversations, both in this show and elsewhere, about how potentially social media is starting to be linked with depression, anxiety and so forth. That timing kind of overlays the effects of this decline in spending time with other people quite cleanly, that sort of rise in anxiety and depression that we're seeing now started kind of around 2012, 13. So how much of it is just we're living in our phones and our screens and having this illusion of social connection through spending time on social media? We might not know yet, but what's your thought on that?

Bryce Ward: I think it's a big part of it, right? You're obviously right. The timing lines up. These trends apply to adolescents. We have 15-to-25-year-olds in these data, they're down slightly more, actually. That's the time in your life when you actually spend a ton of time with friends, a 50% or 60% decline. It's huge. I mean, in 2013, 15-to-25-year olds are spending over 2 hours a day with friends. In 2021, they spent less than 50 minutes a day. I mean, it's just an enormous amount I mean, over 400 hours a year of lost time interacting with your friends in person. So, you know, one of

the ways you look at that, is you say, well, there's happy and meaning, right. But those are separate things. How meaningful was this activity and how happy were you during it? Right. And I can compare you to you because I have multiple observations where you're reading activities.

Justin Angle: Sure. So, the same person repeats over time.

Bryce Ward: Same person repeated, you know. But I can see how then what you're doing or who you're with affects that. When I say like being with friends is super important. I've said that on here multiple times. Right. But like, it's one of the biggest things that you can do in happiness and in meaning is spending time with others. Right. The activities that generate the biggest thing are socializing, communicating, attending parties, even things like helping non-household children or helping your own children. Like these are things that are good for our, you know, well-being in terms of happiness and meaning. And I think I used this statistic once before, but there's this guy, Robin Dunbar, who wrote a book recently called All About Friends. And in the first part of that book, he talks about some of the research about friendship, and he claims that there's a paper I didn't actually go follow the trail, but that the effects of friends on your health is equivalent to quitting smoking. It's enormous, whether it's social media that's driving it or other forces, whatever it's doing. Yeah. I mean, certainly this has got

to be part of the trend that we're seeing in suicide, depression, anxiety, and also just lack of trust and polarization. And all of these things, I think, are fed by our inability or our choice to not interact with others at anywhere close to the levels that we were doing even ten years ago.

Maggie Ward: I think also the social media, that platform, you know, it just fosters the ability to make a lot of assumptions about people and their lives and their quality of life. You don't have tone, inflection, body language, you don't have interaction. You just have a picture, you just get a snippet. And we are starting to become trained in making assumptions about that. I think that as that grows and we start to do that more frequently, I think that is an unhealthy approach. And not only are you missing out on friend time, but you're starting to develop skills that we really should be doing the opposite. We should be learning how to break down our assumptions and start to learn how to ask people questions and kind of move in the other direction. But I think social media forces us.

Bryce Ward: So not only we're not building the muscles, we should be building, we're building wrong muscles that actually make it harder for us to go out into the real world and interact with people. Interesting.

Justin Angle: Hmm. So, I guess I jumped right to social media, but I should ask, Bryce, are there patterns in our use of time? Like what's replaced the time spent with other people in the survey? Or does anything emerge?

Bryce Ward: Time spent alone. And you know, and the other thing, so we don't ask who you're with if you're doing certain things right. So, it could be hidden in personal time. Sleeping and grooming and that kind of stuff. So, people may be doing more of that.

Justin Angle: But maybe they're just watching TV by themselves.

Bryce Ward: Yeah, I think the 2016 election has a lot to do with this. I think that polarization around the election, you know, it made it so we didn't want to see certain people and we didn't want to have conversations with certain people. And, you know, again, this is just a thing that I'm picking out because the timing is right. But, you know, the.

Justin Angle: Political conversations in general were much less comfortable regardless of your political persuasion.

Bryce Ward: You start seeing a little bit of a dip before. The meat of the decline is 2017, 2018, 2019, and then obviously the COVID effects, which again, hopefully those go away, they're just COVID effects. But, you know, the concern is that, look, there's all these benefits that we get from interacting with each other just in terms of our own personal benefits, you know, and in addition to just well-being stuff. Like people are really useful to helping you solve problems, right? Relationships, having those relationships are how we can access resources that we wouldn't otherwise access, the information, expertise, all of that kind of stuff comes through relationships. And so, to the extent that we're just spending less time with others, we have fewer relationships. We have relationships that are of different caliber so that, you know, our ability to kind of improve our own well-being and also solve our problem is diminished. And then our collective well-being is worse off because we're not trusting each other and all this kind of stuff.

Maggie Ward: I think well, you know, in the workplace, when you think about like optimizing your performance as a group, whether it's an interdisciplinary team of natural resource specialists or a sports team, D1 basketball team, you have to have those relationships in place and you have to have the ability to work well with others that have very different personalities, come from very different cultures, very different life experiences. And so that ability, while it's extremely important in our personal

realm to succeed as a professional, whatever your profession may be, you have to be willing to start growing those skills. And every team tends to have, functional teams, tend to have at least one or two experts within their team that are good at helping bring others along and nurture those that might not have as many skills. But I think it's on all of us to just start trying to grow that social muscle, right? So that you can be not only happy in your personal life, but in a functional member of whatever team you decide to choose to be on.

Justin Angle: Given the amount of time you spend with teams, has the nature of work changed that in maybe such a way that's driving some of this isolation?

Maggie Ward: Absolutely. I think you only have so much, Bryce likes to talk about this, you only have so much energy to give in a day. And the more stressors you have in your home environment or in your life, the harder it is to give 40 hours a week or whatever allocated amount of hours you have. It's just hard. And we just had this conversation in a workplace I was in the other day, I was giving a training and I said, look, we have 40 hours that you're supposed to give, but you might come in low, and you can only give a certain amount in that time. Be transparent with people. I'm off today. It's going to be a hard day. I'll be here, but I'm probably only going to get 6 hours of being productive. And that's just, that's life. And I think we all can have grace with

each other and understand that. Where I start to observe problems is where routinely you can't ever meet your hours. That's when you're like, okay, something else is going on. And then we need to adjust the stressors separately. And that's when I really, really do encourage counseling, seeking help. There's a lot of mental health experts out there that can really help folks. I was just in a mediation the other week where there's this new conversation about, we should have conflict coaches. So, the two parties, when I, the mediations I've done, the mediator can call caucuses if there's an emotional kind of need to separate and kind of help defuse and talk. But now, given the rise, I think, in what we're observing with anxiety and some other of these issues, there's a conflict coach that's intended to help be a process expert, but also help with psychological safety concerns and needs. We had, I have not seen that before in my 15 years of doing it, so I think we are seeing a need to address some of those stressors that people are experiencing. I've definitely observed a trend upward in some people that have great stressors in their life.

Justin Angle: We'll be back to my conversation with Maggie and Bryce Ward after this short break.

Justin Angle: Welcome back to A New Angle. I'm speaking with Maggie and Bryce Ward about why we're spending less time with each other.

Justin Angle: Are you seeing evidence that we are collectively worse at doing conflict and resolving conflict, navigating it?

Maggie Ward: No. I mean, it depends on where you are. You know, I think the fun thing when I do public lands management, it's so fun to bring together members of the public from very different perspectives and views and lenses. And I think there's some really powerful work that I've observed being done where people have to sit in a room together and come up with some solutions. Montana is known for having a lot of really well thought through collaboratives that have kind of been before, I think the Blackfoot Collaborative started back in the eighties. We've had some collaboratives where it is like, let's just bring people together. It's awkward, it's uncomfortable. We might say the wrong thing, but we're going to have grace with each other when we do, you know, get out of the polarization and just try to solve problems. And I think what we're starting to see is going back to that, there's been efforts through time, and I think people are now starting to, on the other side of COVID, say we need to get back together and sit in person and talk to people. I do still see some outliers where that's, it's going to be a big struggle. But I think most of us are trying to get back to where we were before COVID.

Bryce Ward: This is a very specific setting. But in the experimental setting, right. You know, over 600 studies across several decades where we do these trust games. People's willingness to cooperate and trust with strangers has not changed. So that's a positive. But, you know, that's one very narrow specific setting. But, you know, at least our capacity and our willingness to cooperate with strangers in an experimental setting hasn't changed. That doesn't mean that we haven't lost muscles in more specific contexts where, again, if you're just a stranger in an experiment you had mentioned earlier, like, I'm not making much of assumptions about you, whereas you put me in specific contexts in our modern society and I just look at you and I make assumptions about you, right? And therefore, oh, you're that person. I don't want to trust you. I'm not going to cooperate with you. You're bad or whatever it is.

Maggie Ward: And I think part of that, when I do, kind of in the conflict arena, it's a willingness to understand other people. You don't have to agree with other people, but a willingness to, I think it was Chris Voss, *Never Split the Difference*, he wrote this, and he said, you need to parachute into the other person's mind to understand where they're coming from. And again, it doesn't mean you necessarily agree with them, but there is an important aspect to understanding people, because once we understand each other, we can start to move forward and have conversations and communicate

better. It's really essential. But if we just judge and make assumptions, we won't get to that understanding piece.

Justin Angle: Back to the nature of work piece. You know, we've had over the last 20 or however many years the rise and kind of what I call productivity tools, whether it's Slack, text, other forms of rapid communication that are built for workplace productivity, kind of tech culture has glorified the ability to multitask in many ways. And in a lot of ways that just fractures attention, and it creates a velocity of communication that has problems for a lot of reasons, we feel beholden to it, we're distracted by it, and a lot of it rolls up into fewer in-person interactions. I'm more likely to Slack a person down the hall than I am to just walk up, walk down the hall ten steps and ask the person the question. And so, I wonder, too, if that's a mechanism through which we're just getting worse at dealing with other people.

Maggie Ward: Absolutely. I did a cultural assessment of an athletic department a while back, and one of the recommendations at the conclusion was, we need, you need some protocols around when you can use these platforms and when you need to be in person. And it was the overreliance on text and just shooting messages, Snapchat, they even had on one team. It eliminated almost in some cases the in-person. And so, part of the recommendation for that particular department was only if you're

information sharing, that's great for information sharing, schedules, time practice, when you need to be somewhere. Absolutely. If you have something that you're disagreeing about, you want to discuss, if it's more in the realm of a feeling or emotion or there's some substance to it, in person. And it's really important because if you don't be intentional about setting those rules, you can slip into a non in-person environment pretty quick.

Bryce Ward: Well and the evidence is clear. I mean, text is so easily misinterpreted. So, you know, you think, oh, this is an obvious joke or whatever it is. And people like more than 50% of the time misinterpret what you're saying.

Maggie Ward: That's where you use emojis, Bryce.

Bryce Ward: We have allowed ourselves in the, in the pursuit of making things, quote, easier on ourselves. We use the term social muscle when we come teach classes. Right. And we use that very intentionally because we've allowed ourselves to become social weaklings. Right. And you know we've given ourselves all sorts of tools that allow us to, you know, get stuff done and kind of, you know, substitute for some of it. But there's this core part that was kind of overlooked, the well-being component, you

know, the trust component. And, you know, now we're kind of waking up in this world and it's like interacting with others is hard. Right. It's always going to be hard.

Justin Angle: This effect with socializing coming out of pandemic. I was working from home, pretty isolated, and then I started to come back to the office more. At first, the experience was kind of jarring, like people would come by and stop by and say hi I'd think, oh God, they're just getting in my way. I can't get as much done. Why do I have to have these stupid conversations about your day? And then I sort of realized like, whoa, hold on a second. Like those five or so minutes or however long it is, those watercooler conversations, as it were, actually not only feel pretty good, but I'm actually starting to feel a little bit more happy and not quite so isolated. Like, oh, this is the whole point of a workplace. It was this weird effect, and it's still, I'm still sort of climbing out of it, but I don't know if any listeners experience that. But yeah, being around other people in an office, even for introverts like me is pretty healing.

Maggie Ward: You know, I'm always surprised by how much creativity can come from just random interactions like that. That's when you make connections, you gain insights, and you just know how people are doing. It is awkward and, but I think the good news is you're willing to embrace it, right? You're embracing it. You acknowledge

it feels awkward. It's little frustrating at first, but you're embracing it and that's a good thing.

Justin Angle: As practice.

Bryce Ward: Well, and it also generates important conversations, shoulder conversations that, you know, this is the problem with Zoom meetings is you show up, there's none of this, I got there early and I'm just hanging out and then there's no, oh, the meeting's over and I'm just hanging out. Right. It's the meetings here. The meetings done, we do the meeting stuff and the meeting's over. You don't have any of those shoulder conversations. Those shoulder conversations are A, where we build bonds and bridges with people that we work with and B, frequently those are people that you're not in, normal team people. And so, this are where we get the cross-pollination and that leads to creativity. A lot of social interaction is momentum based. When we teach classes on this, we talk about the Ford model, right? These are just this little simple thing that you can, like come back to when you're having a conversation: family, occupation, recreation, dreams. Why do you ask about those things? Because those things are always there.

Justin Angle: Most people have those.

Bryce Ward: They have those. And, you know, particularly when things like recreation, you know, it's like, oh, I'm going on a trip soon. Oh, you see the person a couple of months. Now the momentum's already there. Oh, this happened to me last night. I ran into somebody I hadn't seen in six weeks. I knew that he'd been on a trip over that period and was like, Oh yeah, how was the trip? They're just lubricants that allow us to keep the relationship going and keep it, you know, particularly for people like us who are introverts, who want to hide. Right. And would much rather, you know, not have people interrupt us. But like at the end of the day, yeah, I do feel better when I have those conversations. I do get stuff out of those interactions. And what's happening, what's driving these trends, is too many of us have lost sight of these benefits and then we've let ourselves atrophy enough that it's harder now.

Justin Angle: And we don't quite grasp, and hopefully after this conversation people will start to grasp, that we don't quite grasp the health consequences in the same way we do with letting our diet slip or letting our sleep slip or letting our exercise slip.

Bryce Ward: We get feedback on that pretty quickly. The social stuff, it shows up in this long-term stuff. It's like, well, why are we anxious? Why are we depressed? Why am I unhappy? Why am I, you know, not whatever. And it's because this thing that we

took for granted, right, because we're social creatures, we're just kind of living in the social world. We kind of expect social things to function, but we increasingly rely on the Maggie's of the world to basically manage all of our social lives, because so many of us, myself included, have allowed ourselves to just be like, oh, let's work.

Justin Angle: Let's close with some recommendations, you know, what would you recommend to listeners as to how they might go about allocating time more effectively in their lives? Maggie, start with you.

Maggie Ward: I think you kind of just put yourself back out there. If you are out there, great. Continue. Foster friendships, invite people over for dinner. You know, we all have busy lives and busy schedules, but recognizing that, just like you said with your diet, this is really important. Go to that dinner with friends, invite them over, go for a hike, not just with your family, but make an effort to foster the relationships outside of it. So, for those of you who are doing it, great, keep going. If you aren't, small steps. Start with a phone call with someone.

Justin Angle: Yeah.

Maggie Ward: Reconnect. The other thing I would say is start growing skills and self-awareness. Sometimes people don't know how to connect with people, and they don't know themselves well. Understand kind of what your motivations are, your fears are. Get a handle on that a little bit and then continue to put yourself out there.

Justin Angle: Super. Bryce?

Bryce Ward: So, at the individual level, yeah, don't bail. That's the easy one. Like you already, it's already planned. Don't bail. Also, keep track. Give yourself some data, I'm a data person, right. So don't let yourself just think, oh, I'm connected with people because I looked at some posts on Instagram or Facebook. No. Like how often have you like actually hung out with people, you know? And then to the extent that you're feeling like those muscles have atrophied. Look, there's lots of resources out there. If you're afraid of difficult conversations, if you're afraid, you know, just, you know, tap into some of the resources that are out there. But then at the collective level, I do think this is a social problem that we should be addressing collectively to the extent that, you know, we need to put resources, public resources, into trying to subsidize whatever we can that gets people back out into the world and interacting with each other. I think we need to start having a conversation about what that would look like.

Justin Angle: So, my recommendation deals with texting. I think it's often easier sometimes, or we feel like it's easier to default to text and it is fine for an informational thing. But I sort of I'm trying to develop this rule where if it takes more than two texts to organize a plan, just call, right? Just make the phone call. And if you feel like it, just start with the phone call.

Maggie Ward: I think your concept is so important, which is, it's so easy to text. Yeah, even about emotional things. I've had friends send me text messages about their parent's ailing health and then I pick up the phone and make the call back because.

Bryce Ward: We hear, I hear that a lot. That's not a text. That's a phone call. I got to make that as a call.

Maggie Ward: And I think it's so important to just remember, even if they don't pick up, leave the message. Thinking about you, care about you.

Bryce Ward: I'll add another one. Like I've had two different people in my life who they've seemed to stop this. So maybe they, you know, this is all part of this larger trend, but. They would call me whenever they were doing certain things. You know, I had one, it was like, I'm on this stretch of the road that I drive every week and, you

know, look, and it would be 2 minutes, right? But there was that, you know, keep those. Don't let it go too long. Like keep reaching out, you know, schedule things, if necessary, because then it's just easy.

Justin Angle: Routines help.

Bryce Ward: Routines definitely help in in relationships.

Maggie Ward: Yeah. If you're shuttling kids right, when you drop them off at practice, whatever it may be, there's 10 minutes you might have to have some downtime and you're waiting. Make that the time you call a good friend from college or a good friend from childhood that you just want to connect with for a couple of minutes. Those are the small steps just to take to kind of start yourself fostering that muscle again and grow in it.

Justin Angle: Awesome. Well, I enjoyed working on the social muscle with the two of you today. Thanks for being here. Thanks for sharing your expertise and we'll see you down the road.

Maggie Ward: Thanks, Justin.

Justin Angle: Thanks for listening to A New Angle. We really appreciate it. And we're coming to you from Studio 49, a generous gift from UM alums, Michele and Loren Hansen.

Justin Angle: A New Angle is presented by First Security Bank, Blackfoot Communications and the University of Montana College of Business, with additional support from Consolidated Electrical Distributors, Drum Coffee and Montana Public Radio. Keely Larson is our producer. VTO, Jeff Ament and John Wicks made our music. Editing by Nick Mott, Social Media by Aj Williams, and Jeff Meese is our master of all things sound. Thanks a lot and see you next time.