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adapted from an article by Sam Blum



- 1 It didn't take long for Jessica Zollman to amass a giant following on Instagram. As the company's fifth employee and 95th user of the app in 2011, she was in on the ground floor of the tech giant a year after its launch, advising users on best practices that are now ingrained in social media's DNA. Naturally, scores of followers flocked to her account.
- 2 Her newfound Insta-fame quickly earned her a ride on a "beautiful, mysterious train, making a really, really impressive amount of money as an influencer," she says. But four years later, the train had sputtered to a halt, leaving her scrambling financially.
- 3 "22," she says. "People started noticing how lucrative doing that kind of work was, and so there came this new goal of becoming the influencer." Brands weren't paying as much because people would work for less – or even for free. "I had to lower my day rate. I had to work twice as hard for half as much," she says.
- 4 The psychological impact of struggling for work, coupled with the surge of competition, was enough for Zollman to quit the influencer lifestyle and transition back to the polar opposite: a traditional nine-to-five job. Relying on Instagram for creative validation and regular income had left her emotionally exhausted, and getting a steady job felt like the best thing for her mental health.

- 5 Zollman isn't the only influencer who's grown disillusioned with what she calls the "song and dance performance" of the industry. Experts say it's evidence of change; a sort of fatigue affecting not only influencers, but also brands and consumers, who are justifiably sceptical of many of the sponsored posts cluttering their newsfeeds.
- 6 Companies are becoming increasingly cautious about selecting influencer talent, according to Karen Doolittle, social media director at an advertising firm in Los Angeles. A few high-profile cases of influencer fraud – when influencers have artificially inflated the reach of their accounts or fabricated personal narratives – have helped the public become "more shrewd and discerning", she says, and there's now a "hesitancy and almost mistrust on behalf of both consumers and brands" when it comes to influencers.
- 7 "A steady influencer gig will be harder to come by for many," says Doolittle. "If sponsored content resonates and feels relevant, people will engage. If it doesn't, they unfollow. The one and done, hit it and quit it content deals you might see scattered across your Instagram feed today lack authenticity," she says. To allay growing public scepticism, brands will go for more long-term campaigns in the vein of traditional brand ambassadorships, and focus on micro-influencers whose smaller audiences are more relatable to consumers.
- 8 For Zollman, leaving the financially precarious influencer world behind has been a great decision. She now oversees photography and marketing for a Los Angeles coffee company as its visual coordinator, and no longer feels her self-esteem is so intertwined with her job. She still maintains an Instagram page and publishes the occasional sponsored post for her 216,000 followers, but does so on her own terms. "I don't feel like I gave something up," she says. "I feel like I have a day job so I can still make art, and make art that makes me feel good."

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