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Does loving your job really make work feel effortless?

The popular saying, “Do what you love, and you’ll never work a day in your life,” suggests that pursuing work based on your passion eliminates the potential drudgery of labour. This idea may have inspired many to pursue meaningful work, but empirical evidence on its validity has been scarce—until now.

Our study, published in the *Journal of Management Scientific Reports* with our collaborator Professor **Jennifer Tosti-Kharas**, set out to test some of the fundamental assumptions inherent in advice as well as theory about experiencing a “calling” toward your work.

What does “calling” really mean?

In the context of organisational psychology, people with a strong calling experience deep-seated passion and a sense of purpose toward their work. For these people, work is more than a pay cheque—it’s a source of fulfilment, meaning, and passion. Over the years, research has linked experiencing a strong calling to improved job satisfaction, heightened engagement, and even better job performance. But two fundamental assumptions about calling remained largely untested. Specifically:

1. **Effort:** Do people with strong callings actually *work harder* than those with weaker callings?
2. **Enjoyment:** Do they *enjoy even mundane tasks more*, making work feel less effortful?

We set out to address these questions in a real-world setting.

Testing the myth

We conducted a study involving 2,839 workers on Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk), a crowdsourcing platform where individuals complete tasks for payment. Participants first rated their **sense of calling** toward MTurk before completing a straightforward, repetitive task: adjusting sliders on a screen to match specific values. This task, though mundane, provided a clear way to measure effort (the number of sliders completed) and enjoyment (through a self-reported task enjoyment rating).

To add another layer of complexity, participants were divided into two payment groups: a fixed pay group, where they received a set amount regardless of effort, and a piece-rate group, where additional effort led to additional pay. This setup allowed us to examine whether financial incentives influenced the relationship between calling, effort, and enjoyment.

The results: A complex picture

So, what did we find? The results revealed a more nuanced picture than the popular saying suggests.

Effort: Calling fuels hard work—But with limits

We found that participants with a stronger sense of calling completed more of the seemingly dull slider tasks, even when there was no additional financial incentive for doing so. However, when participants were paid piece-rate, those with weaker callings stepped up their effort, narrowing the gap in performance. This suggests that while strong callings can be highly motivating, external rewards like money can also drive significant effort.

Notably, calling was most predictive of effort when pay was fixed. In other words, people with strong callings were more willing to go the extra mile when there was no immediate financial gain—a potential double-edged sword that raises ethical concerns about worker exploitation.

Enjoyment: Loving what you do makes even the boring parts bearable

When it came to enjoyment, the findings were a bit different. People with strong callings reported higher enjoyment of the slider task, even though it was repetitive and intentionally unengaging. Moreover, contrary to the idea that financial incentives might “crowd out” the more internal type of motivation coming from a strong calling, participants in the piece-rate group (who could earn more money when they did more sliders) enjoyed the task more than those earning fixed pay regardless of the strength (or weakness) of their calling. This suggests that internal (calling) and external (pay) rewards can coexist and even enhance one another.

Debunking the myth—Sort of

So, does loving your job mean work never feels like work? Not quite.

Implications for workers:

Our study's findings confirm that while pursuing work aligned with your calling can indeed make work more enjoyable and motivate you to put in extra effort, it does not erase the reality of hard work. People with strong callings face the risk of becoming overcommitted to their work, making them vulnerable to exploitation and reduced well-being. This tendency to go above and beyond can lead to burnout, poor work-life balance, and even health issues.

Implications for employers:

For organisations, hiring employees with strong callings can mean benefiting from their higher effort. However, organisations should be cautious about unintentionally—or certainly intentionally—exploiting these employees. Fair pay and manageable workloads are critical for maintaining a sustainable, ethical workplace. Additionally, our study shows that financial incentives remain a powerful motivator for all employees, not just those lacking a strong calling. A thoughtful blend of internal and external motivators might maximise both effort and enjoyment of employees.

In sum, for individuals and organisations alike, the key lies in balancing callings with fair compensation, realistic expectations, and a commitment to well-being. By doing so, we can create workplaces where effort and enjoyment coexist sustainably—a much healthier approach to living the dream.

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