

Having a strong calling can help you make challenging career decisions

One approach to career pursuit encourages people to prioritize doing what they love and to pursue their passions, as exemplified by Steve Jobs' [statement](#) that "the only way to do great work is to love what you do. If you haven't found it yet, keep looking." A second approach prioritizes achieving outcomes such as salary and job security, as exemplified by Alison Green's [article](#) in *U.S. News & World Report*: "Do what you love,' for most people, is not a reliable way to find the right career – and can lead to anxiety, job-hopping and dissatisfaction..."

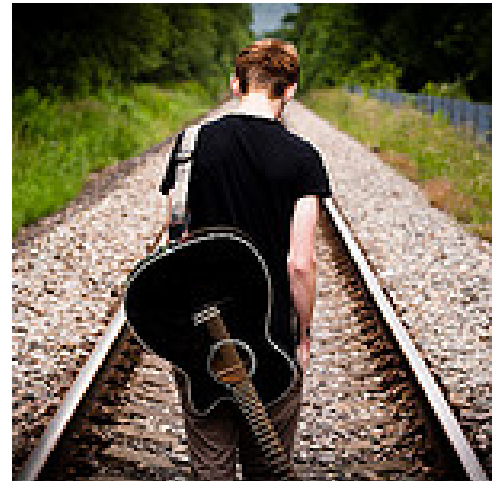
Ideally, people can follow both approaches – pursuing a career that simultaneously permits them to do something they love *and* earn a strong salary and have job security. However, given economic realities, people commonly face trade-offs as they make initial decisions that pit these two sides of careers – the "heart" or intrinsic side and the "head" or extrinsic side – against one another. This poses a difficult dilemma, as people typically care about both.

So, what happens when people need to make career-pursuit decisions in a context that provides positive opportunities for developing the intrinsic side of their profession, but poses serious challenges on the extrinsic side? Should they pursue a path they are likely to find intrinsically rewarding but not extrinsically rewarding (or vice versa)?

In a recently published [study](#), we tracked 450 young people for 11 years as they progressed from adolescence to young adulthood, in a career setting in which the intrinsic and extrinsic sides can clash: the path to become a professional musician. We suggested that a sense of *calling* – or the consuming, meaningful passion people experience toward a domain – may resolve this dilemma.

We found that participants with stronger callings toward music during adolescence were likely to perceive their musical abilities more favourably and, consequently, were more likely to pursue music professionally as adults. What is striking about these results is that they occur *regardless* of participants' actual musical ability or pressure from their parents and teachers.

Although a strong calling appears to enable people to live out their dreams as musicians, difficulties can go along with this path. Participants who were involved in music professionally, even at a minimum, earned considerably less (a gap of \$12,000 per year on average), were less satisfied with their pay, were more likely to be employed part time rather than full time, and were more likely to be working in a freelance capacity than those not professionally involved in music. Yet they also experienced similar or slightly higher satisfaction with their jobs and lives. Thus, for those with strong callings, extrinsic rewards may matter less than intrinsic rewards or they may have lower goals or apply lower standards to extrinsic rewards compared to intrinsic rewards.



Making effective career decisions becomes particularly critical during times of economic uncertainty.

If you experience a strong calling, you need to be cognizant of your relative preferences for intrinsic versus extrinsic rewards and of the potential trade-offs between the two – and then decide accordingly. Making effective career decisions becomes particularly critical during times of economic uncertainty.

Our research findings highlight a silver lining for you: you are *more likely* to succeed in challenging career contexts, thereby achieving some positive intrinsic and extrinsic outcomes. Yet because of the nature of winner-take-all labour markets, where there are many people who attempt to pursue a career path but only few who succeed, there will necessarily be people with strong callings who will not be able to professionally enact them. Among our study participants, even those with the strongest callings only earn about a third of their income from music.

Thus, if you experience a strong calling in a particularly challenging career context like music, you may benefit from considering a less challenging path while enacting your calling in ways other than as a full-time profession, for instance, as an avocation, a part-time profession, or one component of a multifaceted career. In less challenging career domains, you may not need to exercise as much caution. Further, in domains characterized on average by weaker calling levels, you may experience a competitive advantage, such that you are able to experience positives on both the intrinsic and extrinsic sides of your career.

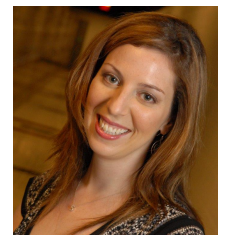
At a societal level, large numbers of strong-calling individuals pursuing challenging career paths suggest a positive and unexpected implication. Society benefits from the excess of talented people competing for a limited number of positions in winner-take all labour markets because the individuals who “win” in this market are exemplary. Although most individuals entering this type of market eventually “lose” in extrinsic terms by definition, they may still benefit from intrinsic rewards and garner subjective value and well-being, such as the satisfaction derived from attempting to fulfil their calling, even for a short time.

| *Should people avoid callings entirely or learn to navigate the rough waters that swirl around them?*

If attempting to fulfil one’s calling can be so alluring yet also set up potentially challenging career pursuits, as we saw in our research, should people avoid callings entirely or learn to navigate the rough waters that swirl around them? Our research reveals an optimistic picture in which those with strong callings are more likely to take the risk, to persist, and ultimately to graduate and get jobs in the calling domain, thereby potentially satisfying their extrinsic and intrinsic career needs. Across occupational contexts, particularly in those in which considerations about the intrinsic and extrinsic sides of the career might clash, we thus encourage people to consider how callings can help resolve career decision-making dilemmas.

Featured Image Credit: [Frederik Magle Music CC-BY-2.0](#) Smaller photo in the post: [Karlos Smith CC-BY-2.0](#)

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