

WORK AS A CALLING

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A *calling*, generally speaking, is a consuming meaningful passion people experience toward a domain. That domain is most often work – whether one’s specific job, organization, occupation, or broad social principle (e.g., social justice, child welfare) – but may encompass any other domain of interest (e.g., music, sports, family). Those who experience work as a strong calling are consumed by the work, which may mean they are easily engrossed in their work and feel a sense of destiny, or pull, toward doing the work. They are also likely to see work as central to their overall identity, or concept of who they are as a person. These people also feel that work is meaningful, providing a sense of purpose and significance. Not surprisingly, calling tends to accompany a belief that work serves a broader social purpose, or makes the world a better place. In addition, people with strong callings feel extremely passionate toward their work, gaining a great deal of satisfaction from simply doing the work. Calling therefore can be understood as an extreme form of subjective career success.

Historically, only members of the clergy could claim to view their careers, as such, as a calling. However, this view changed during the Protestant Reformation, when Martin Luther offered the notion that just about any type of work could be a calling. Although this classical view of calling had religious connotations – specifically that the calling is from God – the modern view of calling is secular. The secular view of calling originated with sociologist Max Weber in the 1900s, and is largely dominant in contemporary writing about calling. In the modern view, there is not one fixed path toward viewing work as a strong calling. That is, people may feel that they have been called to their career paths by a higher power, by luck, or by fate. They may also come to view work they did not originally choose

as a calling through deep engagement with the work. In addition, although people may feel a calling toward a particular type of work, they may be unable to work in that domain for a variety of reasons.

The modern view of calling stems from research that broadly addresses the question of why people work, what rewards they seek from work, and the meaning they ascribe to their work and careers. Sociologist Robert Bellah and his colleagues first conceived of a tripartite model of work as a job, career, or calling. When people view work as a *job*, they see work as not a meaningful end in itself, but primarily an avenue to gain extrinsic rewards, like pay. When work is seen as a *career*, it becomes a means to gain status and advancement within a company or industry. Finally, when work is seen as a *calling*, the reward from working is deep fulfillment from doing the work itself. Job and calling orientations toward work are typically seen as opposite ends of the same dimension; that is, the stronger the feeling that work is a calling, the weaker the feeling that it is a job.

Because calling is a subjective belief about the work, research has found that any type or level of job can be viewed as a calling. Similarly, two people in the same role may view their work differently, in that one views work as a strong calling and the other does not. However, members of certain occupations tend to report stronger callings on average than others. As previously mentioned, calling often accompanies work that provides societal benefit, is deeply personally involving, or both. For example, musicians and artists have reported stronger levels of calling on average than managers. Although calling may seem to be a luxury experienced only by people whose basic survival needs are already met by their work, even people in impoverished circumstances have demonstrated that they can view work as a strong calling.

In terms of assessment, calling is not a binary construct that people either “have” or “do not have.” Rather, calling exists in degrees, ranging from stronger callings to weaker

callings. Researchers have employed different methods of measuring calling, ranging from interviews to survey questionnaires. One popular survey instrument asks respondents to read paragraphs describing the experience of hypothetical people at work that map to the job, career, and calling dimensions, and then choose which description is most like them. Several scale measures of calling exist, each comprising multiple items for which people indicate the extent of their agreement or disagreement, in order to form a calling score. Sample items include “I enjoy doing my work more than anything else,” and “It sometimes feels like I was destined to do this work.” The item text can be adapted for work in general, or a specific domain. Having established the definition, background, and measurement of calling, it is important to next understand what factors precede calling (i.e., “antecedents” of calling) and what outcomes calling leads to (i.e., “consequences” of calling).

Antecedents of Calling

Initially, most calling research did not consider that antecedent factors might shape the initial development and evolution of calling. Collectively, this calling research assumed the following sequence: the existence of a calling is the starting point, an individual “finds” it, and then when that person “has” it, it is a predictor of career and general life consequences. In contrast, other calling research specifically studied calling longitudinally over many years to investigate whether calling might instead be dynamic – that is, that it can change over time and can be shaped by antecedent factors. Calling is thus not waiting to be found; rather, it might be developed. This research found that calling does indeed change, and that people who were more involved behaviorally and comfortable socially in the area toward which they felt a calling not only experienced higher initial levels of calling but also experienced a decrease in calling over time. Although it is not clear why this decrease over time occurs, it may be due to the early idealism of work wearing off as reality sets in. Interestingly, people’s level of ability in the calling domain was not related to either their

initial level of calling or their change in calling over time.

The study of antecedents of calling is in its infancy; thus there are many open questions. Future research should begin to address questions like whether there are additional antecedents of calling; how calling changes over long amounts of time, in particular the many years, even decades, that comprise a career; and whether the lack of a relationship between ability and calling holds across different occupational contexts.

Consequences of Calling

Although many people consider calling an important end in and of itself, people are generally interested in whether calling leads to other important outcomes in work and life. As a first step toward addressing this question, many calling studies have documented positive correlations relationships between calling and subjective constructs such as life satisfaction, job satisfaction, better health, fewer missed days of work, intrinsic motivation, work engagement, job involvement, zest, and well-being, as well as several career constructs, including career-related self-efficacy, clarity of professional identity, career insight, and career development variables. Because of the cross-sectional, non-experimental methodologies used in these studies, we know that calling and these variables are related, but it remains unclear whether calling leads to these other variables, or vice versa. For instance, we do not yet know whether calling leads to occupational choice or occupational choice leads to calling via such mechanisms as reducing cognitive dissonance or fostering retrospective rationalization. In fact, the question of whether callings are “found” or “made” is one of the largest ongoing debates in this line of research.

More recent research has explored the connection between calling and actual career pursuit over time, using longitudinal data to track adolescent amateur musicians into adulthood. This methodological approach can thus begin to explore the link between calling and career outcomes. Study participants with stronger callings toward music during

adolescence were likely to perceive their musical abilities more favorably and, consequently, were more likely to pursue music professionally as adults, *regardless* of their actual musical ability or pressure from their parents and teachers. These findings thus indicate an intriguing pattern in which the experience of stronger early callings led to greater perceived ability that was *not* reflected in greater actual ability. In other words, people's subjective perceptions and experiences – more so than talent – were the major drivers of their career choices.

Although a strong calling appears to enable people to live out their career dreams as musicians, difficulties can accompany this path. Participants who were involved in music professionally, even at a minimum, earned considerably less (\$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 participants 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.

Findings such as these highlight that callings might be “double-edged swords.” That is, although most extant calling research has primarily focused on positive aspects of calling, it is more likely that callings have both positive *and* negative implications. For instance, those with strong callings may be exploited by management, may experience tension between personal and social identities in challenging occupations, may suffer strain in their personal and professional relationships as a result of their high degree of focus on work, and may be more likely to ignore potentially useful but discouraging career advice. Last but certainly not least, they may be willing to make considerable financial sacrifices to pursue their calling.

There are many open questions about consequences of calling, including linking calling to a greater range of affective, behavioral, and cognitive career outcomes over time.

Research should also explore in greater depth the potential trade-offs people with strong callings are willing to make between competing needs, such as between the extrinsic and intrinsic sides of their careers. Lastly, research can continue to explore both the bright and dark sides of calling.

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See also Work orientation; Meaning of work; Intrinsic motivation

Suggested Readings

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