

# How to avoid burnout when you follow your passion in your career choice



Emma always loved animals. When she accepted a position in her local SPCA, she thought she had found her dream job. Instead, she found herself shocked by the lack of training and resources, and the sheer number of heartbreaking [euthanasias](#). Seeing her coworkers as less dedicated than herself, she distanced herself from other staff and compulsively hoarded animals in her office and home to save them. Within three years she had burnt out and left the shelter.

Emma's experience is not unique. In recent years, an increasing number of employees, particularly millennials, express desire to pursue a 'calling', work that is personally meaningful or makes an impact in the world. Our research suggests that many may not appreciate the challenges or potential downsides of such work upon entry.

In [our recent study](#), we interviewed 50 veteran shelter employees to develop a better picture of how callings are navigated in the face of challenges. We focused on shelter work precisely because it attracts those with a calling and entails difficult and demanding labour. Our interviews revealed that there isn't one specific way to enact a calling. Instead we uncovered three distinct calling 'paths', two of which led to burnout and one to thriving.

Interviewees on the **identity path** entered shelter work with a sense of themselves as having a unique 'gift' to help animals. When confronted with challenges in the shelter, they experimented with different positions, trying to find the work that would allow them to best enact their gift. They ended up retreating from their coworkers, and sacrificing their own leisure and wellness in their efforts to do the work as well as they could. Ultimately, this over-dedication 'broke' them and they left to pursue happier animal work like pet grooming or training. As one explained, "I wasn't willing to make the sacrifice to stay there for the animals... I felt really bad about it, but I thought at some point, it's me or them. So I chose me."

Those on the **contribution path** felt they had special skills that could make a difference in the shelter. Like those on the identity path, their idealised expectations of their calling clashed with shelter reality. Convinced that things "would be different if I ran the place... I would clean house" they vied for leadership positions and worked hard to bring about change. Despite their efforts, they came to feel defeated by shelter inertia, leaving for more impactful work like social work, teaching, nursing or environmental work.

Only a minority of our interviewees managed to carve out a sustainable **practice path**. How did they do it? Paradoxically, these employees saw themselves as having neither a special gift nor skill. Instead, they sought to join a community of shelter employees and learn the craft of helping animals. With more modest aspirations they focused their energy on learning, growing, and collaborating into increasing responsibility. Today, they not only remain in shelters but are among the innovative leaders in the field, pushing legislative efforts, guiding rescue teams, or running model shelter operations.

Our findings offer insights for employees and employers to ensure meaningful work doesn't turn from soul-stirring to soul-crushing.

### **Sustaining your calling**

**Balance idealism and pragmatism.** Pursuing your calling is exciting, especially if the switch has involved big deliberations or sacrifices. Be careful, however, that your expectations about the work are realistic. Find out as much as you can in advance, and ask current or previous job holders what they found hardest and how they dealt with it. Our study warns that early idealism can usher in burnout when not properly managed.

**Focus on viable goals.** Think of your calling as a marathon, not a sprint. Wanting to 'fix' your organisation, industry or community is a commendable desire but recognise that such big plans cannot be accomplished quickly. Set [S.M.A.R.T. goals](#) to keep yourself on track, motivated, and protected from frustration and defeat.

**Don't isolate yourself.** If you feel "called", you may think of yourself as different or unique. Insidiously, this impulse may prompt you to judge others as less able or committed to the cause, or to assume they just don't understand. This can isolate you from valuable sources of comfort and support. Instead, try to empathise with coworkers: ask yourself, "Is it that they don't care, or are they simply overwhelmed right now and could use a helping hand?" It is also helpful to seek out allies with whom you can speak freely – colleagues, friends, or family – to resolve the wear and tear of your work.

**Have a rich life outside of work.** It may sound counterintuitive, but a vital precaution to remaining in your calling may be to step away regularly. Ensuring that your calling is not your singular focus in life is an important safeguard for your well-being. Set boundaries and don't cross them. Interviewees on the practice path described how important it was for them to have passions away from work: from playing in a community orchestra to taking a boat out on the lake to disconnect and replenish their energies.

### **Supporting your called employees**

Called employees represent an attractive group of candidates. In our study, we found such workers put in unpaid hours, volunteered for the most difficult shifts, were extremely diligent, and brought new ideas to the organisation. However, we also saw many problematic behaviours, from conflict with coworkers to bucking supervision and guidance. We offer some advice on how to mitigate such problems:

**Calibrate candidates' expectations.** Providing a realistic job preview is crucial to helping recruits avoid a sense of defeat when their idealism meets the reality of your work. Highlight the challenges they will likely encounter and during on-boarding share ways others have successfully negotiated them.

**Channel passion into constructive outlets.** Interviewees on all three paths were eager to roll up their sleeves and advance their organisation. Harnessing this energy – matching mentorships, assigning special projects, or soliciting suggestions – can help maximise employees' contributions and prevent their frustration.

**Keep on it.** Our study highlighted that employees experienced multiple 'waves' of challenges, beginning with limits on their own work (e.g. lack of training) and gradually learning about broader organisational constraints (e.g. restrictive legislation). This gradual unfolding of challenges suggests that realistic job previews and initial support do not suffice, and that employees require regular, ongoing support to thrive.



- This blog post is based on the authors' paper [Negotiating the Challenges of a Calling: Emotion and Enacted](#)

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[Sensemaking in Animal Shelter Work](#), *Academy of Management Journal*, October 2017.

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**Kira Schabram** ([schabram@uw.edu](mailto:schabram@uw.edu)) is an assistant professor of organisational behaviour at the Michael G. Foster School of Business, University of Washington. Her research focuses on understanding and mitigating challenges encountered in the pursuit of meaningful work.



**Sally Maitlis** ([sally.maitlis@sbs.ox.ac.uk](mailto:sally.maitlis@sbs.ox.ac.uk)) is a professor of organisational behaviour and leadership at the Saïd Business School, University of Oxford. Her research interests include organisational sensemaking, trauma, compassion and post-traumatic growth at work, studied through narrative and discursive lenses.