

Workers Pursuing a 'Calling' Face a Double-Edged Sword

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Behavioral scientists characterize a calling as a feeling of being drawn to a vocation and engaging in it meaningfully and passionately. A calling is often pro-social in nature; a person feels called to a particular career through a desire to improve their world.

But, having a calling does not automatically make one more employable, according to new studies from behavioral scientists at Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam. While those with a sense of calling may be more engaged in professional development, they show less professional flexibility and thus struggle to find a job that meets their ideals.

Inflexibility hinders employees from branching out into similar occupations and related positions. At a time when job openings are competitive and job markets are changing, compromised flexibility can be self-defeating.

The two studies involved one rather specific population of business professionals, followed by a larger sample of more diverse workers. Both studies, however, showed similar results. The researchers surveyed 1,232 total workers to measure employability and calling. Employability questions included those related to competence, such as “I am confident that I would find another job if I started

searching”; and flexibility, like “What I look for in a job will change in the future.” Calling was measured via responses to questions like “I am passionate about being in my profession”. All the questions were taken from previous research that verified their appropriateness for the survey.

This research is in line with previous investigations into goals and flexibility, which have They may fail to consider alternatives even when the situation demands it, in cases where their goals are too lofty for their skills or jobs are in very short supply. In a real-life example, a 2014 study showed that 50% of airline pilots reported feeling “stuck” or “trapped” in the job related to their calling and struggle to seek opportunities outside their current career. It is possible that having a calling constrained these pilots’ options or their ideas of their options.

This laser focus may apply to goals and focus on many levels. A 2010 paper published in *Psychological Science* showed that those who ruminate depressively are also more focused on short-term goals in the face of distractions (a letter-naming task), and show poor flexibility (switching between goal-oriented tasks in the lab).

Past research has suggested that not living out one’s calling has a negative effect on well-being. A recent study suggested that an “unanswered calling” may have more negative consequences than not having a calling at all. The Vrije Universiteit researchers advise workers to pursue their calling — with some caution. Researching different careers and experimenting with self-concept in different careers may help broaden the range of job opportunities. Workers that can recognize their own obsession or exploitative working conditions will be better able to self-regulate career flexibility. Career counselors may also have a role to play, exposing workers to a variety of career options and identifying individuals with single-track career focuses.

References

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