

# Two Ways to Think About Career Fulfillment

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5 Comments

A good job pays well. A great job fills you with a sense of purpose. A meaningful career is something most of us want, even if it can be hard to create.

What makes a career meaningful? I've been thinking about that, and I've come to two very different possible answers. Although they might seem incompatible, I think seeking the types of opportunities where they overlap is probably the best route to career fulfillment.

## The Economic Perspective

Intuitively, we should feel like our career is meaningful if it is helping others in some way or fulfilling some creative vision. Creative vision is a bit hard to quantify, but luckily helping others isn't. We already have a field of study for pinning it down: economics.

Economics roughly equates the idea of helping others with increasing utility. Utility is a technical word that roughly means happiness or the things people want. If you increase someone's utility you're helping them get more of what they want from life. That sounds pretty close to the original intuition about what should make for a fulfilling career.

A fulfilling career, by this definition, is one that creates a lot of utility for other people. If you spend your life helping others get what they want from life, that seems like a pretty good start.

Then how do you create utility? One way would be charity. If you help people without charging for your services, you'll be increasing their utility straightforwardly. If I give free haircuts, and getting a haircut gives you some utility, then you're that much better off after we interact.

Charity is great, but it can sometimes be unsustainable. After all, I need to eat, sleep and work. I have my own utility to worry about, and money helps me get it.

Luckily you can still create utility, even if you charge for your labour. If I charge \$20 for haircuts now, and a haircut is worth \$40 to you, then I've given you the additional utility of the haircut minus the utility of the money you had to give me. Economists call this consumer surplus, which is calculated in dollars.

My career as a writer produces a fair amount of consumer surplus. Even if I wanted to maximize income and didn't care about helping others, I'd still have to write a lot of free content to attract visitors. That free content creates a surplus for my readers. Second, even when I do charge for products, I have to charge the same price to everyone. Some people value the material a lot more than I charge, so that also creates consumer surplus (although it does leave out the people who value it less than the price).

To summarize: if a meaningful career is one that helps people, and if “helping people” roughly equates to helping them get more of what they want, then you can measure the meaning of your career by the amount of value you generate for other people, minus the value of whatever you charged them.

This quantity isn’t exactly calculable, but a good heuristic might be figuring out how much money you earn, and comparing that to the amount you would be paid if you could extract every cent from the value you provide. The larger this “extra” is, in absolute terms, the more your career helps others, and therefore the more fulfilling it should be.

*Side note: There’s a lot of “all else being equal” assumptions being made here. Rich people have more money, but get less utility from every dollar they spend (so high consumer surplus on luxury goods may yield less utility than services for the impoverished). The perceived value of your services and actual value may differ (addicts may pay a lot for more drugs, but that’s not necessarily helpful). This analysis isn’t without complications, but it’s still a useful simplification for thinking about less extreme cases.*

## **The Psychological Perspective**

The economic perspective appeals to me rationally. It does make some assumptions, but it’s largely free of tricky value judgements. If we were selflessly trying to help others, increasing consumer surplus is at least a pretty good starting point.

However, the economic perspective doesn’t feel very fulfilling. Just because you earn \$100,000, and estimate that you could earn \$300,000 if you were fully compensated for all the value you provide, doesn’t mean you feel more fulfilled than someone who only produces \$20,000 per year.

Money isn’t very fulfilling, and while the money you earn is subtracted in order to get the consumer surplus you create, it should at least be on a similar order of magnitude. Doing a very high paying job, all else being equal, helps more people than doing a low-paid one. Yet this doesn’t feel quite right in terms of fulfillment.

The other perspective for fulfillment is psychological. People feel fulfilled at their jobs when they have autonomy, ability, connection with others and respect. Sometimes jobs with these features are high paying, but sometimes they aren’t.

By this perspective, the way to get a fulfilling job doesn’t need to directly relate with any quantifiable measure of helping people at all. Just find a job that gives you autonomy over your work, uses your skills, allows you to connect with others and is seen as being well-respected in the eyes of others.

## **Reconciling the Two Perspectives**

The advantage of the psychological perspective is that it’s more emotionally fulfilling. It doesn’t require calculations to work. Just work towards building more autonomy, ability, connection or respect in your career and that will do the trick.

The advantage of the economic perspective is that it's a bit more rationally fulfilling. Economic value may not be exactly the same as "helping others" and the money you earn may not be an exact approximation of the economic value you provide, but they provide a starting point for thinking about it.

The other advantage of the economic perspective is that it redeems "boring" jobs that produce a lot of their value indirectly. Many jobs produce tons of economic value, but don't interact directly with the end benefactor. Other jobs produce a ton of value, but the benefits are dispersed very broadly, so you don't see the effect concentrated in one or two individuals.