

Research: Viewing work as a 'calling' may have negative repercussions



M. Teresa Cardador, a professor of labor and employment relations, says viewing work as a calling can be a fulfilling path, but it also can be a rocky road that leads to high sacrifice and personal strain.

http://news.illinois.edu/news/12/0326callings_teresacardador.html

Story

3/26/2012 | Phil Ciciora, Business & Law Editor | 217-333-2177;
pciciora@illinois.edu

CHAMPAIGN, Ill. — Despite the perceived desirability of viewing one's work as a "calling," research from a University of Illinois expert who studies meaningful work and workplace identification shows such an attitude toward work may also have detrimental effects on one's personal and professional relationships.

M. Teresa Cardador, a professor of labor and employment relations, says while viewing work as a calling can be a fulfilling path, it also can be a rocky road that leads to high sacrifice and personal strain.

"Callings are often held up as an idealized orientation toward work," Cardador said. "People who have a calling often have a high sense of passion for their work, and feel that their work is socially valuable. Since it's associated with all of these great things, why wouldn't you want to have a calling orientation toward work? Well, it turns out that there's intriguing evidence that callings might not always be beneficial to workers."

In an article to be published in the Journal of Career Assessment, Cardador and co-author Brianna B. Caza, of Wake Forest University, explore the conditions under which callings might be beneficial or problematic for personal relationships, as well as relationships with co-workers and one's employer.

"In professions that are traditionally associated with a high sense of calling — teaching and nursing, for example — there are high rates of burnout," she said. "We

wondered why that was happening and looked to the literature to try to understand when and why callings can sometimes be a double-edged sword.”

According to the research, individuals are engaged in a healthy pursuit of their calling when they are able to develop and sustain positive and mutually rewarding personal and work relationships, facilitated not only by a strong investment in work but also by what the researchers term a “flexible work identity,” which allows individuals to adapt to natural changes in their profession, their own lives and their organizational environment.

By contrast, having a rigid work identity is often associated with individuals who are engaged in an unhealthy pursuit of callings, which entails forming negative and depleting relationships along with a strong investment in work.

“Without work-identity flexibility, individuals with callings have more difficulty adapting to the natural changes and stressors in their profession, their work environment and their personal lives,” Cardador said.

This means that from a co-worker’s perspective, colleagues who look at work as a calling might alienate themselves from the rest of their office mates.

“This orientation toward work can sometimes be associated with strain in personal relationships at work,” Cardador said. “Individuals engaged in an unhealthy pursuit of their calling might have difficulty trusting or cooperating with co-workers who they perceive as not holding the same high standards that they hold for themselves.”

According to the research, there’s also evidence that having a broad sense of purpose attached to work can lead individuals to feel disillusioned with the organization they work for – either because the organization is not supporting their sense of calling, or because the firm might be undermining the individual’s vision for successfully enacting their calling.

“They might end up viewing the organization with more suspicion or developing a sense of disillusionment over time because the organization is not furthering the high standards and expectations they’ve set for themselves and their work,” Cardador said.

There’s also evidence to suggest that individuals with callings might risk exploitation more than other workers.

“They may be more willing to make personal sacrifices, including working longer hours for less money, which also creates some potential for a strained relationship with their employing organization,” Cardador said.

The researchers argue that because callings are often associated with a heightened sense of personal sacrifice, if that high level of sacrifice is associated with a depleting effect, then it could have a negative spillover into an individual’s personal life.

“If you’re experiencing an energy drain at work, it can have negative effects on your home life,” she said. “So for those engaged in unhealthy pursuit of a calling there may be detrimental effects on their personal relationships at home.”

Why are more people interested in callings today? The notion of callings has been around a long time, but one of the reasons they are gaining more currency is that

work is increasingly central to our lives, even replacing other social institutions in its centrality to our identities, Cardador says.

“People might be more involved in work than in other social institutions outside of work, like church or other community organizations,” she said. “So there’s an argument that it has replaced other institutions as a major source of meaning for some individuals.”

Organizations foster this heavy involvement in work, Cardador says.

“Now you can get your day care at work, you can get your dry-cleaning done there, there’s a gym and a game room and other social functions – all in an effort to get employees to work longer, be more engaged and be more loyal to the company,” she said.

Rather than just viewing work as employment, individuals are more interested in seeking meaning through work, the evidence indicates. Although this can lead to an increased desire to find work that is one’s calling, modern day work may make the meaning and purpose associated with callings hard to sustain.