

What's Your Calling? The Importance of Meaning at Work

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Do you have a job, a career or a calling?

Traditionally, the concept of a 'calling' has been given a religious or spiritual connotation and may seem out of place in the world of business. Recent research, however, has started to explore whether we can indeed have a 'calling' when it comes to our professional lives, and the preliminary findings have been fascinating. One of the first studies to examine this concept was conducted by Amy Wrzesniewski at the University of Michigan (*i*). In this landmark research, she found that people categorized their work in one of three distinct ways:

1) A job

People work primarily for the material/extrinsic rewards associated with their employment (e.g., money, benefits, etc.).

2) A career

People work for the advancement opportunities and/or for the challenge of getting better in their chosen field. This leads to opportunities to be recognized as an organizational/industrial expert/leader.

3) A calling

People work for the intrinsic satisfaction of completing the work. It is the "doing what you love" category. These people report feeling that they were "born to do this." These individuals would continue working in their field even if they won the lottery. Overall, Wrzesniewski and her colleagues found that people who labelled their work as a calling had significantly higher life- and job-satisfaction scores than those who viewed their work as either a career or as a job. Our office wanted to add to this important and emerging literature by spearheading a research project that examined the concept of a 'career calling' within a relatively large sample of respondents, the vast majority of whom were based in Ottawa. These individuals were drawn from public, private, and non-profit sector organizations. We were most interested in seeing whether the individuals in our sample who had a 'calling' experienced the positive benefits espoused by Wrzesniewski and her colleagues in their seminal research.

A snowball sampling approach was used, which resulted in almost 300 individuals filling out our web-based questionnaire. Interestingly, a roughly equal percentage of respondents viewed their work as a job (19.7%) or a calling (14.5%), with the remaining two-thirds (66%) of people falling in the career category. It should also be noted that our results showed that a 'calling orientation' was equally prevalent in each of our demographic groups, including gender, age, and sector (e.g., public, private, and not-for-profit). Results also showed a strong connection between how people categorized their work and their levels of engagement and commitment to their organization.

Impacts on Employee Engagement

Of those who viewed their work as a calling, 76% said they were always engaged at the office; compared to 54% of the careers group who reported feeling the same way. Incredibly, none of the people who saw their work as 'just a job' reported being "always engaged" at the office. In fact, over one-quarter of those in the "job" category were never engaged at their workplaces .

Being more engaged at work often leads to personal benefits for employees, as promotional/bonus opportunities are so often linked to on-the-job performance. Pursuing working for its own rewards (e.g., otherwise termed intrinsic motivation) has also been deemed to be important for our psychological well-being. Therefore, it is in our personal interest to be as engaged as possible within our workplaces.

The benefits of employee engagement are not confined to the employees themselves. Hewitt Associates very recently conducted an engagement survey and found that organizations with high levels of engagement (e.g., defined as when at least 65 percent of employees are engaged) outperformed the total stock market index, a trend which was maintained even under the most challenging of economic conditions. They reported that in 2009, the total shareholder return for these 'engaged' companies was 19 percent higher than industry averages. On the other hand, when looking at companies with low engagement (e.g., less than 40 percent of employees are engaged), their rate of total shareholder return was 44 percent lower than the industry standard.

Watson Wyatt further found that companies with highly engaged employees experienced 26% higher employee productivity; a finding which closely matches our study when comparing the calling and career groups (in our data, it was 22% higher engagement). In addition, they reported that 'engaged' organizations experienced lower risk of turnover and were better suited to attract top talent. Finally, and arguably most important, the report noted that highly engaged employees were twice as likely to be top performers and miss 20% fewer days of work. They also exceed expectations in performance reviews and are more supportive of organizational change initiatives.

Impacts on Commitment

Despite the recent prolonged economic downturn, the 'war for talent' continues as we become an increasingly knowledge-based economy. Thus, finding ways to improve employee commitment is an important priority for today's organizations. Many HR and senior executives are searching for what seems to be an elusive answer to this all-important question.

Table 1: I feel committed to my organization

Committed to the Organization	Job	Career	Calling
Never	40.4%	4.2%	2.4%
Sometimes	43.9%	31.9%	14.3%
Always	15.8%	63.9%	83.3%

Our survey results suggest that the answer may be closer than we think; creating an environment that encourages people to view their work as a calling would be invaluable to employee and organizational well-being. Indeed, the vast majority of people who view their work as a calling reported always feeling committed to their organization versus only 16% of those who view it as a job.

Not surprisingly, having a more committed workforce brings innumerable benefits to an organization. Research has shown that more committed employees contribute

higher levels of innovation/creativity to an organization (ii). Furthermore, additional studies have highlighted that organizational commitment reduces the possibility of leaving (iii), while also increasing intentions to stay with an organization (iv). Thus, higher commitment yields more innovative employees who cost less to the organization, since it lowers recruitment, on-boarding and training costs.

Another outcome for organizations is on-the-job performance. A recent large-scale summary of the existing scientific research, which was extracted from 51 studies conducted over the past 25 years across 14 countries, found that higher levels of commitment were positively related to job performance in sales personnel (v).

Conclusion

Our preliminary survey results provide a compelling argument for the importance of finding/growing a calling at work, as individuals who have a 'calling' report feeling significantly higher levels of engagement and commitment within their organizations. The scientific evidence linking these feelings to positive, tangible, individual, and organizational outcomes is quite extensive.

Clearly, having a 'calling' is not restricted to a religious/spiritual context. Indeed, people who have a calling can work in different types of organizations and can have different personalities and backgrounds. More importantly, our survey results have shown that whether or not one views his or her work as a calling may have tremendous impacts on their levels of engagement and ultimate commitment to the organization for which they work. This suggests that an incredibly powerful question that we should ponder when examining our career path is "What is my calling?" Based on our data, finding an answer to this question will be tremendously beneficial for you, for your organization, and for its customers.

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