



# Work as a Calling:

## Bliss, Burdens, and a Stroll through the Zoo

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# The quest for meaning...

*"I think most of us are looking for a calling, not a job. Most of us, like the assembly line worker, have jobs that are too small for our spirit. Jobs are not big enough for people."*

— Nora Watson, quoted in Working

- What is a calling, and how do people find it?
- What is it like to manage people with a calling? (a “Millennial” challenge)

# Reasons Why We Work

**Job orientation**  
(economic motives)

“[People] will work hard for **money**; they will work harder for **other [people]**. But [people] will work hardest of all when they are **dedicated to a cause.**”

- Harry Emerson  
(1878-1969, theologian)

**Career orientation**  
(esteem, recognition, status motives)

**Calling orientation**  
(ideological, cause-related motives)

# Work as a Calling: Classical Views

- **Ancient Greeks:** work inhibits the sublime pursuits
- **Hebrews:** work is a curse for original sin
- **Early Christians:** work is a route to goodness (wealth lets you help others)
- **Protestant Reformation:** work is noble
  - *All* work is a calling (cobbler & minister both serve God, others)
  - Finding and embracing your calling is a sacred obligation!
- ***Classical definition:*** A calling is work you are destined to do because of God-given gifts and talents, and the opportunities afforded by your station in life.



# Work as a Calling: Contemporary View

- **Modern workplace:** Calling has virtually no religious connection

*The idea of a calling “prowls about in our lives like the ghost of dead religious beliefs.” (Max Weber, 1930)*

- What does a calling mean today?
  - “Find your bliss”
  - “Dream job”
  - “My work feels like play”

# An Example: Zookeepers

- Zookeeping lacks strong economic incentives:
  - Average income is under \$25,000 per year
  - About 63% rely on another source of income (e.g., second job, family)

# An Example: Zookeepers

- Zookeeping lacks strong economic incentives
- It also lacks strong *status* incentives:
  - “[A] nun came by with a school group and the nun said, ‘See the kind of job that you get when you don't finish your education!’ This was within ear shot ...”

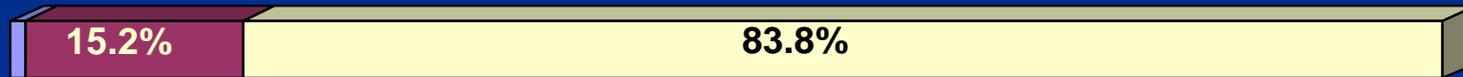
**Note:** About 73% of zookeepers have a bachelor's degree or higher!

# And Yet, Zookeepers Are Highly Committed

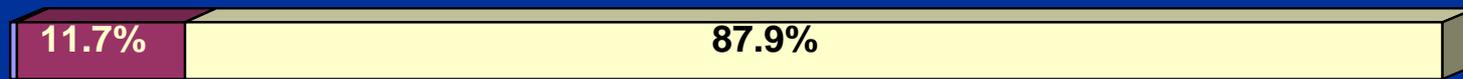
- Nearly half of 1330 keepers surveyed volunteered for at least a year before getting hired.
- Only 6.5% were seriously thinking of leaving the profession.
- Sample quotes from interviews with 24 keepers:

- “There's not much that they could do to get me to quit.”
- “I can't think what would cause me to leave.”
- “I don't think there's anything they could do to me that would make me leave ...”

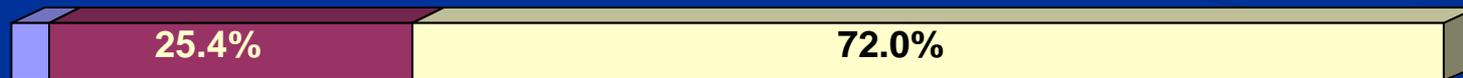
# Why? Calling and Cause



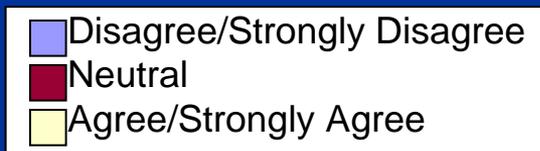
“I have a meaningful job that makes a difference”



“Working with animals feels like my calling in life”



“I'm willing to sacrifice non-work time for animal care & conservation”



# How Do Zookeepers View Calling?

## “Hardwiring”

“It's a calling for me just **because my whole life I've just been interested in animals**. So looking back I should have known at some time I would be working with animals ...”

“It's a **Theme 1: Zookeepers are “hardwired” in a way that suits them for a career working with animals.** Whatever my genetic makeup is I'm geared towards animals.”

“I was **always interested in animals** ever since I was a kid. I drove my mom nuts catching bugs, and worms, and frogs, and salamanders, bringing home anything I could find ... butterflies, stuff like that.”

# How Do Zookeepers View Calling?

## “Destiny”

“I was here two days and I knew **this is what I was meant to do**. There's people that have volunteered here for years and they don't get a job and I worked here a month and a half. So it's kind of like my calling I think.”

“I've always read a lot about [animals] and **it kind of led me here. It was** ...”

**Theme 2: Zookeepers perceive that the hand of fate has brought them inevitably to their work.**

“So things kind of worked out **the way they should** ... I kind of fell into this. Things just worked out real well.”

“I just fell into **the right places**. And I'll admit being where I am right now is 50% pushing me to go in a certain direction and 50% luck. I mean that part time job I got when I first came here, **I had nothing to do with it.**”

# What does calling mean today?

- *Classical definition:* A calling is work you are destined to do because of God-given gifts and talents, and the opportunities afforded by your station in life.
- *Contemporary definition:* A calling is work you feel destined to do because of innate talents, passions, and life opportunities.
  - You don't necessarily "choose" it
  - It isn't always fun

# The Burdens of Calling

## “Moral Duty”

“[I]f I don't stay then who's going to be here to make sure that the animals are taken care of the way I want them to be taken care of? **I'm here for that.**”

“The animals never chose to be here and **it's our responsibility to come in and give them the care that they need** and make sure that they're healthy and happy.”

“[T]here's a quote that I read somewhere that says that we become responsible for that we have obtained. That's kind of how I look at it. We obtained these animals... I mean, they have no other choice... They're stuck here. **So I have to do what's best for them.**”

# The Burdens of Calling

## “Sacrifice”

### Pay

“I’m making \$9 an hour and every day I drive past Subway and on their little leader board out front: ‘Hiring starting at \$9 an hour.’ I make as much as someone at McDonald’s does. **I’m certainly not doing it for the money.**”

“We had at least one person on food stamps. We have a lot of people working two jobs. I know of one keeper here working three jobs to make ends meet.”

### Balance

“When the nightwatch calls me up and says we’ve got a problem in your building, **I’m out of bed and I’m in here.**”

“Working here at the zoo has **cost me a marriage.**”

# What's the Upside of Managing People with a Calling?

Keepers with a stronger sense of “calling”:

- Were less likely to think about quitting
- Are willing to sacrifice for their work
- Were more satisfied with their work
- Were slightly more likely to be seen as “star” performers by zoo management

# And the Downside (or the Complicating Factors)?

Keepers with a stronger sense of “calling”:

- Hold their zoo to a higher moral standard
- Are less flexible about changing their job assignment
- Are more critical of fellow keepers who don't measure up to their standard

“Some people are here just because it's a job. I don't have patience for that. People should be here because they care.”



# The Puzzles

Does passion pay?



**NO!**



# Puzzle 1: Paying the Passionate

The higher the sense of “calling,” the lower the salary (independent of job level)

- ∅ Does management take advantage of passion?
- ∅ Or do keepers use passion to *compensate* for low pay? (cognitive dissonance theory)

“I love the zoo. I would not tell [management] that because they can get a strong hold on you that way. If management knows you love your job, they'll try to do things to undercut your pay.”

# Puzzle 2: Placating the Passionate

- Must management say one thing & do another?



- Some evidence that keepers identified most strongly with their zoo when --
  - They *believed* that the zoo ranked conservation over entertainment
  - Their zoo director *actually* ranked entertainment over conservation

# Some Take Aways

- Having a “calling” fosters loyalty and sacrifice; it can compensate for lack of other incentives
- It also “raises the moral bar” and may make employees less flexible
- Managers must be cautious of unintentionally penalizing callings
- Keeping passionate employees satisfied may require managing mixed messages
- Passionate people especially need direct interaction with beneficiaries