

# Career priorities emphasize passion over financial security during pandemic

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Job instability during the COVID-19 pandemic reshuffled the priorities of millions of workers, who placed greater importance on work passion rather than financial security, according to a newly published University

of Michigan study.

Researchers sought to learn more about what happens to the career priorities of college-educated workers who lost their [jobs](#) or were furloughed during the [pandemic](#).

Contrary to assumptions that people in [economic turmoil](#) will prioritize [financial security](#) above all else, research shows that workers who experienced employment instability as a result of the pandemic were more likely to prioritize finding passion in work than people whose jobs were stable over the pandemic.

This emphasis on passion "suggests that employment instability can spark existential unsettling that leads people to broader senses of meaning-making beyond [financial stability](#)," said Erin Cech, U-M associate professor of sociology and the study's lead author.

Cech and U-M doctoral student Sofia Hiltner compared the priorities of 1,628 U.S. college-educated workers who were laid off or furloughed eight months into the pandemic with those of workers whose jobs remained stable. During this period, vaccinations were not available and the full economic consequences of the pandemic were not yet clear, Cech said.

The study focused on college-educated workers because they have access to safety nets that may allow for greater financial freedom to consider other options, the researchers wrote. In general, they said, financial constraints from employment instability during a crisis may lead many unemployed people to scramble to secure whatever work they can find.

Yet according to the findings, college-educated workers who experienced pandemic-related job instability placed more importance on finding work they were passionate about than jobs with stability or a

high salary. In other words, they prioritized fulfillment and meaning in their career, Cech said. In fact, 46 percent of these respondents rated passion as their top priority in job decision-making, compared to 20 percent who rated salary and 13 percent who rated job security as their top concern.

These patterns existed across gender, parental status, race/ethnicity or class background, she added.

"These results indicate that the economic fallout accompanying the pandemic did not quell the popularity of meaning and fulfillment as guiding principles for career decision making, at least for the college-educated," Cech said. "The experiences of pandemic-related employment [instability](#) may have even amplified it.

"The results provide important context for understanding why we see so many "Help Wanted" signs in the nation right now. They suggest that the Great Resignation may be perpetuated in part by workers seeking a different relationship to paid work—one that provides greater meaning and fulfillment to their lives."

Yet, Cech cautioned that "following your passion" comes with its own risks. As she explains in her recent book, "The Trouble with Passion: How Searching for Fulfillment at Work Fosters Inequality," prioritizing [passion](#) can make workers vulnerable to exploitation by their employers and entrusts a core sense of their identity to turbulent flows of the global economy.

The study was published in *Socius*.

**More information:** Erin A. Cech et al, Unsettled Employment, Reshuffled Priorities? Career Prioritization among College-Educated Workers Facing Employment Instability during COVID-19, *Socius*:

*Sociological Research for a Dynamic World* (2022). [DOI: 10.1177/23780231211068660](https://doi.org/10.1177/23780231211068660)

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