

Paper: Higher pay consistently trumps meaningful work as strongly valued job attribute

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When choosing between meaningful work or a better salary, it's not even

close—most people overwhelmingly prefer higher-paying jobs with low meaningfulness over low-salary jobs with high meaningfulness, says new research from a University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign expert who studies what factors contribute to meaning in life and in work.

Although meaningful work is a strongly valued attribute, it may be less influential than [salary](#) when [prospective employees](#) evaluate hypothetical career opportunities and their current jobs, said Sarah Ward, a professor of business administration at the Gies College of Business.

"Jobseekers often must choose between prioritizing meaningful work or high compensation, and this paper illustrates that people have a stronger relative preference for a [higher salary](#) as opposed to meaningful work," Ward said. "Ideally, you'd want to have a highly compensated, highly meaningful job, right? But sometimes you have to choose between the two, and the vast majority of people would pick higher pay."

Across eight studies spanning more than 4,000 participants, Ward examined the tradeoffs between meaningful work and salary in prospective workers' evaluations of actual and hypothetical jobs.

Although meaningful work and high salaries were both independently perceived as important qualities, when presented with a choice between the two, participants consistently preferred high-salary jobs with low meaningfulness over low-salary jobs with high meaningfulness, according to six of the studies.

Additionally, two studies showed that participants expressed stronger preferences for higher pay versus more meaningful work in their current jobs.

The work is [published](#) in the journal *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*.

"Whether it's [college students](#), people just starting out in their careers or much more experienced workers—the common thread is that people frequently just focus on how much more money they can make, even though having a meaningful job is important to sustaining long-term motivation at work," Ward said.

The study is counter to what some experts predicted about the post-COVID-19 zeal for workers to seek more meaning in their working lives.

"Some of the studies in the paper were conducted before the pandemic, and others were conducted later. But the common denominator was that most people preferred money over highly meaningful work, which may explain why meaningful work is increasingly desired but infrequently experienced," Ward said.

Higher salaries are preferred over meaningful work because people think that earning more money would translate into to a happier, more meaningful personal life, according to the paper.

"Quite obviously, that's an assumption that carries some risk," Ward said. "The broader implications might be that if people had things like guaranteed [health care](#) or a better social safety net, then they might not have to prioritize just taking the highest paying job at the expense of a lower-paid, more meaningful job. They might be able to find a career that's more deeply fulfilling to them, such as teaching or [social work](#), without being concerned about whether they can afford next month's rent."

The results held even for people at higher income levels, Ward said.

"When I looked at workers across different income levels, I found that when you ask people whether they prefer higher pay or more meaningful

work in their current job, even people who already make a lot of money still say they prefer higher pay," she said. "So it's not like the need for more money necessarily gets satiated at high levels. People are constantly striving to make even more. And depending on where people live, they might feel like they can never have enough."

The long-term implications of the research point to how a variety of factors might interfere with the preference for and the pursuit of finding meaningful work.

"The big takeaway from this paper is to think about how meaningful a particular job might be, and how important it will be for you later on in your career, rather than just focusing on bottom-line numbers like salary and that's it," Ward said. "Certainly, it's understandable why people focus on those details. But I think it's so important to figure out what kind of work you'll enjoy doing, and how that work is going to make you feel about your life and about the impact you're going to have on others, because so much of our motivation at work is really about whether that work feels meaningful and purposeful to us."

More information: Sarah Ward, Choosing Money Over Meaningful Work: Examining Relative Job Preferences for High Compensation Versus Meaningful Work, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* (2023). [DOI: 10.1177/01461672231159781](https://doi.org/10.1177/01461672231159781)

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