

Thinking about work as a calling can be meaningful, but there can be unexpected downsides as well

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Many Americans—especially young adults—want to do work that feels

meaningful. Creating meaning for oneself may be especially important as fewer workplaces [provide good pay](#) and benefits to their employees.

[Those who are religious or spiritual](#) often want to connect their faith to their work through a sense of calling. But there can be unexpected downsides for those who do so. People who say they feel "called" report [better work and life satisfaction](#), but they may also be less likely to address [workplace](#) problems or unfair treatment when it arises.

Faith in workplaces

As [scholars who study religion in the workplace](#), we have found that about one in five American workers agree with the statement, "I see my work as a spiritual calling." Most of those who see their work in this way link it to religious sensibilities and practices.

Even though faith can be deeply connected to work, there are few comprehensive studies on this topic. In 2018 and again in 2021, we gathered responses from across the United States on how people see their faith in relation to their work.

Over 15,000 people representing a cross section of American adults filled out our surveys. These respondents included individuals from many different faith traditions and also those who did not follow a religious tradition. We also conducted in-depth interviews with over 250 of our survey-takers.

We found that 53% of Americans who feel called to their work are "very satisfied" with their current job compared with [39% of those who do not feel called](#).

Religious calling in work

The "concept of calling" has roots in Christian history, where people felt called to serve the church. More recently, calling has been extended to a possibility for any person in any job that serves the world.

There is no widely agreed-upon definition of what a modern-day spiritual calling might entail. Business scholars [Mitchell Neubert](#) and [Katie Halbesleben](#) [define it as](#) "a summons from God to approach work with a sense of purpose and a pursuit of excellence in work practices."

Findings that [relate calling to positive workplace outcomes](#) are consistent with previous research that shows viewing work as a calling has a positive effect on worker satisfaction, [mental health](#) and well-being, including [feeling one's talents are being well used](#). As one respondent whom we interviewed told us, "I definitely feel more fulfilled in my work because of my faith, and vice versa. I feel like I'm being a better Christian by doing the work that I do ..."

Yet, less is known about the specifics of how people see their work as a calling. Interviews we conducted found that a sense of calling provides workers with higher purpose in their work, especially when facing work that is either extremely challenging or mundane.

For example, teachers talked about dealing with the bureaucracy of state educational systems, and medical service workers discussed the daily grind of mopping floors and handling bodily waste. However, despite the challenges of their work, these people also acknowledged that they were able to get through the day-to-day aspects of their jobs because they felt spiritually called to their work.

Being called to work has downsides

There is reason to be cautious, however, in touting the advantages of viewing work as a calling without also considering the detrimental

effects that can emerge.

For example, people who feel that God intended them to be in their current workplace or industry might be more disposed to stay in their current role regardless of [unfair treatment](#) or working conditions that take advantage of them, such as being underpaid or overworked. Specifically, in previous work we found that people who do feel called to their work report higher job satisfaction—even when they are experiencing discrimination—than people who do not feel called to their work.

A sense of calling may make people less likely to initiate changes to problematic workplace situations. Indeed, as we found in our research, those who view their work as a calling but also perceive discrimination in the workplace report being less likely to speak up in these situations compared with those who do not attach the same meaning to their work.

This can be especially detrimental for those of racial and religious minority groups who are more likely to experience discrimination at work in the first place. As one woman who works in government told us, "It is difficult being an African American woman in my field, so my faith allows me to step back sometimes and remove myself from the situation."

This also shows how religion may help individuals cope with discrimination at work, but sometimes in a way that could detract from actively seeking change.

The double-edged sword

Experiencing work as a calling can be a double-edged sword. Because those who feel called to their work [have a high level of commitment to their jobs](#), they tend to be more likely to tolerate, endure or ignore work

situations that are unreasonable, inequitable or even discriminatory.

According to organizational ethics scholars [Stuart Bunderson](#) and [Jeffery Thompson](#), [workers who feel called to their jobs are](#) "more likely to see their work as a moral duty, and to sacrifice pay, [personal time](#) and comfort for their work." Thus, it can become easier for organizations to exploit these employees, whether they do so intentionally or unintentionally.

Having and being led by a sense of calling is also linked to financial stability. According to our data, 68% of people who do not feel called to their work agree that "the primary reason" they do the work is to make money. In comparison, 47% of those who experience a sense of calling view making money as their primary reason for working.

The discrepancy could also speak to gender, race and class privileges. In her research on the "passion principle"—the idea that Americans feel the need to follow their passion and choose jobs they find fascinating, intriguing or fulfilling—sociologist [Erin Cech](#) notes how the concept of pursuing paid work that one loves or feels called to can inadvertently foster [structural and cultural inequalities](#). According to Cech, race and class can influence the freedom to choose their work. Not surprisingly, Cech found that white, upper-class men who did not need to worry about money as much enjoyed the most liberty to do so.

Our research also shows that when workers see their job as a spiritual calling, it can blind them to the difficulties others experience at work. They may be less able to empathize with those who feel stuck in their job because of money concerns, are unhappy or unfulfilled in their work, or are struggling to find a job.

Our surveys reveal that 60% of those who view their work as a calling agree that "anyone can find a good job if they try hard enough," whereas

only 49% of those who [do not view their work as a calling concur](#).

Based on these findings, we suggest that leaders in organizations can help cultivate a sense of calling in workers by helping them identify their particular gifts and interests and facilitate their development along these pathways. At the same time, they can and should encourage feedback that can lead to a healthier workplace for everyone.

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