

Can being too enthusiastic about work have its downsides?

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CU Denver's Mijeong Kwon. Credit: University of Colorado Denver

How much do you love your job? Some employees show up every day, profoundly passionate about their company's mission. Others are extrinsically motivated and work primarily because they need to financially support their family or enjoy the social status that comes with a prominent job title.

Both kinds of employees can be highly productive. But intrinsically motivated workers more often alienate their colleagues who work for external rewards, according to a new research study by Mijeong Kwon, Ph.D., assistant professor of management at CU Denver's Business School, Julia Lee Cunningham, Ph.D., (University of Michigan), and Jon M. Jachimowicz, Ph.D., (Harvard Business School).

Judging extrinsically motivated employees as less worthy can have severe consequences for the [work environment](#), retention, and organizational performance, the three professors recently wrote in an *Academy of Management Journal* [article](#) published by the Harvard Business School.

"Employees who love their work more also prioritized helping their more passionate colleagues, whom they consider morally superior," the researchers wrote, summarizing their surveys of more than 1,000 full-time workers from varied industries. "In contrast, employees who worked for other reasons received less help from their more passionate colleagues, making it more difficult for them to advance in their organizations and making them more likely to be excluded from important projects."

Employees' cultural and [socioeconomic backgrounds](#) can influence how they approach career motivations. Managers who place greater value on those with intrinsic [motivation](#) risk creating exclusive environments that don't foster diversity, equity, and inclusion, Kwon said.

For example, Kwon posits how other factors—including parental privilege—may factor into an employee's motivation. "If you're coming from a high socioeconomic status, then you may have had more opportunities to figure out what you want in your career," she said. "As a child, if you tell your parents you want to play a harp or ride a horse, then your parents may be able to afford it."

She said the reverse can also be true. "Whereas if you are coming from a lower socioeconomic status, you might experience some [financial hardship](#)," Kwon said. "And you pursue a job that can earn money for your family. That shapes your future motivation. So that's why I really strongly argue that you shouldn't evaluate people based solely on their motivation."

Kwon advises that managers should instead ignore the urge to assign more prestigious projects to those who are more passionate about the organization's mission than others. "They should be aware that people can work for diverse reasons and those diverse reasons can all contribute to [high performance](#)," she said. "It's best if managers rely on objective performance measures to evaluate them, rather than relying on potentially inaccurate perceptions of why people are working."

In addition, Kwon said those who have altruistic passions for fields such as nonprofits, education, or arts should perhaps scale back their excitement a bit—especially when applying for jobs and entering salary negotiations. The reason why is a phenomenon known as "passion exploitation," which she recently cited on a fundraising industry podcast. "Employers know that people with strong passion are willing to take lower salaries because, for these people, working itself should be the reward," she said.

Kwon hopes to continue researching motivation and plans to focus next on how cultures of individualism and work centrality shape this phenomenon, which she terms the "moralization of intrinsic motivation."

Ultimately, Kwon said that the research shows how managers can overcome biases for motivation, while giving employees information on how to use their passions to fuel fulfilling work. Because, for the record, Kwon said she truly does love teaching and making education work for all at CU Denver. But there are other motives for coming to the office,

too.

"Like a lot of people, I have many different reasons for why I come to work," she said. "I have the intrinsic motivation for research where I genuinely like my research topic. But I have the extrinsic motivation to support my family in my home country of South Korea. And I also have prosocial motivation when I think of my students and I want them to learn a lot and be successful in their own fields."

More information: Mijeong Kwon et al, Discerning Saints: Moralization of Intrinsic Motivation and Selective Prosociality at Work, *Academy of Management Journal* (2023). [DOI: 10.5465/amj.2020.1761](https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2020.1761)

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