

WHEN A JOB IS A CALLING: THE MEANINGS OF MONEY FOR MEANINGFUL WORK

SAMUEL MORTIMER

Saïd Business School, University of Oxford
Park End St, Oxford OX1 1HP

KATHERINE KLEIN

The Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania

INTRODUCTION

Since the tripartite model of work orientations was introduced to the organizational literature (Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin, & Schwartz, 1997), it has captured the imagination of researchers, giving rise to a large and growing literature on why people work (Schabram, Nielsen, & Thompson, 2022). According to the model, there are three ways people experience their work: as a job, where they work for the remuneration and other material benefits that work provides; as a career, where they work for advancement and status within their occupation; and as a calling, where they work for passion and to make a valuable contribution to the world. Of these three, the notion of calling has proved particularly influential; scholars have linked the experience of work as a calling with a number of positive outcomes, ranging from increased organizational and occupational commitment (Cardador, Dane, & Pratt, 2011; Duffy, Dik, & Steger, 2011; Bunderson & Thompson, 2009), to reduced emotional exhaustion and burnout (Rawat & Nadavulakere, 2015; Yoon, Daley, & Curlin, 2017).

There has recently been a move away from seeing the three work orientations as separate, incompatible types (Schabram, Nielsen, & Thompson, 2022), with emerging evidence showing that it is possible to have both a calling and a strong or a weak career orientation (Schabram & Maitlis, 2017; Bloom, Colbert, & Nielsen, 2021; Hagmaier & Abele, 2012). However, the prevailing view remains that a calling is incompatible with a job orientation—that those who work for the money cannot also be truly motivated to change the world for good. As Jiang and Wrzesniewski (2022: 788) put it, “job and calling orientations represent sharply contrasting orientations toward work along the same dimension—strong calling orientations are accompanied by weak job orientations.”

Despite the prominence of this theoretical argument, empirical research examining the extent to which individuals who feel a calling orientation toward their work also feel a job orientation toward their work, valuing and perhaps even prioritizing its financial and other material rewards, is surprisingly limited. Many studies of individuals who feel a strong calling toward their work have focused exclusively on low-paying jobs (e.g., Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Conklin, 2012; Beadle, 2013; Schabram & Maitlis, 2017; Cinque, Nyberg, & Starkey, 2021). Research based on such samples makes it difficult if not impossible to assess whether called workers in higher-paying jobs are motivated and appreciative of the financial rewards of their work, or indifferent as extant theory suggests. Further, recent studies examining the relationship between experiencing a calling and extrinsic work motivation suggest that there may be more variation in the attitudes of called workers toward material benefits than is often assumed, with some called workers having low levels of extrinsic motivation but others having high levels (Zhang & Hirschi, 2021; Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2011). Finally, a burgeoning

literature on the psychology of pay suggests that people view prosocial and financial motivations as incompatible, censuring those who express altruistic motivations while receiving financial rewards (Lin-Healy & Small, 2013; Carlson & Zaki, 2018; Bénabou & Tirole, 2006; Newman & Cain, 2014). This raises the possibility that called workers who also feel a job orientation toward their work may hesitate to express these views. In sum, the extant empirical literature leaves open the possibility that individuals who have a calling orientation toward their work may have a job orientation toward their work too.

We encountered evidence of this while conducting a three-year longitudinal qualitative study of a school system in a large urban district in the USA. The district created a program, SAGE (not its real name), to turn around the performance of several low-performing, high-poverty elementary schools. The program sought to recruit and retain a new team of star teachers and principals to join the project and improve the educational prospects for the children in these communities. Alongside a variety of benefits, the teachers were offered a signing bonus and a significantly increased stipend, as well as an additional bonus based on assessments of their classroom performance.

We found that many teachers expressed both a calling and a job orientation to their work. They were dedicated to their occupation, passionate about the prosocial mission of the program, and prepared to make substantial sacrifices of time and resources for the sake of their students. At the same time, they cared deeply about their pay, describing the extra stipend as a crucial reason that they joined and key to their continued motivation and retention.

Yet we also observed a tension between these two attitudes. These teachers went to lengths to justify accepting the higher pay, and they criticized peers who had joined just for the money. Yet they also saw their callings and compensation as entwined, characterizing their extra stipends as an integral part of their mission at SAGE. In the words of one teacher during the final year of the project: “SAGE means money.” When, after three years, the school district ended the SAGE program in the schools we studied, the teachers saw that as sabotaging the very mission to which they had dedicated themselves.

Our findings challenge the pervasive assumption that the job and calling work orientations are incompatible—falling at opposite ends of a single dimension (Schabram, Nielsen, & Thompson, 2022; Jiang & Wrzesniewski, 2022). They suggest that people can be highly motivated by both the meaningfulness of their work and its material rewards. Yet our findings also reveal that it is not straightforward for workers to have both a strong calling and a high job orientation to their work, instead involving a tension that workers may struggle to resolve.

METHODS

We used a qualitative approach, interviewing participants in four waves throughout a three-year period: at the start of the first year of the SAGE program, and at the end of each school year subsequently. All interviews were recorded and later transcribed verbatim.

In total, we conducted interviews ranging from 40 – 60 minutes in length with 116 teachers. Depending on their availability, when they joined, and whether they remained with the program, each teacher was interviewed between one and four times, leading to a total of 232 interviews over the four waves of data-gathering. Of the teachers we interviewed, 63 (54%) discussed pay in one or more of their interviews, although we never actually asked interviewees to comment on any facet of their compensation. Our longitudinal design meant that we were able

to study the role of money in both the teachers' decision to join the program, and their eventual decision of whether to leave when the extra pay was removed.

Setting

The SAGE program was a three-year project to turn around the performance of struggling state elementary schools in a large urban US school district. The four elementary schools initially selected for the project consistently had some of the lowest levels of student attainment on reading, writing, and mathematics in the district. Approximately 95% of the students were considered economically disadvantaged according to state standards, and between 30–60% spoke English as a second language. In the schools we followed, teacher turnover prior to the program ranged from approximately 10–40%.

A cornerstone of the SAGE program was a significant financial investment in the schools, most of which was dedicated to replacing almost the entire teacher and leadership body (though the highest-performing existing teachers were invited to stay, leaving around 10% of the existing teachers in place). In addition to the standard base pay for teachers in the district of approximately \$60,000, most of the new staff (including the remaining teachers from before) were offered stipends of \$6,000 – \$15,500, depending on experience, and, for the new teachers joining, a signing bonus of \$2000.

Data Analysis

We followed an analysis procedure consistent with grounded theory (Lune & Berg, 2017; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Through an iterative process of identifying emerging themes, comparing them against additional data, reviewing the salient literature, and discussing the emerging themes together as co-authors, we identified twelve categories that seemed to capture the most important and unexpected elements of the teachers' experiences. Pay—a category that included the stipends, signing bonus, and TEA performance pay—emerged as a particularly important factor in teachers' decisions to join the program and their experiences in the program, as well as a source of tension and complexity in the teachers' experiences. Working with a team of research assistants, we split every transcribed interview into individual “thought units” (Currall et al., 1999; Klein, Ziegert, Knight, & Xiao, 2006; Gioia & Sims, 1986). A thought unit is a selection of text—anything from a word to a group of sentences—that expresses a complete, self-standing thought (Gioia, 2003). We then set aside the categories that did not concern pay, our category of interest (Goodstein, Butterfield, & Neale, 2016; Neale, Butterfield, Goodstein, & Tripp, 2020), leaving us with 171 thought units concerning pay.

The first author then began coding each remaining thought unit in an iterative process, constantly comparing emerging categories with existing categories and refining both (Lune & Berg, 2017; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). We noticed during this process that when discussing pay, the teachers regularly used distinct kinds of explanations, which we label ‘rhetorical strategies.’ Eventually we had identified a set of five rhetorical strategies that characterized the majority of the thought units.

FINDINGS

We found evidence that many of the teachers we interviewed had both a high calling orientation and a high job orientation to their work. We will begin by discussing the evidence for this, before discussing the ways teachers reconciled these two orientations, identifying and describing five rhetorical strategies teachers used to explain and justify being motivated by both meaning and money.

Both a Calling Orientation and a Job Orientation

Callings. The majority of the teachers we interviewed joined their schools for the purpose of participating in the SAGE program. Many were willing to make personal sacrifices for the sake of the program, because—in line with Thompson and Bunderson’s (2019) claim that callings involve a sense of both inner demandingness and outer demandingness—they both loved their work and felt needed in their role. As is often the case with called workers, the challenge they faced was part of the appeal (Shea-Van Fossen & Vredenburg, 2014).

Job orientation. Even though the teachers who joined were passionate about helping the students in these four schools, they described themselves as highly motivated by the large stipend they were receiving as well. For some teachers, they saw themselves as being needed by SAGE—corresponding to the ‘outer requiredness’ dimension of callings described by Thompson and Bunderson (2019)—but money was still the deciding factor in their choice to join. Other teachers were primarily attracted by the challenge, seeking to push themselves to make even more of a prosocial difference, but they explained that the money motivated them to go even further. Some teachers joined in part because they had a long connection to the area and felt called to give back; but often they were already teaching in this area, fulfilling their calling, and so it was the money—not their calling—that was the deciding factor in leaving their current school and joining SAGE.

Tension Between a Calling and a Job Orientation

As we analyzed the data, we realized that the teachers seemed to feel a tension between these two work orientations. This led us to ask how the teachers reconciled them: How do they justify being motivated by both the meaning and the money?

Reconciling a Calling Work Orientation with a Job Work Orientation

We identified five rhetorical processes by which our participants reconciled these two work orientations.

Censuring. Among the teachers who joined SAGE, according to our participants, are those who joined for the right reasons (or who have their hearts in the right place) and those who joined *just* for the extra stipends (the wrong kind of people). For our participants, the ‘right reasons’ included doing what is best for the students, producing great results, and being passionate.

Double-barreling. Our participants presented a divide between teachers who are here for the right reasons and those who are here for the wrong reasons—i.e., just for the money. Yet our participants often said that the money was an important factor in choosing to join and stay with the project. So were they here for the wrong reasons or right reasons? The answer suggested by

their comments about pay is that they were not here *just* for the money. Instead, they were here for the money *and* to help the students.

The reasons our participants gave for following both the money and their callings were often because they had other non-negotiable responsibilities in life, such as supporting their families or preparing for retirement. This reflected the complexities of the lived experiences of our participants. Even for people with a calling, there are many things in life for which money is needed, and work is the primary way that people usually raise that money. As well as retirement and supporting their families, our participants mentioned reasons including needing to save up for an expensive health procedure, or to send their children to college.

Equating. Still, even if our participants were participating in SAGE both the money and prosocial ends, they still risk appearing like they traded prosocial ends against financial gain. As the psychology of pay literature shows, people who benefit from a prosocial activity are seen as less altruistic and are often censured by others who doubt their prosocial motivations (Lin-Healy & Small, 2013; Carlson & Zaki, 2018; Newman & Cain, 2014; Kirgios et al., 2020).

This next strategy is how the teachers avoid this implication. According to many of the teachers, their previous schools were not just similar, but often *exactly the same* as their new SAGE schools in dimensions salient to their callings—like the demographics, or the location. This suggests that at no point did they trade money against the social value of their work. Instead, they just faced the opportunity of being paid more for ‘doing what they love’.

Naturalizing. According to this strategy, it is natural that the kind of high performance teachers that SAGE set out to hire would follow the money, since that was how they hired them in the first place. As a result, if the stipends are taken away, or if the money is better elsewhere, that would cause the teachers to leave. This strategy helps teachers escape the implication that they as individuals were involved in choosing to follow the money. Instead, the money caused them to come—and it could cause them to leave again if the stipends are taken away. Characteristic of naturalizing as a rhetorical strategy is that the teachers do not present themselves as the choice-makers in the matter of where they work. Instead, they describe the removal of the stipends by the district as the cause of their departure—an exodus that they predict will lead to the failure of the SAGE project—thereby presenting the district as the locus of agency (and thus responsible) for its failure.

Moralizing. Not only is following the money part of what it means to be a SAGE teacher, but also—according to our participants—an extra stipend is something they deserve, because they work particularly hard and well. Since the SAGE program is all about placing the best teachers (working well) in the challenging environment of turning around the performance of these schools (working hard), higher stipends are a good thing and should be a part of the SAGE project. This rhetorical strategy, which we term ‘moralizing’, allows the teachers to reconcile holding both a calling and job orientation, because it places the onus on their employer to pay more rather than on themselves—the employee—to seek out better paid work.

For our participants, there was an implicit contract involved in being given a stipend because you work so hard and so well. The teachers felt they had to work hard to deserve their stipends. In this way, the meaning of the stipend became entangled with the hard work and excellent performance that all the teachers knew was required for the success of the SAGE project.

DISCUSSION

Given the pervasive assumption in the literature that workers cannot have both a calling and a job orientation, we were surprised to find that many of the teachers we interviewed were highly motivated by both the financial rewards of their work and the fulfillment their work brought them as they pursued their prosocial passions. We were also struck by what we perceived to be a certain defensiveness on teachers' part as they discussed their calling and job orientations. They seemed to feel a need to explain and justify their actions and preferences. The psychology of pay literature helps to explain possible reasons for this apparent defensiveness, consistently finding that people see altruistic and material motivations as incompatible and sometimes censure people who express both (Lin-Healy & Small, 2013; Carlson & Zaki, 2018; Newman & Cain, 2014; Kirgios et al., 2020).

Our qualitative findings challenge the view—common within the callings literature—that the job and calling orientations are at opposite ends of a single dimension (Schabram, Nielsen, & Thompson, 2022; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). Our findings suggest that called workers do not necessarily “prioritize meaningfulness over money” (Schabram, Nielsen, & Thompson, 2022: 17). The SAGE teachers clearly prioritized meaningfulness *and* money. Building on our findings, we recommend a modification to the tripartite model of work orientation. Rather than conceptualizing a job orientation as the antithesis of a calling orientation, we recommend conceptualizing job orientation as a distinct dimension, orthogonal to both the calling and the career dimensions. This gives rise to a three-dimensional model of career orientations: job, career, and calling are three separate dimensions, and workers can score high, moderate, or low on each dimension.

The three-dimensional model we are proposing may help to make sense of the current literature, including prior studies of called workers. For example, we expect the zookeepers interviewed in Bunderson and Thompson's (2009) landmark study, who expressed caring about neither money nor career advancement, to be low in career and job orientations and high in calling. By contrast, the teachers in our study are high in calling and job orientations, but perhaps not high in career, caring about money and fulfillment more than career advancement (since they did not join SAGE to receive a promotion, gain a leadership position, or improve their status, instead staying in the same equivalent positions as in their previous schools).

CONCLUSION

Callings are prevalent in many of the professions most essential to society, including teachers, nurses, firefighters, and entertainers. Called workers leverage their gifts and passions for the sake of a prosocial end (Thompson & Bunderson, 2019). Since pay is one of the main ways organizations attract and motivate workers, as well as typically being workers' main source of livelihood, this means that understanding how called workers experience financial motivations is of crucial importance for management scholars. Our study takes the first step to filling a lacuna in the literature, showing that—despite a pervasive assumption to the contrary—called workers can also be highly motivated by financial rewards. We thus propose a three-dimensional model of work orientation. Workers, we show, may be high, low, or moderate in their calling orientation, their career orientation, *and* their job orientation.

REFERENCES ARE AVAILABLE UPON REQUEST FROM THE AUTHORS