



Is Your Work Your Calling?

Why you should use your existing well-honed muscles to perform at your best

» BY CRAIG DOWDEN, PhD

It is the ultimate dream. Working in a role and for a company you love. Each morning springing out of bed, excited to tackle the challenges that the day brings. Many people routinely wonder how to achieve this type of career bliss.

Plenty of research has shown that disengagement in the workplace has reached epic proportions. Research conducted by the Gallup Organization suggests that one in three people are actively disengaged at the office. These individuals “aren’t just unhappy at work, they’re busy acting out their unhappiness. Every day, these workers undermine what their engaged coworkers accomplish.”

Gallup estimates that actively disengaged employees cost U.S. employers between \$450 billion to \$550 billion each year in lost productivity as they are ‘checked out’ at the office. They show little or no concern for how well the organization is performing and their entire workdays revolve around their breaks.

However, research has started to shed some light on how to combat this disturbing trend. An emerging and powerful line of evidence suggests that utilizing our strengths is an essential element of engagement. Numerous researchers, including the Gallup organization, have discovered that employees who report using their strengths more often in their day-to-day roles experience greater levels of job satisfaction and engagement. What’s more, these individuals are much less likely to leave their employers.

Individuals in the ‘calling’ category feel they were born to do their job. If they won the lottery, there is a very good chance they would show up to work on Monday morning.

Surprisingly this is not profound when you think of athletes. A cross-country runner, who has the strength and muscular endurance to travel great distances, will most likely not excel in weightlifting. And a husky weightlifter will most likely not succeed as a sprightly high jumper. If these athletes play to their strengths, they will be highly successful. If, however, they compete in a discipline where they are not engaging their strongest muscles—their strengths—their satisfaction and results will be dismal.

Capitalizing on your strengths is clearly a competitive advantage, as it brings incredible benefits from an engagement and retention perspective; two key organizational priorities in the ongoing war for talent. Despite this valuable insight, an additional and equally important question becomes how many of our strengths should we leverage to maximize our chances of engagement?

In a recent study, researchers were interested in exploring just that. They took a group of professionals, with an average age of 47, and examined the number of strengths they used each day in their roles. The team then linked this information to see the threshold beyond which this diverse group of professionals, such as doctors, lawyers, teachers, mechanics, office workers, viewed their work as a calling. As the name suggests, viewing our work as a calling

represents the ultimate form of engagement. Individuals in the ‘calling’ category feel they were born to do their job. If they won the lottery, there is a very good chance they would show up to work on Monday morning. Their work brings tremendous benefit to their personal and professional lives.

The team determined that employees who utilized between four and seven strengths were significantly more likely to report positive experiences at the office and view their work as a calling. Research has suggested that individuals who view their work as a calling report significantly higher levels of engagement and also are much more satisfied with their lives in general.

What leaders and workers can do


The key first step in the process is to accurately identify your strengths. There are multiple tools on the market, including the StrengthsFinder 2.0 from Gallup or the VIA Pro from the Values in Action Institute. Both assessments provide a customized report, which highlights your signature strengths.

Once this knowledge has been obtained team members can speak with each other, as well as with their supervisors about how they can capitalize on these natural abilities more often in their work. Teams can break down their roles and responsibilities into smaller component parts and facilitate an open discussion that seeks to match individual strengths with key deliverables. In this way, it provides an opportunity for each team member to maximize the expression of their strengths.

If there are limited opportunities to leverage these strengths at the present time, leaders and teams can start to think about how potential deliverables or responsibilities could be crafted differently to enable this type of process to occur more naturally. Staying focused on providing employees the opportunity to maximize their use of their strengths clearly has the potential to bring considerable ROI to the individual, the team, and the organization.

Concluding thoughts

Maximizing engagement is a key area of concern for organizations today. Previous research has documented that a crucial part of this strategy is facilitating opportunities for employees to use their strengths more often in their daily work.

As this knowledge base has evolved, evidence suggests that the maximum value can be extracted when individuals have the opportunity to leverage multiple strengths through their work. Leaders and employees can now capitalize on this relationship to better design and deliver on their core responsibilities. Taking a more strategic approach to organizing your work and thinking carefully about how to engage your best qualities is a key to loving your job. 

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Craig Dowden Ph.D., focuses on bridging the gap between what science knows and what business does. His firm specializes in the custom design and delivery of evidence-based leadership development programs and services. His main areas of practice include executive and career coaching, workshop facilitation/keynote speaking, employee engagement, and psychometric/personality assessment including 360-feedback.