

The Relationship between Career Calling and Workaholism

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The difference between having workers involved in their work, on the one hand, or too exhausted to contribute, on the other, can be tenuous and compromise work orientation. The positive outcomes of career calling (a deep purpose and meaningfulness in work characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption) to organizations are clear, namely the relationship of career calling with high levels of commitment and engagement. However, the dark side of career calling remains a less explored point.

career calling

workaholism

career orientation

work orientation

1. Introduction

The concept of career calling is not new in the literature, but it has grown exponentially in recent decades. To Choi et al. ([Choi et al. 2020](#)) calling is a cognition process that drives individuals to a deep, meaningful, and fulfilling experience related to their work. The term calling was born out of the idea of divine connection, as a calling from God to fulfill the work ([Dalton 2001](#)). This divine connection disappeared, but the concept of calling remained in the literature with the meaning of a relationship with work marked by a strong internal source that drives towards a certain work ([Wrzesniewski et al. 1997](#)). The concept of career calling has been widely used in the literature ([Chen et al. 2023](#); [Cai et al. 2021](#); [DiRenzo et al. 2022](#); [Parola et al. 2023](#); [Shang et al. 2022](#)) and represents a perfect fit between work and an individual's identity and sense of destiny or inevitability ([Duffy et al. 2014](#); [Pitacho et al. 2019a](#)). In career calling, a professional occupation is an extension of an individual themselves, of their values and interests. If vocation is 'what I love to do', career calling is 'who I am and how I express myself through work' ([Wrzesniewski et al. 1997](#); [Pitacho et al. 2019a](#)).

Work plays a fundamental role in life and individual identity ([Rodrigues et al. 2018](#)) and plays an important role in meeting social and psychological needs ([Morkevičiūtė et al. 2021](#)). Career calling is the deepest way of experiencing work. Research has consistently shown the positive relation between living a career calling and positive outcomes of work, life, and well-being ([Bunderson and Thompson 2009](#)). Employees who live a career calling are often among the happiest, most committed, most satisfied, and most engaged ([Duffy and Dik 2013](#); [Wrzesniewski 2003](#)).

Career calling has received increasing attention from researchers over the past two decades. Extensive research has been placed on career calling as a significant predictor of relevant individual and work outcomes. Usually, career calling seems to be a deep and truly positive experience ([Bloom et al. 2021](#)). It often even looks like

something that was idyllic, with its proponents focusing on its benefits for employees ([Sharma et al. 2022](#)). For example, career calling orientation is positive and significantly related to higher levels of social and psychological well-being ([Mesurado et al. 2022](#)), as well as work engagement ([Zhu et al. 2017](#)).

However, some authors have warned of what they have called the double-edged sword of career calling ([Bunderson and Thompson 2009](#); [Yang and Chen 2020](#); [Hirschi et al. 2019](#)). These authors have demonstrated that career calling does not always have positive consequences. In their study with zookeepers, [Bunderson and Thompson \(2009\)](#) verified that workers who showed high levels of career calling were more predisposed to making personal sacrifices, which included both physical and time sacrifices; they are predisposed to working more and earning less. Consequently, the authors verified that these workers have the most risk of work–family conflict and suffered a higher risk of exploitation as well. The authors [Dik et al. \(2009\)](#) showed that students with high levels of career calling showed more difficulty in accepting career counselling. Additionally, career calling has a positive and significative relation with excessive work investment and workaholism ([Keller et al. 2016](#)). In a study with Chinese nurses, [Yang and Chen \(2020\)](#) showed that career calling has a positive impact on work–life conflict levels.

A disturbing and prominent example of the dark side of career calling is that living a career calling has been regularly associated with workaholism ([Berkelaar and Buzzanell 2015](#); [Dalla Rosa and Vianello 2020](#)). Typically, common sense sees workaholism as something positive because such individuals work more. But it is also an addiction, and like other addictions, it has negative consequences for both individuals and organizations.

Knowledge about the dark side of career calling is scarce, but it is important to understand when and by what means career calling has good or bad consequences for individuals and organizations. The present research looks for explanations for and about this double-edged sword and has two main purposes: first, to deepen the study of the relationship between career calling and workaholism, and second, to test the role of career orientation on the relationship between career calling and workaholism.

| 2. Work Orientation

A large part of a human being's life is spent studying and preparing for professional life, and a third of an adults' time is spent at work ([Sharabi 2017](#)). [Ortiz and Jaimes-Osma \(2012\)](#) argue that suffering, love, and work are the three main areas of action from which individuals derive meaning for their lives. It is through work that people build identity and cultural integration, as well as seek dignity, socioeconomic freedom, status, and social prestige ([Bendassolli and Tateo 2018](#)).

The meaning of work has been a theme of research since at least the 1930s. However, the concept of career calling emerges later from the literature with the work of sociologists [Bellah et al. \(1985\)](#). These authors, in their work entitled *Habits of the Heart*, introduced the concept of work orientation into the literature. Work orientation addresses the purpose that work serves in an individual's life as a way of contributing meaning ([Willner et al. 2020](#)). This construct reflects different motivations and relationships with work, ranging from a more intrinsic to a more instrumental perspective ([Jaffery and Abid 2020](#)). This concept has been defined as the fundamental purpose

that paid work assumes in one's life and a reflection on how one finds meaning in the work context ([Fossen and Vredenburg 2014](#)). [Bellah et al. \(1985\)](#) proposed a three-dimensional model of work orientation. In other words, the authors developed a model where they postulate the existence of three distinct ways of attributing meaning to work. [Bellah et al. \(1985\)](#) argue there are three ways of conceiving the relationship with work, job orientation, career orientation, and career calling orientation. The three dimensions of this theoretical model were later empirically tested and corroborated ([Wrzesniewski et al. 1997](#)). Each of these orientations guides individuals towards their basic goals, understanding the individuals' beliefs about the role of work in their lives, and reflects their feelings and behaviors regarding the organizational context ([Wrzesniewski 2003](#)).

While the literature has been consensual in definitions of job and career orientation, the same is not true of career calling itself ([Dobrow 2004](#)). People who see their work as a job seek to derive only material benefits from it and look at their work as an instrumental activity. That is, they do not see work as an end but as a means or instrument to receive financial resources that allow them to enjoy their leisure time ([Wrzesniewski et al. 1997](#)). For individuals with job orientation, the relationship with the worker is superficial and merely instrumental. Working is just a way to make money and make a living. All major and deepest interests are not expressed through work ([Schabram et al. 2022](#)).

On the other hand, the people who see their work as a career invest more deeply in their professional life or professional career, and they want to achieve high levels of recognition and self-esteem. These people look for success; such success includes advances in the organizational structure or career growth, recognition, social status, and power ([Jaffery and Abid 2020](#); [Fossen and Vredenburg 2014](#); [Dobrow 2004](#)). That is, in career orientation, the deepest personal investment in work arises not from monetary gains or personal fulfillment but rather from the motivation for career progression and hierarchical ascension, marked by status and the ambition for power ([Schabram et al. 2022](#)).

Finally, career calling has the least consensual definition but is the work orientation that has gleaned the most interest from researchers. Initially, in classic definitions, career calling was related to religion and seen as a divine appeal ([Dalton 2001](#)). Later, it appears in the literature with the neoclassic definition. Career calling gave up its divine character, but its source is still external and focuses instead on sense of mission or destiny and prosocial desire to positively impact society or community ([Dik and Shimizu 2019](#)). [Wrzesniewski et al. \(1997, p. 22\)](#) appeal to external sources of career calling and prosocial motivation. These authors argue that a work that is seen as a career calling is a "work that people feel called to do [that] is usually seen as socially valuable—an end in itself—involving activities that may, but need not be, pleasurable ... and think that it contributes to making the world a better place". Finally, in modern perspectives, some authors have reformulated the previous definitions focusing on passion and internal, personal, and deep motivation. From this perspective, the source of career calling is internal and can be illustrated, for example, by the definition of [Dobrow and Tosti-Kharas \(2011, p. 1005\)](#) that defines career calling as "a consuming, meaningful passion people experience toward a domain". Recently, in a critical review of the literature, the authors consider that in the calling dimension, work constitutes a practical ideal of activity and is felt to be morally inseparable from life. For those who live with work as a career calling, do not work

for financial gain or career progression but rather for the fulfillment that the work brings them ([Schabram et al. 2022](#)).

Based on the definitions of the different dimensions of work orientation, it can be considered that “calling versus job orientations are related to, yet conceptually different from, ostensibly similar constructs—especially intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation and passion” ([Cho and Jiang 2022, p. 1355](#)). These two dimensions of work orientation may be antagonistic, but career orientation appears as a possible orthogonal dimension. In other words, it is possible to combine career orientation with the remaining two dimensions. This conjunction of orientations has been discussed in the literature and presented as hybrid work orientation profiles ([Schabram et al. 2022](#); [Pitacho et al. 2021](#)). Despite the enormous number of research articles that address career calling, the number of works that address work orientation capturing the three dimensions is scarce ([Pitacho et al. 2019b](#)). Furthermore, the study of the dynamics of work orientation and hybrid profiles is incipient, meaning more information is needed on the results of this type of mixed profile. Some articles point theoretically to their existence ([Schabram et al. 2022](#); [Fossen and Vredenburg 2014](#); [Pitacho et al. 2019b](#)) and a work that empirically proved the existence of these profiles ([Pitacho et al. 2021](#)).

Regardless of the definition of career calling, the literature has predominantly “paint[ed] a rosy picture” of career calling ([Bunderson and Thompson 2009, p. 427](#)). This picture has shown positive outcomes for those who live a career calling. For example, career calling has been associated with high levels of life and work satisfaction ([Wrzesniewski et al. 1997](#)) and enhanced overall health and health satisfaction ([Wrzesniewski et al. 1997](#); [Conway et al. 2015](#)). Living a career calling has been associated with increased experiential work-related well-being, too ([Duffy et al. 2012](#)). Additionally, [Dobrow and Tosti-Kharas \(2011\)](#) contributed to the positive perception of career calling when they verified that career calling was associated with high levels of work engagement. Moreover, living a career calling has been associated with positive career outcomes. For example, [Chen et al. \(2018\)](#) verified that people who see their work as a career calling self-report more career success, and [Kim et al. \(2018\)](#) revealed that career calling was associated with self-reported high work performance.

However, despite the evident positive perception of living a career calling, it has a dark side, and negative outcomes of living a career calling have been gaining more attention from scholars. Understanding the potential dangers of a career calling contributes to a more balanced theoretical understanding of this construct ([Duffy et al. 2018](#)).

3. Workaholism

The labor market is very unstable, and organizations are increasingly differentiating their employees according to their performance and their effective contribution. Employees feel increasingly compelled to work hard to stand out favorably from their peers. However, the experience of this competitive climate seems to have both advantages and disadvantages: on the one hand, it is associated with excellent performance, but on the other, with work addiction ([Morkevičiūtė and Endriulaitienė 2021a](#); [Keller et al. 2016](#)). Hard-working or workaholic behavior is commonly valued in this organizational environment and highly appreciated by employers ([Molino et al. 2016](#)). The

workaholic is often seen as a more competitive, more productive, effective person who lives for the company and is always in search of work-related objectives, reaching high levels of professional performance ([Van Wijhe et al. 2014](#)). However, like any other addiction, workaholism can lead to negative consequences for individuals and organizations ([Choi et al. 2020](#); [Van Beek et al. 2012](#)).

Workaholism was initially defined as a need or uncontrollable compulsion to work incessantly ([Oates 1971](#)). More recently, [Clark et al. \(2020\)](#) defined workaholism as an addiction to work. Although it is not a recent concept, the definition of workaholism is far from being consensual. The ambiguity of this concept begins in its components or dimensions ([Clark et al. 2020](#)). [Ng et al. \(2007\)](#) argue that there are three components or dimensions: the behavioral, the cognitive, and the affective. The behavioral dimension corresponds to the time the individual dedicates to work. The cognitive dimension corresponds to the obsession with work being seen as an uncontrollable work involvement and to the presence of constant and invasive thoughts about work. Finally, the affective dimension is the most controversial of all. This dimension matches both positive or negative emotions related to work, depending on whether they are related to a source of satisfaction and pleasure or to feelings such as fear, guilt, and depression ([Shkoler et al. 2017](#)). [Ng et al. \(2007\)](#) point out that workaholics take pleasure in their work, arguing that the real enjoyment they take from the activity comes from the acts of working themselves and not necessarily from the real tasks they perform. On the other hand, [Van Wijhe et al. \(2014\)](#) argue that workaholics continue to work incessantly not because they are enjoying the tasks or the work itself, but because they constantly feel that they have not done enough. In addition, when they are not working, they remain focused on work tasks, duties, or responsibilities, thinking about work continuously, even feeling guilt or anxiety. Additionally, such workaholism cannot be seen as a way of coping with heavy workloads. The excess of time and energy that a person with this behavior spends in their work is not justified by monetary needs or by the competitive environment; it is not just an external driver at play. The person with this behavior is internally motivated, as there is an internal force compelling the person to work, like a compulsion ([Morkevičiūtė and Endriulaitienė 2021a](#)).

[Spence and Robbins \(1992\)](#) presented a classic model of workaholism that is still one of the most used in the literature today. The authors introduced a triad into the workaholism literature: work involvement, feeling driven to work, and enjoyment in work. Work involvement represents a generalized attitude of psychological involvement with work ([McMillan et al. 2002](#)). It is the degree to which an individual is constructive in the use of their time at work and how committed the individual is to being productive at work ([Erkmen et al. 2010](#)). Enjoyment represents the level of pleasure and fun that individuals derive from their work ([McMillan et al. 2002](#)). And drive represents a compulsion to work, an acute need to be active, which causes anguish and guilt when the individual leaves work ([Spence and Robbins 1992](#)).

A workaholic or work addict can be identified as someone with a high involvement with work and a high drive for work. They have high performance and compulsion that represent a great deal of time dedicated to work but with little pleasure taken from work itself.

Combining these three dimensions of workaholism through cluster analysis identified three workaholic patterns (work addicts, work enthusiasts, enthusiastic addicts) and three nonworkaholic patterns (relaxed, disenchanted,

unengaged). Work Addicts are represented by high work involvement, high inner drive to work, and low enjoyment. In this pattern of workaholism, individuals work intensely and compulsively but do not derive pleasure or fun from their activity. Work addiction is the most serious and dangerous form of workaholism. Work enthusiasts present high work involvement and low inner drive but high enjoyment. In this pattern of workaholism, individuals feel deeply involved in work activities and derive pleasure and fun. However, they do not feel a compulsion and do not feel distressed or guilty when they are not working. Without compulsive behavior, there is a positive cognition and feeling towards work. In their turn, enthusiastic addicts are represented by high values in three dimensions: work involvement, inner drive to work, and work enjoyment. This is an ambiguous pattern of workaholism. The individual becomes deeply involved in their work and derives pleasure and fun from their activity, but they behave compulsively due to the acute need to be active and feels guilty when they are not working. Despite obtaining pleasure from their activity, compulsion is present, which is a relevant factor in characterizing addiction and its harmfulness for individuals. Relaxed workers manifest high enjoyment but low work involvement and low inner drive to work. Unengaged workers present low values in all three dimensions. Finally, disenchanted workers feel high inner drives to work and low work involvement and enjoyment. For this study, the workaholism model of [Spence and Robbins \(1992\)](#) was adopted.

4. Career Calling, Workaholism, and the Mediating Role of Career Orientation

A person with career calling orientation is commonly viewed as a hard worker and seems to achieve excellent individual and organizational excellent. But where is the thin line between career calling and workaholic behavior that can have bad results for organizations and oneself?

Despite the positive consequences of living a career calling being ostensibly described and portrayed in the current literature, some authors demonstrate that it can increase the propensity for workaholism ([Berkelaar and Buzzanell 2015](#); [Clinton et al. 2017](#); [Dalla Rosa and Vianello 2020](#); [Keller et al. 2016](#)). Despite the reduced amount of literature showing the dark side of career calling, some studies have reported in a supported way the relationship between career calling and workaholism.

The relationship between career calling and workaholism can be complex and multidimensional. On one hand, career calling refers to a strong sense of purpose and meaning that an individual derives from their work. It is characterized by a deep connection to chosen profession or occupation, a strong desire to contribute and make a difference, and a sense of fulfillment and personal identity linked to work ([Wrzesniewski et al. 1997](#)). On the other hand, workaholism refers to an excessive and uncontrollable need to work, often resulting in neglect of other vital areas of life such as relationships, self-care, and leisure activities. Workaholics tend to define their self-worth through work achievements and may feel a compulsive need to remain constantly busy and engaged in work-related activities to the point of exhaustion ([Spence and Robbins 1992](#)). Like workaholism, career calling has been associated with working long hours and with personal sacrifices that take away from nonwork domains ([Bunderson and Thompson 2009](#); [Duffy and Dik 2013](#); [Clinton et al. 2017](#)). In an emblematic study with zookeepers, [Bunderson and Thompson \(2009\)](#) verified that because of their career calling that translates into there being a strong passion

for their work, zookeepers work more hours, seem not to value extrinsic rewards, and present a high risk of being exploited by abusive employers. In another recent study, career calling not only motivated people to work longer hours but limited their psychological detachment from work in the evenings and when they were away from the workplace. The results of this are that sleep quality and morning vigor are reduced ([Clinton et al. 2017](#)). This means that intense career calling can limit the process of recovering work experiences. Looking at the constructs of career calling and workaholism, it is intuitive to perceive the relationship between career calling and work involvement and enjoyment ([Pitacho et al. 2018](#)) that characterizes workaholism, or more precisely, the work enthusiast pattern. However, the relationship between career calling and drive, the compulsive dimension of workaholism, has not yet been explained or found.

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