

Understanding Work Passion: An Important Element for Career Success and Improved Quality of Life

Stephen C. Bushardt
The University of Texas at Tyler

Marilyn Young
The University of Texas at Tyler

Brent D. Beal
The University of Texas at Tyler

A dualistic model of both harmonious and obsessive passion suggests that work passion may have both positive and negative effects toward career success. We explore the potentially negative effects, the "dark side" of work passion, and address warning signs, such as burnout and work-life balance issues. A continuum of obsessive work passion identifies the nature of this potential problem, which may be a roadblock to one's career success and quality of life. To counterbalance this effect, feedback from significant others, self-observation, and learning critical thinking and self-reflection skills are possible tools for human resource managers.

INTRODUCTION

The need to focus on employees' long-term career development has assumed an even greater importance for human resource management. The lingering effects of a slow recovery, high unemployment rates, workforce dropouts, and slow wage growth suggest riding the tide of prosperity is not what it used to be and is not likely to return (Giuliano & Spilimbergo, 2009). Global competition and increasingly open markets place an even greater demand on individuals to focus on career development (Bushardt & Larriviere, 2009). Since employees are working to an older age, long-term career strategies are necessary to ensure successful careers. Therefore, researchers have suggested that understanding work passion is a key component for career success and overall improvement in quality of life.

WORK PASSION AND CAREER SUCCESS

Such common expressions are, "Find your passion and just pursue it" (Pauley, 2013) and "Discover what you are passionate about and just do it," emerged as a rallying cry in the seventies and has risen to the level of an iconic truth among many (Klein, n.d.). Warren Buffet and Bill Gates have offered this advice and are a manifestation of how pursuing one's passion leads to success (Anderson, 2013).

Speakers at graduation ceremonies through the years have delivered this message in various ways. Whether one collects a paycheck or is in business for themselves, the basic message is that it is important to be passionate about the work (Bushardt, Glascoff, & Doty, 2010; Klein, n.d.).

Although encouragement to be passionate about one's work may be perceived as sound career advice, some qualifications may be necessary. In pursuing one's passion, one must create economic value that is valued by society (Newport, 2015). When an employee is passionate about an activity that does not create outcomes that are valued by society, the work may be a rewarding hobby, but not a job. For many individuals, the responsibility of supporting a family makes the possibility of pursuing work passion a luxury they cannot afford. For many, it is important to learn how to carry one's passion as the career unfolds (Robinson, 2009). This is particularly relevant in today's job market, given that many people currently entering the workforce will change both jobs and careers a number of times before retirement.

While most experts agree that work passion is a key component of career success, emerging research suggests that the effects of work passion may not be uniformly positive. In other words, being passionate about work may enhance one's career but also have a number of negative side effects. In addition to the practical realities of earning a living, it seems important for counselors, supervisors, and others to examine some of these negative outcomes and provide career counseling to employees. Consequently, exploring the "dark side" of work passion may be counterintuitive, given the consensus that employees should be passionate about work. Nonetheless, an examination appears necessary and may yield important insights. For example, recent research on work passion has distinguished between harmonious passion and obsessive passion. This dualistic view of work passion has been validated in field studies and is raising new questions about the relationship between work passion and career success (Astakhova, 2014; Vallerand, Paquet, Phillippe & Charest, 2010; Vallerand & Houliort, 2003).

DUALISTIC MODEL OF PASSION

The dualistic model of passion identifies harmonious passion as fostering greater work/life balance. While highly engaged in work activities, these individuals are able to engage successfully in activities off the job with family, friends, and outside interests. In addition, they reported high job satisfaction and less conflict in their personal lives and are able to disengage from work activities and focus on off-the-job activities. In addition, they reported less job burnout than individuals with obsessive passion did. Researchers have found harmonious work passion helps to build a successful long-term career (Mageau et al., 2009; Vallerand et al., 2007; Vallerand & Houliort, 2003).

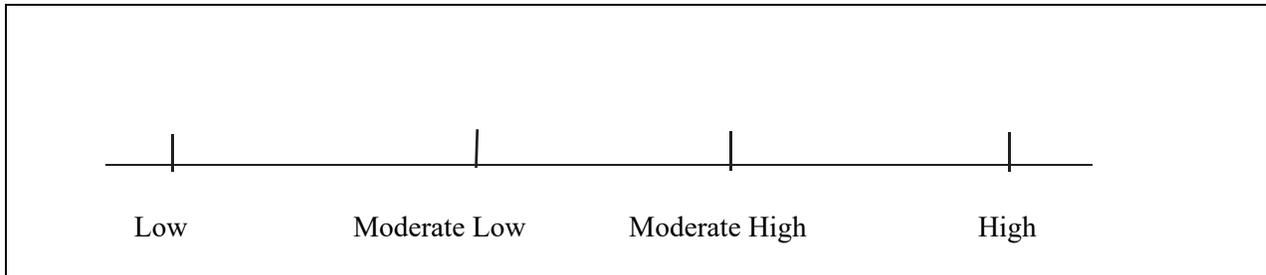
Individuals with obsessive work passion may also be highly engaged in work activities and may report high levels of job satisfaction but often cannot disengage from work. They carry work-related issues into their time away from the job and may have difficulty engaging with family and friends, as well as exhibiting thinking that is more rigid. While away from work, they devote considerable thought processes in reevaluating work activities and thus experience turmoil while reconsidering work-related decisions. Consequently, they have work/life balance issues that may result in both career burnout and mental exhaustion. While individuals are often regarded as successful in their careers, they may withdraw and cut their careers short over time. Obsessive passion may be a career killer and even considered a "dark side" of work passion (Burke, Astakhova & Hang, 2014; Vallerand, et al., 2010; Zigarmi, Nimon, Houson, Witt & Diehl, 2009).

From a coaching perspective, it is difficult to identify individuals with obsessive passion as opposed to harmonious passion, as they tend to be productive, highly engaged in work activities, and have a high degree of job satisfaction (Kaufman, 2011; Boyatzis, McKee, & Goleman, 2002). However, organizations may eventually become aware of employees with excessive work passion when they announce they are leaving due to burnout and mental exhaustion. (Burke, Astakhova, & Hang, 2014; Vallerand, Paquet, Phillippe & Charest, 2010; Zigarmi, Nimon, Houson, Witt & Diehl, 2009). Therefore, while building a successful career, individuals need to take responsibility for monitoring an obsessive passion and take steps to resolve this potential career disabler.

A CONTINUUM OF OBSESSIVE WORK PASSION

Current research has effectively validated the dualistic model of passion in different professions and in multiple cross-cultural studies from Russia, China, Canada and France (Burke, Astakhova & Hang, 2014; Vallerand et. al., 2010). A richer understanding of the impact of work passion on careers is to examine both dimensions on a continuum from low to high harmonious passion and another continuum from low to high on obsessive passion. The obsessive passion continuum is illustrated in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1
CONTINUUM OF OBSESSIVE PASSION



Source: Bushardt, S.C., Beal, B.D., Young, M. & Kholsa, S. "Professional Nurses and the Dark Side of Passion," *Nursing Management*, January, 2016.

The current dualistic model uses nominal data and conceals information that is useful in developing an intervention strategy for addressing obsessive work passion. For example, an employee at the lower end of the obsessive work passion continuum is likely to require a very different intervention than an individual at the high end to ensure successful career development. Astakhova (2014) examined obsessive work passion on a continuum in examining work passion and organizational citizenship behavior.

WARNING SIGNS OF OBSESSIVE WORK PASSION

While it is easy to identify individuals who have work passion by observing their level of engagement and commitment to work, it may be difficult to differentiate individuals with harmonious passion and obsessive passion within the work setting, as they both report high levels of job satisfaction. The issues with obsessive passion tend to occur outside the work setting long before the employee's career is impacted. Burke et al. (2008) suggested that there should not be a dichotomy between personal and career themes in counseling, as they tend to impact each other requiring an examination of both which is necessary to identify obsessive work passion.

One method in which individuals may assess work passion is through a questionnaire (Vallerand & Houliort, 2003). Early signs of obsessive passion may often manifest themselves in relationships and work/life balance issues. For example, many individuals have successful careers but go through several marriages. In addition, relationships with their children are often strained, and the children complain that the individual was "just not there for them." Individuals with obsessive work passion reported conflict in their relationships outside of work and rigid thinking (Greenhaus, Collins & Shaw, 2003; Martins, Eddleston & Veiga, 2002). If one is enjoying a successful career but has no outside interests, obsessive work passion may be present. In fact, life outside work may suffer, and job burnout and an early end to the career may occur (Carvalho & Chanbel, 2015).

People who are passionate about their work often talk about work-related activities away from the job. This is normal and commonly seen in both types of passion. However, employees with obsessive passion tend to reprocess work activities when they are away from the organization by reevaluating work activities and experience turmoil while reconsidering work-related decisions. In addition, those

employees with obsessive passion tend to engage in more risky behaviors (Burke & Fiksenbaum, 2009; Burke, 2008).

MANAGING OBSESSIVE WORK PASSION

A goal for individuals with obsessive passion is to “let go” when they are off the job (Forest, Mageau, Sarrazin & Morin, 2010). However, the challenge in changing an ingrained behavioral pattern may be difficult depending on how extreme the obsessive passion is on the continuum. Kaufman (2011) offered the following suggestions to alter obsessive work passion: “Schedule real breaks, don’t bring work home, change your thought patterns when you work, and commit to a new hobby.” While these suggestions may be effective for an individual at the low end of obsessive passion, it may be less for those possessing high levels of obsessive work passion. In fact, a more appropriate strategy for these employees may be some type of therapy.

While those employees with both harmonious and obsessive work passion display their passion through engagement, commitment, and creativity, individuals with harmonious passion couple their passion using rational cognitive processes. In other words, they have strong critical thinking skills that allow them to make rational choices between work/life issues. Gibran (1923) in *The Prophet* addressed passion by suggesting, “Your reason and your passion are the rudder and the sails of your seafaring soul. If either your sails or you rudder be broken, you can but toss and drift, or else be held at a standstill in mid-seas. For reason, ruling alone is a force confining, and passion, unattended, is a flame that burns to its own destruction.” Therefore, rational thought and passion are intertwined with career success similar to a double helix.

Individuals with obsessive work passion make poorer decisions in work/life balance issues, and their passion often becomes the flame of career destructions (Burke & Fiksenbaum, 2009; Burke, 2008; Sturgis & Guest, 2004; Martins, Eddleston & Veiga, 2002). While a good counselor or supervisor may help the individual examine work passion in a rational process, other sources are available, such as the Center for Critical Thinking. This resource offers extensive resources, including conferences, training programs, and workshops to assist in the development of reasoning skills. Moreover, if critical thinking skills are enhanced to facilitate harmonious passion, an improved work/life balance could occur.

ASSESSING WORK PASSION

While the constructs of both harmonious and obsessive work passion were validated in various research studies, the challenge remains for an employee to be able to assess his/her own obsessive passion. However, this may be difficult, since “As obsessive passion results from a controlled internalization of the activity into one’s identity” (Vallerand et al., 2003). Assessing work passion may be measured with the Passion Scale, which is composed of two subscales to assess both harmonious and obsessive passion. While this assessment instrument has been validated in many research studies, it may not be as practical for personal assessment focused on self-improvement and career development. Individuals are more likely to rely on self-observation and feedback from individuals who are closely integrated in their lives and have an opportunity to observe behaviors that emanate from their internal cognitive state. Surveying others has been suggested as a tool for human resource counselors and may be used to assess obsessive passion (Smith, n.d).

While focusing on career success, an employee may utilize significant others, as well as close friends and family, who may be very capable of providing feedback regarding one’s obsessive work behavior. In order to be effective, employees who provide feedback should understand the differences between the two types of work passion. In addition, those providing feedback should know the warning signs of obsessive work passion. This may be difficult, since the closeness of the relationship may tend to cloud the objectivity of assessment. Significant others, family, and friends are those individuals who are most likely to observe such obsessive work passion that ultimately may derail a career.

Career counselors within the Human Resource Department and mentors may be valuable in identifying obsessive work passion when available through the organization or through independent services. These support individuals may bring a higher level of objectivity than friends or family. In addition, they are highly skilled at identifying work/life imbalances that often result from obsessive work passion. (Rochlen, Milburn & Hill, 2004). Moreover, career counselors are often involved in the early stages of career development and facilitate a better understanding of the ill effects of negative work passion by providing early education as a means of prevention.

An important component of career assessment and a means to identify obsessive work passion is self-reflection. Reflection is a cognitive process that individuals use to assess their life and shed light on work/life balance issues. An honest self-examination is likely to be the single most effective process for identifying obsessive work passion. Self-reflection is a skill set that may be used in career assessment and as a means to examine obsessive work passion. If begun early in one's career, the skills may develop, and issues of work/life balance may be addressed long before possible career burnout. On the other hand, before receiving the benefits from reflection, one needs to understand the dualist model of passion.

CONCLUSION

The construct of work passion as a dualistic model of harmonious work and obsessive work passion is an emerging concept in the career development literature. While research studies have validated the constructs, additional research is needed to address obsessive passion as a continuum as Astakhova (2014) demonstrated. More methods are needed for the early identification of obsessive work passion, as the destruction to one's career is often developed over time with early manifestations becoming apparent in work/life balance issues. While several techniques for addressing obsessive passion have been presented, more extensive research that may validate those approaches and propose exploratory studies on alternate treatments. Any proposed action needs to recognize the nature of the continuum, as intervention strategies are likely influenced by the level of obsessive work passion.

While gender differences and work passion have been explored in various cultures, the results have been mixed (Burke, Astakhova & Hang, 2014; Vallerand, Paquest, Phillippe & Charest, 2010). Although these studies involved workers in China, Russia, France, and Canada, research efforts on gender difference in the U.S. should be explored. In addition, studies are needed which assess professions and careers, since they are important in affecting obsessive work passion in career development and job satisfaction.

The literature on obsessive work passion suggests that personality may be a component in developing obsessive work passion. An examination of personality and obsessive work passion could provide insight for early intervention, as well as a better understanding of the appropriate intervention technique. Using the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) personality inventory, different levels of obsessive work passion could enhance the understanding and dynamics of work passion. Additional understanding of intervention techniques that are dependent on the level of obsessive work passion need to be examined as part of successful career success and job satisfaction. While current research has provided insights on this potential career roadblock, further investigation is needed.

While work passion is considered a critical component of a successful career and job satisfaction, current research using the dualistic model suggests a "dark side" to work passion that may be destructive to careers. While harmonious work passion is consistent with career success, obsessive work passion may be a destructive force for many careers by eroding life/work balance. Obsessive work passion has been demonstrated to affect life/work balance negatively by leading to job burnout, mental exhaustion, rigid thinking, and interpersonal relationship conflicts. The corrosive effects of obsessive work passion may erode relationships, family involvement, and work/life balance. Such a situation may foster poor mental health that may affect career success and job satisfaction over time by being a destructive force.

Recent research has validated the construct of a dualistic model of work passion. However, obsessive work passion on a continuum with differing degrees would be a contribution to the literature in that the current dualistic model may mask these differences. Since individuals with obsessive passion are highly

engaged and report high levels of job satisfaction, it is difficult to identify these individuals in the work setting. This paper has suggested the use of critical thinking and self-reflection as diagnostic tools; however, other approaches may be effective as well. Counselors, mentors, supervisors, and others may be valuable resources in identifying work/life imbalances that result from obsessive passion.

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