

## 5 drawbacks to following your passion

[Erin A. Cech](#), University of Michigan

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<sup>1</sup> After earning bachelor's degrees in engineering and **sociology**, I was determined to do what I love. I headed straight to graduate school to investigate the social problems that frightened and fascinated me.

<sup>2</sup> For almost a decade, I told everyone I encountered – students, cousins, baristas at the coffee shop I frequented – that they should do the same. “Follow your passion,” I counseled. “You can figure out the employment stuff later.”

<sup>3</sup> It wasn't until I began to research this [widely accepted career advice](#) that I understood how problematic – and **rooted** in **privilege** – it really was.

### The passion principle

<sup>4</sup> As a sociologist who [examines workforce culture and inequalities](#), I interviewed college students and professional workers to learn what it really meant to pursue their dreams, which I will refer to here as the passion principle. I was stunned by what I found out about this principle in the research for my book [“The Trouble with Passion.”](#)

<sup>5</sup> I examined surveys that show the American public has held the passion principle in high regard as a [career decision-making priority](#) since the 1980s. And its popularity [is even stronger](#) among those facing pandemic-related job **instability**.



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<sup>6</sup> My interviews revealed that **proponents** of the passion principle found it **compelling** because they believed that following one's passion can provide workers with both the motivation necessary to work hard and a place to find **fulfillment**.

<sup>7</sup> Yet, what I found is that following one's passion does not necessarily lead to fulfillment, but is one of the most powerful cultural forces **perpetuating** overwork. I also found that promoting the pursuit of one's passion helps perpetuate social inequalities due to the fact that not everyone has the same economic resources to allow them to pursue their passion with ease. What

follows are five major **pitfalls** of the passion principle that I discovered through my research.

## 1. Reinforces social inequality

<sup>8</sup> While the passion principle is broadly popular, not everyone has the necessary resources to turn their passion into a stable, good-paying job.

<sup>9</sup> Passion-seekers from wealthy families are better able to wait until a job in their passion comes along without worrying about **student loans** in the meantime. They are also better **situated** to take **unpaid internships** to get their foot in the door while their parents pay their rent or let them live at home.

<sup>10</sup> And they often have access to parents' **social networks** to help them find jobs. Surveys revealed that working-class and first-generation college graduates, regardless of their career field, are more likely than their wealthier peers to end up in low-paying unskilled jobs when they pursue their passion.

<sup>11</sup> Colleges and universities, workplaces and career counselors who promote the “follow your passion” path for everyone, without leveling the playing field, help **perpetuate socioeconomic inequalities** among career aspirants.

<sup>12</sup> Thus, those who promote the “follow your passion” path for everyone might be ignoring the fact that not everyone is equally able to find success while following that advice.

## 2. A threat to well-being

<sup>13</sup> My research revealed that passion proponents see the pursuit of one's passion as a good way to decide on a career, not only because having work in one's passion might lead to a good job, but because it is believed to lead to a good life. To achieve this, passion-seekers invest much of their own sense of identity in their work.

<sup>14</sup> Yet, the labor force is not structured around the goal of nurturing our **authentic sense of self**. Indeed, studies of laid-off workers have illustrated that those who were passionate about their work felt as though they **lost a part of their identity** when they lost their jobs, along with their source of income.

<sup>15</sup> When we rely on our jobs to give us a sense of purpose, we place our identities at the mercy of the global economy.

## 3. Promotes exploitation

<sup>16</sup> It's not just **well-off** passion-seekers who benefit from the passion principle. Employers of

passionate workers do, too. I conducted an experiment to see [how potential employers would respond](#) to job applicants who expressed different reasons for being interested in a job.

<sup>17</sup> Not only do potential employers prefer passionate applicants over applicants who wanted the job for other reasons, but employers knowingly **exploited** this passion: Potential employers showed greater interest in passionate applicants in part because employers believed the applicants would work hard at their jobs without expecting an increase in pay.

## 4. Reinforces the culture of overwork

<sup>18</sup> In conversations with college students and college-educated workers, I found that a substantial number were willing to sacrifice a good salary, job **stability** and leisure time to work in a job they love. Nearly half – or 46% – of college-educated workers I surveyed ranked interest or passion for the work as their first priority in a future job. This compared to only 21% who **prioritized** salary and 15% who prioritized work-family balance. Among those I interviewed, there were those who said they would willingly “eat ramen noodles every night” and “work 90 hours a week” if it meant they could follow their passion.

<sup>19</sup> Although many professionals seek work in their area of passion precisely because they want to avoid the **drudgery** of working long hours doing tasks they aren’t personally committed to, passion-seeking **ironically** perpetuates the cultural expectations of overwork. Most passion-seekers I spoke to were willing to work long hours as long as it was work about which they were passionate.

## 5. Dismisses labor market inequality

<sup>20</sup> I find that the passion principle isn’t just a guide that its followers use to make decisions about their own lives. For many, it also serves as an explanation for workforce inequality. For example, compared to those who don’t **adhere** to the passion principle, proponents were more likely to say women aren’t represented well in engineering because they followed their passion elsewhere, rather than acknowledging the deep [structural and cultural roots](#) of this underrepresentation. In other words, passion principle proponents tend to explain away patterns of labor market inequality as the benign result of individual passion-seeking.

## Avoiding pitfalls

<sup>21</sup> To avoid these pitfalls, people may want to base their career decisions on more than whether those decisions represent their passion. What do you need from your work in addition to a paycheck? Predictable hours? Enjoyable colleagues? Benefits? A respectful boss?

<sup>22</sup> For those who are already employed in jobs you are passionate about, I encourage you to [diversify your portfolio of the ways in which you make meaning](#) – to nurture hobbies, activities, community

service and identities that exist **wholly** outside of work. How can you make time to **invest** in these other ways to find purpose and satisfaction?

<sup>23</sup> Another factor to consider is whether you are being fairly **compensated** for the extra passion-fueled efforts you contribute to your job. If you work for a company, does your manager know that you spent weekends reading books on team leadership or mentoring the newest member of your team after hours? We contribute to our own exploitation if we do uncompensated work for our job out of our passion for it.

<sup>24</sup> My research for "[The Trouble with Passion](#)" raises **sobering** questions about standard approaches to mentoring and career advising. Every year, millions of high school and college graduates **gear up** to enter the labor force full time, and millions more reevaluate their jobs. It is vital that the friends, parents, teachers and career coaches who **counsel** them begin to question if advising them to pursue their passion is something that could end up doing more harm than good.

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[Erin A. Cech](#), Associate Professor of Sociology, University of Michigan

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