

The pitfalls of loving your job a little too much

The fashion for passion

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Back in the dim and distant past, job candidates had interests or hobbies. Those interests could be introspective: reading a book was a perfectly acceptable way of spending your spare time. No longer. Today you will probably be asked if you have a “personal passion project”, and the more exhausting your answer sounds, the better. Go white-water rafting, preferably with orphans. Help build motorway crossings for endangered animals. If you must read, at least do so in the original.

Passion is becoming a staple for workplace success. A new piece of research from Jon Jachimowicz and Hannah Weisman of Harvard Business School includes an analysis of 200m job postings in America. It finds that the number which explicitly mention “passion” rose over time, from 2% in 2007 to 16% in 2019.

Career websites offer helpful advice on how to come across as passionate about deeply ordinary pursuits. Here is a suggestion from one site on how to talk to prospective employers about putting things into an oven. “I love the process of researching new recipes and testing them out. I’ve been writing up my experiences with baking for the past three years...I’m very detail-oriented, and love the scientific aspects of baking. However, I’m also a very social person, and use my baking as a chance to get together with friends and family.” Do not say: “I just really like cake.”

Once inside an organisation, passion for the job also seems to be a good way to get ahead. Another paper by Mr Jachimowicz, along with Ke Wang of Harvard Kennedy School and Erica Bailey of Columbia Business School, found that employees who were regarded as more passionate than their peers got more positive feedback as well as more promotion and training opportunities. Other research has found that workers who cry at work are more highly regarded if they attribute these displays of emotions to caring too much.

On the surface the fashion for passion makes sense. Better, surely, for an employee to be enthused than not. Most workers want to do a job they love; most companies want a workforce that is committed and motivated. The case for unbridled energy is particularly strong for certain types of companies. There is a reason why startups do not embrace the cult of the occasionally interested founder.

But passion can also warp judgment. For firms, the obvious pitfall is rewarding commitment over competence. Just as that note-taking, detail-orientated baker could be churning out the world’s most disgusting profiteroles, the super-keen employee who volunteers for everything may not be that great at their job. The paper by Mr

Jachimowicz, Mr Wang and Ms Bailey finds that passion may indeed be blinding managers to reality: it finds that even when the performance of passionate employees is on the downward slope, they are still more likely to be given promotions than taciturn peers.

Dangers also lurk for employees. Even if commitment is heartfelt, passion comes in different varieties, some better than others. Psychologists distinguish between harmonious passion, in which people engage in an activity because they genuinely enjoy it, and obsessive passion, a more compulsive behaviour in which people feel like they are not really in control of themselves.

One obvious pitfall stands out. There are only so many ways to communicate passion. Widening your eyes and nodding wildly: too weird. Jumping, whooping and sweating: even weirder. Working ever longer hours, on the other hand, is a fairly simple way to show that your commitment is beyond question.

Some evidence suggests that employers feel justified in exploiting that fact. A survey by academics at Duke University, the University of Oregon and Oklahoma State University found that people thought it was more legitimate to ask passionate workers than disengaged ones to work for no money and to miss time they were meant to be spending with their families. They are also more comfortable with the idea of asking passionate employees to do totally unrelated tasks. People apparently believe that if you love your job, you will enjoy cleaning the office toilets more than people who are less enthused by it.

It is great to feel passion for your job. But if you are up at 4am for a meeting with Asia, constantly working on your holiday or have just been handed a bottle of bleach and a mop by your boss, you are in the grip of something that is not entirely healthy.

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