

To Be Successful, Chase Your Purpose, Not Your Passion

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"Follow your passion" is one of the most frequently repeated bits of work advice. It's also one of the most frequently criticized, and for good reason. Experts suggest that, for most of us, hard work makes us passionate for a field rather than the other way around. We develop passion for what we do over time, rather than starting out with a clear, defined passion for a particular career path.

But if passion is a trailing indicator that you've found the right field for you, that still leaves those at the start of their careers with a tough question: If you don't follow your passion, how do you choose a career?

A new Harvard Business Review post from Harvard Business School professor Jon Jachimowicz offers a simple, research-backed reply. Focus less on what makes you feel passionate, and more on what you truly care about.

Why purpose beats passion.

When we think about passion, we think about the joy you get when you're rocking out with your garage band, indulging in a beloved hobby, or volunteering to cuddle kittens at your local shelter. Those are all, of course, great things to do. But Jachimowicz insists happiness is a lousy career guide, and his research proves it.

In one study of several hundred employees, he notes, "we found that those who believed pursuing passion meant following what brings one joy were less likely to be successful in their pursuit of passion and were more likely to quit their job nine months down the line."

Chasing passion, in other words, tends to make you less satisfied at work because -- no huge shocker here -- work is often difficult, draining, and even boring. So, are you doomed to simply take whatever job you can do that pays the bills? Nope, replies Jachimowicz. All you need to do is substitute "purpose" for "passion" when considering your path.

Instead of asking what makes you happy and "following your passion," instead ask yourself what you care deeply about, he instructs. By focusing on purpose, you align your work with your deepest values, and also relieve yourself of the expectation that the long slog of a career will be all (or even mostly) happiness and sunshine.

Purpose gives you the resilience to succeed.

Again, Jachimowicz has research to back up his claim that chasing purpose will make you more successful than chasing passion.

"In another set of studies, I found that passion alone is only weakly related to employees' performance at their work. But the combination of passion and perseverance--i.e., the extent to which employees stick with their goals even in the face of adversity--was related to higher performance," he writes.

A well-rooted sense of purpose, in other words, gives you way more resilience than passion alone ever could. And that resilience is what is likely to make you successful over the long haul (plenty of other experts have argued the same point).

So, if you're at the start of your career or contemplating a change of direction, stop trying to follow your passion to the right job for you, and instead ask yourself this simple question: What do I truly care about? Purpose is a far better career compass than joy.