

The problem with following your passion

By Jon Jachimowicz and Sam McNeerney November 6, 2015

In a recent biography of Elon Musk, Bloomberg technology writer Ashlee Vance documents how the entrepreneur transformed the electric car industry, launched rockets into space, developed solar technology and devised plans to colonize Mars. Vance emphasizes Musk's diligence and unwavering zeal, not just his intelligence and eccentricities. Like Steve Jobs, Musk is a mercurial perfectionist, prone to moments of rage, spurred by passion.

It's tempting to read about someone like Elon Musk and conclude that passion is a prerequisite for success. And months from now, it's likely that a suite of commencement speakers will stand in front of class after class of new graduates, remarking that "the only way to do great work is to love what you do," as Steve Jobs told the Stanford class of 2005.

But is passion really an essential condition for leading a successful life? That idea has come under attack in the last few years. Passion is increasingly labeled as mere post hoc storytelling, an empty cliché that makes for a good narrative. Cal Newport, an assistant professor at Georgetown University and author of *So Good They Can't Ignore You*, insists the passion mantra is not just unoriginal but misleading. The goal shouldn't be to find your passion—as if it has been there, undiscovered, from the beginning—but to create one.

Recently, a team of psychologists led by Patricia Chen, a graduate student at the University of Michigan, published [research](#) that gives us new insights into the relationship between passion and work. The team polled 794 people and found that about 70 percent believed passion is about matching an intrinsically rewarding skill with a certain line of work—what Chen calls the *fit theory*. Under this paradigm, it's easy to explain people like Musk and Jobs: They persevered because their work tapped into a fundamental joy of theirs.

The other 30 percent of participants in the study indicated that passion for work is developed and cultivated over time—what Chen calls the *develop theory*. According to this view, which is similar to what Newport endorses, we should think of our skills and proclivities as malleable instead of fixed. Passion is the result of persistent and deliberate practice.

Across four studies, the psychologists found that those who think passion can be developed were just as likely to be satisfied with their job in the long run as those who searched for a perfect fit. These findings suggest, Chen and her team note, that people can "achieve similar levels of well-being at work by endorsing either the fit or develop theory."

This piece of research helps psychologists better understand the nature of passion, yet it still pivots off a very narrow definition, in which to be passionate about something is essentially to enjoy particular challenges that would otherwise be grueling. Moreover, it assumes such passion is the basis for a rewarding professional life.

We'd like to introduce two more concepts to broaden what we mean when we talk about passion. Psychological research shows that life satisfaction correlates with the ability to assess something from multiple viewpoints. And so by widening the meaning of passion, we also allow ourselves more opportunities to find meaning and satisfaction in the lives we lead.

In German, the word for passion is *Leidenschaft*, which literally means the ability to endure adversity. It is a much less rosy word, not the graduation bromide its English counterpart has become. If you're passionate about something in Germanic cultures, you don't necessarily enjoy it. *Leidenschaft* is about knowing the pursuit will be unpleasant but tolerating it because the outcome is worth the cost. Critically, Germans can be passionate about an activity without feeling the need to pursue it as a profession or worry about higher ideals. From this view, work is a means to an end, enabling the pursuit of passion during non-work time.

In Eastern Europe, passion can also be understood as *cierpienie* (which roughly translates to "suffering" in Polish). It's a word that describes having a calling, but without any implications of deriving pleasure. You have no choice but to endure it, even when the outcome is not necessarily positive.

A good example is Phil Hansen, an artist who developed permanent nerve damage in his hand from spending years practicing pointillism—a drawing and painting technique in which small dots are used to create a larger image. Because of his jittery hand, Hansen could no longer draw straight lines; his previously round dots began to look like "tadpoles." He eventually dropped out of art school and gave up art completely.

When his doctor suggested that he "embrace the shake," Hansen decided to develop a new approach to art that relied on his handicap. The result was a new genre of creative work. Hansen made portraits out of matches, grease and food. He still used his hands to draw, but instead of creating images from perfect dots, he drew pictures composed entirely of squiggles.

In the American sense of the word, art is Hansen's passion. But it's more accurate to describe his life with *cierpienie*. He still experiences joint pain and he still can't draw straight, so he has no choice but to endure his limitation. Despite his glowing [TED Talk](#), the outcome is usually negative, as is the case with all creative work. The final product invariably results from dozens of failed ones.

Although it's important to value work that is intrinsically fulfilling, let's stop advertising the myopic idea that life without passion—whether it is something to be found or created—is not worth living. Working adults aren't either passionate and fulfilled or lifeless and miserable. That's an overly simplified worldview, in which the dreary desk

workers of the world are constantly pitted against the Elon Musks.

Instead, we should recast our own American concept of passion to include other definitions that embrace a broader sense of what a meaningful life could look like. “Having too few constructs or insufficiently validated ones can create problems, particularly when life is moving quickly and you are trying to make sense of it,” Cambridge University psychologist Brian Little writes in his book *Me, Myself and Us*. “Your constructs can cage you in.”

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