Inclusion

Vocational Calling, Meaningful Work, and Job Satisfaction Among Disability Services Providers
--Manuscript Draft--

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Corresponding Author:	Erik W. Carter, Ph.D. Baylor University Waco, TX UNITED STATES
First Author:	Erik W. Carter, Ph.D.
Order of Authors:	Erik W. Carter, Ph.D.
	Emily R. Lanchak, M.Ed.
	Grant B Morgan, Ph.D.
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Abstract:	Recruiting and retaining a strong disability workforce remains an enduring concern in the field of intellectual and developmental disabilities. Yet little attention has focused on the sense of calling that disability service providers have to this important work and its relationships to their job satisfaction. We surveyed 269 disability service providers to examine whether they (a) perceive a calling in their life, (b) are living out that calling in their current work, (c) find meaning in their career, and (d) experience job satisfaction. The experience of both having and living out one's calling in their current work was especially prominent among participants. Likewise, most providers indicated they drew considerable meaning and purpose from their work. Perceiving a calling contributed to higher job satisfaction through living out one's calling and finding meaning in one's work. Some variations in ratings were associated with personal demographics (i.e., sex, years of experience). These findings provide new insights into what might draw disability service providers into this work or sustains their commitment amidst challenging and changing working conditions. We highlight areas for research and practice aimed at place of calling within efforts to strengthening recruitment and retention.

July 21, 2023

Dear Dr. Scott,

Thank you for the opportunity to revise our manuscript, "Vocational Calling, Meaningful Work, and Job Satisfaction Among Disability Services Providers." Both reviewers were complimentary of the study and their feedback was helpful in strengthening the manuscript. We detail below how we responded to each of their comments.

REVIEWER 1

1. **The reviewer asked that we address in the introduction why chose to examine the correlation of sex and years of experience with the scales. Likewise, they suggested that we elaborate further on these findings in the discussion.**

We have added a new paragraph to page 6 that provides a rationale for comparing the ratings of women and men, as well as examining the correlation with years of experience. We recognize that many other factors might also be associated with the constructs in our study. However, we were limited in what we could explore in this pilot study, as these data were drawn from a larger project (see Point 2). We now suggest additional areas of inquiry related to new variables on page 18. In the discussion, we now elaborate on our findings related to these variables (see pages 16-17).

2. **The reviewer suggested we address the omission of other salient factors might be correlated with these scales, but that were not collected as part of this project.**

We agree that a number of other factors might also correlate with having a calling and meaningful work. For example, other studies have explored or suggested an array of personal, organizational, and community factors that may relate to these constructs. We highlight the omission of such variables as a potential limitation of our study and suggest they be explored in future research (see page 18).

3. **The reviewer asked us to make more explicit comparisons between our findings and those of previous studies in different disciplines, as well as to elaborate more on our recommendations.**

Direct comparisons to other disciplines are made somewhat difficult by wide variations in measurement and reporting across studies. Unfortunately, there is a very limited pool of studies we could draw from in order to compare specific statistics. We have incorporated direct comparisons to a study of calling in the general population (page 15), referenced high levels of meaningful work across other professions (page 15), and compared job satisfaction ratings to a national study of direct support providers (page 16). We are not aware of other studies that used our same measures or reported them in comparable ways.

We have included an additional recommendation related to our findings, as well as elaborated on some of the existing recommendations.

4. **The reviewer noted that concept of calling might be described and defined differently based on people's beliefs, backgrounds, and other factors.**

We agree that there are a great many ways that calling can be conceptualized and measured. We make this point more explicitly in the introduction (pages 3-4) and extend this point further in our discussion (pages 17-18). Moreover, we call upon future researchers to extend this line of research with samples that are more geographically, linguistically, racially, and culturally diverse. (page 19). The reviewer wondered whether our measures would be inclusive by people who share different beliefs and orientations. We better address our choice of measures on page 9 and address potential limitations on pages 17-18. We tried to identify measures that have been used across cultures and groups in other studies, but we recognize that no single measure can capture the breadth of views on and understandings of this topic.

5. **The reviewer felt that the path diagram in Figure 2 was not self-explanatory.**

We have revised the figure and figure caption to ensure it is clear for readers.

REVIEWER 2

The reviewer noted that the topic is critically important and raised one primary criticism.

1. The reviewer noted that we did not pay sufficient attention to participants' demographic information when disaggregating them in our results or in the discussion. They suggested we unpack any differences in the discussion in order to better situate our findings.

This concern relates to Reviewer 1, Point 1 and Point 2. In our revision, we now attend more to these demographic variables in both the results and discussion. In the results, we have added group means when comparing the ratings of women and men. In the discussion, we added a new paragraph in which we elaborate on these findings, as well as findings related to years of experience. As this is the first study to explore this concept among disability service providers and our sample was bounded, we remain somewhat tempered in our claims. The reviewer mentioned race as another possible factor to explore and unpack. We agree this would be intriguing to explore. However, the sample sizes in each category of race/ethnicity are too small and unbalanced to make statistical comparison. We have identified this as a recommended line of future research, along with the exploration of other factors that might shape vocational calling, meaningful work, and job satisfaction.

Vocational Calling, Meaningful Work, and Job Satisfaction Among Disability Services Providers

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Abstract

Recruiting and retaining a strong disability workforce remains an enduring concern in the field of intellectual and developmental disabilities. Yet little attention has focused on the sense of calling that disability service providers have to this important work and its relationships to their job satisfaction. We surveyed 269 disability service providers to examine whether they (a) perceive a calling in their life, (b) are living out that calling in their current work, (c) find meaning in their career, and (d) experience job satisfaction. The experience of both having and living out one's calling in their current work was especially prominent among participants. Likewise, most providers indicated they drew considerable meaning and purpose from their work. Perceiving a calling contributed to higher job satisfaction through living out one's calling and finding meaning in one's work. Some variations in ratings were associated with personal demographics (i.e., sex, years of experience). These findings provide new insights into what might draw disability service providers into this work or sustains their commitment amidst challenging and changing working conditions. We highlight areas for research and practice aimed at place of calling within efforts to strengthening recruitment and retention.

Keywords: disability services, job satisfaction, retention, calling, meaningful work

Vocational Calling, Meaningful Work, and Job Satisfaction Among Disability Services Providers

The contributions of disability service providers are both important and impactful. More than one million professionals provide critical services and supports to people with disabilities across the United States (McCall & Scales, 2022). The form and function of their work can be wide ranging—from providing direct support to serving as a frontline supervisor. Moreover, the settings in which they serve can span across residential facilities, homes, workplaces, day programs, schools, and medical settings. Each of these service providers, however, plays a vital role in promoting the well-being and full participation of people with disabilities (Friedman, 2018; President's Committee for People with Intellectual Disabilities, 2017).

The challenges associated with strengthening and sustaining this workforce has remained an enduring concern (e.g., Hewitt & Larson, 2007; Laws & Hewitt, 2020). Researchers and advocacy groups cite a constellation of conditions that coalesce to impact whether people choose to become or remain involved as disability service providers, including low wages, insufficient benefits, limited advancement, inadequate training, and inconsistent support (e.g., American Network of Community Options and Resources, 2022; Bogenschutz et al., 2014; Houseworth et al., 2020; Johnson et al., 2021). Amidst growing demand within this field, increasing instability is evidenced through growing vacancies and higher turnover rates (Galindo et al., 2021; Pettingell, Houseworth, et al., 2022). Yet, many people do still select this vital career path and choose to continue working in this field over time. What, then, are the factors that lead them to enjoy and endure in their roles as disability service providers?

The concept of calling could offer valuable insights into why people enter the disability workforce and/or choose to remain within it. Although calling has been defined in myriad ways across time and people, contemporary definitions typically emphasize the sense of being clearly summoned to a particular work that is both purpose-laden and other-oriented (see Dik & Duffy,

2009; Thompson & Christensen, 2018). For example, Duffy et al. (2019) conceptualize calling as "an approach to work in which one seeks to demonstrate or derive a sense of meaning driven by prosocial motives, often arising out of an internal or external summons" (p. 3). In this sense, it is broadly conceived to be more inclusive of the wide array of ways calling might be experienced. In everyday conversations about their work, people might say that they "found their calling," that they have a deep sense that they "must" or "ought" do this particular work, or that they were specifically "drawn" to or "designed" for this work. This experience of a transcendent summons can be described in both sacred and secular terms; it is not limited to workers with religious beliefs. Likewise, the concept has salience across many cultures (Dik, Canning, et al, 2019). Studies across diverse professional fields (e.g., education, healthcare, hospitality) suggest that alignment between one's calling and one's work may contribute to greater motivation, engagement, self-efficacy, job performance, commitment, happiness, and organizational attachment (e.g., Lysova, Dik, et al., 2019; Wrzensniewski et al., 1997). Conversely, misalignment can contribute to dissatisfaction and departure. In other words, calling can be a motivating factor for why people choose a particular career or a sustaining factor for why people remain in their careers, even amidst changing and challenging circumstances.

Do disability service providers experience a sense of calling? Does their current job enable them to live out that calling? The literature is largely silent regarding these questions. A few qualitative studies make close references to the calling construct. For example, in their interviews with community residential support providers, Hensel et al. (2015) found that many staff were driven by a strong personal motivation to be "making a difference" in people's lives or a sense of "duty" to provide quality care. Likewise, Mittal et al. (2009) found that "being called' to service" was among the themes personal care aides linked to job retention. However, we know of no studies that focused centrally on the calling orientations of disability service providers.

Greater alignment between one's sense of calling and their current job could lead to work that is more meaningful (e.g., Dik et al., 2019; Steger et al., 2012). In such cases, people are not undertaking jobs merely for the sake of financial gain, advancement, or prestige; instead, they are pursuing work that matters personally and perhaps deeply (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). A small number of studies have addressed the meaning disability service providers derive from their jobs. For example, in their survey of diverse human service professionals in Sweden, Ineland et al. (2018) identified a sense of core professional mission in which some participants articulated the meaning of the work they undertook. Likewise, in their study of direct support provider and frontline supervisors in the United States, Hall et al. (2022) reported many staff expressed gratitude for having work they considered to be meaningful. People who discover deep meaning in their work may be more likely to remain even when other jobs offer more pay, perks, and/or praise (Lysova, Allen, et al., 2019). New research is needed to understand the extent to which disability service providers describe their work as meaningful.

The pathway from perceiving a calling to experiencing better work (and life) outcomes has also been the focus of accumulating research in other fields (e.g., Duffy et al., 2012; Duffy & Dik, 2013). One outcome that relates strongly to longevity within the disability field is overall job satisfaction (Novack & Dixson, 2019). Low levels of job satisfaction are presumed to withdrawal intentions, burnout, and job departure. Indeed, job satisfaction seems to vary widely among disability service providers (Galindo, 2021). Studies in other fields, however, suggest that employees who are living out their callings tend to have higher job satisfaction (e.g., Duffy et al., 2019). To link these constructs together, it may be that perceiving a calling leads to living out one's calling at work, which contributes to more meaningful work and higher job satisfaction (e.g., Duffy et al., 2012). The nature of this relationship should be explored among disability service providers.

The experiences of vocational calling and work meaning may also vary across different people based on demographic and other factors. For example, in their nationally representative U.S. study, White et al. (2021) differences in having a calling were related to age group, employment status, and the importance of spirituality. No differences were found in relation to factors such as race, household income, educational attainment, or political affiliation. One area of mixed findings relates to differences among women and men in the areas of vocational calling and meaningful work. Some studies have reported higher ratings among women compared with men (e.g., Duffy et al., 2013; Lazar et al., 2016; Paola et al., 2022), while others have reported no differences (e.g., Duffy & Sedlacek, 2010; White et al., 2021). Because most disability service providers are women (McCall & Scales, 2022; Pettingell, Bershadsky, et al., 2022), identifying variations in vocational calling and work meaning could provide further insight into what motivates or sustains different people in this profession. Another factor that may be associated with vocational calling and work meaning among disability service providers is longevity in the field (i.e., years of experience). As is true of many other professionals (Duffy et al., 2019), disability service providers who feel called to their work and consider it meaningful may be more likely to remain in their roles over a longer period of time. Investigating this relationship could deepen understanding of factors that may contribute to the exceptionally high turnover rates among direct service providers (Laws & Hewitt, 2020).

The purpose of this study was to examine the experience of calling among service providers who work closely with individuals with disabilities. We sought to address the following research questions:

RQ1: To what extent do service providers perceive a calling related to their work?

RQ2: To what extent do service providers feel they are living out their calling in their current work?

RQ3: To what extent do service providers find meaning in their current work?

RQ4: How do these answers vary based on service providers' sex and years of experience?

RQ5: What is the pathway from perceiving a calling to job satisfaction among service providers?

Method

Participants

Participants included 269 disability service providers involved in supporting individuals with disabilities in [state masked]. Our inclusion criteria required that participants be at least 18 years old and work in an organization, program, or non-profit agency that served individuals with disabilities and their families. Demographics are displayed in Table 1. Consistent with other national provider data (McCall & Scales, 2022; Pettingell, Bershadsky, et al., 2022), most were women. Their ages varied widely: 8.2% were between 20-29, 20.1% were between 30-39, 26.4% were between 40-49, 24.2% were between 50-59, 17.1% were between 60-69, and 3.7% were over 70; 0.4% chose not to report their age. Overall, their average years of experience in the field was 14.0 ($SD = 11.7$); almost one third (32.0%) had been in the field 5 years or less.

Recognizing that many providers support multiple areas of people's lives, we asked about all the areas in which they provided services or supports. Responses included education (51.3%), behavioral (46.1%), employment/vocational (43.9%), family support (43.1%), transportation (27.5%), residential (26.0%), early intervention (23.0%), health (22.7%), and/or other (22.1%; e.g., legal advocacy, sports and recreation, financial, faith and religion). One quarter (27.9%) selected only one of these response options; the average number of areas in which they provided services or supports was 3.1 ($SD = 1.9$). Likewise, participants served individuals experiencing a range of disabilities (see Table 1). The majority (83.3%) of providers served people with intellectual disability and/or autism spectrum disorder. However, the average number of disability categories served was 7.8 ($SD = 4.2$). Many participants served individuals across

different age levels, with the majority focused on adults (see Table 1).

Recruitment

These data were drawn from a larger project addressing the information and resource needs of individuals with disabilities, families, and professionals in the state of [masked]. We developed our recruitment approaches in close collaboration with a leadership team comprised of representatives from eight state agencies. We incorporated an array of recruitment strategies including paid and unpaid social media postings, newsletter announcements, email blasts, flyers, and presentations to key stakeholder groups. Because there was no publicly available list of all disability service providers in the state, we distributed study announcements through numerous programs (e.g., employment and day programs, residential providers, behavioral health providers, transportation service providers), state agencies (e.g., Council on Developmental Disabilities; Departments of Education, Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, Human Services/Vocational Rehabilitation, Mental Health), disability organizations (e.g., Arcs, autism societies, Down syndrome associations, educational and advocacy programs independent living centers,), school districts, and community programs (e.g., family support, sports and recreation). Each organization received print and electronic flyers, sample social media posts, and email examples personalized for their organization. All recruitment materials included a link to the project's website, which detailed study information and linked to the online survey (Harris et al., 2009).

Our recruitment efforts spanned five months from December 2020 to April 2021. All surveys could be completed anonymously in any three forms: online, print, or by phone. Participants could complete a separate survey to request free resources related to topics included in the survey and enter into a drawing to receive a $20 gift card. Participants worked in more than half (54%) of the state's 95 rural, urban, and suburban counties.

Measures

We asked participants to provide demographic information and complete the four

measures described below. These latter measures were described as optional within a larger

survey. The instructions read:

> Given your current work related to serving individuals with disabilities and/or their
> families, we want to know what draws you to this work and brings you meaning. Please
> respond honestly, not according to what is socially desirable or what you feel you 'ought'
> to think.

We again reminded participants that their individual responses would not be shared with others.

We recognized that the constructs of calling, work meaning, and job satisfaction could be

defined and experienced in myriad ways. We sought measures that were psychometrically sound

and broadly conceptualized, while also remaining relevant to individuals working in this

particular state and field. Yet, we also recognize that every measure is constrained in the degree

to which it can fully capture all aspects of a construct in ways that will resonate with all people

across diverse backgrounds, cultures, and countries.

Demographics. We asked participants to report their sex, race/ethnicity, age band, and

number of years of experience working in the field. To characterize the disabilities experienced

by the individuals whom they served, participants selected from a fixed list that combined

special education categories with additional disability groups identified by our project's

leadership team (see Table 1). We also asked them to report the ages of those whom they served:

infants, children, youth, young adults, adults, and/or older adults. For both disability and age

categories, multiple options could be selected and often were. Recognizing that providers often

support multiple areas of people's lives, we asked participants to identify all of the areas in

which they provided services: behavioral, education, employment/vocational, family support,

healthcare, residential, transportation, and/or other. Finally, we also asked which type of

communities in which the individuals with disabilities they serve live (i.e., rural, suburban, and/or urban) and the county in which they worked.

Brief Calling Scale. The *Brief Calling Scale* (Dik et al., 2012) is comprised of four items—two addressing whether people are searching for their calling (searching subscale) and two addressing whether people perceive a presence of calling (presence subscale). Each item is rated on a 5-point, Likert-type scale ranging from *not at all true of me* (1) to *totally true of me* (5). All items and response options are displayed in Table 2. The following text accompanied this section:

> Some people, when describing their careers, talk about having a "calling." Broadly speaking, a "calling" in the context of work refers to a person's belief that she or he is called upon—by the needs of society, by a person's own inner potential, by God, by Higher Power, etc.—to do a particular kind of work. Although at one time most people thought of a calling as relevant only for overtly religious careers, the concept is frequently understood today to apply to virtually any area of work. The following items address the degree to which you see this concept as relevant to your own life and career.

Scores for each subscale were obtained by adding the two items, with a possible range of 2-10. Previous research indicated that the items within the searching ($r = .75$) and presence ($r = .81$) subscales are strongly correlated (Duffy & Sedlacek, 2007). The internal consistency between the two items in the present sample was high ($\omega = .95$) and the estimated polychoric correlation between responses to the two items was .83.

Living Calling Scale. The *Living Calling Scale* (Duffy, Allen, et al., 2012) is comprised of six items addressing the degree to which a person senses they are living their calling. Each item is rated on a 7-point, Likert-type scale ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (7). All items and response options are displayed in Table 2. This section was only completed if participants indicated they had a calling. A total score was obtained by adding the items, yielding a possible range of 6-42. Previous research indicated the scale has strong validity and reliability (e.g., Duffy & Autin, 2013). Internal consistency in the present sample was high ($\omega = .97$).

Work as Meaning Inventory. The *Work as Meaning Inventory* (Steger et al., 2012) is comprised of ten items addressing three dimensions of meaningful work: experiencing positive meaning in work (positive meaning subscale, four items), sensing that work is a key avenue for making meaning (meaning making subscale, three items), and perceiving one's work to benefit some greater good (greater good motivations subscale, three items). These items were rated using a 7-point, Likert-type scale ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (7). All items and response options are displayed in Table 2; one item is reverse coded. The overall score is obtained by adding all items, with a possible range of 7-49. Internal consistency in the present sample was high (ω = .95).

Job satisfaction. We used a single item to gauge participants' overall job satisfaction: "I feel fairly well satisfied with my present job." This item was rated a 7-point, Likert-type scale ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (7). This item has been used widely in studies addressing job satisfaction.

Data Analysis

We used descriptive statistics (i.e., percentages, means, standard deviations) to address the first three research questions. Our fourth question was exploratory. We used a Pearson correlation to examine the relationships between years of experiences and the following variables: perceiving a calling subscale, total living calling scale, and total work as meaning scale. We also compared the ratings of women and men using an independent samples *t* test. To address the fifth question, we used a structural equation modeling (SEM) approach, which allows for the estimation of relationships between variables while accounting for measurement error in the observed variables. We first reviewed the descriptive statistics for all items. Next, we estimated the structural model that included the linear sequence of variables using an estimator appropriate for ordinal data (DiStefano & Morgan, 2014). Before interpreting the model

parameters, we reviewed the fit summary information to evaluate the model-data fit using conventional cutoffs of Hu and Bentler (1999). Specifically, we interpreted comparative fit index (CFI) values between .9 and .95 to be adequate model fit and values greater than .95 to be good model fit. For the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), values between .05 and .08 were interpreted as adequate and values less than .05 as good. We also generated the 90% confidence interval for RMSEA, which is customary in SEM (Kline, 2015). For the standardized root mean residual, values at or near .05 were taken as evidence of good model-data fit. Finally, we reviewed and interpreted the standardized and unstandardized model parameter estimates to support substantive conclusions about the research questions.

Results

To What Extent Do Providers Perceive a Sense of Calling Related to Their Work?

Most disability service providers affirmed that they have a calling to a particular kind of work and have a good understanding of their calling as it applies to their career. For both items, more than 80% reported this was mostly or totally true of them. The average rating on this subscale was 8.54 (SD = 1.83; range, 2-10). Conversely, a much smaller percentage of providers were searching for a calling. The average subscale rating was 3.82 (SD = 2.41; range, 2-10). Women had significantly higher ratings on the perceiving a calling subscale than men (M = 8.65 versus 8.00), $t(260)$ = 2.10, p = .037, d = .36. Years of experience was significantly, positively correlated with ratings on the perceiving a calling subscale, r = .162, p =.008.

To What Extent Do Providers Feel They Are Living Out Their Calling in Their Work?

Among those who did perceive a calling, most moderately or strongly agreed they have regular opportunities to live out their calling (76.9%), they are currently engaging in activities align with their calling (72.6%), and they did so consistently (69.4%). With regard to their job, most of these participants moderately or strongly agreed they were currently working in a job

closely aligned with their calling (78.9%), working in a job to which they felt called (76.9%), and are living out their calling right now in their job (72.1%). The average rating on this scale was 36.12 (SD = 7.04; range, 7-42). No significant differences were found between women and men (M = 36.51 versus 34.19), t(242) = 1.84, p = .067, d = 0.33. However, years of experience was significantly, positively correlated with ratings on the Living Calling scale, r = .263, p < .001.

To What Extent Do Providers Find Meaning in Their Work?

The majority of participants either moderately or strongly agreed with all ten items. The highest agreement was found for "I have found a meaningful career" (92.3%) and "I have a good sense of what makes my job meaningful" (90.3%). The lowest agreement was found for "My work helps me make sense of the world around me" (67.2%) and "My work helps me better understand myself" (73.1%). The average scale score was 63.44 (SD = 7.72; range, 25-70). Women had significantly higher ratings than men on the Work as Meaning scale (M = 64.18 versus 60.08), t(254) = 3.19, p < .001, d = .55. Years of experience was significantly, positively correlated with ratings on the Meaning in Work scale, r = .132, p = .035.

What is the Pathway from Perceiving a Calling to Job Satisfaction?

The average job satisfaction ratings were quite high (M = 6.27, SD = 1.16). Across participants, 59.0% strongly agreed, 24.1% moderately agreed, 7.5% slightly agreed, 5.6% were neutral, 2.3% slightly disagreed, 0.8% moderately disagreed, and 0.8% strongly disagreed.

The relationships between the sequence of calling variables and job satisfaction were simultaneously estimated in the structural model. Overall, there was adequate to good model-data fit. The estimated CFI was .98, SRMR was .06, and RMSEA was .10 (CI_{90} = .096 - .114). The CFI and SRMR indicated good model-data fit, and the RMSEA and confidence interval indicated adequate model-data fit. The model χ^2_{150} was 591.3 (p < .001). Having concluded that

the model-data was acceptable, we proceeded to interpret the full model, which is presented in

Figure 1. The standardized coefficient when regressing Living Calling onto Presence of Calling

was 0.86 (*SE* = .02, *p* < .001). The standardized coefficient when regressing Work as Meaning

onto Living Calling was 0.80 (*SE* = .03, *p* < .001), and the standardized coefficient when

regressing Jon Satisfaction onto Work as Meaning was 0.86 (*SE* = .03, *p* < .001). The

proportions of variability explained in Living Calling was .74, in Work as Meaning was .64, and

in Job Satisfaction was .74. Each of these proportions of variability explained indicates a high

degree of shared variability in the variables (observed and latent). Each of the structural (i.e.,

regression) parameters was positive, which indicates that those with higher reported Presence of

Calling tend to have higher Living Calling, which leads to higher Work as Meaning and

ultimately higher satisfaction in one's job than those with lower reported Presence of Calling.

The indirect effect of Presence of Calling on Job Satisfaction was 0.59, and the indirect effect of

Living Calling on Job Satisfaction was .69.

Discussion

The extent to which a job aligns with someone's calling and brings them meaning can

influence whether they pursue or persist within a particular line of work (Duffy et al., 2019). In a

field marked by high turnover and growing vacancies (Laws & Hewitt, 2020), it is important to

understand the array of factors that might shape job outcomes within the disability workforce.

We examined the constructs of calling, work meaning, and job satisfaction—as well as the

relationships among them—within a diverse sample of disability service providers. Our findings

provide new insights into the calling orientations of these important and influential staff.

First, the sense of both having and living out one's calling was quite prominent among

disability service providers. Indeed, fewer than 10% of participants indicated this experience—as

captured on this measure—was not at all or only mildly true of them. This contrasts sharply with

37% of a nationally representative sample of the general population in the United States who provided the same ratings (White et al., 2021). The salience of calling within this workforce is remarkable, as the portrait reflected in our sample differs substantially from the portraits described in studies of the general population (e.g., Duffy & Sedlacek, 2010; Peterson et al., 2009). Indeed, Duffy et al. (2019) contend that only half of working-age adults in the United States perceive a calling and far fewer report living it out in their current work. Why might perceiving and living a calling be so high in our sample? Like other jobs focused on meeting societal needs (e.g., public service, caring professions), many disability-related positions are other-oriented and imbued with purpose. Moreover, most direct support and frontline supervisory positions do not typically appeal to extrinsic motivations (e.g., pay, prestige, or advancement opportunities). This is not to suggest that it requires a calling to work in this field. People can certainly choose their jobs for an array of alternative reasons unrelated to calling. We cannot speak to whether participants in our study were called *to* this work or whether they discovered their calling *through* their work. Studies have also suggested a sense of calling may be high within other "caring professions," such as nursing, education, and public service (e.g., Park & Lee, 2018). Future research is needed to compare and contrast calling across disability-focused professions and other related occupations.

Second, most disability service providers found considerable meaning in their work. This included having a job that brought them significance and purpose, helped them understand themselves and others, and contributed to the greater good. Studies have also documented high levels of meaningful work among health care providers (Bayer et al., 2021), special educators (Murangi et al., 2022), future counselors (Um & Bardhoshi, 2021), and social workers (Tan et al., 2021). This sense of meaning could comprise a major motivation for why some disability service providers remain in their roles even amidst working conditions that can be marked by

low pay, limited advancement, and complex responsibilities. In their review of outcomes associated with obtaining meaningful work, Allan et al. (2021) note its strong connection with employee commitment, engagement, adjustment, and well-being. The experience of living out one's calling in their job appears to account for some of that meaning. However, it is important to note that other factors unexplored in this study could help make work meaningful, including the relationships people form, the difference they make, the good they receive, and the enjoyment they experience (Crane & Havercamp, 2020; Lunsky et al., 2014). For example, Hensel et al. (2015) found that direct support providers expressed an array of motivations falling within four categories: the people they supported, the work they did, practical motivations, and personal motivations.

Third, job satisfaction among these disability service providers tended to be quite high. Specifically, 83% of participants moderately or strongly agreed they were fairly well satisfied with their job. In a field marked by high turnover and in the midst of a global pandemic, we were somewhat surprised by this positive framing of their current work. Such ratings were somewhat more favorable than reported in a concurrent survey by Galindo et al. (2021), in which only 65% of respondents indicated they were somewhat or completely satisfied working as a direct support provider at their current organization. Other studies addressing service providers' perceptions of work during the pandemic also present a mixed portrait of work life experiences (e.g., Hall et al., 2022; Pettingell, Bershadsky, et al., 2022; Sheppard-Jones et al., 2022).

Fourth, some variations in ratings may be associated with personal factors. A high proportion of the disability workforce is female (McCall & Scales, 2022; Pettingell, Bershadsky, et al., 2022), punctuating the importance of understanding more fully their motivations and experiences in the field. Although perceiving a sense of calling tended to be quite high for the entire sample, ratings were significantly higher among women compared to men. A similar

pattern was found in ratings of meaningful work. It is unclear whether these findings reflect broader trends in the general population or are somehow unique to this particular career path. Likewise, service providers with more experience in the field tended to have higher ratings in the areas of perceiving a calling and meaningful work. All other factors being equal (e.g., pay, benefits, hours), it may be that people who do not feel called to or find meaning in their work transition to other jobs or career paths over time.

Fifth, perceiving a calling contributed to job satisfaction through living out one's calling and finding meaning in one's work. Compared to participants with lower ratings, disability service providers who endorsed having a calling tended to rate higher on living out their calling, which led them to find more meaning in their work and thus experience more job satisfaction. Similarly strong relationships between calling and job satisfaction have been found in other studies of employed adults (e.g., Duffy, Bott, et al., 2012; Duffy et al., 2015). Although we cannot draw causal inferences from this model, these strong relationships are intriguing and raise important questions about the difference having a calling might make in work lives of disability service providers. At the same time, we are not suggesting that attending to people's sense of calling should have primacy in multipronged efforts to improve recruitment and retention. Efforts must also be directed toward addressing financial factors, working conditions, and other challenges that might lead even the most committed staff person to consider alternative options.

Limitations

Several limitations to this study warrant consideration. First, the constructs examined in this study have each been defined in multiple and divergent ways—both currently and over time. Our reliance on a single measure of calling, meaningful work, and job satisfaction means our findings reflect a particular way of understanding each these multifaceted and evolving constructs. Moreover, the language and emphasis of these measures will likely require further

refinement when extended across varied cultures and belief systems (Dik et al., 2019). Second, we explored whether a narrow set of factors (i.e., sex, years of experience) were associated with perceiving a calling, living a calling, and meaningful work among providers. However, other personal (e.g., educational attainment, income level, race/ethnicity, religiosity, sexual orientation), organizational (e.g., social context, job design, and other working conditions), and communal factors (e.g., family, cultural, and community beliefs or expectations) may also be related to these constructs and warrant future examination (e.g., Blustein et al., 2023; White et al., 2021). We were limited in our analyses to demographic variables collected as part of the overarching project and for which our sample was size was adequate. Third, we selected a single-item measure of overall job satisfaction. Although this approach has been used in numerous studies, it is likely that calling is more closely related to satisfaction in some areas (e.g., job responsibilities, work relationships) than others (e.g., compensation, benefits, schedule). Fourth, a small subset of participants (8.5%) from our overall project choose not to complete the optional items related to work meaning and calling. Although we do not know why they skipped this final section (e.g., survey fatigue, limited time), it may be that our sample is slightly biased in the direction of participants who saw the construct of calling as more relevant to their lives.

Future Research

Although the study of calling and work is not new, its extension to the disability workforce is novel. Additional research should be undertaken in several areas. First, studies are needed to examine more deeply the experiences, origins, and implications of calling among disability service providers. Qualitative interviews may be especially appropriate for exploring what calling looks like, where it comes from, when it emerges, and how it contributes to greater meaning and job satisfaction. Second, the work of disability service providers varies widely

across settings (e.g., residential, employment, healthcare, education) and job categories. Future studies should address whether and how calling orientations might look different among direct support providers, frontline supervisors, administrators, and other disability related professions. Third, this area of research should be extended to samples that are more geographically, linguistically, racially, and culturally diverse. It is important to understand the breadth of perspectives and experiences reflected in the disability workforce—both in the United States and around the world. Fourth, we did not account for other factors like pay, benefits, and working conditions in our examination of work meaning and job satisfaction. Future studies should explore whether the contributions of living out one's calling to positive work outcomes is similar to or different from other salient factors. Fifth, the antecedents of calling are intriguing and understudied. What leads to its discovery? How might it be cultivated? Fifth, longitudinal studies are needed to examine whether and how living a calling relates to longevity within the disability workforce.

Implications for Practice

Although this initial study of calling, meaning, and purpose is descriptive in nature, some practical implications still follow. First, the experience of calling seems to have considerable salience within the disability workforce. As service providers share their own stories of what motivates their ongoing work, references to some form of transcendent summons—whether sacred or secular—should not be surprising. Acknowledging the presence and pertinence of such calling in people's lives can be affirming for staff and yield a richer understanding of their motivations for work. Second, conceptions and experiences of calling can vary within and across groups of people. Understanding what matters most to people is best accomplished by listening closely to what staff choose to share. Although many people may feel called to their work and draw deep meaning from it, others will not. It is important to recognize and respect the breadth

of perspectives people bring to their work. Third, frontline supervisors can help disability support providers recognize the connections between what they do each day and the overarching work to which they feel specifically drawn. Amidst responsibilities that sometimes seem peripheral or compliance-driven (e.g., documentation, training), staff may need help seeing how their day-to-day work enhances the lives of the individuals they serve. This might be accomplished by pointing out how the particular services and supports they provide promote the participation, relationships, dignity, and well-being of people with disabilities. Fourth, where flexibility is possible, it may be valuable to adjust job responsibilities in ways that more closely align with someone's area of calling. This practice of job crafting could enhance overall job fit and strengthen motivation (Berg et al., 2010). Fifth, it is important to regularly assess job satisfaction and the reflect upon the factors that shape it. Although most of our participants were fairly satisfied with their work, others presented as less content. Knowing the difference early on could allow opportunities for problems to be addressed.

In his presidential address to the *American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities*, Gaventa (2016) called upon colleagues to give greater attention to issue of "why we do what we do" and to "speak from our motivation, values, and sense of call and vocation" (p. 455). Professionals, he suggested, are likely to pursue roles in the disability field "because doing so fulfills something deep within us, something or someone that touched us, called us, and/or hooked us" (p. 459). Many of the disability service providers represented in the present study would likely affirm this to be true in their own professional lives. Having a calling and actualizing it at work may bring a sense of meaning and purpose that leads to greater satisfaction. We encourage other researchers to examine each of these issues more closely in order to provide a richer understanding of the factors that impact the recruitment and retention of a strong disability workforce.

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Table 1

Participant Demographics and the Individuals Whom They Served

Variable	*n*	%
Sex		
Female	227	84.4
Male	41	15.2
Prefer not to answer	1	0.4
Race/ethnicity[a]		
American Indian and Alaska Native	8	3.0
Asian	3	1.1
Black or African American	36	13.4
Hispanic/Latino	8	3.0
Native Hawaiian & Other Pacific Islander	0	0.0
White	216	80.3
Other	5	1.9
Prefer not to answer	4	1.5
Types of disabilities among individuals whom participants serve[a]		
Autism spectrum disorder	188	69.9
Deaf-blindness	107	39.8
Deafness	111	41.3
Developmental delay	186	69.1
Hearing impairment	155	57.6
Learning disability	167	62.1
Intellectual disability	199	74.0
Mental illness, mental health disorder, or emotional disabilities	184	68.4
Other health impairment or ADD/ADHD	141	52.4
Physical disability	175	65.1
Speech/language impairment	163	60.6
Traumatic brain injury	114	42.4
Visual impairment	134	49.8
Substance abuse disorder	77	28.6
Age of individuals with disabilities whom participants serve[a]		
Infants (under 2)	69	25.7
Children (2-12)	115	42.8
Youth (13-18)	113	42.0
Young adults (19-25)	171	63.6
Adults (25-65)	178	66.2
Older adults (65+)	139	51.7
Type of communities in which participants serve[a]		
Rural	187	69.5
Suburban	172	63.9
Urban	134	49.8

Note. Percentages are based on the number of participants who completed the given item.
[a]More than one option could be selected; total percentages exceed 100%.

Table 2

Participant Ratings on Brief Calling Scale

Items	Not at all true of me	Mildly true of me	Moderately true of me	Mostly true of me	Totally true of me	*M* (*SD*)
1. I have a calling to a particular kind of work.[a]	2.3	4.9	10.5	26.7	55.6	4.29 (0.99)
2. I have a good understanding of my calling as it applies to my career.[a]	1.5	4.2	11.4	33.0	50.0	4.26 (0.92)
3. I am trying to figure out my calling in my career.[b]	55.1	16.9	10.5	12.0	5.6	1.96 (1.28)
4. I am searching for my calling as it applies to my career.[b]	58.8	15.4	11.6	9.4	4.9	1.86 (1.23)

Note. Percentages are based on the number of participants who completed the given item.

[a]Presence of calling subscale. [b]Search for calling subscale.

Table 3

Participant Ratings on Living a Calling Scale

Items	Strongly disagree	Moderately disagree	Slightly disagree	Neutral	Slightly agree	Moderately agree	Strongly agree	*M* (*SD*)
1. I have regular opportunities to live out my calling.	1.6	2.4	1.6	8.0	9.6	24.7	52.2	6.04 (1.37)
2. I am currently working in a job that closely aligns with my calling.	0.8	1.2	2.0	7.2	10.0	21.5	57.4	6.18 (1.23)
3. I am consistently living out my calling.	2.0	1.2	4.0	9.5	13.9	25.0	44.4	5.85 (1.41)
4. I am currently engaging in activities that align with my calling.	0.4	1.6	2.0	7.5	15.9	24.2	48.4	6.03 (1.22)
5. I am living out my calling right now in my job.	2.0	1.6	2.0	10.0	12.4	25.5	46.6	5.92 (1.39)
6. I am working in the job to which I feel called.	1.2	1.2	3.2	7.6	10.0	22.7	54.2	6.09 (1.31)

Note. Percentages are based on the number of participants who completed the given item.
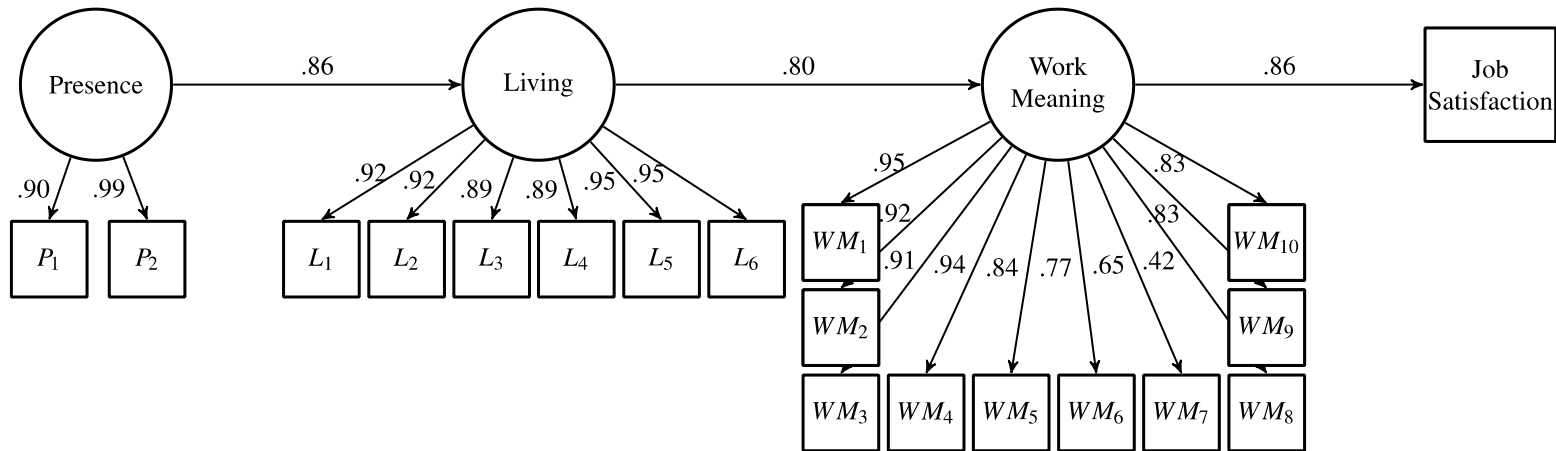
Table 4
Participant Ratings on Work as Meaning Inventory

Items	Strongly disagree	Moderately disagree	Slightly disagree	Neutral	Slightly agree	Moderately agree	Strongly agree	*M* (*SD*)
1. I have found a meaningful career.[a]	0.4	0.7	1.1	2.6	3.0	15.4	76.9	6.60 (0.96)
2. I understand how my work contributes to my life's meaning.[a]	0.4	1.1	0.7	3.0	7.1	19.9	67.8	6.46 (1.00)
3. I have a good sense of what makes my job meaningful.[a]	0.0	0.4	0.8	3.4	5.3	14.7	75.6	6.60 (0.85)
4. I have discovered work that has a satisfying purpose.[a]	0.0	0.8	1.9	2.6	5.3	18.4	71.1	6.51 (0.98)
5. I view my work as contributing to my personal growth.[b]	0.0	0.4	1.1	3.7	7.1	22.8	64.8	6.45 (0.93)
6. My work helps me better understand myself.[b]	0.4	0.8	0.4	13.3	12.1	26.5	46.6	6.02 (1.17)
7. My work helps me make sense of the world around me.[b]	0.8	2.3	4.2	11.5	14.1	23.7	43.5	5.81 (1.39)
8. My work really makes no difference to the world.[cd]	67.5	9.4	6.0	4.1	3.4	3.7	6.0	2.02 (1.82)
9. I know my work makes a positive difference in the world.[c]	0.0	0.8	0.8	3.4	7.9	21.1	66.2	6.46 (0.92)
10. The work I do serves a greater purpose.[c]	0.0	0.8	0.4	2.6	7.1	18.0	71.1	6.55 (0.86)

Note. Percentages are based on the number of participants who completed the given item.
[a]Positive meaning subscale. [b]Meaning making through work subscale. [c]Greater good motivations subscale. [d]Reverse coded.

Figure 1
Path Diagram

Note. P = Brief Calling Scale, presence subscale. L = Living a Calling Scale. WM = Work as Meaning Inventory. Numbers refer to scale items, as listed in Tables 2-4,

July 21, 2023

Dear Dr. Scott,

Thank you for the opportunity to revise our manuscript, "Vocational Calling, Meaningful Work, and Job Satisfaction Among Disability Services Providers." Both reviewers were complimentary of the study and their feedback was helpful in strengthening the manuscript. We detail below how we responded to each of their comments.

REVIEWER 1

1. **The reviewer asked that we address in the introduction why chose to examine the correlation of sex and years of experience with the scales. Likewise, they suggested that we elaborate further on these findings in the discussion.**

We have added a new paragraph to page 6 that provides a rationale for comparing the ratings of women and men, as well as examining the correlation with years of experience. We recognize that many other factors might also be associated with the constructs in our study. However, we were limited in what we could explore in this pilot study, as these data were drawn from a larger project (see Point 2). We now suggest additional areas of inquiry related to new variables on page 18. In the discussion, we now elaborate on our findings related to these variables (see pages 16-17).

2. **The reviewer suggested we address the omission of other salient factors might be correlated with these scales, but that were not collected as part of this project.**

We agree that a number of other factors might also correlate with having a calling and meaningful work. For example, other studies have explored or suggested an array of personal, organizational, and community factors that may relate to these constructs. We highlight the omission of such variables as a potential limitation of our study and suggest they be explored in future research (see page 18).

3. **The reviewer asked us to make more explicit comparisons between our findings and those of previous studies in different disciplines, as well as to elaborate more on our recommendations.**

Direct comparisons to other disciplines are made somewhat difficult by wide variations in measurement and reporting across studies. Unfortunately, there is a very limited pool of studies we could draw from in order to compare specific statistics. We have incorporated direct comparisons to a study of calling in the general population (page 15), referenced high levels of meaningful work across other professions (page 15), and compared job satisfaction ratings to a national study of direct support providers (page 16). We are not aware of other studies that used our same measures or reported them in comparable ways.

We have included an additional recommendation related to our findings, as well as elaborated on some of the existing recommendations.

4. **The reviewer noted that concept of calling might be described and defined differently based on people's beliefs, backgrounds, and other factors.**

We agree that there are a great many ways that calling can be conceptualized and measured. We make this point more explicitly in the introduction (pages 3-4) and extend this point further in our discussion (pages 17-18). Moreover, we call upon future researchers to extend this line of research with samples that are more geographically, linguistically, racially, and culturally diverse. (page 19). The reviewer wondered whether our measures would be inclusive by people who share different beliefs and orientations. We better address our choice of measures on page 9 and address potential limitations on pages 17-18. We tried to identify measures that have been used across cultures and groups in other studies, but we recognize that no single measure can capture the breadth of views on and understandings of this topic.

5. **The reviewer felt that the path diagram in Figure 2 was not self-explanatory.**

We have revised the figure and figure caption to ensure it is clear for readers.

REVIEWER 2

The reviewer noted that the topic is critically important and raised one primary criticism.

1. The reviewer noted that we did not pay sufficient attention to participants' demographic information when disaggregating them in our results or in the discussion. They suggested we unpack any differences in the discussion in order to better situate our findings.

This concern relates to Reviewer 1, Point 1 and Point 2. In our revision, we now attend more to these demographic variables in both the results and discussion. In the results, we have added group means when comparing the ratings of women and men. In the discussion, we added a new paragraph in which we elaborate on these findings, as well as findings related to years of experience. As this is the first study to explore this concept among disability service providers and our sample was bounded, we remain somewhat tempered in our claims. The reviewer mentioned race as another possible factor to explore and unpack. We agree this would be intriguing to explore. However, the sample sizes in each category of race/ethnicity are too small and unbalanced to make statistical comparison. We have identified this as a recommended line of future research, along with the exploration of other factors that might shape vocational calling, meaningful work, and job satisfaction.