

Why Faith@Work Needs Vocational Psychology: 5 Key Findings

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The desire for the Gospel to influence all of life is as old as the Gospel itself, and connections between faith and work are present in God’s first instruction to his people recorded in the book of Genesis (1:28). Christians have navigated the topic of faith and work for the full duration of Christian history. In recent decades, Christians have pursued the faith and work conversation with renewed urgency; Miller (2007) even suggested that we are currently living in the Faith at Work Era. Many helpful resources have emerged from this movement, and key initiatives—networking groups, think tanks, conferences, etc.—are now in place among Christians highly motivated to explore the impact of the Gospel on work across the full scope of creation. Countless books are available that explore faith and work themes; *hundreds* were included in Hammond, Stevens and Svanoe’s (2002) annotated bibliography of such books, published more than 15 years ago.

Yet decades of research within vocational psychology—the scientific study of career choice and development—have been almost completely overlooked by the Faith@Work movement. This is stunning given that this area of research addresses questions of enormous relevance to the faith and work conversation, such as “Which factors influence well-being in people’s careers?” “Which intervention activities lead to the best outcomes for people making career decisions?” and “What difference does it make when people perceive a calling to their work?” The apparent reasons for the thick wall between vocational psychology research and the faith and work conversation are understandable. Even a casual perusal of practical faith and work resources reveals that the vast majority have been written by pastors, theologians, and business leaders—authors guided by scripture, experience, and historical wisdom (from which I

have personally benefitted richly), but authors who tend not to make a habit of reading (and seldom even have access to) empirical social science research published in peer-reviewed journals. Although understandable, it is nevertheless unfortunate, because key questions asked by many Christians about their career decision-making and workplace experiences are not directly addressed in scripture, yet are directly addressed within vocational psychology. The sufficiency of scripture means that the Bible is authoritative on every concern it addresses. But scripture doesn't address every area of modern life, and the Bible itself teaches that God's revelation extends beyond scripture to creation (e.g., Psalm 19; Belgic Confession, Article 2). Much like how physical scientists learn more about God by studying the physical world, psychological scientists learn more about God's creative design for human beings by studying their behavior—including their work-related behavior. Social science offers incomplete answers that can be misapplied, but if conducted carefully and applied accurately, thoughtfully, and in view of scripture's teachings, it offers a glimpse into God's created intent for human life, and can be an invaluable source of wisdom for Christians (e.g., Jeeves & Ludwig, 2018).

The central goal of this paper is to establish a voice for vocational psychology within the faith and work conversation. Now considered a subdiscipline of counseling psychology, vocational psychology scholarship dates to early efforts to articulate a systematic approach to career guidance more than a century ago (Savickas & Baker, 2005). In the decades since, vocational psychology has carefully investigated the role that interests, values, abilities, and personality play in career development (Dawis, 1992); explored the developmental course of career decision-making (e.g., Super, 1990); parsed the cognitive processes through which people make choices and accomplish outcomes in their work (e.g., Lent, 2005); examined the meaning-making processes that infuse a sense of purpose in work (e.g., Dik et al., 2015) and studied

influences attributable to cultural differences in how people experience their work (e.g., Fouad & Byars-Winston, 2005). While each of these topic areas (and many others) are relevant, the purpose of this paper is to focus on five domains of vocational psychology research that are especially salient in the current milieu: (1) the link between “decent work” and dignity in work; (2) the role that differing gifts have in predicting career outcomes; (3) critical ingredients that promote successful career decision-making; (4) the role of adaptability and “planned happenstance” in expressing a calling in a changing world of work; and (5) the importance of moving from discerning to living a calling.

1. “Decent Work” Enables Dignity in Work

Many Faith@Work authors note that work has inherent dignity (because God works, we work as God’s representatives, we are granted the task of developing creation, etc.). For example, this is a central point of the early chapters of the bestselling book *Every Good Endeavor* (Keller & Leary Alsdorf, 2012). Christians affirm work’s dignity, yet in a fallen world, severe constraints too often prevent people from experiencing it. Vocational psychology has begun to examine the boundary conditions that govern people’s experience of dignity in their work. For example, vocational psychologists propose that work cannot be meaningful until it is “decent,” defining “decent work” as an employment situation consisting of “(a) physical and interpersonally safe working conditions (e.g., absent of physical, mental, or emotional abuse), (b) hours that allow for free time and adequate rest, (c) organizational values that complement family and social values, (d) adequate compensation, and (e) access to adequate health care” (Duffy, Blustein, Diemer & Autin, 2016, p. 130). According to the Psychology of Working Theory (PWT), decent work offers a way for people to meet their needs for survival, social

connection, and self-determination; once these needs are met, the context is in place for people to experience higher-level outcomes such as meaningfulness and well-being (Duffy et al., 2016).

Emerging PWT research has begun to identify, and empirically demonstrate, how key socio-cultural factors set the conditions in which work's dignity can be legitimately experienced by workers. The theory proposes that decent work is inversely predicted by marginalization (i.e., the relegation of people to less powerful or included positions in society) and marginalized identities, and also economic constraints which limit access to opportunity. Work volition (one's perception of choice in career decision-making) and career adaptability (one's readiness and resources for coping with anticipated tasks of career development) mediate the influence of these predictors, such that the reason marginalization and economic constraints impact decent work is because they shape volition and adaptability, which in turn influence decent work. The preceding hypothesized relationships have been supported empirically (Duffy et al., 2016). For its part, decent work is theorized to predict the extent to which people meet their needs for survival, for social connection, and for self-determination through work. Only when those needs are met do people also experience a sense of fulfillment and well-being in their work.

While PWT includes several propositions that have found empirical support (e.g., Duffy et al., 2017), ongoing research has yet to test it comprehensively. Nevertheless, the broader perspective outlined by PWT is highly relevant to the faith and work conversation. Specifically, although work has inherent dignity, external constraints too often diminish that dignity in the lived experience of workers. For employers, policy-makers, and socially-conscious Christians, a society in which people experience the dignity that God ordained for work is one that actively strives to address and reverse classism, poverty and oppression. As these constraints are

ameliorated, workers can develop increased volition and adaptability, clearing a pathway toward experiencing decent work and in turn, dignity in work.

2. Different Gifts Equip People for Different Callings

Many Faith@Work resources note that a wise strategy for discerning a calling involves evaluating one's gifts (e.g., Smith, 2011). The Apostle Paul describes the role and function of gifts in several places in the New Testament. An example is 1 Corinthians 12:4-7: "There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work. Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good." The basic principle is straightforward: God grants us different gifts, and there are different roles in which those gifts can be expressed. Our responsibility is to work alongside others, each expressing our unique gifts collaboratively, in ways that advance the common good. Later in this same chapter in 1 Corinthians (and elsewhere in the New Testament), Paul elaborates on this point by describing the church using the metaphor of the body: "Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ" (v. 12). One part cannot say to another, "I don't need you;" all parts are needed, and all need to function together to advance the well-being of the whole.

Paul is clearly talking to the church (in Corinth and beyond) in these passages, but the basic principle he expresses--people are mutually dependent, with common needs, but have different gifts that must be expressed in mutual service for the good of the whole—generalizes to the broader world of work. Martin Luther set the stage for this,ⁱ noting that farmers, shoemakers, and homemakers stand before God just like monks, nuns and priests do, all bringing glory to God when approaching their work as an act of service. A generation later, John Calvin agreed,

stressing that “in following your proper calling, no work will be so mean and sordid as not to have splendor and value in the eye of God.”ⁱⁱ Eventually, the Puritans directly extended to the world of work the New Testament principle of diversity and unity in gifts.ⁱⁱⁱ Consider this instruction offered more than 400 years ago by William Perkins, commenting here on the same passage in 1 Corinthians quoted above:

...Paul (1 Cor. 12)...shows the diversity of gifts that God bestows on his Church, *and so proportionally in every society*...And by reason of this distinction of men, partly in respect of gifts, partly in respect of order, come personal callings...personal callings arise from that distinction which God makes between man and man in every society (emphasis added).

Christians in the church have different spiritual gifts, and are called to respect their diversity while expressing their unique gifts collaboratively for the well-being of the whole. Similarly, the world of work is structured such that we have common needs and rely on mutual service through the various professions; when people within each profession respect each other and work collaboratively toward communal well-being, a healthy society results.

When vocational psychology was emerging as a field, among the first topics researchers investigated was the question of what individual differences are helpful in informing career decisions. They identified four primary constructs (i.e., “gifts”) that are highly relevant to identifying good-fitting work environments: vocational interests (Dik & Rottinghaus, 2013), work-related values (Rounds & Jin, 2013), personality traits (Goldberg, 1993), and abilities (Metz & Jones, 2013). Several “person-environment fit” theories (P-E fit; e.g., Dawis & Lofquist, 1984; Holland, 1959) postulate that when a person’s particular constellation of gifts maps onto particular opportunities in the world of work, good outcomes result.

This P-E fit principle has been rigorously tested using empirical methods. In a classic meta-analysis (i.e., study of studies), Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, and Johnson (2005) examined the overall effects that cut across 172 studies that had investigated some aspect of P-E fit. They found that the greater the degree of fit between a person's gifts and the work environment, the better the outcome, a pattern that held across multiple levels of fit (e.g., fit to occupation, fit to job, fit to the organization, fit to one's work team, fit to a supervisor). For example, when people fit their current job well, they express satisfaction with their work to a far greater degree than do people who don't experience a good fit. People who align well with their organization are more committed to the organization than are people who don't feel they fit as well. At the team level, when people fit their work team they are far more likely to express satisfaction with their co-workers than are people who don't fit the team well. Even on a one-on-one level, when people sense that they are a good fit with their supervisor, their satisfaction with the supervisor is far greater than is the case for people who experience less of a fit. All of this points to the conclusion that across all levels, one's fit really does matter. This truth was taught by Paul and the Puritans, and it's supported by scientific research. One way to discern a calling, clearly, is to examine one's gifts and consider how they correspond to opportunities and needs in the world of work.

3. Five "Critical Ingredients" Assist in Discerning a Calling

While exploring one's gifts has been affirmed as a key pathway through which one can discern a calling, vocational psychology research has investigated other strategies that assist in the career choice process. Typically, they do so by conducting studies that track outcomes experienced by people with career concerns who participate in some kind of career intervention, where "intervention" refers to a guided strategy or activity designed to help people address their career decision-making concerns. Many of these studies test the effectiveness of an intervention

by conducting an experiment. In the simplest version of this, they begin by identifying a group of people with relevant needs (say, individuals seeking career counseling), then randomly assign them into two conditions. In the first, recruits participate in the career intervention being tested, whether that is one-on-one career counseling, group counseling, a classroom-based intervention, a workshop, or an online assessment system. In the second, the recruits do whatever it is they would ordinarily do on their own.^{iv} Measures are administered, usually using a brief survey, of the recruits in both groups at the same points in time, typically once before the intervention begins, once after it ends, and then at least once more, weeks and/or months down the road. Those measures assess attitudes about their current status in their career, like how confident or optimistic they feel about the process, the extent to which they've made a decision they feel good about, or the level of clarity they experience about their career direction. Then the researchers examine scores on those measures to evaluate how much the two groups change over time. If the group that experienced the intervention has substantially better outcomes than the control group, researchers can conclude with confidence that the intervention is effective.

A large number of these studies have accumulated over the years—so many that researchers have conducted several meta-analyses on the question of what works in career interventions. Meta-analyses are goldmines of information on this question, because they gather every published study that has experimentally tested a career intervention. Then, across all these studies, they apply sophisticated statistical methods to estimate the overall effects that have been found. In one influential meta-analysis of 62 studies with 7,725 participants, Loyola University Chicago researchers Steve Brown and Nancy Ryan-Krane (2000) were interested understanding two questions. First, are career interventions effective? And second, if career interventions are

effective, and if some interventions are more effective than others, what do the really helpful interventions include that the less helpful interventions leave out?

The answer to that first question is a resounding yes: People with career concerns who participate in career interventions do experience better outcomes than do control group participants. The size of the effect is both statistically and practically significant, similar in size to the effects found from general psychotherapy on psychological health outcomes. To answer the second question, Brown and Ryan Krane assigned codes to the intervention tested in each study based on the particular components it included, such as the use of self-report inventories, values card sorts, written exercises, and so forth—18 such components in all. Then they examined which components tended to show up in the most effective interventions.

They discovered that five specific components made a statistically and practically significant difference in intervention effectiveness. These “critical ingredients” are as follows: (1) Written goal-setting and reflection exercises, (2) Individualized interpretation and feedback, (3) Modeling of effective career decision-making behavior, (4) Support-building by enlisting encouragement and help from important people in participants’ lives, and (5) up-to-date, accurate information about the world of work. (Note the acronym WIMSI, for readers who benefit from mnemonic devices.) The most effective interventions included in the meta-analysis incorporated some combination of these five components, and the more of them that were delivered in a particular intervention, the larger the intervention’s effect.

Christians are ordinarily (and appropriately) encouraged to pursue a prayerful discernment strategy in which they carefully seek God’s will. Results from vocational psychology research suggests that outcomes are likely enhanced when prayerful discernment is accompanied by these five critical ingredients of career interventions.

4. Adaptability and “Happenstance” Are Needed to Enact a Calling

There was a time when people looking for work in countries like the United States could reasonably expect to find a job close to home and stay employed within a single organization for a long time. That employer would define their career path over the next few decades, and then pay a pension when they retired. They could expect a short drive to an office where they would interact face-to-face every day with supervisors and co-workers. And they could plan to clock in at 9 and clock out at 5, allowing them to “leave work at work” when they returned home. Such jobs still exist, of course, but they are now the exception rather than the rule. Today, the average adult in the U.S. holds nearly a dozen jobs between ages 18 and 50.^v Job change is so much the norm that people increasingly think of their career trajectories as occurring in four-year chunks, each popularly referred to as a “four-year career” (Kamanetz, 2012). Changing demographics in the global economy are leading to shorter employment relationships, a larger proportion of independent contractors, and more contingent work (Cascio, 2010). In fact, freelance work will make up more than 40% of the U.S. economy in 2019, up from 34% in 2017.^{vi} This “gig economy” offers flexibility and freedom, but also increased vulnerability, given that it requires few benefits and little loyalty on the part of employers.

As a consequence of this rapidly changing world of work, people today bear more responsibility for managing their own careers than anytime prior. This reality can generate enormous anxiety, but it also represents an important opportunity for people who are well-equipped to navigate the change. Vocational psychology scholars have identified two characteristics that are critical for survival in the changing work world: career adaptability and planned happenstance. *Career adaptability* refers to one’s readiness and resources for coping with developmentally relevant career-related tasks, transitions, and traumas (Savickas & Porfeli,

2012). Four types of psychological resources are thought to foster adaptability: a motivation to prepare for future possibilities, deliberate decision-making that exerts personal control, the ability to explore potential roles effectively, and confidence in one's problem-solving skills and ability to pursue one's aspirations (Savickas, 2013). More than 90 studies have investigated career adaptability; these have found scores on measures of the construct to predict a wide range of career-related and general well-being outcomes (Rudolph, Lavigne & Zacher, 2017).

The second characteristic critical for navigating the changing world of work is *planned happenstance*, an oxymoron of a phrase that refers to a process through which a person creates, recognizes, and integrates seemingly random events into their career decision-making process (Krumboltz, 2009; Mitchell, Levin & Krumboltz, 1999). Planned happenstance starts with the idea that it's important to live an active life, constantly trying new things, introducing oneself to new people, learning about them, sharing one's plans and passions with them. The more people do these kinds of things, the more likely it becomes that one of these interactions or events will introduce a legitimate opportunity that opens new pathways for living one's calling.

Building adaptability and applying "happenstance" with wisdom are mechanisms that assist in proactivity building a meaningful career. These concepts highlight the axiom that callings are constructed as much as they are discovered (Dik & Duffy, 2012). Indeed, one study revealed that scores on a scale designed to measure "seeking a calling" correlate positively with scores on a "perceiving a calling" scale, highlighting how a calling is a dynamic, ongoing process, rather than a thing to be found (Dik, Eldridge, Steger & Duffy, 2012). This sheds helpful light on the tendency of some Christians to assume there is a single specific job title that aligns with God's will for their lives, and that pursuing alternatives to that "one right answer" are akin to living outside the center of God's will. A more helpful approach is to recognize that

while God's will of degree and will of desire are clear from scripture, God's will of direction is another matter (DeYoung, 2014). Recognizing that callings ordinarily transcend a particular job title (Dik & Duffy, 2012), and that multiple pathways may be equally aligned with a person's constellation of gifts, a person can potentially pursue any of them while being faithful to one's calling, provided one is using one's gifts to glorify God and serve the common good.

Adaptability and planned happenstance are mechanisms to navigate a constantly changing work world, enacting career shifts wisely while remaining faithful to one's broader calling.

5. It's Not About Having a Calling, It's About Living It

Researchers within vocational psychology have typically defined "calling" as "a transcendent summons, experienced as originating beyond the self, to approach a particular life role in a manner oriented toward demonstrating or deriving a sense of purpose or meaningfulness and that holds other-oriented values and goals as primary sources of motivation" (Dik & Duffy, 2009, p. 427). More people report that they have a calling than is typically assumed (i.e., between 1/3 and 1/2 of most samples; Duffy & Dik, 2013), and a sense of calling is associated with myriad career-related and general well-being outcomes (Dik, Reed, Shimizu, Marsh & Morse, in press). For example, a sense of calling is linked to career commitment, turnover intentions, organizational commitment, work meaningfulness, occupational identity, occupational self-efficacy, work engagement, person-job fit, life satisfaction, and meaning in life as a whole (see Duffy & Dik, 2013, for a review).

Even so, despite all its associations with positive criterion variables, research finds that perceiving a calling does not guarantee that one is currently living out that calling. For example, Berg, Grant and Johnson (2010) interviewed adults who self-identified as having a calling they were unable to live out, and found that many lived with regret and experienced stress rooted in

attempting to pursue their callings outside of their jobs. Another study found that participants who both perceived and lived a calling had optimal job-, life, and health-related outcomes, but those who perceived a calling and were unable to live it out experienced poorer outcomes than did those who did not perceive a calling at all (Gazica & Spector, 2015). Other studies have found that the prevalence rates of perceiving a calling are equivalent regardless of employment status, but that, naturally, those who are employed are more likely to report that they are living a calling (Duffy, Bott, Allan & Autin, 2015; Torrey & Duffy, 2012). Efforts to measure perceiving and living a calling have found that living a calling scores are more closely associated with outcomes such as work meaning, job satisfaction, life meaning and life satisfaction than are scores on perceiving a calling. Furthermore, living a calling has been found to fully mediate the link between perceiving a calling and these outcomes, suggesting that a key reason that people who perceive a calling experience well-being is that many people who perceive a calling are able to successfully live it out (Duffy, Allan et al., 2013; Duffy, Douglass, et al., 2016).

This research highlights how, for Christians seeking to integrate their faith with their work, the process does not end when they identify a career path that aligns with their sense of calling. Indeed, this only marks the starting point; actively living a calling is required to reap the personal benefits of experiencing work as a calling. Presumably, living a calling also optimizes one's impact on the world around them. But how can people ensure that, once they perceive a calling, they can actively live it out? According to the newly articulated Work as a Calling Theory, people who perceive a calling are more likely to live it out when they land a good-fitting job (a process moderated by organizational support and by one's personal motivation) that generates a sense of meaning and to which they are highly committed (Dik, Duffy, Douglass, England & Velez, 2018). They also are more apt to translate a perceived calling into a lived one

when they engage in job-crafting, an orientation to work in which a person activity shapes the tasks, relationships, and even the very meaning of the work itself (Berg, Dutton & Wrzesniewski, 2013; Dik & Duffy, 2015). Expressing one's agency and engaging in an active process of expressing one's gifts to glorify God and serve the common good is a crucial component of faithfully integrating faith and work.

Summary and Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to establish a voice for vocational psychology in the faith and work conversation by reviewing five key findings from vocational psychology scholarship that are frequently overlooked within the Faith@Work movement, but that offer valuable insights that can enhance our understanding of how faith can be expressed within our careers. There are other domains of research that could be added beyond these five, such as evidence of the restorative role of rest and its implications for the Sabbath, research on work-family balance and its implications for stewarding callings in all life domains, and caveats about the "dark side" of a sense of calling (e.g., vulnerabilities for burnout, workaholism, or exploitation by unscrupulous employers). Yet the five areas of scholarship reviewed in this paper represent important examples of how empirical research in psychology converges with scripture and also offers a pathway through which common questions asked by Christians, but that are not directly addressed in the Bible, can be explored. As subsequent drafts of this manuscript are developed, more detailed suggestions for a constructive dialogue between vocational psychology and the Christian faith will be explored. In the meantime, my sincere hope is that this essay facilitates a fruitful conversation that extends beyond artificial disciplinary silos and ivory towers toward a genuine exploration of shared meanings that are God-glorifying and that support the flourishing of his church and, by extension, his creation.

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ⁱ Specifically, it was Luther's emphasis that human righteousness comes only by faith in Christ (rather than through good works) that leveled the vocational playing field.

ⁱⁱ Calvin, John. (1536). *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Trans. by Henry Beveridge (2008), Hendrickson Publishers: Peabody, MA. p. 472.

ⁱⁱⁱ Luther and Calvin operated in a simpler economic climate than we do today, one in which career choice was extremely rare (and career changes were probably rarer still), and social roles people inherited were viewed as part of God's created order. As a result, while people came to view all honest areas of work as a potential calling (instead of only work within the cloister), people discerned their callings by accepting their stations in life, and serving God faithfully there. This perspective on "stations" began to shift in the writings of the Puritans in England and later in the United States, which viewed social structures (like "stations") as subject to sin, just like people are.

^{iv} As a matter of research ethics, all participants must provide their informed consent before getting involved, and are usually also provided a modest incentive, such as a small payment or (if they are students) some form of extra credit. If the intervention is found to be effective, those in the control group are offered a chance to participate in it at the conclusion of the study.

^v <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/nlsoy.pdf>

^{vi} <http://money.cnn.com/2017/05/24/news/economy/gig-economy-intuit/index.html>