

Yale Talk: Conversations with Peter Salovey

Episode 25: Crafting Your Job into a Calling

Guest: Amy Wrzesniewski, Michael H. Jordan Professor of Management

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FULL TRANSCRIPT

Peter Salovey: Hello, everyone. I'm Peter Salovey. Thank you for joining me for Yale Talk. The scale of the so-called great resignation continues to grow apace across our country. Back in November, for instance, a full 4.5 million workers quit their jobs, the highest figure on record. Part of what's driving workers to depart in droves is a desire to add greater purpose to their lives. Ninety-two percent of job switchers recently said the pandemic made them feel life is too short to stay in a job they weren't passionate about. My guest today is the formulator of a practice dubbed job crafting, which helps people find the sense of meaning and thereby satisfaction in their work. Amy Wrzesniewski is the Michael H. Jordan Professor of Management at the Yale School of Management, and her research interests, which also focus on the experience of work as a job, career, or calling, are as timely as they are essential amid a tectonic shift in the labor landscape. Amy, thank you for joining me today for Yale Talk.

Amy Wrzesniewski: Thank you so much for having me.

Peter Salovey: So, let's start with your seminal work on job crafting. This is a practice by which employees redesign the contours of their roles. Tell us a little bit more about job crafting.

Amy Wrzesniewski: Certainly. So, this work began many years ago now with colleagues of mine at the University of Michigan, and we were interested in the work that we were doing in studying how people whose job it was to clean hospital rooms for a living thought about the meaning of their work. And we were interested in this population because so much of the work that had been published previously in sociology and literatures on professions of this sort depicted the work as likely to be not very meaningful, not very motivating, and not very engaging for the people who were doing it. But because of prior work I'd been doing, looking at how people in all kinds of occupations think about, or relate to their work, we suspected that the reality might be a bit more complex. And what we did in the study was randomly selected a number of hospital cleaning staff members and we interviewed them. We shadowed them, we surveyed them about their work and in analyzing the results, were struck by a puzzle. One of the questions that we asked the people in our sample was how skilled the job was that they did, and we had in the responses a group that described the job as being very high in skill, and a group that described the job as being quite low-skilled and would, in fact, say to us things like "it's just cleaning, it's like what you do at home." So we thought, this is a pretty discriminating question from the point of view of how it split the sample, and there must be some explanation for it from the point of view of maybe how long they had worked in the job. Perhaps people who had been there longer had more of an appreciation for the skill that went into it to do it well. Maybe they worked in different kinds of units that required different levels of skill, or on different shifts where they were navigating much more populated spaces. And we could find no differences in either the demographics, or the kind of shift or unit or what have you that people worked. So, this deepened our sense of mystery about what could be going on that could have people in exactly the same job classification, doing exactly the same work, describe it in such radically different terms. And so, we dug more into the data that we had collected across the full sample to see what was it that differentiated these two groups. And what differentiated them is if you looked at the questions that we asked them about the kinds of things that went into the tasks, the relationships, the interactions, and

indeed how they thought about the work, they were essentially describing two different jobs. This was very surprising to us because what we were hearing in the group that described the work as being very highly skilled, they were describing doing things like forming relationships with the nurses and the clerks on their units so that they could adapt the timing, the chemicals, the materials they were using in their cleaning, so that it would better facilitate the healing or the comfort of the patients in those rooms. They talked about forming relationships with patients and with patients' visitors that sometimes went on for years after a patient was discharged, where they continued to write to the family and correspond with them that way. They talked about doing things like taking patients from point A to point B, if that was going to be helpful for them, for walking the visitors of patients who were sometimes their elderly parents all the way through the metropolis of the hospital buildings back to their car, so that the patient wouldn't be worried that their parents weren't going to be able to find their way out--even though this was something, in this case, that the hospital cleaners would be in trouble for doing. In fact, what was interesting was the kinds of job duties and description of the job that these cleaners were given specified explicitly that they were not to be interacting with patients and visitors unless they were asked a question. And what we were finding instead was a very deep and rich relational world that they had created, where they came to see their job as being patient care, which included cleaning, but also included doing anything that they could to help facilitate a patient or visitor's sense of how well their time in the hospital was going, how well cared for were they, could they make them laugh, could they come back and spend time with a patient they had noticed hadn't had visitors in a while? Things like this.

Peter Salovey: Wow. So, these two groups of custodians, they have the same job description, right?

Amy Wrzesniewski: Yes, exactly the same job description. The other group, who described the job as being quite low in skill, stuck very much to the job description. And so, it's not that they were bad hospital cleaners, but they were doing the job as prescribed. And as the literature would have predicted, described the job as being not very motivating, not very meaningful, and they were counting down to retirement. They were there because the benefits were good and this kind of thing, as opposed to something about the work itself.

Peter Salovey: And did this different understanding of the role predict things like turnover, or certainly job satisfaction, I assume?

Amy Wrzesniewski: Yeah. So certainly, job satisfaction. The things that it ended up predicting in this study--so this was not a study where we looked at predictions of turnover--but it was associated with very different ways of people describing what their roles were in the organization. So, another interesting difference that emerged from these two groups was one of the questions in our protocol was to ask people, "What is your role here?", and in the group of hospital cleaners that were not deviating from the job descriptions they were given, they would give us their technical job title, as it was written down in the organization's records. In the other group of people who were crafting their work, and again sort of forming these meaningful relationships with patients and visitors, nurses, and so on, they were much more likely to describe their role, when asked, as being things like, "I'm an ambassador" for the organization for the hospital.

Peter Salovey: So, I used to notice this in my own lab, that some of my research assistants, you'd say, "What's your job?" And they say, "I'm a Research Assistant II, Grade D", and others would say, "I'm working to help people not get melanoma." Yes, right. And it was such a different kind of response to the same question, a literal technical...

Amy Wrzesniewski: Exactly.

Peter Salovey: ...versus thinking about the role in a richer way.

Amy Wrzesniewski: What's interesting about job crafting is that these different ways of understanding what it is that the work is, is associated with doing quite a different job. And we have found in lots of research since, that job crafting seems to be happening, whether managers are aware of it or not, whether leaders or managers sanction it or not, that people are finding ways, when they're motivated to, to deviate from the designs of their jobs in ways that allow them to derive more of the kind of meaning that they seek from it.

Peter Salovey: So, this must relate to this other, you might call it a grander issue that you study, about people who see their work as a job; people who see their work as a career; people who see their work as a calling. I'd be very interested in hearing a little bit more about that, and how that relates to fulfillment in one's work.

Amy Wrzesniewski: This work began many years ago. This was my first foray into research on work, which has been a topic that has fascinated me for my whole career. And in this particular case, we were curious to build on work by Robert Bellah, a famous sociologist and his colleagues, who have asserted quite boldly that people relate to their work in one of three ways: they see it as a job where it's primarily about a means to an economic or financial end; or as a career where it's a means to advancement in a job or in a field or an occupation, whether that's within the same organization, or moving between different organizations; or finally, people who see the work that they do as more of a calling, where the work is not a means to a financial end or to career advancement, but rather, is seen as a fulfilling end in itself. And what's interesting is people who see their work as a calling tend to see the work is making a contribution to the world in some way that feels meaningful and tangible to them, regardless of what the job is. And so, with my colleagues, we went into a variety of different contexts and jobs that were perhaps those that we would expect would be experienced as a calling, to jobs that seemed very much, on paper, just like jobs. And what we found was people varied quite a bit in terms of how they related to even the same jobs. And to give an example, if you look at people who are working as administrative assistants in a university (a different university from Yale in this case), what we found was about a third of them saw the work as a job; about a third of them saw the work more as a career where they were looking to advance; and a third of them saw that work as a calling. They had very similar levels of education. They made the same amount of salary in this role. The ones who saw it as a calling were far more likely to be satisfied with that work, to be satisfied with their lives. We found people miss less work, they're absent less often.

Peter Salovey: Now are people able to change? Can someone who sees their work as a job become someone who sees it as a calling, even in the very same job?

Amy Wrzesniewski: Glad you asked this question. And I don't want to be a downer, but I will say, that in my years of studying these questions, the instance that I've seen far more frequently are people who've gone into a job seeing it as a calling, wanting to be there because of the way in which they feel that the work is important to the world and how fulfilling they feel the work is, and who over time come to see that work as just a job, or as a career where they're now focused on moving and up out of that work into a different kind of position because they're not able to experience, or even craft into the role the kind of experience they had sought from it. If people feel as though they're in some sense blocked from doing the

things that, for them, would make the work meaningful. You can either leave the job, which I think plenty of people do. We're going to talk about the great resignation, or you can try to change the job in a way that may make that work able to meet the sort of meaning that you're looking to derive from it. Or you just change how you think about why you're there, as a way to survive the situation. To flip that question on its head, to go to your question about can someone take a job that they're in, that they don't see as a calling and craft that job, so it's experienced more like a calling? I would argue that, yes, that's possible. And in fact, I think that the thing managers and organizations can do that is far more powerful than trying to do their own job redesigns to try to design more meaningful work, or to tell people about the ways in which, you know, the work is meaningful to the world, is to allow people some freedom to begin to navigate and negotiate how it is they're executing that work. What is it that they're focusing more on? Who are they doing that work with? How are they pulling in other partners from within the organization or from suppliers or clients in ways that help them really connect with the meaning that they seek in the work, while accomplishing what it is that they're responsible for in the organization?

Peter Salovey: It sounds like organizations could stomp this out of people. They see it as a calling, we can, by frustrating them, by not allowing them to succeed, move up, take on more responsibilities, we push somebody back from a calling, into merely a job. And it also sounds like this is a way of re-understanding what burnout might be. Is that true?

Amy Wrzesniewski: I think it is. And here I'll draw on work of colleagues of mine that I think is just brilliant, where they did a study looking at people who work in a calling that tends to have a lot of burnout and turnover. And they dug into trying to understand what may predict exit, what may predict burnout, versus people who are able to work under the same conditions but stick it out and continue to find meaning in the work and to be able to sustain a career in that work. And what they found is that for the people who were likely to burnout and exit, they in some sense, narrated the way that they thought about their calling as being very much about their identity; that I am this thing. For example, I am a physician who saved lives. And if you are working, either in conditions or managerial regimes, that make it impossible to accomplish that, and you are failing every day at accomplishing or meeting that identity of yourself that you hold, it simply becomes too hard for people to sustain that because your experience of your work that had meant so much to you that it was constitutive of your identity, ceases to be tenable. You can no longer claim that you are this thing, because you're failing at it each day. The people who were much harder, under the same conditions, also saw their work as a calling--that their work was about trying to learn and develop themselves into the best whatever physician, animal care worker, whatever it may be that they could be. And so that yields, I would argue, much more of a flexible path for people that you're always trying to approximate and improve on something that is never finished, as opposed to you're failing at the accomplishment of something that you've defined in a static way. So that, I think, seems to be meaningful as we try to understand burnout, and what it is that is yielding so much burnout across a number of different professions. I think a lot of it is about the structural conditions in which work is happening, increasingly. But I think part of it is how people have been either guided, or how they themselves understand who they are and the work that they're doing.

Peter Salovey: Would you be willing to speculate a little bit about what's going on with health care workers in this era of COVID, where people who certainly see their work as a calling are really having great difficulty? Are they just exhausted?

Amy Wrzesniewski: I think exhaustion is part of it. I think part of it that matters quite a bit. These insights come from research that I've done with colleagues of mine here at the School of Management in

health systems during COVID, is that there's a big difference between feeling like your leaders are in the trenches with you, that the managers of your units are out there, they're trying to help, versus they're in their office. And they're also trying very hard to manage the crisis that everyone's been working in, but they're not visible to the people who are working on the floors. And so, I think part of it is either actual support, which can vary, but also even if that support is high, how much the people who are doing the frontline work see and feel that support, sort of spending the time walking the floors, helping out, being with the people who are delivering care, seems to make a big difference in how people experience that. The other thing that we found in a paper that my colleagues and I in OB, and some of our doctoral students here have published with colleagues in the emergency department at Yale, shows that the extent to which people feel like they are part of a team in the work that they're doing in the hospital system, and this was during COVID, seems to have buffering effects to the kinds of feelings and experiences related to burnout. And so there can be this buffering effect of feeling like you're maybe accompanied, if you will, by others, by people who are trying to support you, run interference for you, and so on. Another thing that I think in COVID uniquely that I'm finding with one of my doctoral students, Eunice Eun, is that in a crisis like COVID, you are either by patient load, or by the unknown elements of a virus, which was where we very much were in the first wave. Everybody was trying to figure out what's the best way to care for these patients? In what order do we try sort of different things? In that crisis, I think for the people who identified themselves as being most expert at the most critical kinds of care that need to be delivered, the load issues, particularly in urban centers, were so high that there was a way in which people experience the care that they were delivering, in retrospect, as not being the kind of care that they had wished they could have delivered. And so, for the people who are most expert, ironically, we have found been the most haunted by what happened, by necessity, in the crisis in terms of how care had to be delivered, but who had seemed to struggle the most, and I think are likely to be exiting at higher rates, than people who were kind of thrown into the situation, rose to the occasion, didn't really have as much of a background of knowledge about critical care to know the ways in which this was not ideal. And I think a great swath of our health care profession has been in that situation over the duration of this crisis, in ways that are likely to be driving exit and burnout.

Peter Salovey: Very, very interesting. So, for our final topic, why don't we focus a little bit on remote work since many, many people have experienced that in this era of COVID. Remote workers will account for about half of the labor force, maybe more than half of the labor force this year. And yet, there is survey after survey suggesting that these teleworkers are significantly burned out. One survey says 86 percent report being burned out, fatigued, emotionally exhausted. Pew [Research Center] estimates that two of three teleworkers feel unconnected to their colleagues. Give us a little bit of guidance about telework since everybody thinks they want it. Seems like there's a bit of a downside to it, too.

Amy Wrzesniewski: I think there very much could be, and I think the coming chapter of time in the world of work is going to be defined by what happens once we can go back more easily to onsite work. The resistance we're already seeing from an enormous proportion of the workforce that does not want to either go back full time, or in some cases, go back at all. I think that the findings you reference around people feeling exhausted and burned out are likely reflecting a few things. So first, we know that when people go from working in the office to working from home, that there is the loss of a number of boundaries that had typically defined a workday. Zones of activity. Physical zones of activity even, and gave people the benefit of a commute to work, even if it's just a walk through town to the office, or something much more of an undertaking, that there was this transition, kind of in identity, in a sense of focus, and so on, that tends to help people, in some sense protect people, from having that mode be the mode that they're in sort of constantly. And so there have been a lot of studies that have shown that

people, much to perhaps the surprise of their managers, instead of working less when they're working from home, tend to actually work more, and really struggle with turning work off. Now, for people who love the work that they're doing and want to do it without interruption, this is great news because you can just kind of tune in and dig in on projects for as long as you'd like. But for people for whom that was not necessarily the intention and being immersed in the work that they're doing sort of to that extent, can remove a sense of this boundary between work and home, and work in the rest of life, in ways that can yield exhaustion. The other thing that I think is happening is in a Zoom world, we're not with our colleagues. It has not been a surprise to me that in talking with so many of my faculty colleagues, and so many of our students, that there is a strong preference for being together when we can be safely in the classroom, in conversations, in symposia and so on. There is something that comes from being physically present with others in the execution of work, or the execution of learning, that is a enlivening and an energizing. For many people, that a day of Zoom meetings where you're just going from web address to web address begins to feel draining to people and yields a sense of disconnection. The other thing that contributes to this, which to me, is very interesting personally, and I think has important things to say to students who are thinking about the kinds of work that they're going to be doing after their time at the university, is this part of what was revealed in COVID when so many kinds of jobs were suddenly being done from home, which was certainly not all jobs, right? Plenty of people didn't have the option to do that. But for people who could work from home, suddenly the commute is gone. The work attire is gone. The conversations around the coffee maker are gone. The identity benefits of, you know, working in this organization and striding into this building are gone. Being able to meet with clients, or customers, or what have you, and fly about the country and so on, and consume the cachet of the roles that we're in, is gone. The camaraderie of our colleagues going out after work, what have you, is gone. And what's left, is the work. And for some people, that's great news because they love the stuff of the work itself. It's why they're there. But for other people, that work was made tolerable by all of this other stuff. Being caught up in the trappings of the status and the collegiality and the, you know, being around smart people, and so on, made it easier to endure work that maybe was not that engaging, or not that interesting, or certainly not able to carry someone's sense of meaning and engagement in the long term. And I think the pandemic laid that bare for a lot of people, that this was just not going to be enough for them. And I think that's part of what's feeding these numbers. I think there are all kinds of conversations, and connections, and serendipitous moments that just aren't happening any longer because so much of our interaction is scripted by meetings on the calendar, as opposed to the kinds of things that I think make the work that many people feel they do that's most engaging, much harder to accomplish.

Peter Salovey: So, a final question. There are students listening to these podcasts and I'm wondering if you have any advice for them, any guidance for them, as they prepare to enter the workforce once they leave Yale University, and are doing that in a interesting and difficult era, both from an economic point of view, and from a pandemic point of view.

Amy Wrzesniewski: I have advice for sure, that I hope they will take seriously. And it's based on, I guess, now about twenty-seven years of teaching university students, and being able to hear about what their experience of the working world has been after they've left their programs with their degrees. And the lessons that I had drawn before the pandemic have only been reinforced by the pandemic. And that is, there's a big difference between taking a job because the marquee value of the firm name, or how smart the people are who work there, or the status that you will be assigned by having won that position, burns off pretty quickly, and is quite a bit different than caring about and being engaged and energized by the kind of work that you'll be doing every day because the work itself is engaging and because you feel that work matters in a way that's really important to you. And so, the students I tend to hear back from who

find themselves in real trouble trying to sustain their motivation, trying to sustain engagement, wondering about how long do I stay in this role before it would be OK to move on, are the ones who I would argue, have underweighted what is the stuff of the work itself? Does it interest you? Does it matter to you in the world in a way that can sustain you through a hard project or a bad quarter, or what have you? That seems to be what sustains a sense of meaning, and a sense of connection to the work that makes people far more satisfied over a long period of time. And I would urge students to really think about that, to pay attention to firms that are trying to attract you with how exciting being a member is going to be, and tries to kind of dodge, or not talk quite so much about the kind of work that you'll be doing, because that's not as important. I take that as a red flag from the point of view of thinking about what you're going to be doing day in and day out for a long period of time, sometimes remotely. Given the pandemic and given the way in which that's reshaping workplaces, you may be doing that work kind of all on your own. And if the work is not enough to hold you, that's worth thinking about before you say yes.

Peter Salovey: That seems like excellent advice, and I'm sure it'll be of value to many of our students who are listening to this podcast. So, I'm speaking to Amy Wrzesniewski, and she is the Michael Jordan Professor of Management at the Yale School of Management. Amy, thank you for the insightful perspective you've shared with us, and by fulfilling your calling, I think you're helping so many others find theirs as well. Now, before we conclude, I'd like to encourage our listeners to explore the Being Well at Yale Initiative, which supports employees in their progress toward a healthier work environment. There's a wide range of personal wellness and professional development workshops, webinars, and other services, that are available through Yale Health, and through the It's Your Yale website. And you can learn more about these resources by visiting your.yale.edu.

To friends and members of the community, thank you for joining me for Yale Talk. Until our next conversation, best wishes and take care.

The theme music, Butterflies and Bees, is composed by Yale, professor of music and director of university bands Thomas C. Duffy and is performed by the Yale Concert Band.