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sitting in the next cubicle expects work to provide genuine fulfillment?

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Why does one person see work primarily as a means to a paycheck, while another sitting in the next cubicle expects work to provide genuine fulfillment?

In exploring the origins of adults' work orientations, University of Michigan researchers found that the orientations of their parents play a stronger role than other forces such as religion, personality or profession.

“Work orientations are a modern link between the meaning of work for parents and children,” said Wayne Baker, professor and chair of management and organizations at U-M's Ross School of Business. “Socialization during adolescence is the mechanism through which this persistent link is established.”

A work orientation represents a person's beliefs about the meaning of work. Research has suggested that adults tend to favor one of three primary work orientations: job, career or calling.

With people working harder than ever and changing jobs more rapidly than in the past, they are interested in understanding why they see their work in a certain way, said Baker's co-author Kathryn Dekas, who earned her Ph.D. from Ross and now is People Analytics Manager at Google.

“This study suggests the way people see their work is fairly deep-seated,” she said. “And it is influenced by the way one's parents saw their work, no matter whether parents and children share the same occupation.”

Parents and children may hold different types of jobs in the modern era, but they conceptualize the meaning of their work in similar ways. Children carry their

parents' views about work into new jobs, industries and careers.

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She found that career-oriented people derive much of their identity from working, and see work mainly as an opportunity for upward mobility, prestige, social status and achievement. Calling-oriented people primarily see work as a means to enact their passions and find personal fulfillment; they often believe their work makes a positive impact on the world.

This new study found that while fathers may be the most influential role model in the development of a strong career orientation, both parents are necessary role models for a child to develop a strong calling orientation.

Participants who were close to their fathers were more likely to mimic their father's career orientation, but close relationships with mothers during adolescence discouraged a strong job orientation during adulthood.

Certain outside influences can diminish the parents' influence on work orientations, Baker said.

“If you are working in a distressed industry, that tends to swamp the effects of parental influence,” Baker said. “I think it's hard to think about the higher purpose of your work if you are fearful of losing your job.”

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*Greta Guest is a communications professional for the University of Michigan Ross School of Business.*

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