

Helping Smart People Work Smarter



the DuncanReport

by Rodger Dean Duncan

Does Your Job Improve the World? If Not, Improve Your Job



Beyond obvious things like a paycheck and insurance benefits, does your work have purpose?

For your sake, let's hope so.

According to a Gallup study, there's a 68% probability that you're not highly satisfied with your life in general if you're dissatisfied with work. Conversely, there's a nearly 80% probability that you're highly satisfied with life if you're satisfied with work.

Bea Boccalandro has devoted her career to helping people get more from their work than a paycheck. For more than 20 years she has served as president of VeraWorks, a global consulting firm specializing in workplace purpose. She's helped companies such as IBM, FedEx, PwC, and Toyota ignite purpose in the workplace. Her latest book is *Do Good at Work: How Simple Acts of Social Purpose Drive Success and Wellbeing*.

Many (most?) jobs lack a compelling purpose. That deficiency leads to sluggish performance, disengagement, carelessness, disloyalty, and unhappiness. Aside from the human toll, all that of course has huge financial implications. For example, employee disengagement is estimated to cost the overall U.S. economy upwards of \$400 billion every year.



Bea Boccalandro

Boccalandro believes a big part of the solution is to help people improve their own jobs.

As a little girl growing up in Venezuela, she was taught a life-changing lesson by her father: "Listen beyond the clamor of your wants for the whisper of the world's needs."

"I try to animate every workday with that advice," she says. "Its value is not so much that it helps me be more caring and ethical, although I do appreciate that aspect, but that it drives my best performance."

Is she saying that merely shifting work toward social purpose boosts people's motivation, performance, and satisfaction?

As a matter of fact, yes.

"To be honest, I was once skeptical," Boccalandro says. "But dozens of studies paint a clear picture: Conducting acts of social purpose, even those lasting no more than five minutes and costing no more than five dollars, typically improves attitudes and behavior."

So how does social purpose in the workplace affect people's personal lives?

"Making meaningful contributions to others or societal causes at work impacts how well-rested we feel when the alarm blares, how often we argue with our spouse, and other far corners of our personal lives," she says. "Studies show that work with social purpose reduces stress, improves sleep, heightens happiness, dampens chronic pain, strengthens immune response, boosts career success, supports mental health, lowers the risk of heart disease, lengthens lifespan, stabilizes relationships, and makes us more attractive to potential romantic partners."

Do the benefits of social purpose sound too good to be true? Boccalandro expands.

“That something as squishy as social purpose drives substantial impacts, at first, sounds preposterous,” she says. “It starts to make sense, however, if we consider our ancestry. Unlike bears, who are solitary and self-sufficient, prehistoric humans were needy. They couldn’t hunt big game, fend off tigers, rear their young, or even sleep safely without a helping hand. Our forbearers had to aid each other to survive. Evolution, therefore, shaped us into creatures with a primal need to contribute to our

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tribe or community. Our physiology rewards us when we engage in social purpose. For example, it reduces our levels of cortisol, what is often referred to as the ‘stress hormone.’”

Boccalandro frequently tells people that if their job doesn’t improve the world, they should improve their job.

For most people, she says, workdays are often devoid of social purpose. The solution she recommends is something she calls “job purposing.” This involves making meaningful contributions to others or society as part of our workweek—however we can. “I recently job purposed by directing a small fraction of my workday to support the mental wellbeing of two coworkers,” she says. Other examples of job purposing include:

- An administrative assistant ordering catering from restaurants owned by minorities. Her event planning supports social justice.
- A marketing associate inviting all new hires at her small company to lunch once a week for their first month. She helps colleagues make a smooth, pleasant transition to their new job.
- A surfboard designer inserting sensors in the fins that relay data to scientists trying to save the oceans.

You get the idea. Job purposing is about applying the advice Boccalandro received from her father. It’s a way to use work as a platform to help meet the world’s needs.

Job purposing can also be practiced as a team.

“When team members job purpose with colleagues, as opposed to solo, the workplace benefits are augmented,” Boccalandro says. “This includes motivation, performance, and satisfaction, as well as recruitment, engagement, teamwork, and retention.”

Managers who don’t have the authority to define their organization’s purpose can job purpose specific functions and still benefit from managing a team ignited by purpose. For example, a manufacturing plant manager decided to donate ten dollars from his department’s budget to a local food pantry every day his team has no safety violations. “His team members now fight hunger whenever they strap on a hard hat or hold a

ladder for a colleague,” she says. “Not surprisingly, this job-purposed incentive resulted in his plant’s safety record beating that of the company’s other 130 plants.”

Boccalandro has also seen managers job purpose by replacing the company holiday party with a beach cleanup, creating a competition for making products more inclusive, and using office space to exhibit the art of disabled artists. The possibilities of managerial job purposing are endless.

How does job purposing differ from following one’s passion?

“Many believe that doing what they love doing can ignite purpose at work. It can’t,” she says. “The only way to ignite purpose at work is to contribute meaningfully to others or a societal cause.”

She cites the work of Morten Hansen, a management professor at the University of California, Berkeley. He collected data on thousands of workers showing that people

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with both passion and purpose place in the 80th percentile in performance, on average, per supervisor ratings. “This is the best-case scenario,” she says. “Those who aren’t passionate about their job but still have purpose perform in the 64th percentile, a little lower but still above average.”

designing logos, or forecasting sales—but their workdays lack social purpose? “They dramatically underperform,” Boccalandro says. “They’re in the 20th percentile of performance, on average.

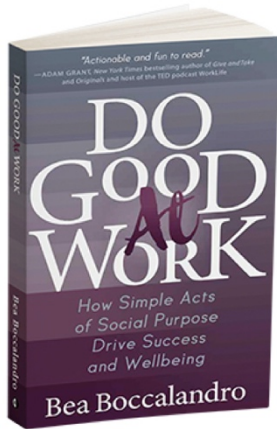
Doing what we love won’t save us from the consequences of purpose deprivation. If our job lacks meaning, we need to job purpose to perform anywhere near our best.”

What are some of the challenges and risks of job purposing and how can people best deal with them?

“The biggest challenge to job purposing is that the concept is so darn simple that people think it’s easy. It’s not,” she says. “Coming up with even one feasible job purposing idea takes concerted effort, often over several weeks. To anybody looking to job purpose: Be gentle with yourself. If, at first, you can’t figure out how to proceed, there’s nothing wrong with you! Keep playing with possibilities.”

Boccalandro quotes organizational psychologist and author Adam Grant as saying, “Self-interest and other-interest are completely independent motivations: you can have both of them at the same time.” How does that apply to this discussion?

“Many believe that contributing to something other than ourselves necessarily means neglecting our own ambitions,” she says. “But that’s akin to saying the more humorous



we are, the fewer vegetables we eat. Research, including some conducted by Grant, finds that self-oriented and social-purpose ambitions aren't opposite ends of one spectrum. They are independent qualities that don't contradict or detract from each other. If anything, studies suggest that people with lofty social-purpose visions often pair these with high ambitions for recognition, power, and wealth.

So, what's some good career advice? Maybe it can be found in those 14 words from Bea Boccalandro's father: "Listen beyond the clamor of your wants for the whisper of the world's needs."