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Vocational ideation and management career development

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Abstract

Purpose – The concept of "career" has become the dominant mode of thinking about the "lifespan" of one's working life in contemporary late capitalist society. The research literature on the concept of "vocation" and/or "calling" has grown in recent years, but has not yet received extensive treatment in the area of management career development. The purpose of this paper is to address this lacuna by outlining and describing the practice of vocational ideation (or considering one's work as calling, as opposed to a career or a job) in relation to its potential utilization in contemporary management and career development.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper is essentially conceptual and is informed by an extensive review of research literature and theory which examines how the concept of the "calling" has been integrated with learning, educational and developmental activities.

Findings – The paper discusses the implications of the return to the concept of "vocation" in HR and Management Development theory and demonstrates why "calling" is a small but significant nuance which can change the way in which managers engage with career development practices. The literature on introducing the concept of vocational ideation to career development activities has grown in research years. However, the literature review found that this body of work tends to focus on pre-experience college students, which indicates that it has not often been considered as a viable avenue for management development practice or research.

Research limitations/implications – As the paper is purely conceptual, and most of the literature in this field tends to focus on pre-experience students, potential implications for practice and avenues for future research are outlined. One of the two main categories of research need which emerged from the conceptual work described in this paper in relation to vocationally oriented career ideation was concerned with developing an understanding the dynamics of introducing the concept of vocational calling into management career development interventions.

Practical implications – A template for "doing" for vocational ideation in a management career development or management development context was offered. This outline may be altered to assist management development practitioners to develop and augment vocational ideation initiatives as part of their work and professional practice.

Social implications – Another area of research need emerging from this work was concerned with understanding changing perspectives on non-economic aspects of work as a social practice, the impact of culture on how vocations are understood, and the relationship between spirituality and meaningfulness and career behavior. In summary there appears to be a need for more studies which demonstrate how changed understandings of the vocation is reflective of broader social change.

Originality/value – The concept of vocational ideation is original and does not exist as a concept or a practice in the professional or research literature. It is discussed here in the context of the growth of interest in spirituality and religion in workplaces. Specific attention is given to how it can be applied in contemporary workplaces and organizations as part of management development practices.

Keywords Management development, Callings, Spiritual management development, Vocational ideation, Work ethic, Workplace spirituality

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1. Introduction

The upsurge of interest in spirituality and religion as it applies to the fields of management and organizational studies (Oswick, 2009; Kamoche and Pinnington, 2012)

has gradually received increased attention within the field of management development (Bell and Taylor, 2004; Cullen, 2008). Numerous articles, for example, have appeared in the *Journal of Management Development* on the application of practical wisdom to contemporary management development practices that can be found within certain faith traditions (Meynhardt, 2010; Kletz *et al.*, 2012; Marques, 2012). However, other theorists have highlighted that introducing learning from certain faith traditions into management development practices can be ethically difficult (Bell and Taylor, 2004), harmful to the well-being of participants (Driver, 2010) and ineffective as a result of being culturally inappropriate to the organization in which it is deployed (Cullen and Turnbull, 2012).

This paper suggests that the process of introducing a spiritual dimension to management development is not necessarily doomed to failure for ideological and practical reasons, but can be engaged with through engaging with the concept of "vocation". The paper begins by discussing the implications of the return to the concept of "vocation" in career and management development theory in order to clarify why the concept of "vocation" rather than "career" is relevant to this area.

2. "Calling" in contemporary career and management development practice

Since Weber (1930/1992) defined vocation as a "life task, a definite field in which to work" (p. 39) it has since become variously and confusingly discussed in the much of the research literature (Dik *et al.*, 2009; Dawson, 2005). Substantial work has been undertaken to refine the concept, which has resulted in an understanding of vocation as a something that is simultaneously: meaningful in that provides individuals with a sense of existential purpose (Lips-Wiersma, 2002; Dawson, 2005; Hall and Chandler, 2005); fulfilling for the individual who commits to a vocation, principally through helping others or creating social value (Hall and Chandler, 2005; Lips-Wiersma and McMorland, 2006), and: appeals to the individuals need for a coherent, directed sense of inner, authentic selfhood (Heelas, 1996; Cullen, 2008).

Wrzesniewski *et al.* (1997) usefully elaborate on Bellah's (1985) distinction between jobs, careers and callings by defining jobs are work relationships which are solely based on material benefits, careers are based on advancement through occupational structures, and callings as work positions as inseparable from the individual's broader life project. Recently, Dik *et al.* (2009) have noted various attempts to "reclaim the constructs of vocation or calling in career and life planning" (p. 26). This reclamation of vocation, as a valid concept represents the degree to which it was eroded over time in a number of different ways (Cochran, 1990). Vocation has often become synonymous with professionalization (Lips-Wiersma and McMorland, 2006; Grugulis, 2003), with the result that discussions of vocations in the context of learning and personal development have often become associated with skills development in relation to apprenticeships for specific trades or occupations.

Another reason for the demotion of the term vocation may be due to its association with religion. The traditional understanding of vocation as a religious concept (denoting a calling to work which emanates from the divine or the transcendent realm), might be viewed as anachronous to organizational and social contexts which are increasingly secular (Pearce, 2011). Although vocation is still used in religious contexts, it is now also considered from secular perspectives, denoting a personal, inner calling to a particular sphere of work. Discussions of vocation in the research literature has moved increasingly in a secular direction (Hall and Chandler, 2005), and

some writers have differentiated between secular and religious vocational orientations (Steger *et al.*, 2010; Hartnett and Kline, 2005).

The benefits of an individual discovering and working at their vocation are multifold and impact on improved performance in the workplace, greater mental health, enhanced general well-being and self-identity (Steger *et al.*, 2010; Hall and Chandler, 2005; Dik *et al.*, 2009; Treadgold, 1999), all of which not only benefit individuals, but also their organizations and employers (Wrzesniewski *et al.*, 1997).

With such an apparently strong case for employees and managers to engage with the concept of the vocation as it relates to their own ethics, values and search for meaningfulness, there is an abiding concern that current approaches to career development are inadequate (Savickas *et al.*, 2009):

> Indeed, a future orientation in one's vocational development is a sign of maturity, yet little has been done in career planning to address this concept or promote a future orientation in career counseling (Laker and Laker, 2007, p. 129).

Whereas traditional management development has often been undertaken with a view changing managers skill sets and capabilities to meet changing corporate requirements, vocational ideation seeks to get individuals to consider their own self of selfhood, which is "an individual's feeling of identity, uniqueness, and self-direction" (Bamberg, 2011, p. 6).

The process of reflexively considering and testing one's vocational aspirations involves engaging with one's own implicit values in a deeply subjective way. In many ways, the burgeoning amount of research which emphasizes the advantages of exploring one's working life through the lens of a vocation (Steger *et al.*, 2010) stems from the relatively recent contributions to career theory of protean (Hall, 1996, 2002) or boundaryless (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996) careers. It has been claimed that the interest in these theories (Sullivan and Arthur, 2006) represent an intuitive acceptance of the physical mobility and professional fluidity required by organizations operating according to the maxims of new capitalism (Inkson, 2006; Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005). Career development through the lens of the Boundaryless or Protean career shares an emphasis on the person in the context of their entire life trajectory (Briscoe and Hall, 2006), the utilization of career planning to find meaning or make sense of one's self and identity (Lips-Wiersma and McMorland, 2006) and a stress on subjective assessments of psychological success, as opposed to employability, as the objective of career development (Hall and Chandler, 2005; Lips-Wiersma and McMorland, 2006), with more vocationally oriented personal development. It is not suggested, then, that vocations are different to boundaryless or protean careers; indeed the clarification of the vocational aspects of one's career development is often a central characteristic of these approaches, as is evident in Lips-Wiersma and McMorland's "proposed reinstatement of *vocation* as a useful adjunct to current career theory" (2006, p. 147).

Developing an understanding of one's vocational identity is not unproblematic. As vocations are based on personally significant events, beliefs, skills and values, the scripts which inform understandings of vocational identity are highly subjective. As such the processes by which individuals come to aspire to certain vocations can be driven by motivations which individuals may not be consciously aware (Freud *et al.*, 1974), or come to reject on the basis of self-evaluations of the features of the occupation or their own abilities (Gottfredson, 1981). The process of exploring what one's vocation actually is can become a highly confused exercise, and managers and employees, particularly those who are at an early career stage and have had less significant

experience or exposure to the workplace, often do not know how, or where to begin (Laker, 2002; Laker and Laker, 2007). Thus, encouraging managers and employees to think about their vocations without offering guidance and structure, risks generating further confusion and anxiety. Interventions which have aimed to assist the development of such an orientation amongst pre-experience students towards their future career development have demonstrated high rates of success in developing an awareness of self-development in the context of careers (Marko and Savickas, 1998). To explore the type of resources which can be useful in helping employees, a process known as "vocational ideation" is suggested. Before describing the various components of this approach, it is important to provide a clear definition of vocational ideation.

3. Vocational ideation

Vocational ideation is the process of identifying, and reflexively developing an understanding of one's personal work vocation or calling. It is suggested that vocational ideation interventions should include a set of structured activities and exercises for participants in management development programmes in order to assist: the clarification of vocational identity; the investigation of this identity through experiential testing, and; the development of a personal vocational development plan.

"Beginning in early childhood, individuals are socialized: they receive messages from a number of sources that shape their expectations and beliefs about careers" (Myers *et al.*, 2011, p. 88). In the absence of interventions which have been developed through rigorous research, individuals tend to make career choices and follow career development paths which are based on activities which "are often quite haphazard" (Laker and Laker, 2007, p. 129). This is likely to arise from the fact that many people subconsciously make choices about their vocational goals during their childhood and adolescent years (Hirschi, 2010). These "pre-ideational" activities are influenced by a number of factors: "including the images held of the personalities of people employed in occupations, the activities they do at work, the lives they lead, the rewards and conditions of their work, and perceptions of the relative appropriateness of different occupational work for various types of people" (Junk and Armstrong, 2010, p. 580). Vocational pre-ideation is influenced by many factors which are external to the individual, and include: parental influences (Wiese and Freund, 2011); educational institutions; part-time work; relationships with peers; media portrayals (Jablin and Putnam, 2001; Myers *et al.*, 2011; Jablin, 2001); country of origin; personality; labour market conditions (Super, 1990); family (Morgan and Foster, 1999; Schulenberg *et al.*, 1984; Thompson and Miller-Perrin, 2008); engagement in occupational contexts (Levine and Hoffner, 2006); the influence of individual teachers (Stekolschik *et al.*, 2010); societally constructed gender expectations (Schoon and Polek, 2011; Rudman and Phelan, 2010), and; class (Huppatz, 2010).

Such a diverse array of potential influences on a client's vocational self-concept do not necessarily hinder the process of vocational ideation. Mednick (1962), for example, notably illustrated how the development of creative thought processes stemmed from an ability to associate apparently heterogeneous ideas or theories "into new combinations which either meet some specified requirements or are in some way useful. The more mutually remote the elements of the combination, the more creative the solution" (p. 221).

The process of ideation involves formulating original thoughts and ideas (Reid and Moriarty, 1983; Ames and Runco, 2005) that are "useful toward the attainment of some

desired state or outcome […] in the form of solutions, courses of action, and opportunities" (Reinig and Briggs, 2008, pp. 404-405).

The process of developing an understanding of one's vocational identity takes into account one's past and present experiences in a way which assists decisions on future occupational choices (Grier-Reed and Skaar, 2010). This choice is not something that is not solely decided at a particular stage in one's career, but continues as a reflexive process throughout an individual's life/career project (Savickas *et al.*, 2009; Dik *et al.*, 2009; Schulenberg *et al.*, 1984). Whereas many contemporary career selection interventions place significant emphasis on assisting clients to identify their skills and values, constructionist approaches to vocational ideation advocate that participants focus on identifying the meaningfulness of their lives, and the role that their work will play in constructing this meaning (Dik *et al.*, 2009; Lips-Wiersma and McMorland, 2006; Rafferty and Griffin, 2009). The philosopher, Alasdair MacIntyre,has stated this position thus:

> Everyone needs to find some productive work to do in the world, if their lives are to have point and meaning. Productive work has point and purpose, both because of the way in which it involves us in common enterprises with others and because of the ways in which it is worth doing in and for itself (1979, p. 6).

If traditional career theory requires participants and clients to think broadly about the recruitment market and how they need to change themselves to enter it, this suggests a process which is more akin to conducting employment market research. The process of ideation involves the opposite of this: it requires participants to isolate a small set of ideas with the intention of implementing one of them (Barki and Pinnsoleault, 2001). By getting participants to focus on exploring and understanding their vocation, as opposed to planning their career, it is likely that they will engage with the process in a highly engaged fashion as "one of the deepest forms of satisfaction or psychological success can occur when the person experiences work as more than a job or career – when it is a *calling*" (Hall and Chandler, 2005, p. 160). Rather than replacing existing models of career development, vocational ideation offers what Hall & Chandler refer to as "different vantage points" (p. 155) on student occupational choice.

This is not to say that vocational ideation merely involves thinking about one's vocation and developing aspirations on the bases of the conclusion of this process. Rather it requires the participant to develop: self-awareness through understanding the constructed nature of their identity and how meaning is co-constructed through relationships (Savickas *et al.*, 2009); an appreciation of the ontological roots of their own vocation (i.e. whether it is religious and/or secular and what this means for them; Hall and Chandler, 2005); a clear picture of their anticipated satisfaction and expectations about the vocation they have ideated (Bandura, 1982), and; the practical implementability of achieving their vocational goals or realizing their personal vocational development plans (Reinig and Briggs, 2008).

In line with several calls in the more vocationally oriented career development literature, vocational ideation requires participants to engage "dynamically" with the process (Savickas *et al.*, 2009). Not only does this require participants to critique vocational ideation interventions, it also expects them to develop their own critical assessment of what vocations are. In relation to implementable output mentioned in the last paragraph, it is hugely important that when participants have considered and researched their vocation that they then "specify some activities that try on and actualize that identity" (Savickas *et al.*, 2009, p. 247). This process of "trying on" some

aspect of the vocational identity is an essential element of enabling participants to discover "purport of life through the concrete sphere of activity or profession" (Danilevičius, 2010, p. 105). Such forms of active career-related exploration (Laker, 2002) have been found to develop a clearer sense of vocational direction amongst participants, particularly those with limited "real-world" experience of the occupational field (McKinney and Drovdahl, 2007). By taking participants through each of these stages, it is envisaged that the goal of introducing a formal process of vocational ideation would be reached: to encourage participants to develop the deepest possible understanding of themselves in relation to their work in order that they might reflexively develop an understanding of the aspirations which will create a solid understanding of themselves in relation to their work.

4. A suggested framework for a vocational ideation intervention

Although vocational ideation is neologism to the management development literature and has yet to be tested in the form of a large scale implementation, the following stages, all of which are informed by the literature on constructivist approaches to the life planning and career counseling, are suggested. These stages bear many similarities with Savickas *et al.* (2009) "life planning" paradigm.

4.1 Stage 1: vocational pre-ideation

Participants might be asked to consider the career-planning activities they currently engage in. A short pre-intervention survey should be administered amongst participants to collect data on:

- the degree of clarity which potential participants had about the direction their future career might take;
- the careers which participants had envisaged for themselves prior to engaging with the intervention, and the reasons why they did so;
- the amount of time they currently devoted to career development activities;
- the type of career planning activities they currently engaged in; and
- the individuals who they felt had most influenced their decision about the management career areas they were currently considering.

Participants might then be asked to develop a short statement (between 800 and 500 words) which addressed the following areas:

- the vocation or professional career that they were considering pursuing when they first joined the client organization;
- the reasons why they were personally considering pursuing this vocation;
- the factors (including social, economic, personal, etc.) which had influenced them to pursue this vocation;
- the extent to which the vocation aligned with their personal experiences and interests to date;
- the amount of time that the student has spent researching the career path they found themselves on; and
- the degree to which participants found the identification of a personal vocation difficult at this early stage of the intervention.

4.2 Stage 2: vocational ideation research

The most substantial part of a vocational ideation intervention involves engagement with the process of thinking about, and interrogating, one's vocational orientation. This could be informed by exercises where participants explore their personally significant beliefs, interests, skills and capabilities, and past experiences that participants felt comfortable sharing. Participants should also honestly identify problematic areas that they feel they must address. Activities at this stage might involve "homework" such as conducting: a short literature review on the vocation in which they had expressed an interest in pursuing; an account of interviews (with around three people) who are currently acting in this, or a similar vocation/profession, to ascertain if it met with their personal expectations; and an experiential account of "trying on" this vocation identity. When participants have identified a significant aspect of this vocation, that they should somehow seek a way to practice this in their working or academic life. This experience should then be honestly accounted for in the form of a presentation to a group of participants in the management cohort.

On the basis of this homework, participants should be asked to re-evaluate their rationale for identifying the vocation they had previously considered. On the basis of this reconsideration, participants can develop a purposeful personal management development plan.

4.3 Stage 3: vocational post-ideation reflection

As the construct of the vocation/calling is something which is often reconfigured across the trajectory of an individual's life, it is important to stress that this project should be salient for participants beyond their working lives. Participating managers will have been asked to revise previously held beliefs about their relationship to their management "careers" as meaningful vocations. This reflection is key to developing an understanding of one's engagement with work as something that is malleable and changes across the individual's life span. By focusing on ones vocation, as a relationship to work which is grounded in personal ethics and/or spirituality, participating managers are provided with an anchor point around which to orient a personal and professional reflexive practice. In other words, encouraging participants to see their management practice as a vocation, rather than a career, provides the basis for individual self-development across the entire span of one's organizational or professional career, rather than solely through one intervention.

5. Discussion

To summarize the findings of this research, the growth of interest in the field of spiritual and religious practice in relation management has grown over the past number of years. This has happened alongside the simultaneous resurgence of interest in the callings and/or vocations. Callings/vocations share certain elements with some of the more recent developments in career theory, such as the need to find personally fulfilling work. Vocations/callings do not reject the organizational context in which careers typically develop. However, they see it as a secondary element to how career choices are made, with personally significant events and subjective beliefs, skills and values given greater priority. People do this vocational "ideating" throughout their lives, but often a tactic or unguided level which can result in negative outcomes for individuals and organizations. The literature was then examined with a view to unpacking some of the practices which could inform more structured practices of vocational ideation that could be deployed in organizational or management career

development activities. As the structure suggested for doing this is purely conceptual, the research questions which arise from the research conducted to develop it are summarized below.

"Although prior research has demonstrated that the subjective career precedes and contributes to objective outcomes (Arthur *et al.*, 2005), the calling – a distinctly subjective experience – has been unexamined" (Hall and Chandler, 2005, p. 172). A large lacuna remains as to how the vocational is considered in contemporary management career development theory from which "the vocational dimensions of meaning and purpose are noticeably absent" (Lips-Wiersma and McMorland, 2006, p. 153).

Two broad categories of research need have emerged in relation to vocationally oriented career ideation. The first is concerned with understanding the dynamics of introducing the concept of vocational calling into management career development interventions, particularly with regard to developing an understanding of how "exposure to the 'calling components' of career counseling improves the client-counselor relationship, leads to greater client satisfaction, effectively facilitates clients career decision making, enhances the perception of meaningfulness and purpose they experience on the job, increases their commitment to their careers or organizations, and increases their intrinsic motivation to complete work-related tasks" (Dik *et al.*, 2009, p. 630).

The second major area of research need is concerned with what researchers can learn about changing perspectives on non-economic aspects of work as a social practice (Dawson, 2005), how culture impacts on understandings of vocation (Dik *et al.*, 2009), and the relationship between spirituality and meaningfulness and career behavior (Lips-Wiersma, 2002). In summary, one strand of research advocates research which provides a deeper understanding of how introducing "the vocational" into career ideation, planning and development impacts on participants; the second strand aims to study how changed understandings of the vocation is reflective of broader social change.

The research undertaken for this paper was primarily exploratory and sought to address the concerns of the first strand of research need described above in that it sought to develop an understanding of what might happen when managers undergoing a development intervention encounter the concept of the "vocational" and the practice of vocational ideation for the first time.

Research which has been conducted to develop understandings of the vocational in the context of student experiences or learning interventions have collected data via surveys (Wrzesniewski *et al.*, 1997), participant interviews (McKinney and Drovdahl, 2007), case studies (Hall and Chandler, 2005) and a variety of narrative approaches (Lips-Wiersma, 2002; Lips-Wiersma and McMorland, 2006; McKinney and Drovdahl, 2007; Bamberg, 2011; Schachter, 2011). Dik *et al.*'s (2009) exceptionally useful summary of how theory has been variously developed about the meaningfulness of work in vocational psychology and career counseling demonstrates that there is a vast range of paradigmatic positions and associated methodologies which may contribute to this mix. Savickas *et al.*'s call for research to develop understandings of work-specific life-designing interventions (2009) suggest that mixed-methods approaches might be appropriate at this stage of the development of the field in order to collect as wide of range of data as possible from a the broadest possible spectrum of research paradigms.

6. Future research needs and implications for practice

Although the author of this paper has experimented with various forms of and aspects of vocational ideation in undergraduate programmers, this paper seeks to explore how this concept could be applied as a practical approach in management development

engagements and interventions. When considering this invitation, however, it is important to highlight potential limitations and the signposts for further research which it suggests. In undergraduate classroom scenarios, due largely to the lack of "real world" experience it often proved necessary to put into place some specific processes which would guide the students. These included "creative visualization" (Gawain, 1978), the "5-year CV exercise" (Laker and Laker, 2007) and the "career wheel" (Laker, 2002); all of which are focused on developing a "future focus" and on developing experiential knowledge that informs occupational planning. "Vocation" as a concept, however, can be studied from theological, sociological and psychological perspectives, and a significant opportunity for developing knowledge about how the contemporary nature of vocation has been enabled and compromised as a result of the fundamental changes in the way work is "done" in globalized, post-industrial workplaces, presents. Moreover, there is a significant opportunity to develop a broader range of techniques and exercises to enable participants to engage in vocational ideation than is available in during programmes of undergraduate education.

These points align with Savickas *et al.*'s (2009) call for a form of occupational counseling which begins from the perspective of the individual client or participant, rather than that of the employment market. Vocational ideation, as described in this paper is an approach which has been attempted with a limited number of groups in a small number of scenarios and significant revision and testing of the concept remains if it is to develop as a practice that might be used in management development. Its chief utility is that it could potentially overcome accusations that management development is conducted to alter the selfhoods of employees in a way which prioritizes organizational concerns, rather than individual ethical values. Vocation, in particular, is a concept that can address an individual's engagement with their faith tradition in the context of work. If a manager adheres to no faith tradition, thinking of their calling as a secular vocation offers an opportunity to engage with their ethical and existential values through work.

Perhaps the key value of vocational ideation, however, is that it can help the management development and learning research community to develop tools which assist us in the creation of genuinely reflexive practice. The absence of this reflexivity has been accused of playing a role in creating the conditions which led to the global recession (Currie *et al.*, 2010). By encouraging managers to think of their development as something other than a career or a profession, as researchers we can learn much; not just about the contemporary nature of managerial vocation, but about the ethics of management development itself.

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