Feeling passionate about one's job is usually a good thing, but not always. For some it could lead to an unhealthy obsession.

Many organizations want employees and managers who are passionate about their jobs. Passion is generally connected with both well-being and good performance at work.

“Passion is important for organisations. It’s something we need and that we want in our staff, but not at any price,” explains doctoral student Ide Katrine Birkeland of BI Norwegian Business School.

According to Birkeland, not all passion for work is a good thing.

“It’s important to identify the causes of the passion,” she says.

**Harmonious and obsessive passion**

For her doctoral thesis at BI Norwegian Business School, Birkeland has been examining what role passion plays for well-being and performance in the workplace.

She distinguishes between two main types of passion for your work:

1. **Harmonious passion:** Your passion for work is under control. Harmonious passion is associated with in-role performance, well-being, creativity, flow and organisational commitment. Your job represents something enjoyable and important, but is not all-important.

2. **Obsessive passion:** This kind of passion emerges when other needs, such as for social status or self-esteem, are intertwined with your job. These are people who define themselves by what they do – not who they are. Obsessive passion is often associated with burnout, work/family-life conflicts and work stress. Your job takes up an unreasonably large proportion of your life.

Obsessive passion for a job is not only negative for the person suffering the condition: there are also consequences for those around them. Studies have been carried out in the past into obsessive passion in sport and among gamblers. This is one of the first studies in Norway into obsessive passion at work.

**1,200 people monitored for a year**

As part of her doctoral research, Birkeland has followed 1,200 members of a trade union for almost an entire year. These union members are graduates working in both private industry and the public sector.

Three times over the course of the year, the participants answered questions about passion for work, well-being, behaviour and how they view their workplace environment.
The study shows that more than 4 out of 10 (between 40 and 45 percent) of participants have a high degree of harmonious passion for their jobs. Birkeland believes that harmonious passion has a positive impact on well-being in the workplace.

Around 15 per cent of participants score above average for obsessive passion. Between 2.5 and 3 percent of participants are severely affected by obsessive passion. A higher proportion of men than women exhibit obsessive passion for their work.

Even if there aren’t that many of them, people with a high level of obsessive passion can cause major damage in the workplace.

“Obsessive passion for work is linked to uncivil behaviour in the workplace. Employees with a high degree of obsessive passion behave in a more condescending and disrespectful way towards colleagues. They go around with blinkers on and sharpened elbows out,” comments the organizational researcher.

What can be done

Put briefly, it’s not particularly good to work with people who exhibit an obsessive passion for their job.

Ide Katrine Birkeland therefore wanted to investigate whether there is anything managers and organisations can do to mitigate the negative consequences of obsessive passion.

There were two elements in particular that she looked into: support from colleagues and managers, and the importance of having a mastery climate in the workplace.

In a mastery climate, success is characterised by great effort, self-development, learning, task mastery and collaboration with colleagues. All employees have the opportunity to develop their potential without constant comparison with colleagues.

This is in contrast to a performance climate, where success is just about comparison with others. A performance climate encourages rivalry and internal competition. The focus is on the best and most talented, who are constantly in the spotlight.

“Both a mastery climate and support from management and colleagues have been proven to have a positive impact on well-being and performance at work,” Birkeland concludes.

Supportive colleagues can help

The study shows that colleagues who show consideration for people with obsessive passion, can slow the development of burnout. Unfortunately, this doesn’t appear to have any effect on the symptoms of burnout.

Birkeland had hoped that a mastery climate would help employees with obsessive passion to be less uncivil towards their colleagues, but, in fact, the opposite occurs.

Staff members with a high level of obsessive passion become even more uncivil and rude to colleagues where there is a mastery climate. They are not able to “shine” as brightly in an organisation that values collaboration above competition between employees.

Advice to managers

According to Birkeland, there are no indications that it can be good to have obsessive passion for your work. It is extremely exhausting for the person in question and harmful to the rest of the organization.
She provides five practical pieces of advice for organisations that want staff with a passion for their jobs.

1) Be aware that employees with harmonious passion for their job are good for the workplace.

2) Familiarize yourself with the difference between harmonious and obsessive passion.

3) Be sure to screen out candidates with obsessive passion when hiring managers and employees.

4) Use the interview to identify the reasons for a candidate’s passion for the job. Does he or she have a life outside work? How does he or she explain their passion for the job?

5) Encourage managers and colleagues to show consideration and support each other in the workplace.

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