
You Can Have More Than One True Work Identity



By [Henrich Greve](#) , INSEAD Professor of Entrepreneurship

People with multi-pronged careers shouldn't feel inauthentic or fear being branded as such.

We live ever-longer lives, filled with transformative experiences, yet popular culture tells us to always remain the same. “Be true to yourself” goes the mantra. Likewise, managers with long careers spanning many roles are told: “Be the authentic you.” This is repeated so often that it must be true. Except that things said too many times by too many people warrant careful consideration, because they just might be wrong and in consequential ways.

In a new article in [Administrative Science Quarterly](#), Brianna Barker Caza, Sherry Moss and Heather Vough argue that there is not necessarily a connection between consistency (being the same) and authenticity (being one's true self). The problem with saying that authenticity demands consistency is that one's true self is not a unified whole. Our many thoughts, beliefs and roles can all be fully ours even though they are not always consistent with each other. People are smart enough to handle more than one role, and they are flexible enough to wear more than one professional hat.

The researchers followed the careers of 48 people who held multiple jobs at once and, in some cases, also changed these jobs over time. They were not “moonlighters”, i.e. people who take on second jobs out of financial necessity, but multi-talented professionals who were genuinely interested in pursuing more than one career at a time. These somewhat rare birds were identified through referrals over a five-year period. Most were interviewed more than once, and up to five times. Findings were triangulated by examining other data, such as the participants’ online public profiles, blogs and presentations.

Leading several careers at once creates internal and social struggles

This set of study participants allowed for a strict test of authenticity because we understand and accept that people can be different at work and privately – like the quiet student who is also an outgoing jazz bar musician.

Unsurprisingly, the demands of authenticity were a burden for these multi-careerists. Internally, a number of them questioned their own authenticity, mentioning they suffered from the imposter syndrome or saw themselves as the classic “Jack of all trades, master of none”.

On a social level, many felt misunderstood and discounted by others. As one woman wrote in her blog, she dreaded the question: “What do you do?” Participants felt the weight of others’ judgements, which sometimes led them to question their own abilities, especially in the early stages of their multi-tracked career.

The multi-careerists knew that they were asked to be authentic, and that this implied being the same always, but they also felt that these demands were unnatural. This led to an internal conflict: Was being authentic according to others compatible with being authentic according to themselves?

Integrating one’s various professional identities

In such a battle, there can be no winner, but the subjects of this study usually found a truce that worked well for them. On the one hand, they had to draw lines between who they were by creating strictly compartmentalised work routines, allowing them to be fully immersed in each job. They also carefully considered how they presented themselves. However, this did not involve *acting* – it involved presenting the part of themselves that belonged to the specific job they were doing at the time. To do this, they came up with

a shorthand, a single phrase to describe themselves in a specific context, for the sake of avoiding puzzling looks. Sometimes they could even present a more complete self, but they did so selectively. Another common strategy was to detach themselves from certain people as to create a psychological distance with others' judgement.

On the other hand, they incorporated their multiple roles and identities within their sense of self, and saw this incorporation as authentic and valuable. A way to achieve this was to identify a common thread or theme, such as a specific skill (e.g. writing) or an overarching purpose (e.g. empowering youth).

Over time, participants did away with society's demand for consistency because they could shape their careers and benefit (and allow others to benefit) from the learning and flexibility that these multiple identities provided.

Think about the people around you. Some may seem unusual because they simply do too many things, or too different things. Sometimes you may suspect that such behaviour smacks of inauthenticity. But you could easily be wrong, and you could underestimate their commitment to each activity and the value they add to it.

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