

---

# The Problem When Bankers Marry Social Workers



By Winnie Jiang , INSEAD

**When you and your romantic partner disagree about the meaning of work, it reduces your odds of quickly landing a job should you find yourself unemployed.**

Say you're looking for a job or thinking about making a career transition. If you're attached, you're likely to turn to your significant other to help you sort out your thoughts and next steps.

Now imagine that your partner is the type of person for whom a career is strictly a way to earn a living. They don't particularly care about the mission of their employer, so long as the pay is good. Meanwhile, you've always sought deep purpose and meaning in your career. It's not that you don't care about pay, but above all else, your work must align closely with your values.

When you and your partner don't share the same views about the meaning of work, your conversations about career options are less likely to affirm your life priorities. Your partner may disagree about the kind of opportunities you should pursue. While you talk about purpose, they may suggest you focus on making more money in your next job.

## **Reducing uncertainty in an already uncertain situation**

The result? You may question yourself and your job search. When applying for jobs or talking to recruiters, you may lack clarity and feel pulled in different directions. You may wonder: “Do I have my priorities right?” But if you and your partner are on the same wavelength, it can give you wings.

In our recent [paper](#), Amy Wrzesniewski from Yale School of Management and I found that when a job seeker and their significant other were completely at odds in terms of the meaning they assigned to work, the unemployed partner was about 55 percent less likely to secure a full-time position six months later, vs the unemployed partner of someone who agreed with them on the role of work.

Our research was based on 1,487 couples whom we recruited in unemployment offices in the United States. The couples filled out three surveys over a six-month period, which allowed us to capture their work orientation, level of uncertainty (e.g. if they felt they knew what the future held) and satisfaction with various aspects of their jobs in the case of the employed partner. We also assessed numerous controlling variables.

We found that disagreement between partners led to more feelings of uncertainty and lower odds of the unemployed partner quickly finding a new job. Our results could be extrapolated to relationships with any close confidante. It could be a trusted friend or a sibling you go to for emotional support.

### **What to do about it?**

We are not advocating that you and your significant other split if you disagree in terms of your work orientation. Instead, we recommend that the two of you communicate openly about your priorities. The goal is to recognise that disagreement over the meaning of work might introduce uncertainty – should one of you become unemployed – and slow down the job search process.

In some cases, disagreement may be a good thing because it can help the job-seeking partner think more deeply about what they truly want in their next job. It can also introduce new perspectives in terms of job options.

Having an open communication can help both parties realise that they can complement each other, instead of vying for the same benefits from a job. If

having a purpose-led career matters to you, whereas your spouse thinks work should simply provide for a certain lifestyle, you can reframe the situation as having the “whole package”: While one of you works to provide a good and stable income for the family, the other can focus on contributing to society.

This type of reframing can reduce the pressure if the job seeker is trying to satisfy everyone through finding a job that’s both well-paid and meaningful.

Nowadays, people are often encouraged to disregard others’ opinions when making life decisions. It is common to hear things like, “Don't think about what other people want you to do.” But this discounts the fact that we humans are social animals.

## **Lessons for organisations**

Our data also showed that the job seekers’ partners were affected as well. The more the partners diverged in terms of their perspectives on work, the less satisfied the employed partner felt with their own work. The dissatisfaction related to various aspects of their jobs, including their colleagues and day-to-day tasks.

This is useful information for organisations aiming to be a great place to work. When an employee is unhappy at work, the problem may not be so much the job, but how the employee’s spouse feels about that job.

For example, someone may enjoy working in investment banking. But the partner of that banker may be frustrated with how time-consuming such a career can be.

It is also possible that the banker never thoroughly considered their values before joining the field. But once their partner brings up concepts such as passion and purpose during a job search, the banker starts to feel dissatisfied with their own situation.

In other words, organisations may also consider how the personal life of their employees can affect job satisfaction. If one of your subordinates suddenly isn’t as happy on the job as they used to be, you may consider probing if the problem is due to the job itself or some external factor.

Sometimes people feel dissatisfied about their job, but they don’t know why. If managers point out that a mismatch in expectations could be the reason, it

may reduce the employee's sense of uncertainty. Better self-awareness could help them reframe and resolve the situation, which in turn could increase their job satisfaction.

Finally, our study has implications for career coaching. As a rule, coaches only focus on the people seeking a job or making a career transition. They should recognise the important role played by their clients' partners and consider involving them. They could also explain that when the job seeker and their loved one want different things out of work, it can result in uncertainty, which can be managed through open communication and proper reframing.

#### **Find article at**

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/career/problem-when-bankers-marry-social-workers>

---

#### **About the author(s)**

**Winnie Jiang** is an Assistant Professor of Organisational Behaviour at INSEAD. She studies the dynamics of meaning-making at work, work as a calling, career mobility and transitions, and personal and professional development.

---

#### **About the research**

**"Misaligned Meaning: Couples' Work-Orientation Incongruence and Their Work Outcomes"** is published in *Organization Science*.