

When your dream job is a nightmare

By [Lisa Cohen](#) and [Sandra E. Spataro](#)

12 May 2021

What happens when you land your dream job but it turns out to be anything but?

Friends, career consultants and the media inundate us with a constant barrage of advice telling us to follow our dreams, find our bliss or pursue our passions in our professional lives. Yet this kind of advice is [not always easily followed](#).

Even when it's heeded, the advice can come [with downsides](#), especially when it turns out that those aforementioned passions involve jobs with routine, day-to-day tasks that people are less than passionate about. In short, work is often hard work.



We're told to follow our passions in our careers. But what happens when the job you've clamoured for is mired in drudgery? (Unsplash)

People land jobs in data science and artificial intelligence, for example, expecting to create brilliant algorithms that will solve big problems. But they often end up performing menial data collection and cleaning tasks. The excitement of working for a startup loses its lustre with difficult and boring work often outside an employee's primary areas of interest.

And not everyone promoted to the [lauded ranks of management](#) is thrilled to be there performing management tasks, or even see the job as a step up.

People romanticise working in the media, fashion, film, fine and performing arts and other cultural industries, but the work often ends up being more drudgery than glamour. Any job, especially an entry-level position, has elements of drudgery.

'Glossy work' is lacklustre

This gap between expectations and the day-to-day reality of jobs is a phenomenon we've labelled as "glossy work" in a [recently published study](#).

For the study, we interviewed magazine fact-checkers who worked for high-status organisations in a glamorous industry while performing menial tasks every day. They experienced a kind of dissonance between their work and its setting.

As one fact-checker described it:

“*“Because you’re affiliated with the magazine, people think you’re a strange type of royalty no matter how you’re affiliated.”*”

We examined how this phenomenon affects them.

For employees, the glossy work dissonance can spur attempts to change the actual job, frustration and a quick exit from the position. Glossy work also creates a dilemma about how to present the work and themselves to the world. How do they balance their simultaneous needs for self-enhancement and to be fully understood and authentic?

Glossing over mundane work

We find they do so by differentiating their descriptions of their jobs across different audiences. When talking to complete outsiders — people at social gatherings, for example — they focus on the more glamorous aspects: working in journalism and for glossy magazines.

For the high-status writers they collaborate with, they focus on their own expertise and other status markers. And to insiders, they present a more complete view of their work.

Presenting themselves differently depending on who they’re talking to can mean that anyone who is not a true insider at the company ends up with a partial or biased view of the work. The full nature of the work is often glossed over, and that’s a problem for those considering taking one of these jobs.

When they only hear about the gloss, prospective employees end up with false expectations that tend to fuel the cycle of disappointment.



If you’re only hearing about the glossy elements of a potential job opportunity, you’ll end up feeling disappointed. Tim Gouw/Unsplash

Potential employees can get around this by doing more careful research on the true nature of the jobs they’re considering taking. They should ask questions about the position’s day-to-day requirements and consult a range of people who currently have the job or who have previously held it.

What employers can do

“Glossy work” also comes at a cost to employers as they try to manage worker frustration and staff turnover. They can stop this vicious cycle by providing realistic job previews. This doesn’t mean they should only show the negative side of work, but they should provide an honest balance of the glamorous and less glamorous aspects of the job.

Employers may also want to consider alternative ways of [assembling tasks](#) so that the less pleasant tasks are spread across employees and jobs.

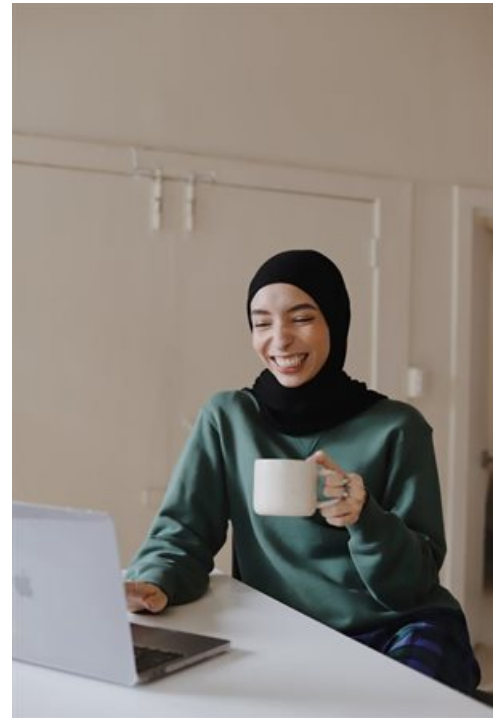
They may also want to be open to employee efforts to [craft and tweak their jobs](#) and create new opportunities within their organisations.

Ultimately, however, performing many mundane tasks remains a reality in all jobs despite the promise that AI will eliminate more and more rote chores.

What’s more, hiring managers should exercise caution when listing “passion” as a job requirement. In an analysis of more than 200 interviews for a [project on startup hiring](#), passion was a frequent subject of discussion. Hiring managers looked for it. Potential employees wanted to live their passion.

Yet none of the hiring managers who were looking for passion in their prospective employees could describe how they would assess passion in candidates, or why it was important for the specific job being filled. The risk here is that they hire people who are passionate and then provide work that either doesn’t match or douses that passion, creating a problematic situation for both employee and employer.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).



Allowing employees to help craft their job descriptions and create new opportunities can be helpful. (Unsplash)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lisa Cohen, associate professor, business administration, McGill University. Sandra E. Spataro, professor, Northern Kentucky University.

For more, visit: <https://www.bizcommunity.com>