



FEATURE

Passion of the explorer

How companies can instill the motivation to learn, develop, and grow

John Hagel, Maggie Wooll, John Seely Brown, and Alok Ranjan

THE DELOITTE CENTER FOR THE EDGE

Leaders are calling for reskilling, capabilities development, and reinvention of how we work. How can they encourage workers to make the necessary effort?

Introduction

Leaders are increasingly looking for employees to break the confines of their job descriptions, looking for problems and for creative ways to solve them. But for most people, employers can't expect this attitude shift to just *happen*. It takes real effort to shift to a mindset of continuous learning and searching. And a first step to instilling passion across the workforce is understanding why some people take on the challenge.

What *compels* a customer agent to look for a better way to support testing decisions by doctors, a farmer to question the irrigating technique for a beet field, a factory worker to identify more ways to use a "job-killing" robot, a video technician to delight basketball fans with new visual experiences,

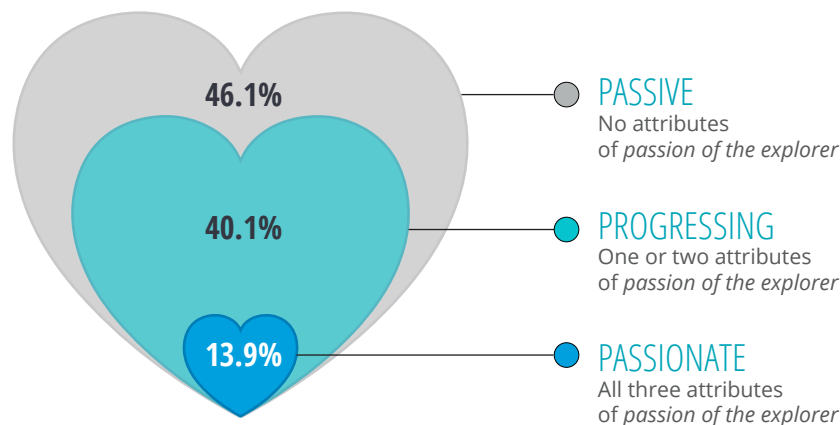
or a programmer to protect children on social media from harmful advertising? What compels a marketer to experiment with new ways of using remote collaboration tools rather than accepting as "not ideal but necessary" endless days of virtual calls, misalignment, and review cycles? What compels an IT support technician to tinker with the way tickets are addressed even though it requires extra effort to learn about bots and automation that could threaten her job?

Something *propels* these workers past the obstacles and doubts: *No one is asking for it; it's not in my job description; I don't want to waste anyone's time; this is the way we've always done it; I don't know anything about this new technology; automation will take my job; if this doesn't work, I'll be fired; if this were a good idea,*

FIGURE 1

Worker passion remains limited in the US workforce

Incidence of passion in the American workforce



Source: Deloitte analysis.

we'd already be doing it; I'm supposed to have answers, not questions; I don't even know enough to know if there's a there.

What motivates workers to move beyond these and try, learn, and try again in the face of uncertainty and headwinds? We'd better find out, because companies need the workforce's full sensing, scouting, innovating, and learning power to adapt to changing conditions and capitalize on emerging opportunities.

An absence of passion

Companies face a shortage of passion in the workforce. In our recent survey of US workers, taken before the COVID-19 shutdown,¹ a mere 13.9% of respondents demonstrated the type of passion to take on challenges, push boundaries, and connect with others in order to develop better ideas and more creative approaches. Across industries, regions, and generations, this *passion of the explorer*—defined by the disposition to both seek out difficult challenges and connect with others in order to learn how to do better, to be more effective, to have more impact²—is in short supply at work. Far worse, 46% of the workers surveyed were *passive*, demonstrating none of the key attributes. As we talk about skills gaps and workforce shortages, new ways of working, tapping into core human capabilities, and the growing need for workers to own their own learning and careers, this lack of passion should cause some alarm. The passion of the explorer is a key part of the motivation needed for learning new skills, tools, and approaches, for taking on difficult or ambiguous challenges, for revealing ourselves and becoming vulnerable by deploying our most human capabilities.

Without that passion, companies may struggle—and so will workers.



EXPLORING THE EXPLORERS

When we talk about worker passion, passionate workers, or explorers, what we mean is a worker who exhibits three attributes—*questing*, *connecting*, and *commitment to domain*—that collectively define what we have termed the “passion of the explorer.”¹³ We will use these terms interchangeably throughout this article.

FIGURE 2

The passion of the explorer is defined by three attributes



TOGETHER, THESE ATTRIBUTES DRIVE:



Constant learning



Faster learning



Sustained performance improvement

- Workers with **questing** dispositions constantly probe and test boundaries. They experiment with the tools they have and seek new ones. They actively seek out challenges—the more difficult the better—as a means of learning and pushing themselves to the next level.
- Individuals with **connecting** dispositions seek out others both inside and outside the organization to help find solutions to their challenges. They build deep, mutual connections not to advance their careers but to gain insights from related domains and to build new knowledge and capabilities.
- **Commitment to domain** is a desire to make a significant impact in a particular area. This commitment provides focus and structure for people’s efforts and allows them to develop deep context.

Source: Deloitte analysis.

What is passion?

Passion, the specific type we call the passion of the explorer, can fuel the individual's motivation for learning. And although it's often uncommon in the workplace, this type of passion—to take on challenging problems, to connect with others to learn how to better address them, and to have a desire to make a significant impact on the field over time—isn't confined to certain ages, geographies, or industries. In past years, we've looked at this question in depth and found no significant correlation between passion and these characteristics.⁴ There's no reason to believe that most people aren't capable of developing the attributes of passion, assuming they are in the right environment, and companies may find fertile ground for fostering passion, a finding supported by the 40% of respondents who already demonstrate one or two attributes. In fact, 87% of respondents report having and pursuing a passion, although only 25% report discovering their passion through their work. While many pursue passions independently, the findings show that most US workers surveyed haven't managed to effectively connect passion to their day-to-day work.

Why does it matter?

Today, it might be easy to dismiss the idea of *passion*: Whether workers feel passionate about their work might seem like a nice-to-have during a crisis. But having employees with the passion of the explorer *for the work they do* may be even more critical, assuming the business wants to evolve, adapt, and act rather than merely react to a rapidly changing world. In short, in an environment of accelerating and unpredictable change, the passion of the explorer is key for thriving.

Passion is an important but often-missing element in how companies think about developing the workforce for the future. Whether that means

cultivating enduring human capabilities or training and reskilling, we found a significant difference in outlook and orientation toward learning between the passive and workers with the passion of the explorer. Many of us claim to love learning. But learning *about* a new topic—of our own choosing, on our own timeframe, and with no baggage or consequence attached—is easy. What about learning that is less *about* and more *how, why, what else, and what happens if?* Learning that happens in real time, in the flow of work, through considered risk-taking and productive friction with a diverse mix of collaborators—that is harder. The learning that companies will find most important will require employees to get out of their comfort zone, to try new things and let go of old ones, and to be present and attentive with others. Not only are the passionate oriented toward seeking out challenging opportunities and connecting with others to learn faster—they are overwhelmingly confident in their ability to learn and adapt:⁵

- Ninety-six percent of passionate respondents (versus 59% of the passive) reported feeling confident of remaining relevant as technology changes work and the workplace.⁶
- Ninety-one percent of the passionate (versus 48% of the passive) strongly or completely agreed that when they need a new skill, tool, or resource, they can easily figure out how to acquire it in a way that fits their current need.
- Ninety-eight of the passionate (versus 56% of the passive) believe that they can face any technology disruption at the workplace and are always eager to learn.
- Eighty-nine percent of the passionate (versus 46% of the passive) welcome changes in work and workplace even if it takes a while to adjust.

We've written elsewhere about the imperative for business to help employees adopt new behaviors that use and develop enduring human capabilities

such as curiosity, imagination, creativity, empathy, and courage.⁷ Few workers will evolve and change their behaviors without motivation. Exposing your underdeveloped human capabilities to coworkers, investing yourself and risking failure, putting in the effort to notice and question what you've always done, putting in the effort to learn new behaviors and skills: This can be hard, uncomfortable work. Why would anyone do it? In general, it won't be because of a specific incentive or the hope of checking a box on a future performance evaluation. While we shouldn't lose sight of the role that extrinsic factors such as financial stability and recognition play in motivation, intrinsic motivation—passion—may be more potent for the kind of sustained daily effort and courage needed for continuous learning, skills, and capabilities development, and working with others under dynamic and challenging conditions.

When it comes to trying out their human capabilities in the work, the passionate were more likely to engage in the behaviors associated with curiosity, imagination, creativity, and empathy:

- Explorers are willing to raise questions in order to better understand the work. Nearly every passionate worker looks to achieve a better understanding of a problem or situation; only 38% of the passive have a similar outlook.
- Ninety percent of the passionate (versus 45% of the passive) report regularly challenging their assumptions and considering what else is possible.
- Eighty-seven percent of the passionate report regularly working to adapt their thinking, assumptions, or behaviors to new conditions; 90% improvise and use resources in new or unexpected ways. By contrast, 44% of the passive believe that these capabilities are not beneficial to their work.

- Perhaps unsurprisingly, the passionate overwhelmingly believe themselves to have enduring human capabilities, while less than half of passive see themselves as creative, curious, imaginative, or empathetic.

Finally, as we move toward a future of work that is more often interdependent and collaborative, it is interesting to note that passionate workers are more positive about the value of teamwork than are the passive.

- Ninety-four percent of the passionate report enjoying working in a group; just under 40% of the passive share that outlook.
- Eighty-six percent of the passionate believe that they could not accomplish their work objectives without working as a group.
- Eighty-two percent of the passionate report spending more than half of their time working in teams.

What gets in the way of passion?

If passion is a significant motivator of the type of learning that will be most valuable to companies and their workforce in an increasingly dynamic and unpredictable future, what can companies do to foster and tap into employee passion? Our survey revealed significant differences in how the passionate and passive perceive differently their work environment and opportunities.

Both the work and work environment influence the development of passion:

- Compared to others, the passionate were more likely to have discovered their passion through work rather than choosing work that matched a

passion. Just over half of the passionate report discovering their passion through their work; 29% chose a profession based on a passion they already had.

- As the degree of teamwork increases, the worker is more likely to be passionate. A significant proportion of the passive (48%) spend less than a quarter of their time in a team/group work environment. Meanwhile, more than half of the passionate report spending three-quarters of their time in a team environment.
- Encouragement to pursue interesting work increases the likelihood of passion. Some 82% of passionate workers report being encouraged to pursue projects of interest even if that work belongs outside their direct responsibilities; only 17% of the passive report the same encouragement.
- Mentorship also helps provide guidance and better awareness of opportunities for learning. Only 19% of the passive reported having access to mentorship, compared to 84% of the passionate.
- The passionate are more likely to report having access to resources and tools to perform better and create more impact. Access makes it easier for employees to begin experimenting and playing with new ways to accomplish a task or approach a problem and offer some agency. Only a quarter of passive workers report having access to resources and tools.
- Similarly, a sense of autonomy plays a crucial role in inspiring workers to think creatively and come up with new ways to perform a task. Fully 90% of the passionate report having autonomy to achieve their goals, versus 31% of the passive.
- Finally, among the passive, there is a sense of not participating in the changing world. Only

39% of passive (versus 79% of the passionate) agree that, “My day-to-day work and what is expected of me have changed significantly over the past three years,” and only 40% (versus 85% of the passionate) agree that, “The business and competitive environment for my company have changed significantly over the past three years.” It seems likely that if people perceive less change, they may also perceive fewer opportunities to learn, grow, and make an impact.

There were some interesting areas in which the passionate and passive did not diverge. These commonalities may speak to the challenges that companies will face moving into the future. Most respondents, 83%, passionate and passive, report that routine and predictable tasks still comprise more than half of their work. This is notable as automation and AI become more and more capable of taking on routine, predictable tasks. In addition, both the passionate and passive pointed to a work environment focused on speed and efficiency as a top factor preventing efforts to develop new approaches or use more human capabilities at work.



WHAT ELSE MOTIVATES US?

Of course, motivation—in and out of the workplace—comes from more than just passion. Mindset and beliefs play a role, as do our emotional, social, financial, and even physical resources at any given time. Fear can be a powerful motivator for some, especially in the moment. Anecdotes abound of leaders who faced imminent disaster, destitution, or collapse of a business and who averted the looming failure by redoubling their efforts, making desperate calls, taking terrifying risks, or digging deep for creative workarounds. In general, however, fear tends to limit our ability to perceive options. Over time, if we perceive mostly threats—of job loss; loss of status, identity, and relationships; loss of financial stability and well-being—these fears work against learning, vulnerability, and growth. We become defensive and reactionary, our vision narrows, and what learning happens is confined to executing within that narrow tunnel. In a rapidly changing world, those motivated by fear will tend to burn out and become less effective and increasingly marginalized.

At the same time, the workforce has legitimate fears. Passion can be an antidote to fear, but the fears of the workforce are real. Between 20 and 40 million American workers have lost jobs since March 2020⁸—many of them permanently. Workplaces are closed. The future is uncertain. Left unchecked, those fears can overwhelm passion, especially if it is just beginning to emerge. If organizations hope to benefit from employees' passion, they should consider asking two questions: In what ways are we creating a work environment that supports and draws out workers' passion? And in what ways are we contributing to employees' financial, emotional, social, and physical well-being, and in what ways are we destabilizing it?

Efforts to reskill, cultivate capabilities, and encourage new ways of working may be wasted if companies don't focus on the environment *and* address the underlying demotivators associated with a lack of passion.

At the same time, if companies can unlock the passion of their workforce, employees may more actively drive their own learning and development. This becomes especially important as jobs/roles become less clearly defined and evolve more rapidly, making it harder to match a role to an individual's set of preferences. Instead, passion can help overcome the elements of a role that are more challenging. Stoking passion can tap into a worker's desire to learn faster how to have more impact, to take on challenging problems, to reach out and collaborate with others to better

understand the nature of a challenge and develop better solutions.

We began this article by saying that companies face a shortage of passion in the workforce. It might be more accurate, and optimistic, to say that the American workforce is suffering less a shortage of passion than a place to put it. Findings suggest there's no shortage of passion in individuals, but most haven't found a way to connect passion to their work. Companies largely aren't benefiting from the enthusiasm, energy, and creative problem-solving that workers are directing at other areas of their life. It's a missed opportunity—one that leaders shouldn't overlook, even at a time when business and society seem to be lurching from crisis to crisis.

Endnotes

1. In December 2019 and January 2020, the Deloitte Center for the Edge surveyed more than 1,300 full-time US workers from 15 industries across various job levels. The purpose was to explore how the attributes of the explorer manifest in the workforce and how they relate to perceptions of work, technology, teams, and human capabilities. The 2020 analysis focused primarily on the differences between two distinct clusters: the *passionate* (those respondents who have all three attributes of worker passion) and the *passive* (those respondents who lack all three attributes of worker passion). Our findings build on prior years' findings to consider additional aspects of the work and work environment.
2. The passion of the explorer is defined by three attributes: the *questing disposition*, the *connecting disposition*, and the *commitment to domain*.
3. John Hagel, John Seely Brown, and Tamara Samoylova, *Unlocking the passion of the Explorer*, Deloitte University Press, September 17, 2013.
4. The exception is level in the organization: The percentage of respondents who have all three attributes of passion generally increases at higher levels, although even at the executive level, it is less than 30%. We explore the relationships between these dimensions and passion in detail in John Hagel et al., *Passion at work: Cultivating worker passion as a cornerstone of talent development*, Deloitte University Press, October 7, 2014; and look at the relationship to engagement in John Hagel et al., *If you love them, set them free*, Deloitte University Press, June 6, 2017.
5. Fully 97% of the passionate believe that they can learn and adapt easily.
6. Comparisons made between top-two scores (*completely agree* or *strongly agree*) for each group of respondents.
7. John Hagel, Maggie Wooll, and John Seely Brown, *Human inside: How capabilities can unleash business performance*, Deloitte Insights, June 26, 2020.
8. Eric Morath, "How many U.S. workers have lost jobs during coronavirus pandemic? There are several ways to count," *Wall Street Journal*, June 3, 2020.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank our Deloitte colleagues whose enthusiasm, insights, and technical support helped shape this topic: **Narasimham Mulakaluri, Srinivasarao Oguri, Blythe Aronowitz, Weatherly Langsett, Duleesha Kulasooriya, Andrew de Maar, and Carrie Howell.**

About the authors

John Hagel | jhagel@deloitte.com

John Hagel is cochairman of the Deloitte Center for the Edge. He has nearly 40 years of experience as a management consultant, author, speaker, and entrepreneur, and has helped companies improve performance by applying IT to reshape business strategies. In addition to holding significant positions at leading consulting firms and companies throughout his career, Hagel is the author of bestselling business books such as *Net Gain*, *Net Worth*, *Out of the Box*, *The Only Sustainable Edge*, and *The Power of Pull*.

Maggie Wooll | mwooll@deloitte.com

Maggie Wooll leads research at the Deloitte Center for the Edge. She combines her experience advising large organizations on strategy and operations with her passion for getting the stories behind the data and the data behind the stories to shape the center's perspectives. At the center, she explores the emerging opportunities at the intersection of people, technologies, and institutions. She is particularly interested in the impact new technologies and business practices have on talent development and innovation for the future workforce and workplace.

John Seely Brown | jsb@johnseelybrown.com

John Seely Brown (JSB) is independent cochairman of the Deloitte Center for the Edge and a prolific writer, speaker, and educator. In addition to his work with the center, JSB is adviser to the provost and a visiting scholar at the University of Southern California. This position followed a lengthy tenure at Xerox Corp., where he was chief scientist and director of the Xerox Palo Alto Research Center. JSB has published more than 100 papers in scientific journals and authored or coauthored seven books, including *The Social Life of Information*, *The Only Sustainable Edge*, *The Power of Pull*, and *A New Culture of Learning*.

Alok Ranjan | alokranjan@deloitte.com

Alok Ranjan is USI data science leader for Deloitte Services LP's Market Development organization, with more than 17 years of experience in research, advanced analytics, and modeling across different domains. He has executed several advanced analytics and data mining efforts and helped Fortune 500 firms leverage their data assets for decision-making. Prior to joining Deloitte, Ranjan helped set up a niche analytics consulting firm.

Contact us

Our insights can help you take advantage of change. If you're looking for fresh ideas to address your challenges, we should talk.

Practice leadership

Michael Griffiths

Principal | Deloitte Consulting LLP
+1 914 255 5478 | mgriffiths@deloitte.com

Michael Griffiths leads Deloitte Consulting LLP's Learning Consulting practice in North America. He focuses on working with global clients on building high-performance businesses that drive growth and optimization through talent and learning.

Deloitte's Center for the Edge

Duleesha Kulasooriya

Executive director | Deloitte Center for the Edge | Asia-Pacific
+65 6224 8288 | duleeshak@deloitte.com

Duleesha Kulasooriya is lead strategist for Deloitte's Center for the Edge, a global research institute exploring the edges of business and technology, and leads the center in Asia-Pacific. Kulasooriya frequently speaks on dynamic ecosystems, emerging business landscapes, and institutional innovation.

Wassili Bertoen

Managing director | Deloitte Center for the Edge Europe | Deloitte Netherlands
+31 621 272 293 | wbertoen@deloitte.nl

Wassili Bertoen is the managing director for Deloitte's Center for the Edge, Europe.

Peter Williams

Chief edge officer | Deloitte Centre for the Edge Australia
+61 396 717 629 | pewilliams@deloitte.com.au

Peter Williams is a retired partner, chief edge officer of Deloitte Centre for the Edge Australia, and founder of the Deloitte Digital brand.

About The Deloitte Center for the Edge

The Deloitte Center for the Edge conducts original research and develops substantive points of view for new corporate growth. The center, anchored in Silicon Valley with teams in Europe, Asia-Pacific, and Australia, helps senior executives make sense of and profit from emerging opportunities on the edge of business and technology. Center leaders believe that what is created on the edge of the competitive landscape—in terms of technology, geography, demographics, markets—inevitably strikes at the very heart of a business. The center’s mission is to identify and explore emerging opportunities related to big shifts that are not yet on the senior management agenda, but ought to be. While center leaders are focused on long-term trends and opportunities, they are equally focused on implications for near-term action, the day-to-day environment of executives.

Below the surface of current events, buried amid the latest headlines and competitive moves, executives are beginning to see the outlines of a new business landscape. Performance pressures are mounting. The old ways of doing things are generating diminishing returns. Companies are having a harder time making money—and increasingly, their very survival is challenged. Executives must learn ways not only to do their jobs differently, but also to do them better. That, in part, requires understanding the broader changes to the operating environment:

- What is really driving intensifying competitive pressures?
- What long-term opportunities are available?
- What needs to be done today to change course?

Decoding the deep structure of this economic shift will allow executives to thrive in the face of intensifying competition and growing economic pressure. The good news is that the actions needed to address short-term economic conditions are also the best long-term measures to take advantage of the opportunities these challenges create. For more information about the center’s unique perspective on these challenges, visit [Deloitte.com](https://www.deloitte.com).

Connect

To learn more about the Deloitte Center for the Edge, our perspectives, research and approaches, please visit www.deloitte.com/centerforedge.

Engage

Follow us on Twitter at: [@C4Edge](https://twitter.com/C4Edge)

Deloitte Consulting

Innovation, transformation, and leadership occur in many ways. At Deloitte, our ability to help solve clients’ most complex issues is distinct. We deliver strategy and implementation, from a business and technology view, to help you lead in the markets where you compete.

Deloitte.

Insights

Sign up for Deloitte Insights updates at www.deloitte.com/insights.



Follow @DeloitteInsight

Deloitte Insights contributors

Editorial: Matthew Budman, Sayanika Bordoloi, Abrar Khan, and Rupesh Bhat

Creative: Sonya Vasilieff, Anoushriya S. Rao, and Adamyia Manshiva

Promotion: Alexandra Kawecki

Cover artwork: Livia Cives

About Deloitte Insights

Deloitte Insights publishes original articles, reports and periodicals that provide insights for businesses, the public sector and NGOs. Our goal is to draw upon research and experience from throughout our professional services organization, and that of coauthors in academia and business, to advance the conversation on a broad spectrum of topics of interest to executives and government leaders.

Deloitte Insights is an imprint of Deloitte Development LLC.

About this publication

This publication contains general information only, and none of Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu Limited, its member firms, or its and their affiliates are, by means of this publication, rendering accounting, business, financial, investment, legal, tax, or other professional advice or services. This publication is not a substitute for such professional advice or services, nor should it be used as a basis for any decision or action that may affect your finances or your business. Before making any decision or taking any action that may affect your finances or your business, you should consult a qualified professional adviser.

None of Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu Limited, its member firms, or its and their respective affiliates shall be responsible for any loss whatsoever sustained by any person who relies on this publication.

About Deloitte

Deloitte refers to one or more of Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu Limited, a UK private company limited by guarantee ("DTTL"), its network of member firms, and their related entities. DTTL and each of its member firms are legally separate and independent entities. DTTL (also referred to as "Deloitte Global") does not provide services to clients. In the United States, Deloitte refers to one or more of the US member firms of DTTL, their related entities that operate using the "Deloitte" name in the United States and their respective affiliates. Certain services may not be available to attest clients under the rules and regulations of public accounting. Please see www.deloitte.com/about to learn more about our global network of member firms.