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5 **The impact of career calling on innovative behavior of**
6 **knowledge workers: the mediating role of career identity**
7

8 **Abstract**

9 In the highly competitive era of the knowledge economy, innovation has
10 become the cornerstone for enterprises to build core competitiveness. As direct
11 carriers of innovative activities, the creative output of knowledge-based
12 employees is critical to an organization's sustainable development. Although
13 academic circles at home and abroad have carried out a lot of research on career
14 calling and innovative behavior of knowledge workers, the achievements of
15 correlational research between the two are still relatively scarce. Building on
16 prior theoretical foundations—career calling theory, self-determination theory,
17 and social identity theory—this study investigates the impact of career calling
18 on knowledge-based employees' innovative behaviors through the mediating
19 role of professional identity. Using a questionnaire survey method and statistical
20 analysis via SPSS, the findings reveal that: (1) career calling has a significantly
21 positive influence on knowledge-based employees' innovative behaviors; (2)
22 career calling has a significant positive impact on professional identity; (3)
23 professional identity has a significant positive impact on employees' innovative
24 behavior; (4) professional identity plays a mediating role in the relationship
25 between career calling and employees' innovative behavior. Accordingly, this
26 study recommends that organizations strengthen the cultivation of career calling
27 and professional identity among knowledge-based employees to enhance their
28 innovative efficacy.

29 **Keywords:** Career calling; Knowledge-based employees; Innovative behavior;
30 Professional identity

31
32 **I. Introduction**

33 **1.1 Research Purpose**

34 Innovation is the core of enterprise survival and development. Knowledge
35 workers, as the core driving force of enterprise innovation, play a crucial role in
36 stimulating their innovative behavior, which is essential for enterprises to
37 enhance innovation performance and achieve sustainable development. Career
38 calling, as an individual's strong sense of mission and inherent yearning for a
39 specific career, profoundly influences employees' work attitudes and behaviors.
40 Career identity, which plays a key connecting role in individual career
41 development, may act as a mediator between career calling and knowledge
42 workers' innovative behavior. Current research on the action path of the two is
43 not deep enough. This paper, through a combination of theoretical analysis and
44 empirical research, analyzes the internal influence mechanism of career calling
45 on knowledge workers' innovative behavior and the mediating role of career

46 identity, providing a theoretical basis and practical guidance for enterprise
47 human resource management optimization and talent motivation.

48 **1.2 Research Significance**

49 **Theoretical significance:**

50 This study breaks through the limitations of previous research on innovative behavior
51 from perspectives such as organizational environment and individual ability,
52 incorporates career calling and career identity into the framework of innovative
53 behavior drivers, enriches the explanatory dimensions of innovative behavior theory,
54 reveals the important role of individuals' intrinsic career pursuit and self-awareness in
55 the generation of innovation, and provides a new theoretical perspective for human
56 resource management strategies.

57 **Practical significance:**

58 Firstly, it optimizes human resource management strategies, providing targeted
59 directions for enterprise recruitment, training, career planning, and other aspects,
60 strengthening employees' sense of professional calling and professional identity.
61 Secondly, it improves the enterprise's innovation incentive system and cultural
62 construction, emphasizing both material and spiritual incentives, and creating a cultural
63 atmosphere that encourages innovation. Thirdly, it promotes employees' career
64 development and self-actualization, helping employees clarify their career goals,
65 enhance job satisfaction and sense of achievement, and form a virtuous cycle of
66 continuous innovation.

67

68 **1.3 Research Approach**

69 This paper follows the research logic of “theoretical construction – empirical testing –
70 conclusion application.” First, it reviews the current research status of career calling,
71 career identity, and innovative behavior of knowledge workers through literature
72 review. Then, it constructs a research model based on relevant theories and proposes
73 hypotheses, designs a questionnaire and collects data, verifies the hypotheses through
74 statistical analysis, and finally draws research conclusions, proposes management
75 implications, and points out research limitations and prospects.

76

77 **1.4 Research Methods**

78 **Literature research method:**

79 Through authoritative databases such as CNKI and Wanfang Data, relevant literature
80 on career calling, career identity, and innovative behavior of knowledge workers is
81 retrieved. The theoretical basis, variable relationships, and research gaps are sorted out
82 to construct a literature review framework.

83 **Questionnaire survey method:**

84 Drawing on mature scales, a questionnaire is designed to cover dimensions such as
85 career calling, professional identity, and innovative behavior. Knowledge workers from
86 different industries and enterprises of various sizes are selected as the research subjects.
87 The questionnaire is distributed online to ensure sample diversity and
88 representativeness.

89 **Statistical analysis method:**

90 SPSS 21.0 is utilized to conduct reliability and validity analysis, correlation analysis,
91 regression analysis, and mediation effect testing on the data, verify research
92 hypotheses, and draw scientific conclusions.

93

94 **2. Theoretical Basis**

95 Based on the theoretical foundations of career calling theory, self-determination theory,
96 and social identity theory, this study systematically constructs a theoretical framework
97 for the impact of career calling on innovative behavior among knowledge workers.

98

99 **2.1 Career Calling Theory**

100 Career Calling Theory, as a significant theoretical framework in contemporary career
101 psychology, was systematically constructed by Dik and Duffy in 2009. Its historical
102 origins can be traced back to the religious connotation of the concept of “vocation” in
103 the 16th-century religious reform. Later, Weber secularized it into a modern career
104 view of “achieving self-actualization through work,” which eventually evolved into an
105 intrinsic motivation-oriented career mission theory in the field of psychology.

106 The core of this theory lies in explaining how individuals achieve life meaning and
107 social connection through career activities. Its connotation includes three key
108 dimensions:

109 First, sense of meaning construction, emphasizing the unity of career and self-worth,
110 such as teachers viewing educating students as an expression of life.

111 Second, pro-social orientation, believing that the sense of calling stems from the
112 inherent need to serve others or society, such as healthcare workers participating in
113 public welfare activities out of a sense of mission.

114 Third, transcendence perception, referring to the driving force that transcends
115 utilitarianism and stems from external needs or internal passion.

116 With the development of the theory, career calling is also regarded as a dynamic
117 psychological process that evolves with life stages. Overall, this theory emphasizes that
118 individuals not only view work as a means of making a living but also as a vehicle for
119 achieving personal meaning and social value, prompting individuals to seek alignment
120 between work, sense of meaning, sense of mission, and their own abilities and values
121 when making career choices. Based on this, this study takes career calling as the core
122 independent variable to explain how its implied sense of meaning and sense of mission
123 directly drive innovative behavior among knowledge workers.

124

125 **2.2 Self-Determination Theory**

126 In the 1980s, Self-Determination Theory, proposed by Deci and Ryan, emerged as the
127 core framework of contemporary motivation research due to its profound theoretical

128 connotations and wide applicability. This theory emphasizes that human behavior is
129 driven by intrinsic psychological needs.

130 Its theoretical connotations encompass three pillars:

131 Autonomy, which refers to an individual's sense of control over behavioral choices,
132 such as employees' autonomous decision-making at work.

133 Competence, which denotes an individual's perception of their ability to effectively
134 complete tasks, such as the match between skills and tasks.

135 Relatedness, which signifies an individual's connection and belonging experience with
136 a team or professional group.

137 Self-Determination Theory further reveals that career calling can stimulate the intrinsic
138 motivation of employees' innovative behavior by satisfying these basic psychological
139 needs (such as enhancing autonomy through "autonomous innovation"), thus providing
140 important theoretical support for research on the driving mechanism of innovative
141 behavior.

142

143 **2.3 Social Identity Theory**

144 Social Identity Theory, proposed by social psychologists Tajfel and Turner in the
145 1970s, reveals how group belongingness influences behavior by shaping individual
146 cognition—that is, individuals define themselves through group identity (such as
147 professional groups) and adjust their actions in accordance with group norms.

148 This theory encompasses three key mechanisms:

149 First, categorization, where individuals classify themselves into specific groups (such
150 as "I am an engineer").

151 Second, identification, where they internalize the values and norms of that group (such
152 as "engineers should innovate").

153 Third, comparison, where they enhance their self-esteem by elevating the status of their
154 own group.

155 Social Identity Theory explains how professional identity, by strengthening employees'
156 sense of belonging to their profession, encourages them to follow behaviors such as
157 "innovation" that are regarded as norms by the group.

158 In summary, knowledge workers, on the one hand, love their work due to a sense of
159 meaning and mission (career calling), which aligns with the needs satisfaction
160 mechanism of Self-Determination Theory. On the other hand, they actively pursue
161 innovation due to professional identity (social identity). The combination of career
162 calling theory, self-determination theory, and social identity theory provides systematic
163 theoretical support for analyzing the complex relationship between career calling and
164 innovative behavior among knowledge workers in the Chinese context.

165

166 3. Research Hypotheses

167 **Hypothesis 1:** Career calling has a significant positive impact on the innovative
168 behavior of knowledge workers. The sense of meaning and purpose brought by career
169 calling can stimulate employees' intrinsic motivation at work, promoting the generation
170 and implementation of innovative ideas (Amabile, 1993; Zhou Xia, 2018).

171 **Hypothesis 2:** Career calling has a significant positive impact on career identity.
172 Individuals with a strong sense of career calling are passionate about their careers,
173 which can lead to higher levels of career identity and competency (Dobrow, 2012; Liao
174 Xiaoyan, 2023).

175 **Hypothesis 3:** Professional identity has a significant positive impact on the innovative
176 behavior of knowledge workers. Employees with high professional identity are more
177 inclined to follow professional group norms, view innovation as a professional
178 responsibility, and actively engage in innovative practices (Li Guihua, 2021; Zhu
179 Yongyue, 2023).

180 **Hypothesis 4:** Career identity plays a mediating role in the relationship between career
181 calling and innovative behavior among knowledge workers. Career calling first
182 enhances employees' career identity, and then promotes innovative behavior through
183 this sense of identity, forming a conduction path of "career calling – career identity –
184 innovative behavior" (Pei Yujing, 2023; Wang Zishuai, 2023).

185

186 4. Questionnaire Development

187 The questionnaire comprises five modules: introduction, basic personal information,
188 career calling scale, career identity scale, and employee innovative behavior scale.
189 Except for basic information, the remaining items adopt the Likert scoring method. The
190 career calling scale uses a 7-point scoring system, while the career identity and
191 innovative behavior scales use a 5-point scoring system.

192 To ensure uniform measurement scales, the mean value of the career calling scale is
193 converted to a 5-point scoring system through linear transformation. The reverse
194 scoring items in the career identity scale have been converted to forward scoring. All
195 scales utilize mature tools from both domestic and international sources to ensure
196 reliability and validity.

197 5. Data Acquisition

198 The questionnaire was designed through the Wenjuanxing platform and distributed via
199 social media platforms such as WeChat and QQ using snowball sampling. Targeted
200 invitations were sent to knowledge workers across various industries. A total of 265
201 questionnaires were collected. After excluding invalid questionnaires with consistent
202 answers and those completed in less than 60 seconds, 249 valid questionnaires
203 remained, with an effective rate of 93.96%.

204 The basic information of the sample is as follows: In terms of gender distribution,
205 52.60% are female and 47.40% are male. The majority of employees are under 35 years
206 old, accounting for 66.30%. Most respondents have a bachelor's degree (65.10%),
207 followed by 19.30% with a college degree and 15.70% with a master's degree or above.

208 Additionally, 56.20% have three years or less of work experience. The majority of job
 209 positions are grassroots employees (55.80%). The distribution of unit types is relatively
 210 even, with government agencies accounting for the highest proportion (32.10%).

211

212 **6. Data Collation and Statistical Analysis**

213 **6.1 Reliability Analysis**

214 After completing the preprocessing of questionnaire data, a reliability test was
 215 conducted on each measurement scale to assess the stability of the data and the internal
 216 consistency among items.

217 .

218 Table 5-1 Reliability test results

scale	number of items	Cronbach's alpha coefficient
Career calling	12	0.972
professional identity	9	0.821
Employee innovative behavior	6	0.834
Overall scale	27	0.969

220

221 From Table 5-1, it can be seen that the Cronbach's α coefficient value for the career
 222 calling scale is 0.972, the Cronbach's α coefficient value for the career identity scale is
 223 0.821, the Cronbach's α coefficient value for the employee innovative behavior scale is
 224 0.834, and the overall Cronbach's α coefficient value for the scale is 0.969. All
 225 Cronbach's α coefficient values for the scales are greater than 0.8, indicating that the
 226 data in this study have excellent reliability, and the overall reliability of the scale is
 227 excellent.

6.2 Validity Analysis

228 This study employs exploratory factor analysis to conduct validity tests on the career
 229 calling scale, career identity scale, and employee innovative behavior scale.

230 **Table 5-2 Validity Test Results**

231

variable	KMO value	Bartlett's test of sphericity - approximate chi-square	Bartlett's test of sphericity - degrees of freedom	Bartlett's Test of Sphericity - Sig
Career Calling	0.973	3202.718	66	0.000

professional identity	0.872	673.739	36	0.000
Employee innovative behavior	0.867	478.076	15	0.000

232
233

234 As shown in Table 5-2, the KMO values of the career calling scale, career identity
235 scale, and employee innovative behavior scale are 0.973, 0.872, and 0.867,
236 respectively, all of which are higher than the standard value of 0.7. Meanwhile, the
237 approximate chi-square distribution values of each scale meet the statistical
238 requirements, exhibiting a good level of significance, and all p-values are less than
239 0.001, indicating that the questionnaire scales in this study have good construct
240 validity.

241

242 **6.3 Correlation Analysis**

243 This article employs the Pearson correlation coefficient to measure the correlation
244 among career calling, career identity, and employee innovative behavior.

245 **Table 5-3 Correlation Analysis of Variables**

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variable	Career calling	professional identity	Employee innovative behavior
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Career calling	1	0.881**	0.916**
professionalidentity	0.881**	1	0.855**
Employee innovative behavior	0.916**	0.855**	1
Note:**P<0.01			

As shown in Table 5-3:

The correlation coefficient between career calling and employee innovative behavior is 0.916, and the probability value (P) of the correlation coefficient test is less than 0.01, indicating a significant and positive correlation between the two.

The correlation coefficient between career calling and career identity is 0.881, and the probability value (P) of the correlation coefficient test is less than 0.01, indicating a significant positive correlation between the two.

The Pearson correlation coefficient between professional identity and employee innovative behavior is 0.855, with a significance test probability value of $P < 0.01$, indicating a significant positive correlation between the two.

Based on the results of the aforementioned correlation analysis, the first three hypotheses of the study have been basically verified.

6.4 Regression Analysis

6.4.1 Regression Analysis of Career Calling and Employee Innovative Behavior

A linear regression analysis was conducted with career calling as the independent variable and employee innovative behavior as the dependent variable. The results showed that the model had an R^2 of 0.838, indicating that career calling could explain 83.8% of the variation in employee innovative behavior.

The regression equation was:

$$\text{Employee innovative behavior} = 1.052 + 0.709 \times \text{Career calling}$$

The regression coefficient (β) of career calling was 0.916 ($t = 35.826$, $P = 0.000 < 0.01$). Additionally, the model had an F value of 1283.533 ($P = 0.000 < 0.01$), indicating overall significance. Hypothesis 1 was verified.

Table 5-4 Regression Analysis Results of Career Calling and Employee Innovative Behavior (N = 249)

variable	Non-standardized coefficient B	standard error	Standardized coefficient Beta	t-value	Sig	R ²	F-value
constant	1.052	0.079	-	13.240	0.000	0.838	1283.53

							3
Career Calling	0.709	0.020	0.916	35.826	0.000	-	-
Note: The dependent variable is employee innovative behavior							

6.4.2 Regression Analysis of Career Calling and Career Identity

A linear regression analysis was conducted with career calling as the independent variable and career identity as the dependent variable. The model yielded an R² of 0.774, indicating that career calling can explain 77.4% of the variation in career identity.

The regression equation is:

$$\text{Career identity} = 1.944 + 0.545 \times \text{Career calling}$$

The regression coefficient (β) of career calling was 0.881 ($t = 29.193$, $P = 0.000 < 0.01$), and the model F value was 852.240 ($P = 0.000 < 0.01$), indicating that the model is statistically significant overall. Therefore, Hypothesis 2 is verified.

Table 5-5 Regression Analysis Results of Career Calling and Career Identity (N = 249)

constant	-0.532	0.170	-	-3.138	0.002	0.730	671.539
professional identity	1.069	0.041	0.855	25.914	0.000	-	-
Note: The dependent variable is employee innovative behavior							

6.4.4 Mediation Effect Test

The stepwise regression method and the Bootstrap method were employed to examine the mediating effect of career identity. The specific steps and results are as follows:

Step 1: Direct Effect Test (Model 1)

First, the direct effect of career calling on employee innovative behavior was tested. The results showed that career calling had a significant positive impact on employee innovative behavior ($B = 0.709$, $p < .001$).

Step 2: Effect of Independent Variable on Mediator (Model 2)

Next, the effect of career calling on career identity was examined. The results indicated that career calling significantly and positively influenced career identity ($B = 0.545$, $p < .001$).

Step 3: Mediated Regression Model (Model 3)

Finally, both career calling and career identity were simultaneously entered into the regression model predicting employee innovative behavior.

The results showed that:

- The regression coefficient of career calling decreased from 0.709 to 0.561 ($p < .001$), but remained significant.
- The regression coefficient of career identity on employee innovative behavior was 0.271 ($p < .001$), indicating a significant positive effect.

The indirect (mediating) effect was calculated as:

$$0.545 \times 0.271 = 0.148$$

This indirect effect accounts for 20.84% of the total effect, indicating that career identity plays a **partial mediating role** between career calling and employee innovative behavior.

Bootstrap Test

To further verify the mediation effect, the Bootstrap method was applied with 5,000 resamples and a 95% confidence interval.

The results showed that:

- The indirect effect value was 0.1477.
- The 95% confidence interval was [0.0783, 0.2126].
- Since the confidence interval does not include zero, the mediating effect is statistically significant.

Therefore, Hypothesis 4 is supported.

Table 5-7 Results of Mediation Effect Test (N = 249)

model	predict or variable	dependent variable	R ²	B	SE	β	t-value	Sig
one	Career calling	Employee innovative behavior	0.838	0.709	0.020	0.916	35.826	0.000
two	Career calling	professional identity	0.774	0.545	0.019	0.881	29.193	0.000
three	Career Calling	Employee innovative behavior	0.848	0.561	0.040	0.725	13.878	0.000

	professional identity	Employee innovative behavior	-	0.271	0.065	0.217	4.149	0.000
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Table 5-8 Decomposition of Total Effect, Direct Effect, and Indirect Effect

Testing effect	effectsize	standard error	95%lower limit confidence interval (LLCI)	95% Upper Limit Confidence Interval (ULCI)	Effect proportion
total effect	0.7085	0.0198	0.6696	0.7475	-
indirect effect	0.1477	0.0342	0.0783	0.2126	20.84%
direct effect	0.5609	0.0404	0.4813	0.6405	79.16%

7 Hypothesis verification results

hypothesis	Verification result
Career calling has a significant positive impact on the innovative behavior of knowledge workers	establish
Career calling has a significant positive impact on career identity	establish
Career identity has a significant positive impact on the innovative behavior of knowledge workers	establish
Career identity plays a mediating role in career calling and innovative behavior of knowledge workers	establish

8. Research Conclusion

This study explores the mechanism through which career calling influences the innovative behavior of knowledge workers, further enriching the theoretical framework in the field of career calling and knowledge worker innovation behavior. Career identity was introduced as a mediating variable into the research model. Using SPSS 21.0 statistical analysis software, data collected from 249 valid questionnaires

were analyzed. The results confirm that career calling affects the innovative behavior of knowledge workers through the mediating role of career identity.

The specific research findings are as follows:

1. Career calling has a significant positive impact on employees' innovative behavior

The verification of Hypothesis 1 confirms that career calling has a significant positive effect on employees' innovative behavior. When employees experience a strong sense of career calling, their willingness and actual engagement in innovative activities increase significantly.

This effect stems from the stimulation of intrinsic motivation and increased emotional investment, which are transformed into innovative actions such as breaking conventional thinking patterns and actively exploring new approaches.

This finding reveals the direct empowering mechanism of career calling as a deep psychological driving force behind employees' innovative behavior.

2. Career calling has a significant positive impact on career identity

The verification of Hypothesis 2 indicates that career calling significantly enhances career identity among knowledge workers. When employees perceive their work as a mission, their career values, goal pursuit, and self-concept become stronger.

Career calling not only provides intrinsic motivation but also plays a key role in shaping and stabilizing career identity throughout career development. This provides theoretical support for understanding employee career behavior and organizational development.

3. Career identity has a significant positive impact on employees' innovative behavior

The verification of Hypothesis 3 shows that career identity significantly and positively influences the innovative behavior of knowledge workers.

This effect operates through several mechanisms:

- Career identity enhances employees' sense of responsibility and commitment, motivating them to use innovative methods to improve work quality.
- Employees with strong career identity view innovation as an essential part of their professional role and responsibility.
- Such employees are more concerned about maintaining professional reputation through innovation.
- They demonstrate stronger psychological resilience when facing innovation-related challenges.

Thus, career identity functions as an important psychological mechanism that drives innovation behavior.

4. Career identity plays a mediating role between career calling and employee innovative behavior

The verification of Hypothesis 4 confirms the mediating effect of career identity between career calling and employee innovative behavior.

The impact of career calling on innovative behavior is not only direct but also indirect. Career calling enhances employees' identification with their professional roles, which in turn promotes innovative behavior.

Through deep reflection on questions such as "Who am I?" and "What is the meaning of my job?", employees strengthen their career identity and sense of responsibility. As a result, they become more willing to take risks, invest effort, and engage in innovation.

This forms a dynamic mechanism of:

Career Calling → Career Identity → Innovative Behavior

This mediation mechanism provides important theoretical guidance for enterprises aiming to promote employee innovation.

9. Research Limitations and Future Prospects

1. Sample Limitations

The effective sample size was 249, which meets basic statistical requirements but remains relatively limited in scale and industry coverage. This may affect the generalizability of the findings.

Future research should expand the sample size and conduct cross-industry and cross-regional studies to enhance robustness.

2. Variable Limitations

The model did not include moderating variables (such as organizational support or personality traits), which limits understanding of contextual differences.

Future studies may introduce moderating variables to build a more comprehensive theoretical model.

3. Methodological Limitations

The cross-sectional survey design limits the ability to capture dynamic relationships among variables and restricts causal inference.

Future research may adopt longitudinal designs, case studies, or action research methods to provide deeper insight and more practical management implications.

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