

From Ration¹ to Passion, What Motivates Us

The Past

My grandfather is the fourth child among five siblings. He is the most educated member of my family from his generation. He completed his bachelor's, followed by a master's and then went on to serve as a Civil Engineer in the Urban Water Corporation of the largest state of India. He traveled across the state from one location to another as he was transferred periodically. He received timebound promotions at his government job. In that day and age, he led a life and had a career that many aspired for and would consider a remarkable success.

As I child I used to ask him, what is it that he wanted to do, and if he was able to do that? He would always reply that he did what was best for him and his family. He held a secure job with a steady paycheck, had a lot of respect in society, and provided for his family. He said he didn't want to be like his peers and cousins, to sit at the family store from dawn to dusk and always worry about sales.

I know he loves to meet people, make new connections, and form friendships and lasting relationships, in today's day he would have made a fantastic podcaster or a YouTuber or a talk show host. He doesn't know what his passion was, he could never explore it. He knew one thing, that he wanted his life to be different from the cookie-cutter lifestyle of his peers.

On the other hand, my grandmother, who was the fourth child among nine, was married at an early age. She could only study till Class 12th. Even as a child, she would cook for the household. Of the nine children, the first seven were girls, and it was the responsibility of the eldest girl to perform household duties, until of course, she was married off. Then the responsibility fell on the shoulders of the next girl. The boys would study and learn to work at their father's (my great grandfather's) restaurant. That restaurant is still running to this day, with new generations taking on the responsibility.

With each sibling, the level of education kept on increasing. The eldest sister was in Class 5th when she was wedded, and the youngest sister was married midway through college, and fortunately, her in-laws allowed her to study and work, so she was able to do that.

My grandmother never worked outside of the home, for many reasons, her education level, societal acceptance of women working only in certain types of "respectable" roles, for example, teachers, and frequent transfers of my grandfather would not allow a steady job in one place and because she had two daughters to take care of. It was expected that she would do just that, take care of her daughters and husband, and that's what she did her whole life, up until she passed away last year due to Covid.

¹ In India, we colloquially refer to "ration" as any household consumable such as flour, pulses, fruits etc. It comes from the time when food suppliers were rationed, and people started to refer to food itself as "ration"

She loved to cook and would make better food at home than at most restaurants. She could have had her Bakery or a Sweet Shop, she could have hosted her cooking show or a popular YouTube channel.

One thing is evident from both their stories, they did what was expected of them and what they had to, to have a life and a family. To them, the most important thing in life was that their daughters do not go to bed hungry. Their own happiness, passions, and interests were immaterial and did not matter.

The Present

Today I am working as a Consultant for a US-based company, I advise clients on strategy and help them implement those recommendations.

I cannot help but feel that my life is at least in some ways different from my grandparents and my mother who also followed in their footsteps to become an engineer and secure a government job.

When I was choosing my specialization for my bachelor's, I was nudged (read compelled) to choose the one which was my mother's, I was nudged to select the college of her choosing. All this was done with the grand plan to have me appear for selection exams for a government job, have a secure career, get married, and have kids.

After my bachelor's I decided to not take that route, even today I hear this at home sometimes, that I should have appeared for those exams and would have gotten a job like my mother.

I instead decided to go for an MBA. With some hard work and a bit of luck, I entered the best management institute in India. Being an Indian, I can confirm that this is a typical career path for people. They pursue engineering because that is the most "respectable" degree, work for a few years, get bored, go for an MBA, or change their career paths entirely away from Engineering. Those who are passionate about sciences, go for an MS abroad. Drucker talks of a second career in his iconic paper *Managing Oneself*², he says by the time people are 45, they've peaked in their careers, and are bored. I believe that today, people reach that level of stagnancy, and boredom early on in their careers and often become dissatisfied.

The most common thing I hear today from my friends and peers (post bachelor's and MBA alike) is that most of them do not like their jobs and are unhappy but are reluctant to take a risk to pursue something different (other than a higher degree). For several reasons, it is a social stigma, a deep-rooted fear of failure, "Log Kya Kahenge"³ – which in English means what will people say, and so on. They have become comfortable in their ways and are afraid of change.

People want their children to have the same life as they did. Those who own businesses want their children to run those, government servants want their children to secure government jobs,

² Drucker, Peter F., Harvard Business Review. "Managing Oneself." hbr.org, January 1, 2005.

³ Log Kya Kahenge - Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Log_Kya_Kahenge.

because it's a job for life. People looking to move up in life, spend copious amounts of money, usually loans, to pay for coaching for these entrance exams, pushing them further into debt.

Every year, millions of students study for these "prestigious" and extremely few, government jobs⁴. Those who make it, become legends, and their stories used to lure more unsuspecting students into this rat race. All they do is memorize stuff and then write it back in the exams.

But not everything is so negative, many people I know, are pursuing their passions. I'm sure Drucker would be proud of them for starting their second life and career, surely one of many, in today's times.

- I have a friend who is an incredible pianist and singer. He regularly posts videos on YouTube in the hope of getting discovered.
- Another friend left college midway through, to become a Gym Trainer, today he has over 50k followers on Instagram, and he runs online sessions for clients.
- My Yoga Teacher from college is a successful dancer in the Indian Classical dance form "Bharatnatyam," she pursues this in parallel with her job and performs in various venues around the city.
- A fellow Shaper and the outgoing Curator of my Global Shapers hub failed engineering with 30+ backlogs. Today he is a successful entrepreneur running a waste management company, he's a TEDx speaker and a startup mentor at an incubator.
- I interacted with several people from the remote Kutch region of India during my rural immersion and strategy internship with a local NGO. The NGO was working to provide training and market access for local Artisans. Many of those people were passionate about those crafts, wanted to be employed on their terms and not move to big cities for menial jobs. Their entrepreneurial spirit is commendable.
- I was a Panelist in a Fintech Workshop at a global youth event, where I met several youths from across the world. Many of them were working to set up or already running their businesses, often digital-first, in areas like Skill Development or Psychology!
- A college senior left his job and is trying to become a full-time stand-up comic and online content creator.

Synthesis from the past and the present

You must be wondering at this point, what the heck does this have to do with the passion economy? To get to "passion economy," let's break it up, into "passion" and "economy".

⁴ Pandey, Punith. "Youth Stares at Dwindling Government Jobs - Times of India."
<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/home/education/news/youth-stares-at-dwindling-government-jobs/articleshow/81548371.cms>.

Decoding Passion

I can't help but go back to HR-101 course as I try to think of this, Maslow is the name that comes to mind. In 1943, Maslow classified and ranked five human needs.

He said⁵,

"It is quite true that man lives by bread alone — when there is no bread. But what happens to man's desires when there is plenty of bread and when his belly is chronically filled?"

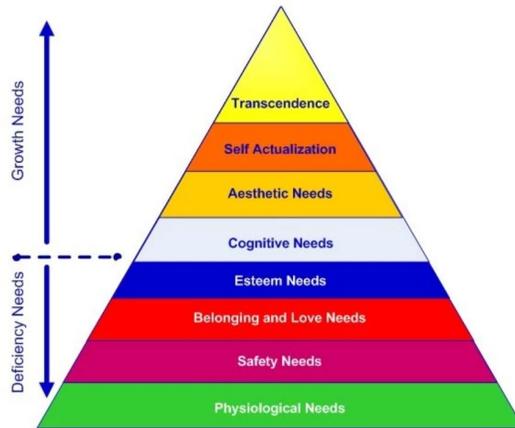


Figure 1 - Maslow's Motivation Model⁶

Decades later, he revised his hierarchy and added three more levels⁷. One can argue about the ranking of needs, but one thing is clear, what motivates today's generation is much more than food or shelter. In those days, people across the world had just come out of the war and the great depression, Indians had their newly found freedom after centuries of British rule, and the only "needs" that took precedence were to stay alive and sustain. And the same "need" or desire to stay alive was passed on from generation to generation.

Today, we have been living through decades of peace (mostly!) and many of us have been fortunate enough to not worry about food or shelter and take that as a given. We have access to the world at our fingertips and can see what people are doing and what is out there that could be for us! What motivated our parents and grandparents simply does not motivate us anymore (a bit of a hyperbole but does make sense).

This shift in what have now become the basic needs, the ability to pursue higher needs, as well as the availability of options and opportunities that allow us to explore what makes us tick, is something that has contributed to a great shift in the way people feel about their jobs. We can

⁵ Maslow, A. H. (1943). A theory of human motivation. *Psychological Review*, 50(4), 370-96.

⁶ Mcleod, Saul, and [Saul Mcleod]. "Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs | Simply Psychology." <https://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html>.

⁷ Maslow, A. H. (1970a). *Motivation and personality*. New York: Harper & Row; Maslow, A. H. (1970b). *Religions, values, and peak experiences*. New York: Penguin.

already see “The Great Resignation⁸” happening as people shift their priorities and realize what is it that they really “need.” This trend will only become more prominent with time.

Drucker has talked in detail about knowing oneself, one’s strengths and weaknesses, values and belongingness⁹. Today’s generation is keen to know all about that, and use it to their advantage, but they are increasingly also focusing on what’s their interest and passion. They value both, often passion more than strength. And hence when they start a second (or third, or fourth) career as Drucker recommended, they follow their passion.

Decoding Economy

In his speech to the Eleventh International Management Congress¹⁰, Drucker talks in detail about the pressure to make employment continuous and stable, due to societal pressure, “fixed” labor costs to run a facility regardless of output, and the loss of knowledge to the enterprise if the skilled employees are let go. He further delves into the pitfalls of this, impacts on company financials through economic cycles, impact on employee productivity due to stable employment, resistance towards technological change from “permanent” employees, and individuals getting stuck in jobs they are not meant for.

This is something that we’ve seen in India as well. The adoption of the Socialist model and the creation of several state-owned enterprises led to inefficient production, stiff resistance to technological advancement from employees, and continued losses to the state exchequer due to subsidizing these loss-making ventures through public money¹¹. The government has sold many of them to private organizations or shut down several of these ventures for good, a most recent example being Air India¹² – which was the flag carrier.

The truth is that the kinds of jobs and benefits that were available to our parents are no longer existent, they are being automated due to technological advancements, outsourced to save costs, or privatized for better efficiency.

There are several articles and research available that talk about the way jobs are disappearing and new types of jobs are emerging. But I offer Lisa Simpson rapping in the finale of the 33rd season of The Simpsons¹³.

She sings to her brother Bart,

⁸ Tong, Goh Chiew. “Great Resignation to Continue, One in Five Likely to Switch Jobs: PwC.” CNBC. www.cnbc.com, May 24, 2022

⁹ Drucker, Peter F., Harvard Business Review. “Managing Oneself.” hbr.org, January 1, 2005.

¹⁰ Drucker, Peter F., and Rick Wartzman. The Drucker Lectures, 2010.

¹¹ Kim, Kunmin, and N. Panchanatham. “Reform and Privatization of State-Owned Enterprises in India | Asian Development Bank.” www.adb.org, December 15, 2019

¹² BBC News. “Air India: Tata Group Takes over Loss-Making National Carrier - BBC News.” www.bbc.com.

¹³ Dailly, Paul. “Watch The Simpsons Online: Season 33 Episode 22.” TV Fanatic. www.tvfanatic.com, May 23, 2022.

“You want a job like Dad? Too bad, so sad,
You’ll never have the life our flabby dad had,
What can he do that a robot can’t?
His job now needs a Ph.D.”

And Bart replies,

“Cause there’s a lot of new ways a guy can make a dollar,
I’ll buy and sell bitcoin, build a new app, Do pranks on YouTube, I’m great at that crap,
Film TikTok tricks on my sick motorbike; I’ll find my new jam, as an Influencer on Instagram,
If all else fails I got back up plans, I’ll shake my cans on OnlyFans”



Figure 2 - The Simpsons Episode 22, Season 33

That was a crude way to put it, but it aptly describes the changing realities of the job market and the economy today.

The Future

We’ve seen the gig economy where people earn by the task, we’ve seen the creator economy where people monetize their content through ad revenues, affiliate partnerships, etc, we’ve seen sharing economy where resources are shared by multiple users.

All of these were the next big thing when they emerged. As is the case with all new things, you find the pitfalls soon enough. All of them came with their issues and problems. Workers are at the mercy of the gig providers and under constant pressure to find the next gig¹⁴, content creators lose almost 50% of their ad revenue to host platforms such as YouTube¹⁵, and Covid certainly was a wake-up call for the Sharing Economy¹⁶.

Today we are looking at the Passion Economy, which is being touted as the next big thing. It has enabled people to find their niche and more importantly share that niche with an audience that

¹⁴ “Passion Economy: What Is It, and Why Is It the Future of Work?” passion.io.

¹⁵ Hutchinson, Andrew. “YouTube Generated \$28.8 Billion in Ad Revenue in 2021, Fueling the Creator Economy | Social Media Today.” Social Media Today. www.socialmediatoday.com, February 2, 2022.

¹⁶ Mokter Hossain, The effect of the Covid-19 on sharing economy activities, Journal of Cleaner Production, Volume 280, Part 1, 2021, ScienceDirect

is eager, engaged, and passionate about that. It has enabled them to break the shackles that the creator economy put on them in terms of financials. It has connected them directly without any intermediary or management to take a cut out of their income (platforms do charge them of course). Content consumers are tired of being exploited and hooked and are increasingly looking for ways to wean themselves from these mass content and click-baits to content that speaks to them directly.

Passion economy is not limited to just content, people can provide products and services to their subscriber base but also helped to form tight-knit communities which support and adore them. I was listening to a podcast a few days back, and they talked about the 100-subscriber vs the 1000-subscriber model. Would you rather have 100 subscribers who pay you 1000 dollars a year or 1000 subscribers who pay you 100 dollars a year? This summarizes the difference between a creator economy where you create for the masses, and they support you with limited financial contribution vs a deep engagement in a passion economy where a limited number of people are highly engaged with your offering.

The current hype around the passion economy is limited to the use of technological platforms to reach like-minded people. I want to go one step further to define passion economy as one where people are following their passions. They are engaged in work that hits the higher levels of Maslow's hierarchy. They are taking risks to try what excites them and exhilarates them.

People can shape their passion in something conventional like music or fitness or something unconventional such as crocheting. Whether the mode to do so is online or offline, I would argue that taking the leap is what passion economy should stand for. I agree that scaling anything would require technological intervention, but the passion economy should not be tied to that definition, and it is certainly much bigger and not limited by technology. A friend of mine from college left his corporate job to pursue a role with an NGO in the social sector, where he is teaching kids in the slums of Mumbai. It is difficult to put a financial or economic price tag on his work, but the change he is bringing to their lives and at the same time following his passion for teaching is invaluable.

I previously mentioned some of the real-life examples from my first-degree connections who're taking the less conventional path, or the road not taken¹⁷. They were all up for it and motivated by it. In today's time, no job can offer job security or a steady paycheck. People are realizing increasingly that if they must work, they'd do so on their terms. They need to manage everything from engaging the subscriber community to finance and HR on their own, but they are facing these challenges.

People have identified areas of opportunities for themselves. Drucker has rightly identified¹⁸ several ways to do so, in this case, the unexpected occurrence of Covid, coupled with changes in

¹⁷ "The Road Not Taken by Robert Frost | Poetry Foundation." www.poetryfoundation.org.

¹⁸ Drucker, Peter F., Harvard Business Review. "The Discipline of Innovation." hbr.org, August 1, 2002.

market & industry due to technology & automation, and driven by changing perceptions about career have fueled a growth in this passion economy.

As someone who manages people on a day-to-day basis, internally as well as influencing client stakeholders, I can feel the change coming. The current and the next generations increasingly have different perceptions of a career, work, and job satisfaction.

Passion Economy is a concept that will truly reveal its scale and might with time, and we will see its impact on the organization as well as the individual.

My Takeaway

While researching and writing this article, I have been forced to reevaluate myself and my work and whether I am truly doing what I am passionate about. And I will continue to do so even after I turn in this essay. For those insights into myself, I am eternally grateful to Drucker.