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RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE IMPACT OF CAREER CALLING ON INNOVATIVE BEHAVIOR OF KNOWLEDGE WORKERS: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF CAREER IDENTITY

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Abstract

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

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Introduction:-

Research purpose:-

Innovation is the core of enterprise survival and development. Knowledge workers, as the core driving force of enterprise innovation, play a crucial role in stimulating their innovative behavior, which is essential for enterprises to enhance innovation performance and achieve sustainable development. Career calling, as an individual's strong sense of mission and inherent yearning for a specific career, profoundly influences employees' work attitudes and behaviors. Career identity, which plays a key connecting role in individual career development, may act

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as a mediator between career calling and knowledge workers' innovative behavior. Current research on the action path of the two is not deep enough. This paper, through a combination of theoretical analysis and empirical research, analyzes the internal influence mechanism of career calling on knowledge workers' innovative behavior and the mediating role of career identity, providing theoretical basis and practical guidance for enterprise human resource management optimization and talent motivation.

Research significance:-

Theoretical significance: This study breaks through the limitations of previous research on innovative behavior from perspectives such as organizational environment and individual ability, incorporates career calling and career identity into the framework of innovative behavior drivers, enriches the explanatory dimensions of innovative behavior theory, reveals the important role of individuals' intrinsic career pursuit and self-awareness in the generation of innovation, and provides a new theoretical perspective for human resource management strategies. **Practical significance:** Firstly, it optimizes human resource management strategies, providing targeted directions for enterprise recruitment, training, career planning, and other aspects, strengthening employees' sense of professional calling and professional identity. Secondly, it improves the enterprise's innovation incentive system and cultural construction, emphasizing both material and spiritual incentives, and creating a cultural atmosphere that encourages innovation. Thirdly, it promotes employees' career development and self-actualization, helping employees clarify their career goals, enhance job satisfaction and sense of achievement, and form a virtuous cycle of continuous innovation.

Research approach:-

This paper follows the research logic of "theoretical construction - empirical testing - conclusion application": first, it reviews the current research status of career calling, career identity, and innovative behavior of knowledge workers through literature review; then, it constructs a research model based on relevant theories and proposes hypotheses; designs a questionnaire and collects data; verifies the hypotheses through statistical analysis; finally, it draws research conclusions, proposes management implications, and points out research limitations and prospects.

Research methods:-

Literature research method: Through authoritative databases such as CNKI and Wanfang Data, relevant literature on career calling, career identity, and innovative behavior of knowledge workers is retrieved. The theoretical basis, variable relationships, and research gaps are sorted out to construct a literature review framework. **Questionnaire survey method:** Drawing on mature scales, a questionnaire is designed to cover dimensions such as career calling, professional identity, and innovative behavior. Knowledge workers from different industries and enterprises of various sizes are selected as the research subjects. The questionnaire is distributed online to ensure sample diversity and representativeness. **Statistical analysis method:** Utilize SPSS 21.0 to conduct reliability and validity analysis, correlation analysis, regression analysis, and mediation effect test on the data, verify research hypotheses, and draw scientific conclusions.

Theoretical Basis:-

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

Career calling theory:-

The Career Calling Theory, as a significant theoretical framework in contemporary career psychology, was systematically constructed by Dik and Duffy in 2009. Its historical origins can be traced back to the religious connotation of the concept of "vocation" in the 16th-century religious reform. Later, Weber secularized it into a modern career view of "achieving self-actualization through work," which eventually evolved into an intrinsic motivation-oriented career mission theory in the field of psychology. The core of this theory lies in explaining how individuals achieve life meaning and social connection through career activities. Its connotation includes three key dimensions: first, sense of meaning construction, emphasizing the unity of career and self-worth, such as teachers viewing educating students as an expression of life; second, pro-social orientation, believing that the sense of calling stems from the inherent need to serve others or society, such as healthcare workers participating in public welfare activities out of a sense of mission; third, transcendence perception, referring to the driving force that transcends utilitarianism and stems from external needs or internal passion. With the development of the theory, career calling is also regarded as a dynamic psychological process that evolves with life stages. Overall, this

theory emphasizes that individuals not only view work as a means of making a living but also as a vehicle for achieving personal meaning and social value, prompting individuals to seek alignment between work, sense of meaning, sense of mission, and their own abilities and values when making career choices. Based on this, this study takes career calling as the core independent variable to explain how its implied sense of meaning and sense of mission directly drive innovative behavior among knowledge workers.

Self-determination theory:-

In the 1980s, the Self-Determination Theory proposed by Deci and Ryan emerged as the core framework of contemporary motivation research due to its profound theoretical connotations and wide applicability. This theory emphasizes that human behavior is driven by intrinsic psychological needs. Its theoretical connotations encompass three pillars: autonomy, which refers to an individual's sense of control over behavioral choices, such as employees' autonomous decision-making at work; competence, which denotes an individual's perception of their ability to effectively complete tasks, such as the match between skills and tasks; and relatedness, which signifies an individual's connection and belonging experience with a team or professional group. The Self-Determination Theory further reveals that career calling can stimulate the intrinsic motivation of employees' innovative behavior by satisfying these basic psychological needs (such as enhancing autonomy through "autonomous innovation"), thus providing important theoretical support for the research on the driving mechanism of innovative behavior.

Social identity theory:-

The social identity theory, proposed by social psychologists Tajfel and Turner in the 1970s, reveals how group belongingness influences behavior by shaping individual cognition - that is, individuals define themselves through group identity (such as professional group) and adjust their actions in accordance with group norms. This theory encompasses three key mechanisms: first, categorization, where individuals classify themselves into specific groups (such as "I am an engineer"); second, identification, where they internalize the values and norms of that group (such as "engineers should innovate"); and third, comparison, where they enhance their self-esteem by elevating the status of their own group. The social identity theory explains how professional identity, by strengthening employees' sense of belonging to their profession, encourages them to follow behaviors such as "innovation" that are regarded as norms by the group. In summary, knowledge workers, on the one hand, love their work due to a sense of meaning and mission (professional calling), which aligns with the need satisfaction mechanism of self-determination theory. On the other hand, they actively pursue innovation due to professional identity (social identity). The combination of professional calling theory, self-determination theory, and social identity theory provides systematic theoretical support for analyzing the complex relationship between professional calling and innovative behavior among knowledge workers in the Chinese context.

Research Hypothesis:-

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

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

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

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

Questionnaire development:-

The questionnaire comprises five modules: introduction, basic personal information, career calling scale, career identity scale, and employee innovative behavior scale. Except for basic information, the remaining items adopt the Likert scoring method. The career calling scale uses a 7-point scoring system, while the career identity and innovative behavior scales use a 5-point scoring system. To ensure uniform measurement scales, the mean value of

the career calling scale is converted to a 5-point scoring system through linear transformation; the reverse scoring items in the career identity scale have been converted to forward scoring. All scales utilize mature tools from both domestic and international sources to ensure reliability and validity.

Data acquisition:-

The questionnaire was designed through the Wenjuanxing platform and distributed via social media platforms such as WeChat and QQ using snowball sampling. Targeted invitations were sent to knowledge workers across various industries. A total of 265 questionnaires were collected. After excluding invalid questionnaires with consistent answers and those completed in less than 60 seconds, 249 valid questionnaires remained, with an effective rate of 93.96%. The basic information of the sample is as follows: In terms of gender distribution, 52.60% are female and 47.40% are male; the majority of employees are under 35 years old, accounting for 66.30%; the majority have a bachelor's degree (65.10%), followed by 19.30% with a college degree and 15.70% with a master's degree or above; 56.20% have 3 years or less of work experience; the majority of job positions are grassroots employees (55.80%); the distribution of unit types is even, with government agencies accounting for the highest proportion (32.10%).

Data collation and statistical analysis:-

Reliability analysis:-

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

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

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

Validity analysis:-

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

Table 5-2 Validity test results

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

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

Correlation analysis:-

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

Table 5-3 Correlation analysis of variables

variable	Career calling	professional identity	Employee innovative behavior
Career calling	1	0.881**	0.916**
professional identity	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 $P < 0.01$, 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.

Regression analysis:-**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: employee innovative behavior = $1.052 + 0.709 \times$ career calling, with a regression coefficient β of 0.916 for career calling ($t = 35.826$, $P = 0.000 < 0.01$). 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							

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 $R^2=0.774$, indicating that career calling can explain 77.4% of the variation in career identity; the regression equation is: career identity= $1.944+0.545 \times$ career calling, with the regression coefficient of career calling $\beta=0.881$ ($t=29.193$, $P=0.000<0.01$), and the model $F=852.240$ ($P=0.000<0.01$), which is significant overall. Hypothesis 2 is verified.

Table 5-5 Regression analysis results of career calling and career identity (N=249)

variable	Non-standardized coefficient B	standard error	Standardized coefficient Beta	t-value	Sig	R ²	F-value
constant	1.944	0.075	-	25.913	0.000	0.774	852.240
Career calling	0.545	0.019	0.881	29.193	0.000	-	-
Note: The dependent							
variable is professional identity							

Regression analysis of professional identity and employee innovative behavior:-

A linear regression analysis was conducted with professional identity as the independent variable and employee innovative behavior as the dependent variable. The model $R^2=0.730$, indicating that professional identity can explain 73.0% of the variation in employee innovative behavior; the regression equation is: employee innovative behavior = $-0.532 + 1.069 \times$ professional identity, with the regression coefficient of professional identity $\beta=0.855$ ($t=25.914$, $P=0.000<0.01$), and the model $F=671.539$ ($P=0.000<0.01$), which is significant overall. Hypothesis 3 is verified.

Table 5-6 Regression analysis results of professional identity and employee innovative behavior (N=249)

variable	Non-standardized coefficient B	standard error	Standardized coefficient Beta	t-value	Sig	R ²	F-value
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							

Mediation effect test:-

The stepwise regression method and Bootstrap method were employed to examine the mediating effect of professional identity, with the following steps: The first step is to verify the direct effect of career calling on employee innovative behavior (Model 1). The results show that career calling has a significant positive impact on employee innovative behavior ($B=0.709$, $P=0.000$). The second step is to verify the positive impact of career calling on career identity (Model 2). The results show that career calling significantly positively impacts career identity ($B=0.545$, $P=0.000$). In the third step, both career calling and career identity were incorporated into the regression model (Model 3). The results indicated that the regression coefficient of career calling on employee innovative behavior decreased to 0.561 ($P=0.000$), which was still significant; the regression coefficient of career identity on employee innovative behavior was 0.271 ($P=0.000$), showing a significant positive effect. The mediation effect value = $0.545 \times 0.271 = 0.148$, accounting for 20.84% of the total effect, indicating that career identity played a partial mediating role. Using the Bootstrap method for further verification, with a set sampling size of 5000 and a 95% confidence interval, the results showed that the indirect effect value of professional identity was 0.1477 , with a 95% CI of $[0.0783, 0.2126]$, not including 0, indicating a significant mediating effect. Hypothesis 4 was verified.

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

Table 5-8 Decomposition of Total Effect, Direct Effect, and Indirect Effect

Testing effect	effectsize	standard error	95%lower limit confidence interval (LLCI)	95% UpperLimit 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%

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

Research Conclusion:-

This study delves into the mechanism by which career calling influences the innovative behavior of knowledge workers, further enhancing the theoretical framework in the field of career calling and knowledge worker innovation behavior. It introduces career identity as a mediating variable into the hypothesis model for investigation. Utilizing SPSS21.0 statistical analysis software, data from 249 collected questionnaires were processed and analyzed, confirming that career calling affects the innovative behavior of knowledge workers through the mediating variable of career identity. The specific research findings are as follows:

Career calling has a significant positive impact on employees' innovative behavior:-

Assuming that Hypothesis 1 is verified, it confirms that career calling has a significant positive effect on employees' innovative behavior. When employees feel a strong sense of career calling, their willingness and actual actions in innovation will be greatly enhanced. This change stems from the full stimulation of employees' intrinsic motivation and the continuous increase in emotional investment, which are then transformed into practical actions that break through conventional thinking and actively explore new methods. This research result clearly reveals the direct empowering mechanism of career calling as a deep-seated psychological driving factor for

employees' innovative behavior, providing a theoretical basis for comprehensively grasping various factors that influence employees' innovative behavior.

Career calling has a significant positive impact on career identity:-

Assuming that Hypothesis 2 is proven to be valid, that is, career calling has a significant positive impact on career identity. This means that career calling can significantly enhance the sense of identity that knowledge workers have towards their professional roles. When employees view their work as a mission, their career values, pursuit of goals, and self-identity are further strengthened. Career calling not only provides an intrinsic motivation source for employees' work but also serves as a key factor in shaping career identity. It plays an indispensable role in building and stabilizing career identity during the career development process of employees, providing important theoretical support for subsequent discussions on employee career behavior and organizational development.

Professional identity has a significant positive impact on employees' innovative behavior:-

Assuming that Hypothesis 3 is verified, the empirical results indicate that professional identity has a significant positive impact on the innovative behavior of knowledge workers, serving as a key influencing mechanism that drives their innovative actions. When employees have a strong sense of identification with their professional roles, their willingness to innovate and their ability to put it into practice will be greatly enhanced.

This positive impact is primarily achieved through the following two pathways:

Professional identity can enhance an individual's sense of responsibility and commitment to their profession. Driven by this psychological motivation, employees will more proactively utilize innovative means to improve work quality, viewing innovation as an important way to enhance their professional abilities and fulfill their job responsibilities; Professional identity leads knowledge workers to highly recognize the behavioral norms of their professional group (for example, the widespread recognition that "innovation is the core competency of practitioners in this field"). At this point, innovation is seen by employees as an indispensable part of their professional role and a requirement that must be fulfilled. In addition, knowledge workers with a strong sense of professional identity tend to place greater emphasis on maintaining their professional reputation through innovative behavior. They are well aware that innovation can showcase their professional strength and help establish a good professional image within the industry. Furthermore, when facing the inevitable challenges in the process of innovation, such employees demonstrate stronger psychological resilience, and will not be easily defeated by difficulties. They will rely on their strong professional identity to tirelessly explore innovative paths, strive to overcome difficulties, and achieve their innovation goals.

Career identity plays a mediating role in career calling and employee innovative behavior:-

Assuming that Hypothesis 4 is verified, it confirms the mediating effect of professional identity between career calling and employee innovative behavior. This finding provides crucial clues for a deeper understanding of the internal mechanism by which career calling influences innovative behavior. Professional identity plays a pivotal role in this process, serving as a crucial bridge connecting career calling and employee innovative behavior. Specifically, the impact of career calling on employees' innovative behavior is not a single direct effect. It can not only directly motivate employees to engage in innovative behavior but also indirectly promote the emergence of employees' innovative behavior by strengthening their identification with their professional roles. Career calling prompts employees to engage in deep reflection on their professional identity (such as "Who am I?" and "What is the meaning of my job?"). These reflections are conducive to enhancing employees' professional identity and sense of responsibility, thus making them view innovation as an important part of their professional mission. Based on this cognition, employees will be more willing to actively take risks in the innovation process and invest more time and energy. As a result, a chain reaction mechanism of "mission triggers identity, and identity promotes innovation" is formed. This mechanism reveals the dynamic relationship between career calling, professional identity, and employees' innovative behavior, providing an important theoretical basis for enterprises to formulate relevant management strategies and promote employee innovation.

Research limitations and future prospects:-

1. Sample limitations: The effective sample size is 249, which meets basic statistical requirements, but the scale is relatively small, and the sample covers a limited range of industries and regions, which may affect the universality of the results. In the future, the sample size can be expanded, and cross-industry and cross-regional research can be conducted to enhance the robustness of the research results.

2. Variable limitations: The model did not incorporate moderating variables (such as organizational support and personal traits), thus failing to reveal the differences in mediating effects under different contexts. In the future, moderating variables can be introduced to construct a more comprehensive theoretical model.
3. Limitations of research methods: The use of cross-sectional questionnaire surveys makes it difficult to capture the dynamic relationships between variables, and there is insufficient exploration of intervention strategies. In the future, longitudinal tracking surveys can be adopted, combined with case studies or action research, to propose more operable management plans.

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