

Conscious Careering



Nobody likes a quitter! Before leaving a job, make sure to explore your full range of options

Matthew B. Youngquist

According to a recent survey by The Conference Board, a national market research firm, only 14% of U.S. workers report being “very satisfied” with their jobs and 25% admit that they are essentially “just showing up to collect a paycheck.” To me, this is a sad state of affairs, given that most people spend a good chunk of their waking lives in the workplace.

What recourse does an employee have, however, when they feel stuck in a job that isn’t giving them much satisfaction?

Unfortunately, most people attempt to treat the “career blues” with only two remedies. They either persevere in their current assignment, blowing off steam and venting their frustration to anybody who will listen, or they muster up the courage to eventually quit their job and go in search of greener pastures. While both approaches can be effective, under certain conditions, my experience has been that they usually fall short of truly helping the employee make progress toward a more meaningful, fulfilling employment situation.

One of the ongoing missions of my consulting practice, therefore, has been to educate professionals about the dozens of alternative techniques that a “conscious” employee can use to enhance their work satisfaction level.

If you’ve found yourself in an unfulfilling situation, for example, the first step is to slow down and try to identify exactly which issues are leading to your lack of contentment. Are you unhappy because you feel you are being compensated unfairly? Do you feel stagnated due to a lack of professional growth or because your current assignment has little or no advancement potential? Are you lacking energy and inspiration because you’re working in a job that you don’t find meaningful or that doesn’t align well with your personal values?

Acute feelings of job dissatisfaction can result from all of these factors, as well as countless others. So before you rush to solution, it’s important to first diagnose the real root cause behind your situation. If you skip this step, you are likely to find yourself in the position of many people I’ve counseled—you’ll jump from one unsatisfying job to the next, repeating the same unrewarding patterns over and over again.

Assuming you do pinpoint the cause of your frustrations, however, what other creative options are there for making things better other than to run your resume up the flagpole? What other positive, proactive steps can an employee take to improve their situation?

The first category of techniques I’d suggest are probably best lumped under the header of “job enrichment.” While this term does have a specific definition within the HR community, I’m going to assign it the rough definition of “sticking with your existing job, but making it better” for the purposes of this column.

This concept encompasses a couple of different maneuvers. For inform your boss that you’d like the chance to work on some special projects or to expand your role with a few additional responsibilities. It might involve taking over some tasks your supervisor is ready to delegate, sharing some new duties with a co-worker, or assuming responsibility for addressing a brand-new need that you’ve spotted around the office. And while it’s not guaranteed that you’ll be able to translate these new responsibilities into extra cash in the short term, they’re likely to alleviate your boredom, if nothing else, and they’ll also set the stage for future promotions and increased compensation down the road. Every boss likes a can-do attitude, and over time, your reputation and initiative should lead to positive results.

If these gradual adjustments seem unlikely to get your needs met, however, you might go a step further and consider an internal job change within the organization. You can either set your sights on the next rung up the corporate ladder, and work with your boss to gain the experience for such a move, or you might consider exploring a lateral move into a new facility, division, or department. The key to accomplishing this kind of change, of course, is communication. While many workers still play by the “old rules” and expect their boss to automatically notice their potential, and promote them accordingly, this is far less likely to happen in today’s world. Instead, you need to take responsibility for your own success. Search for appropriate opportunities within your current organization and then develop a plan, working with your manager and your company’s human resources department, to reach these goals within a suitable timeline.

Yes, I know. You’ve already considered the possibility of an internal promotion or transfer, and have pretty much ruled it out due to a perceived lack of opportunities or a perceived lack of support from your supervisor. Have you actually talked to your company about it, however? Have you spoken with your boss, in a formal manner, about your desire for growth and your interest in receiving his or her help in making this happen? Believe it or not, most managers and HR professionals say they rarely encounter employees who take the initiative and seek out their guidance in creating an internal

career plan. Sure, they might sense some occasional restlessness among their team, and hear passive-aggressive complaints from time to time, but what they're really waiting for is for one of their people to step up to the plate and ask directly for help.

If you approach the career advancement issue from this kind of collaborative standpoint, therefore, you might be pleasantly surprised by management's willingness to help you reach your goals. Most companies want their workers to be satisfied and successful, if not purely for altruistic reasons, then because it helps reduce the tremendous expenses associated with low morale, absenteeism, and turnover. They'll usually respond constructively to an employee who engages them in a positive discussion about the future, as long as that employee doesn't have wildly unrealistic ambitions or doesn't resort to threats and allegations along the way.

Should it turn out that you try this approach, and your earnest attempt to discuss career aspirations with your boss meets with stony silence, you may end up confirming what you already suspected—that the best avenue for creating meaningful change is to start looking for a new assignment outside of the organization. If this is the case, then more power to you. Not every boss or company, unfortunately, is as supportive of their employees as they probably should be if they plan on staying competitive in today's marketplace. At least you can look back without regrets, however, and can know that you did your best to create a collaborative solution instead of just reflexively jumping ship. Trust me—even if it doesn't pay off immediately, this win/win attitude will reward you time and time again down the road.

MATTHEW B. YOUNGQUIST *is a Bellevue-based career coach and outplacement consultant who has personally helped over 3,500 professionals address and overcome the unique challenges of employment transition. He currently owns his own consulting practice, Career Horizons, LLC, where he can be reached at (425) 450-4960 or via e-mail at matt@career-horizons.com.*