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Overcoming the Fear of Change

By Bill Radin

You and I are lucky -- we live in a world rich in possibilities. Besides being able to select from an unlimited variety of occupations, we also have the right to find happiness in our daily work.

Naturally, everyone has a different definition of job satisfaction. For example, the job that seems fine to you may not be of much interest your best friend, and vice versa.

The fact that you live in a free society gives you the privilege to decide your own fate. You have as much power in determining where you work as you do in selecting a spouse, a home, a car, or a pet. Your choice of jobs really depends on how much you want to shape your career, and how much effort you're willing to spend to make the necessary improvements in your life.

If you're considering a job change, it's probably for one of three reasons:

[1] Personal -- You want to change your relationships with others. For example, you may have discovered that you're incompatible with the people in your company. Perhaps they have different interests than you; or they communicate differently or have different educational backgrounds.

[2] Professional -- You've determined the need to advance your career. For example: you've found you won't reach your professional or technical goals at your present company; your advancement is being blocked by someone who's more senior or more politically oriented; you're not getting the recognition you deserve; you and your company are growing in different directions; you're not being challenged technically; or, you're not being given the skills you need to compete for employment in the future. Or, you've simply lost interest in your assigned tasks.

[3] Situational -- Your dissatisfaction has nothing to do with personal relationships or career development; it's tied to a certain set of circumstances. Maybe you're commuting too far from home each day, or you're working too many hours, or you're under too much stress; or you want to relocate to another city (or stay where you are rather than be transferred).

Whatever your personal, professional, or situational reasons may be, you're motivated by the desire to improve your level of job satisfaction and make a change.

A few years ago, when I packed up my bags and moved from Los Angeles to Cincinnati, my decision had nothing to do with my career or the people I was working with. My dissatisfaction was purely situational. I wanted to trade a high-stress, long-commute, manic routine for a more livable, slower-paced lifestyle. (And by making the change, I became a statistic in a larger demographic trend.)

The Complete Job Description

In order to translate your needs into results, let's begin by evaluating your present position -- it's the first step in any job change.

You'd be surprised how many people are unclear about what they actually do for a living, and the way their jobs make them feel.

For example, whenever I interview a candidate, the first thing I ask for is a complete job description.

"So tell me, Bonnie," I begin. "What is it that you do at your present company?"

"Gee, Bill, I thought I told you already. I'm a systems analyst."

"All right, fair enough," I reply. "But would you please describe to me in detail the following two things:

[1] What are your daily activities? That is, how do you spend your time during a typical day; and

[2] What are the measurable results your company expects from these activities? In other words, how does your supervisor know when you're doing a good job?"

Often, I discover that people are hard pressed to come up with solid answers about the specific nature of their work. They're not exactly sure about their job responsibilities, and their lack of focus results in stress or counter-productivity.

While a little bit of stress may be natural in any job, a steady diet of it can destroy your incentive to work. In fact, a recent study indicates a direct correlation between a person's lack of task clarity and their level of job dissatisfaction.

Try this exercise: On a sheet of paper, write a complete, current job description in which you list your daily activities and their expected, measurable results. This exercise will not only help you clarify your own perception of your work; it'll be useful later on when you begin to construct a resume and communicate to others exactly what you've done.

The Positive Power of Values

Once you've described all the facets of your job, the next step is to understand the relationship between what you do and the way you feel.

I use the term values as a descriptor of personal priorities; as a yardstick to help you:

- Understand what types of work-related activities you really enjoy;
- Determine which goals or accomplishments are important to you and give you a feeling of satisfaction; and
- Evaluate whether your personal priorities are in balance, or in harmony with your job situation.

Although it's fairly simple to decipher which daily tasks you really enjoy, the task of scrutinizing your personal priorities can be tricky. That's because there are often factors unrelated to your job that can come into play.

To demonstrate the importance of values in our decision-making process, consider the following:

- I witnessed a job-seeker turn down a position because he was an amateur athlete and he didn't like the air quality where my client company was located.
- Not long ago, I placed a candidate who was a long distance runner. He took the position largely because his new boss was also a runner, and would understand his need to take off work twice a year to run the New York City and Boston marathons.
- I arranged for an engineer to take a job with a company that offered him a demotion, since being highly visible within his current employer's department made him feel uncomfortable.
- I helped a radar engineer change to a lower paying job. The reason? The engineer was a member of the 1988 Olympic rowing team, and the new company was near a river.
- I once found an excellent job for a chemist who was also an avid taxidermist. At the last minute, the chemist turned down the job, which would have required his relocation from Utah to northern California. The chemist explained that the climate in California was unsuitable for stuffing ducks.

Later, I discovered the duck-stuffer's true reason for turning down the new job. He had a hometown mistress, and he couldn't convince her to relocate to California with him.

The point is, we all have highly personal motivations which guide our career choices.

The Job Description Makeover

Now that you know how to clearly define your values, the next step is to describe the changes you'd like to make in your new job.

To illustrate, listen to the way Pat, Craig, and Neil talk about their respective situations, and how they take their values into consideration:

Pat:

"I want to have more autonomy where I work. That would mean having a flexible schedule, working different hours each day at my discretion, without having to ask permission. I'd be able to leave early on Thursdays to take my daughter to her acting class, and in return, I'd be willing to spend several hours working at home during the evening and on weekends. With my personal computer, I'd have access by modem to the database in my department, and I'd be able to make a significant contribution to the workload, any time, day or night. Most importantly, I'd be evaluated solely on my performance, not by the number of hours I've punched on a clock."

Craig:

"I'd prefer to work closer to my home. I didn't think the amount of time I spent commuting was very important when I joined the company two years ago, but now it really wears on me to sit for an hour a day in traffic. It's not only nerve-racking to deal with all the crazy people on the freeway; I could be using the commuting time to be with my family. The reduction of stress would improve my attitude, and give me a higher quality of life. If I could find a job similar to what I have now within a few minutes of home, that would make me happy."

Neil:

“I’m interested in my own career advancement. If I stay at this company too much longer, I’ll work myself into a corner technically and never achieve my potential. The people here are nice, but I don’t share their ‘lifer’ mentality. Look at Ed, my boss. He’s been here 17 years, and although he’s a really solid engineer, he’s not familiar with any of the latest advancements in technology. He’d have a hard time finding another job in this market, and it makes me worried, knowing I might someday be in his situation. Besides, I won’t be promoted until Ed retires. So I’d better leave soon, while I’m still attractive to other companies. That would give me the salary increase I deserve and the opportunity to learn new skills with people who are upwardly mobile and aggressive like myself.”

Now it’s your turn. As any advocate of goal-setting will tell you, the more specifically you’re able to communicate what you’re looking for, the faster you’ll be able to get what you want.

Naturally, you’ll want to be realistic with your expectations, and think like a grown-up when considering your gripes. I’ll never forget Barry, an engineering candidate I interviewed a few years back, who came into my office with a suicidal look in his eyes.

“Bill, you’ve really got to help me,” he moaned. “My job is ruining my life.”

“Your situation sounds pretty serious,” I replied in my most empathic tone. “How long have you felt this way?”

“Gosh, I don’t know, but I’ve got to make a change. My personal life is awful.”

“How do you mean, Barry?” I asked.

“I mean I’m never at home, and don’t have any time to spend with my wife and kids. My company makes me travel constantly.”

“Well, I can see how that might make you feel torn between your work and your home life. What can I do to help you?”

“See if you can get me a job where I don’t have to travel all the time. I just can’t stand the separation from my family,” he pleaded.

My heart went out to him. “Sure, Barry, anything to help. But first tell me something. Exactly how often is your company making you travel?”

“Oh, it’s terrible,” he cried. “They make me stay overnight in a hotel at least one night every three months!”

Your Job Changing Strategy

Someone recently asked me whether I helped people get “better” jobs or jobs that made them happier.

My answer was that the two were the same.

Of course, if you were to look at your career from a purely strategic point of view, I could give you four good reasons why it makes sense to change jobs within the same or similar industry three times during

your first ten years of employment:

[1] Changing jobs gives you a broader base of experience: After about three years, you've learned most of what you're going to know about how to do your job. Therefore, over a ten year period, you gain more experience from "three times 90 percent" than "one times 100 percent."

[2] A more varied background creates a greater demand for your skills: Depth of experience means you're more valuable to a larger number of employers. You're not only familiar with your current company's product, service, procedures, quality programs, inventory system, and so forth; you bring with you the expertise you've gained from your prior employment with other companies.

[3] A job change results in an accelerated promotion cycle: Each time you make a change, you bump up a notch on the promotion ladder. You jump, for example, from project engineer to senior project engineer; or national sales manager to vice president of sales and marketing.

[4] More responsibility leads to greater earning power: A promotion is usually accompanied by a salary increase. And since you're being promoted faster, your salary grows at a quicker pace, sort of like compounding the interest you'd earn on a certificate of deposit.

Many people view a job change as a way of promoting themselves to a better position. In most cases, I would agree.

However, you should always be sure your new job offers you the means to satisfy your values. While there's no denying the strategic virtues of selective job changing for the purpose of career leverage, you want to make sure the path you take will lead you where you really want to go.

For instance, I see no reason to make a job change for more money if it'll make you unhappy to the point of distraction. Not long ago, I placed a project engineer with a company that offered him a \$47,000 a year job. Later, he told me that the same day he agreed to go to work for my client, he'd turned down an offer of \$83,200 with another company. The reason? The higher offer was for a consulting position with an aerospace company in Detroit -- a job that would have taken him down a road he felt was a dead end.

To me, the "best" job is one in which your values are being satisfied most effectively. If career growth and advancement are your primary goals, and they're represented by how much you earn, then the job that pays the most money is the "better" job.

Your responsibility when contemplating a change is to evaluate what's most important to you. Whether you focus on a single aspect of your job (like Pat, Craig, and Neil did), or on the overall nature of the job you'd like to improve, **the more clearly you connect your values with your work, the greater the potential for job satisfaction.**

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