

Creating A Great Work Experience ...*One Critical Factor*

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In the past decade I've worked with many people who are in career transition. A few are there because they want to be, many are there because someone else's decision put them in a place where they needed to find different work and the very rare ones are just starting out and wants to give themselves the best chance possible to start out on the right path.

As I reflect on those many hundred of folks seeking to find work that works for them, I've noticed a common thread amongst almost all of them. They consistently hadn't noticed that being good at something is an insufficient basis for creating work that offers satisfaction, fulfillment or joy.

Say what? Aren't you supposed to focus on the things you're good at? It makes work easy, doesn't it?

Up to a point it is true that when you are good at things they are easy. And as much as we may dream about the easy life, therein lies the problem for many people. When work becomes too easy there isn't any real challenge in it any longer. Initially you find yourself producing good results, getting lots of positive feedback from customers, peers and bosses but it all starts to feel pretty empty and meaningless because you don't really have to be present to do certain tasks; the essence of you is off somewhere else, traveling, golfing, fishing or reading a good book. Eventually you begin to slack off, take shortcuts, miss deadlines because you can't muster up sufficient enthusiasm for the task at hand. Your results begin to suffer and storm clouds loom on the horizon.

Have you ever thought about that? Have you ever made a distinction between what you're good and what you truly enjoy?

I remember one client whom I worked with years ago. She owned her own business, was hugely successful and had begun to hate it all. As our coaching conversations meandered around the homework assignments I'd given her, Natalie began to notice something curious. She was good at developing processes, training people and supervising staff so the management of her business was ticking along just fine. But what she really, really loved doing was marketing and promoting her business. She was very effective at her marketing activities which eventually created a conundrum for her.

Those marketing activities which she got so much joy and satisfaction from took only a small part of each day. She brought so much passion to her marketing efforts (plus she managed her day-to-day operations so successfully) that she had all the customers she could handle unless she grew her business significantly.

She knew that it would take only a small increase in marketing to expand her business, but a whole lot of the kinds of activities she didn't really enjoy. Hiring the right staff, training them, developing quality control systems, hiring and training supervisors, putting in tighter financial controls were all the management things she'd have to address. The few minutes a day of additional marketing to generate the increased demand simply wasn't enough to justify her taking on the added operational management activities she forecast. While she was really good at these, they didn't feed her soul in any way. They were like brushing her teeth in the morning: something that had to be done, something she did well, but not something which had a profound impact on the quality of her experience of life.

It didn't take this smart businesswoman long to sell her existing enterprise and begin a new one in a totally different market, a business that would always require significant marketing and very little operational management. It's been about 8 years now and I run into this client from time-to-time at different networking events. She's so happy with the career shift she created for herself. And she knows that her changed circumstances all come down to a small shift from focusing on what she was good at to what she enjoyed.

Another client felt like he was stuck in a rut that he'd never be able to get out of. He was a writer working in an internal communication function in a large organization. His job was to write a monthly staff newsletter, prepare briefing notes for senior executives and develop press releases. He was a good writer and yet he was dying inside working at a job that paid well, had a lot of prestige associated with it and was completely unfulfilling for him.

As we worked to identify his transferable skills (those are the skills that we all have that can be applied in many different work situations: e.g. decision making, delegating, working with numbers, being persuasive, creativity), Joe began to notice that he was not only good at initiating things, but that he got a lot of pleasure out of that skill. He also began to notice that in his current workplace, initiative was not something that was highly regarded. He had little scope in deciding either the esthetics of his monthly newsletter or the content. There was an organizational 'look' which he needed to comply with and the content of each newsletter was driven by what senior management felt was important, what the union wanted to focus on and what the media was having to say about his very public organization.

When he realized that writing needed to occur within a bigger context called initiative, he quickly decided to move on and found himself a similar position in a totally new organization that did value his zeal for initiating. Over the next few years he found that he was willing to challenge his supervisor on several issues and was getting accolades from his stakeholders for the waves that he was making. This felt like real success and he was now able to take real pride in his accomplishments.

These are just a couple of examples amongst many that I could cite of people who've made enormous differences in finding work that works for them by paying attention to the distinction between what they're good at and what they're good at and actually enjoy.

The former simply doesn't have enough passion behind it to make a difference in a person's life. So if you're feeling like work sucks, like a job that perhaps you used to enjoy has gone flat, like you are quietly wasting away into a shadow of the 'real' you, I encourage you to take the time and energy to discover what you enjoy.

Don't be surprised if that takes a bit of time. Some of us have never really associated words like 'enjoy', 'passion', or 'pleasure' with work and we may need to do some digging to discover the few times we've actually experienced that in our work.

One exercise I get most of my career coaching clients to engage is to create a list of 20 specific successes they've had in life. These need to be specific instances from any area of living (school, home, work, volunteering) such as "ace-ing the math exam I dreaded in grade 5" or "finishing my first proposal" or "learning how to tie my shoelaces" rather than "being a good parent". We then study the list of successes and discover the patterns that underlie them. Many people discover that success only comes for them if they have a big challenge to surmount. Others discover that they are invariably successful when they bring one or two key skills to bear. One client was astonished to notice that the real flush of success he felt within himself (as opposed to the accolades he got from others) always came from tinkering with stuff. But his job held no opportunities for tinkering. He then began looking for similar work that had a big trouble shooting component to it, clear in the knowledge that, for him, trouble shooting would allow him to tinker to his hearts content. He is now a very happy man!

Studying your past successes to discover skills you may not know you have may seem like a small thing for sure, but over the years I've been pleased to discover just how big a difference this can make in people's work lives. Give it a try. It sure isn't going to make things any worse for you! And who knows, you might just discover the small shift that will help you find the kind of work you look forward to each and every day. Wouldn't that be a wonderful way to live?

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