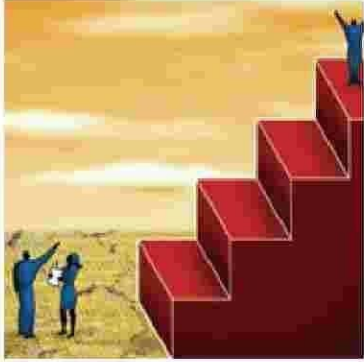


Reaching for the top of a different ladder

Six steps to better understand your aspirations — make sure you're striving for the right goals

By Doug Schmidt



If you're like many people, your childhood career aspirations focused on the jobs you could see around you — a firefighter, a nurse, a doctor, a teacher.

There's a pretty good chance that you're not in one of those roles today — your aspirations changed. In the same way, it could be that you're finding that the career direction you had at the start of your work life is no longer as satisfying as it once was.

Even if you're in a field that you like, it could be that you find yourself in a role that isn't what you want — perhaps you are a "doer" who has been promoted into management, only to find that you miss the camaraderie of your former role and the satisfaction of seeing tangible results from your efforts.

For whatever the reason, you may want to make some changes, possibly radical, in your work life. You're not alone. There are an increasing number of people who are looking for greater satisfaction from the work that they do.

This isn't to say that a career climb can't be rewarding and exciting. It's just that you need to make sure that you're climbing the right ladder.

This isn't just a personal-preference issue. Failing to make necessary career changes can have a devastating effect on other parts of your life. There appears to be an upswing in career counseling clients who are experiencing anxiety attacks, clinical depression, broken families and other symptoms of stress.

You don't have to be among the stressed. Here are six steps to consider when contemplating a career change.

1. Know yourself

Dissatisfaction often arises because people do work that is inconsistent with their view of who they are. So the first step is to know yourself. Over the course of 10 or 20 years, everyone changes substantially. Aspirations change, needs evolve — it's part of life. Take a look back and determine what kind of person you were at the start of your career, and how your values and circumstances have changed.

Then, determine what has created your current sense of dissatisfaction. Was it a promotion you were denied? A new boss? Changing work conditions? A movie or play you saw, a book you read? Inspiration for change comes in many different forms. If you understand what those change triggers are, you'll better understand what your real needs are.

2. Realize that you do have options

The next step is to start generating some options.

You may think that you have no choice but to continue to go to work each day, doing work you no longer find rewarding, trapped by a high mortgage, the costs of a young family and a non-income-generating spouse, or a dozen other real concerns.

But while you may not be able to make a move immediately, and the transition may take a few years to put in place, you can always start to make changes that will allow you to move in the future. The biggest trap is to think you're trapped.

3. Think ahead before making a change

If you're considering a career change, a new locale or some other large commitment, it's important to take it a step at a time,

doing nothing impulsively. Quitting your job to write a novel in a cabin by a lake may sound wonderful, but that may not be what you want either. Without testing the waters, you could be stuck somewhere else you don't want to be.

Intuition has a role to play, but don't let it take over the process. Too often, intuition guides you towards making radical but ineffective changes in your life, while smaller changes often get you what you want.

4. Take advantage of the tools available

Tools such as aptitude tests, work value inventories and personality questionnaires can be helpful for analyzing your situation. There are a myriad of books on career change available in many bookstores and libraries. A qualified career counselor or coach can also help. None of these resources will tell you what kind of career to choose, but they can suggest possibilities you may never have considered.

It's important that you seek out someone with the training and expertise to help you deal with the challenge you are facing. For example, many life coaches work with you under the assumption that the answer you want is within you. Sometimes, what you really need is insight from the outside on what is going on inside. Someone with a background in psychology can help you sort out the issues.

It may be that your worldview, coping strategies and underlying assumptions need some tuning. By the age of 12, these become quite stable, and without some conscious awareness of what these are, we can sabotage ourselves. For example, some people will never be happy because they continually focus on what is missing. Others may never enjoy what they have or achieve because they are so focused on perfection, and very little in this world is ever perfect.

5. Look for alternatives

Armed with the results of your investigations of your capabilities, the next step is to research your alternatives. Advice meetings with people who do the kinds of work you are considering can be a big help. They can often offer you information on the most effective way to make the change to a new career.

In some cases, part-time volunteer work can give you a better understanding of your options. For example, you may feel "called" to move from a corporate career into teaching. Tutoring students can give you a better idea of how well you would do as a teacher, and whether it really is what you want.

Taking evening courses can not only open up options for your next career, but start you on your way to qualifying to work in that field.

6. Take a look outside the box

Be prepared for the idea that the "something different" in your life doesn't have to be full-time work. For example, if you want to express the artistic side of your personality more, it may be best to not quit your day job to start a career as an actor. Rather, get involved in local amateur theatricals, so that your walk across the stage will satisfy your creative urges, while not throwing away your financial security.

It could be that for the changes you want to make in your life, there is no single magic cure for what ails you. It might be a combination of solutions — evening courses, volunteer work, association involvement or some other smaller steps — that will give you the change you want, while you stay in the same career.

With a well-formed analysis of yourself and your options and an action plan, however incomplete, you can develop a life that is rewarding and positive. Ultimately, the choice is yours. As one VP told me at a point when I was dissatisfied with my career, "Five years will pass whether you do something about this or not." The key is to start working on your plans today.

Doug Schmidt, Ed.D. (doug@careersplusinc.com), a former VP of finance, is now president of his own counselling firm, CareersPlus Inc.