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Don't Call It Quits

Turn the Job You Have into the Job You Love

Shana Lebowitz Gaynor • McGraw-Hill © 2022 • 240 pages

Career

Take-Aways

- Staying in a job you dislike is an exercise of agency – you aren't trapped.
- Quitting isn't the only path to satisfaction.
- Start improving your daily work experience by pinpointing the real problem(s).
- Rethink concepts like “meaning” and “passion” in your career.
- Change your job description – without leaving.
- Boost your engagement by focusing on personal growth, mastery and recognition.
- Cultivate a fulfilling life outside of work so that your happiness relies less on your job.

Recommendation

When your job stinks, you should just find a better one, right? As many unhappy employees know, life doesn't always work this way. But staying in a job you dislike doesn't mean you're stuck and doomed to misery. Relying on advice from experts, journalist Shana Lebowitz Gaynor offers real-life examples, practical tips and guided exercises to help you start reshaping your role. Although this book is written for professionals at any career stage, it will offer the most insight to a younger audience – or anyone with high expectations of a fulfilling career.

Summary

Staying in a job you dislike is an exercise of agency – you aren't trapped.

Even though you have an objectively decent job that pays well enough, for whatever reason, you wish you could quit. The idea of sticking it out is unsatisfying or even misery-inducing, but it doesn't make sense to leave. Perhaps you feel stuck. But even when you dislike your job, you don't have to be miserable, and you are certainly not stuck.

There are many good reasons to stay in a job that doesn't thrill you. Perhaps it allows you to pay off debt, enables a lifestyle you enjoy, builds useful skills, leaves room for caregiving responsibilities or simply provides stability. Moreover, some people are, by disposition, more willing than others to quit a stable job. Even if you have the degree of risk tolerance required to pursue a new role, you may not always have the energy or desire to do so – and that's OK.

“Your job satisfaction is largely up to you, as opposed to your boss or the vicissitudes of the global economy.”

The way forward starts by recognizing that you are the one in control. Staying where you are, for any logical reason, is itself a real exercise of agency. Your current role is not a prison. It's an important ingredient in the life you want. Choosing to stay doesn't consign you to a dull or miserable professional life, either. By taking responsibility for the quality of your work experience, you will probably be able to influence it more than you think.

Although there is no quick-fix solution to a less-than-ideal job, a wide range of researchers, career coaches, executives and everyday professionals agree: There are tools that can help you enjoy work more – or at least render it tolerable until you can move on to something better.

Quitting isn't the only path to satisfaction.

Your job or workplace is clearly the problem, so leaving is the best solution, right? Not quite. You can improve your situation, perhaps a great deal, without moving elsewhere. And quitting doesn't always solve the problem. The allure of a fresh start can be a mirage. Take “boomerang employees”: These workers left their jobs in 2021's “Great Resignation” and now want them back.

“Enjoying your job isn’t a black-and-white issue: It’s not a case of either you stick around and suck it up, or you leave and try to find something better.”

Triumphant “quitting stories” have inherent psychological appeal. Accounts of people who “gave it all up” are compelling because they typically have what is known as a “redemptive” narrative arc. The pattern goes like this: The protagonist faces a straightforward problem (unhappiness at work), presses through to a climax (a dramatic exit), and enjoys a happy ending (a totally different and appealing role). Americans in particular often feel a desire, and sometimes social pressure, to have a personal story that resolves in this way.

In reality, whether you go or stay, this often isn’t how events unfold. Problems and solutions alike can be complicated; positive change can be incremental. Sometimes there is no silver lining or redemptive plot twist to make your struggles meaningful. So before you contemplate your next move, give yourself permission to have a messy story, one that progresses through small, experimental shifts rather than big, clean breaks.

Start improving your daily work experience by pinpointing the real problem(s).

Work to understand the root causes of your dissatisfaction. If you are not yet convinced that you can make your current situation better, that’s OK. Getting to the bottom of the problem is valuable even if you end up leaving, as you will gain a clearer vision of what you do and don’t want in a role.

Workers in unsatisfying jobs often have a “quitting fantasy.” Start by letting this scene play out in your mind. Who do you tell? What do you do next? Take some time to observe how the prospect of quitting makes you feel. More than likely, it’s this emotional outcome, perhaps feelings of freedom or empowerment, that you really want – not necessarily a new role.

In the same way, the problem with your job is unlikely to be that it’s horrible through and through. What you want to change is not necessarily the role or the workplace – it’s the way you feel on a daily basis. Your task is to get curious about these emotions and where they are coming from.

“The workday is really a series of little experiences.”

As you begin this process, it may help to think of work as having three main elements or parts. The most important element is your actual role. The nitty-gritty tasks that make up your day tend to have the greatest impact on your emotional state. In second place are your colleagues and broader work environment, followed by your field or industry. With this framework in mind, ask yourself the following questions:

- **What are your favorite and least favorite parts of your current workday, and how do they make you feel?** – What do you find energizing or draining? Be as specific as possible in identifying situations, even if they seem trivial or fleeting, when you like what you are doing and time passes more quickly. To gather data, keep a daily record of how you feel during each activity or part of your workday.
- **What do you think would be better about a new job compared to your current position?** – Again, granularity is your friend. What would you expect to change: relationships, responsibilities, flexibility?

- **What are your top three strengths in a work environment?** – Work is more engaging when it draws upon your strengths. What aspects of your job let you work in an area that underscores your strengths?

When you can trace your feelings about work to specific kinds of tasks, interactions, situations or patterns, you will be in a good position to start making changes for the better.

Rethink concepts like “meaning” and “passion” in your career.

One problem may still lurk in the background, not quite captured in your reflections on your daily grind. Namely, shouldn't work be meaningful? Isn't it important to love what you do for a living?

Remember, your job is just one part of your life. It should facilitate at least some of what is important to you, but it doesn't have to provide everything. From this perspective, a boring job that works well with your life can be just fine. It depends on what is important to you right now. If concerns about passion and purpose are fueling your discontent, consider the following points.

“Do most of us know what exactly we’re searching for when we say we’re on a quest for greater meaning at work?”

First, social pressure may be partly to blame. Knowledge workers commonly believe that they ought to care deeply about their jobs. Some people feel guilty about not pursuing a more “meaningful” path, even though their circumstances don't allow it.

Second, people define meaning differently. When you say you want to feel more passionate or purposeful in your job, what does that look like to you? To make headway on this issue, you need to define meaningful work for yourself, in light of the skills and options you already possess.

Third, there are many potential sources of meaning in a job. You probably don't need to save lives every day to feel that your work serves a good purpose. People often just want to know that their work in some way helps others and aligns with at least some of their core values. You could find meaning through helping co-workers. Or, instead of seeking impact through your work directly, you could donate what you earn in a less hands-on, but more lucrative role.

“Instead of waiting for the perfect role to fall off the job tree and bonk you on the head, you take almost any role that seems good enough and either mold it into something that suits you or find things about the work that do resonate with you.”

Last but not least, there is more than one way to end up in a job you care about. Psychologists have recently put forward two contrasting approaches to this issue. People with a “fit” mind-set – and this typically includes Americans – make enjoyment a priority in their job search. They seek to fit prospective jobs to their current skills and interests. Individuals with a “develop” mind-set believe they can learn to like almost any job. A 2015 study found that this latter category of workers ended up just as happy and well-paid as their fit-minded counterparts. In other words, you can cultivate and discover new passions. If you are in your current job for reasons other than enjoyment, you can still develop real interest in your work.

Change your job description – without leaving.

At this point, you are ready to start “job crafting,” or altering your role so that you can find your work more engaging, or are able to derive more meaning from it. Like the problem-identification process, this step is useful regardless of how long you stay in your current position. What you learn along the way will either convince you to stay or help you target a future job search.

Think broadly about potential changes. Remember that there are many dimensions to your daily work experience, and therefore a wide variety of ways to improve it. You could focus on your day-to-day tasks, your relationships or on simply shifting your perspective. After the thought exercises you have already completed, you should have a sense of what you’d like to try.

“Small wins’ throughout the workday can have outsized impacts on our emotions.”

One common approach is to try to delegate, or even simply stop doing, the less enjoyable parts of your job, while volunteering for some projects that you find more engaging. Another strategy is to make a “trigger” list of negatives, like difficult colleagues or inadequate resources, and potential solutions to each problem. Trying to proactively resolve these issues may, by itself, give you a boost, because you will feel less trapped.

After brainstorming your options, consider bringing your manager into the process. If he or she is supportive and open to change, this could be a great asset. In your pitch, highlight what the organization stands to gain if it makes the changes you seek. If you hope to drop some of your current work, be ready to explain what would be a better use of your time and why others will benefit. Make sure you understand your boss’s priorities, as this will indicate what you can change on your own. Once you know what keeps your boss happy, you can focus less on the tasks that neither of you care about.

“The more you think through different actions you can take and their most likely outcomes, the less anxious you’ll feel about making some changes.”

Job crafting works best when you adopt a “strategic” or “growth” mind-set, recognizing that you have the power to change at least some elements of your situation, with or without your manager’s support. A self-help ethos will keep you troubleshooting and out of a “woe is me” mind-set until you truly hit a wall.

Unfortunately, walls do exist – you will probably not be able to transform a terrible boss, for instance. In these cases, you still have a few survival strategies at your disposal. First, find or build a “misery club”: a group of colleagues who understand what you’re going through and help you feel less alone. Just keep the commiseration productive. You should emerge wiser, validated and empowered to press on, not demoralized. Second, you can learn to manage or even avoid situations like a run-in with your nightmare boss. Learn what triggers him or her, restructure your day to minimize exposure and balance things out by interacting more with colleagues you enjoy. Finally, you can intentionally choose to focus on the positive, beneficial aspects of the job as much as you can.

Boost your engagement by focusing on personal growth, mastery and recognition.

Job crafting that focuses on shifting your own mind-set is known as “cognitive crafting.” One aspect of cognitive crafting deserves further attention: choosing to focus on your own growth, such as developing new skills or building up to a promotion. Even in an unpleasant work environment where your efforts at reshaping your role go nowhere, you can still connect with some element of your work.

This choice offers two major benefits. When the time comes to find a new job, your initiative and ability to grow will appeal to prospective employers. And, more immediately, focusing on learning and growth can itself help you feel more engaged at work. You may find that cultivating knowledge on a topic makes you care more about it, builds your confidence or brings recognition. You will likely feel better about your job, even if it hasn’t technically changed.

“Expertise often paves the way for passion.”

Note that organizations don’t automatically reward good workers – sometimes it takes intentional effort to be seen. Feeling appreciated can increase your job satisfaction, so make sure you receive due credit for your contributions. You might find it helpful to periodically send a summary of your achievements to both your boss and your boss’s boss.

Cultivate a fulfilling life outside of work so that your happiness relies less on your job.

Improving your day-to-day work experience is helpful, but your life outside of work can be just as important.

“When you expand your identity to include a new hobby, you’re inclined to fixate less on a single piece of it, like your job.”

Some people find that their tolerance for their day job increases when they have an engaging hobby, side project or volunteer endeavor. These activities can nudge you to mentally shift away from work in the evening or even to work less altogether. For modern professionals whose output is ephemeral or abstract, the feeling of making tangible progress in a hobby is gratifying. And fundamentally, adopting life-giving extracurricular activities makes you less emotionally reliant on your job.

About the Author

Shana Lebowitz Gaynor is a journalist at *Business Insider*, where she covers careers, leadership and the future of work.



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