



Handling Career Angst

By Nancy Polk, Ph.D.

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As people mature, they sometimes find that the career they first pursued and succeeded at no longer meets their needs. They may have initially needed to achieve that sense of competency and independence that tells them, "I can take care of myself, I can make enough money and support myself." Then, having gained a deeper sense of self-assurance, they sometimes think, "This job was fine in the past, but I can't see myself doing this for another 15 years." Essentially they are moving up Maslow's hierarchy of needs from security toward self-actualization.

In his book, *Career Anchors*, MIT professor Edgar Schein describes what he calls career anchors. These career anchors motivate individuals to make certain career choices during their life. Professor Schein suggests that the career anchor is "one element of a person's self concept that he or she will not give up, even in the face of difficult choices." He adds that a person's job will not necessarily match what their career anchor is at any given time because of external constraints. The eight career anchors he identifies are: Technical/functional competence; General managerial competence; Autonomy/independence; Security/stability; Entrepreneurial creativity; Service/dedication to a cause; Pure challenge; and Lifestyle.

Why People Change Careers

People often say they want to change careers so they can do something more "meaningful." They define "meaningful" in a very personal way. For some, meaningful work requires working in the not-for-profit sector (perhaps in a community agency helping children or the disadvantaged). For other people, meaningful work is being employed at a growing, profitable business that provides a high quality product or service to the public. Others find meaning only in being able to express themselves through creative activities (such as writing or the graphic arts) or having adventures at work (an Outward Bound expedition leader, for example).

Some people need to work in an environment that reflects their values and beliefs. In theoretical terms, these individuals express what John Holland refers to as the person-environment fit. If the things that people value are not appreciated and rewarded at work they often become frustrated and feel out of place. For example, one of my clients was very bright and accomplished. He held an MBA from Wharton and worked for a top consulting Firm doing complex analysis in very detail-oriented, structured projects. But, he was very unhappy. Certainly he had the intellect and skill to do the work, but his temperament required that he be in highly visible, creative, people-oriented activities. His employer did not particularly value or reward the talents he wanted to express, nor did the company's culture match his temperament. Eventually, he switched careers and took an investors relations position in a major corporation. In that position he could draw upon his strong interpersonal and communication skills as well as his financial and analytical talents. The move resolved his career angst.

The first step is before you consider changing careers, be persistent about first looking for solutions within your current job. Do all you can to make the job fit your needs better. This may mean exploring whether you can delegate responsibilities you don't enjoy or add responsibilities that you do enjoy. Ask a trusted co-worker for advice. Consider company resources such as training programs or developmental opportunities. Don't give up on a career without first examining how you can better mold it to your liking.

Secondly, ask yourself how much of your angst is wanting to move away from something as opposed to wanting to move toward something else. You may be burned out or in need of a significant change of scenery. If so, it's common to expend a lot of energy disliking what you currently do for a living. Try instead to channel that energy into clarifying what your career passion is. Doing so makes it much more likely that you'll find a new, satisfying career. Don't make the mistake many unhappy people do of quitting their jobs and going back to school without first doing the difficult work of deciding which career will work for you in the long run. Know where you want to land and then make the necessary educational or training plans.

Finally, ask yourself, "If I was doing this job with another company would I be happier?" You may like your job but dislike the industry you're in. Think about what's at the bottom of your discontent. You may get satisfaction from a job similar to the one you have now but with a different company or in a different industry.

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