The Importance of Job Satisfaction

Your personality, your likes and dislikes, all come into play. Advice on what to do to make good career decisions

Before graduation, Martha Bowen was in the fortunate position of having three job offers from consulting firms. She accepted the most prestigious firm's offer and she's not happy. It was clear from day one that her free-wheeling style and bubbly personality were at odds with the company's staid posture. The carpeting was gray, people wore gray suits, and she felt like she was living in a black-and-white movie.

One of the offers she turned down was from a smaller, less formal firm that she liked, but her parents and friends told her she "couldn't turn down" the larger, better-known firm. It was, they said, "The chance of a lifetime, and look at the money!"

Burt Walker went with a Big Eight firm because his accounting professors said, "You'll never forgive yourself if you don't." He's unlikely to forgive himself anyway because he's not doing well. Burt is overwhelmed by the size and scale of every audit he's assigned. He hates the extensive travel and his boss, the product of a private college, seems to think Burt's state university education is a handicap to be overcome.

Earl Williams, who grew up on Chicago's South Side, took a job in a remote area of northern California. The job was a fine opportunity and the community was reputed to be a nature lover's paradise. Once he settled there, however, Earl missed Chicago far more than he'd anticipated. He was one of only 10 minorities in the company and one of fewer than 50 in the town. The locally popular Mexican cuisine was not soul food.

With the best intentions, all these people made mistakes in choosing a first job that might have been avoided. They listened to parents, friends, and teachers whose advice was well-intentioned but disastrous. After all, more experienced professors, placement professionals, and friends were trying to help. But they blocked out the negative messages from their intuitions and made what appeared to be rational choices. Unfortunately, by being logical and unemotional, they found themselves in jobs they should have rejected. They should not have ignored their feelings and doubts, because what we sometimes call intuition is often a rational response to our past experiences.

Illustrated by Joe Roulette

Martha refused to acknowledge the importance of her style and effervescent personality even though after she'd taken the office tour during the interviewing process, she told her roommate it was "drab" and "stuffy."

A friend of Burt's had gone to work two years before for the same accounting firm he'd chosen. She had left after 18 months, claiming she'd never been happy a day there.

Earl's parents didn't want to throw cold water on his romantic notions about living near the mountains and redwoods, but his mother did remind him that his one experience at a wilderness scout camp had been so disagreeable that he'd begged to come home after one week.

Remember, if you hate your first job, even if you perform well, it's going to be an ego-rattling disappointment. It can also undermine your self-confidence. Every job you have between the first one and retirement may not be

By Marilyn M. Kennedy

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perfect, but that's no reason not to do everything possible to make each one a satisfying experience. Before making a "logical" decision about your first job, consider these vital issues.

Who are you? You have likes, dislikes, values, peculiarities, social and cultural needs, and a bundle of complex and competing interests. Before you go on an interview—or a second interview—and long before you accept a job offer, you should look inward and

get in touch with yourself.

The best way to begin is through a process of elimination. Most people are clearer on what they dislike than on what they like. Start by listing everything you dislike about the following categories: 1) people; 2) work environments; 3) geographical locations; 4) size of organization or size of the work unit.

Mine your memory and think through all your past work experiences. Think of the vacations you've had to places you've traveled and list what you liked or disliked about them and why. Have you ever said, "This is a great place to visit but I'd hate to live here"? If you've lived in several different places, which one did you like the most, the least?

Your lists should be as exhaustive as you can make them—especially when you're considering your people preferences. Had Martha done this, her list of phobias would have included: 1) people who are snobbish and keep reminding others that they went to a prep school; 2) people who lack a sense of humor; 3) low energy people; 4) intense people who can't see that, as Noel Coward said, "Work should be more fun than fun." She might have continued with 10 or 15 more dislikes. Had she made her "shopping" list before she went on her site tour, there is little chance she'd have taken the job, especially when she saw the people were almost as drab as the environment!

Campus recruiters sometimes sense that a prospect is a bit uncomfortable with some aspect of the company and may ask outright, "Have you ever lived in a small town?" The recruiter may note the answer and others who interview a candidate may pick up on it. Earl was asked several times if he was sure he'd like living in a small town. Being a polished interviewee, he managed to overcome the company's doubts even though he honestly hadn't addressed his own.

Burt had more than enough notice that the public accounting firm he'd chosen had a well-known reputation for ruthlessness, but he didn't consider how much that would affect him on a day-to-day basis. It's easy to discount someone else's experience when you're not in touch with your own values. Within three weeks Burt was saying (to himself), "But that's not how I treat the client."

Work environment matters. There's been controversy lately about the effect of bullpen arrangements, partitions, and private offices on concentration and productivity. Think about your study habits: Do you work best in a library with many people around you? Are you able to concentrate better in a room with fewer visual distractions? How do you prepare for finals? Has it been your practice to study with others or alone? Studying is work. You already have work habits and preferences although you may not have identified them as such.

If you know you need a fairly self-contained work area to do your best, wouldn't it be detrimental to both productivity and satisfaction to pick a place that hummed with people working at closely packed desks? This has been a problem for some accounting, data processing, and engineering people. It's not insurmountable. You can learn to function well in a different environment but you should know going in that you'll have to make the effort to adjust.

Working with like-minded people. This is important to job satisfaction. Woe to the person who says, with consummate naivete, "I can get along with anyone." Yes, but at what price? Being the only whatever you are can contribute to an uncomfortable sense of being different. If you're aware of the situation before you begin a job you can be mentally prepared to deal with it. Still, especially on a first job, having a few similar souls around you can be helpful.

Even more important than the more obvious areas of compatibility is compatibility of style. A true loner, accustomed to taking an assignment and returning when the work is completed will have a hard time adjusting to consensus-style management or even participative management. The endless meetings during which people try to work out problems and get commitments to common goals through discussion will be numbingly tedious—and unnecessary as well.

A young banker described just the opposite experience on his first job: "I was given an assignment and sent away. I felt totally abandoned and lonely. My boss never even asked casually how I was getting along until one week before the project was due." A loner would have found that heaven, the ideal environment. Someone who needs more people contact would have had the same reaction as the banking neophyte.

When you have a clear fix on the kind of people you're comfortable working with and the style you work best with, you'll want to find out about both during interviews. Ask, "What's the background of most of the people in the department?" or, "Are meetings an important part of getting the job done?" Neither question is aggressive and will help you find out what you need to know in a neutral way.

Don't dismiss first impressions. Listen to your gut feelings. If the campus recruiter makes you uncomfortable, the size or scale of the company's operation seems overwhelming, or the idea of being 30 miles from downtown five days a week strikes you as bleak, don't dismiss those thoughts. First impressions can be false but frequently they are honest. You may change your mind, but you should do so on the basis of further input, not because you tell yourself, "I shouldn't feel that way." Negative feelings cannot be controlled

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or even effectively suppressed. They can change in response to new data. They should alert you to the need for further investigation.

Virtually every job seeker who made a wrong choice will admit that part of the problem was that he or she rode roughshod over feelings that were honest and important. Admitting that they'd done so when it was too late made them feel even more distressed when the job failed to be satisfying.

A firm's name and reputation have little effect on job satisfaction. Of course, drawing a "Wow, you work for IBM!" from friends may be pleasant, but what if IBM's style—and it has a very definite style—makes you miserable? Do you think being miserable at IBM or Arthur Andersen would be less miserable than being at the Mighty Mouse Computer Co.?

Miserable is miserable—no matter whose name is on the brass plate. Telling yourself you can "stand anything for a year so I can put it on my resume" is foolish. Wouldn't satisfying, developmental, successful experiences almost anywhere look as good? Prestige and job satisfaction rarely compute if the rest of the work situation isn't positive.

Ultimately, your work satisfaction will depend on a combination of circumstances, some of which are within your control. The more care you take as you go through the screening process, the better off you'll be in the long run. Your own feelings and experiences are the only definitive ones, and have the most to do with how satisfied and successful you'll be once you're on the job. ■

For Additional Information

Thank God it's Monday! by William E. Diehl. Fortress Press. 192 pages; $5.95, paperback.

Thank God it's Monday: How to Turn Work into an Adventure by Robert M. Randolph. Institute for Business Planning Inc. 249 pages; $15.95.

Five Fatal Resume Mistakes

Most resumes wind up in the wastebaskets of prospective employers. Advice from an expert on how to avoid this

Are your resume and your prospective employer two ships passing in the night? If so, you may be scuttling your own vessel before you set sail on a hoped-for career. Although you don't want to reenact the collision of the Andrea Doria and the Stockholm with any prospective bosses, you at least want them to be aware of your presence in the choppy seas of job hunting.

Victor R. Lindquist, author of Northwestern University's reputable *Endicott Report*, observed for *The Wall Street Journal*, "Resumes these days are treated like junk mail." If this is the case, we need to ask why it is so and how it can be remedied. If you expect your resume to catch and hold the attention of your employers and generate interest in you as a potential employee, you need to make sure it doesn't hit the circular file before it has delivered its message.

Let's troubleshoot some common faults in writing and formatting resumes so that those fatal mistakes can be avoided. The following are examples of mistakes taken from resumes written by graduating collegians.

Aiming too high, too soon. Lynn, 20, is majoring in communications and minoring in journalism. Her work experience includes instructing aerobic dance classes, waitressing, and working as a receptionist/bookkeeper. However, the job objective on her resume states that she is "seeking a position as a public relations director within a large business organization."

The two ill-chosen words in this example are "director" and "large." In 10 or 15 years, perhaps, with good luck and determined effort, she may land such a job. For the present, however, she needs to think in less grandiose terms. Her immediate occupational goal is to find an entry- level position in an organization (regardless of its size) that will hire her, so she can gain some experience in public relations.

No one becomes an admiral overnight. Though Lynn may have potential, she is not yet ready to be trusted with directing the intricate public relations efforts of a large firm. While starting at the bottom and working up sounds less than glamourous, it is possible. Occupational goals need to be within the realm of the possible. Aiming too high, too soon on a resume means the writer will miss the mark altogether.

Giving all experience equal billing. Resumes should be written in the same way that music is played—with dynamics. Not all entries should be given the same emphasis. Important items need to be stressed; less important ones, muted. To know whether or not something is important, ask yourself if it shows that your abilities match the employer's needs.

James is aiming for a job in sports promotion. Yet, listed side-by-side and given equal space on his resume are two work experiences—one pertains to sports and the other is not related to sports. He listed sports editor for the college newspaper next to lawn maintenance, and equal space has been devoted to each.

Because he is aiming for a sports position, not one in landscape architecture, he should put a greater emphasis on his job as sports editor. The two entries are not equal in the eyes of the prospective employer. The lawn maintenance entry says, "This applicant has held jobs and appears to be ambitious." Although this is certainly not a negative message, it is not as pertinent as the one given by the sports editor's job. The newspaper entry says, "This applicant could plug right into our business. With his first-hand journalistic experience, training him will be no problem."

"Accentuate the positive; eliminate the negative" was the advice in an old World War II song. And "emphasize the pertinent" should be added. How do candidates emphasize the best they have to offer? By choosing to de-emphasize or exclude irrelevant experiences that merely clutter the resume and by allocating the most space to the most applicable experiences. What is excluded is often as important as what is included. Resumes are more like portraits than photographs because you act as the artist/writer who decides what to include on your resume or your canvas.

Once content is chosen, form can be used to enhance it. By underlining or capitalizing significant points and by moving the most pertinent information to the lefthand margin, the resume writer says, "Hey, look at this."

Here is an example of how visual impact can easily be achieved. Most people know, for example, that underlining emphasizes. But few think about the double strength of putting a line above the information as well as underneath it. This is a simple visual modification easily made on either a typewriter or a word processor. But use it sparingly, as overuse will detract from its impact.

Resumes with plenty of white space are easier to read than those with narrow margins that are packed with print. The prospect of reading a resume of solid words, unrelieved by ample fields of white space, may lessen an

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