

Just Like Starting Over

I'm sure at one point or another we have all wondered what ever made us choose our line of work, particularly after enduring a string of sour sales meetings or lengthy business trips. Why on earth, we ask ourselves, would anyone wish to do this for a living?

Simple. Because we often feel that we are forced to, writes Harvard psychologist Howard Gardner, co-author of *Good Work: When Excellence and Ethics Meet*, published earlier this year. "It is difficult to quit one's job, let alone one's profession, in midlife and begin anew saddled with a mortgage and perhaps tuition payments," Gardner writes in a recent issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. "In such situations, many, if not most, of us resign ourselves to our fate."

But what if you could do it all over? Would you follow the same path? If not, you wouldn't be alone. If working adults were able to start their careers and begin their life's work again, only half would remain in their current field, according to a recent Gallup study.

Why? What really makes you happy in your career? Ultimately, how you feel affects how you work—which can be articulated throughout your company in workforce concerns ranging from employee turnover and loyalty to executive leadership.

The other day a question was put around the table during an editorial lunch: "Aside from present positions, what calling would you pursue if every job in the world paid exactly the same wage?" The point is not that journalists simply labor in their chosen field to reap lavish financial rewards. Rather, the question was meant as a conversation starter, and it was interesting to note the responses.

When money was removed from the motivation equation, immediately our minds were free to think not of how we would benefit from our vocation, but of what we could give. Our choices were more dependent on how we would spend our days and on the satisfaction associated with producing meaningful work, an important concept in *Good Work*.

"Studies of motivation reveal the intricate interplay between external rewards for high-level performance and those intrinsic satisfactions that can keep us engaged over the long haul," writes Gardner, "even when things are not going well." What does it mean to be fully engaged—if not for us but for the companies where we work?

The key to our motivation for choosing a career

(and then getting up every morning and putting forth our best efforts at the office) exists in the reciprocal link between career satisfaction, happiness and workplace productivity.

"We increasingly demand of our jobs that they bring, or contribute mightily, to our personal fulfillment," writes George Mason University law professor Peter Berkowitz in a recent issue of *The New Republic*. "We want our work to develop our talents, to provide association with interesting and good people. In the view that Americans increasingly share, work is itself a constitutive part of human happiness."

Nearly 81 percent of the working public believes it's important to have a job they enjoy doing, according to nationwide survey data recently released by FranklinCovey. Yet, the survey also found that 37 percent are dissatisfied with their careers, and another 32 percent are neutral. Moreover, working Americans spend only 60 percent of their days doing work they enjoy, with the remaining time spent on work they are neutral about or flatly dislike.

And in our pursuit of happiness, we constantly seek greener pastures. More than half of all employees are "in the job market" in some capacity, according to the 2001 study, *The Towers Perrin Talent Report: New Realities in Today's Workforce*. Of these, 12 percent said they are "actively looking."

For our own sake and that of our companies, Gardner advocates a renewal of vocational passion. "We are talking about identifying the reasons that one originally chose one's work," he says, "and making a serious effort to determine whether one has strayed from it." Then we must identify role models, says Gardner, and pass the "mirror test." By taking an objective look at yourself, are you the kind of person you want to be?

Quite possibly, this missing sense of calling, purpose and happiness lies at the heart of many workforce issues. As survey data shows, the desire to create a fresh start is alluring. December is the month to decide on a last-minute New Year's resolution. Make it a good one. Reconnect at your current job or in your chosen field. And if you make your plans correctly, as John Lennon once promised in a love song, "It'll be just like starting over."

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