

Appendix D

How to Survive An Unhappy Job

by Genita Kovacevich-Costello

Your job—love it or leave it. In today's economy, unhappy employees question whether they can afford the luxury of following that advice. Hesitant to pursue job satisfaction at the risk of losing job security, they wind up feeling trapped. What can they do? Bay Area career consultants offer these suggestions.

Become A Desert Survivor

"When you start asking questions about surviving in today's job market," explains Richard Bolles, director of the National Career Development Project and author of *What Color Is Your Parachute?*, "it's a lot like being out in the desert." He offers this example.

Two people are stranded in the desert. One knows nothing about survival. The other knows where to find water and which plants are edible.

If you interviewed these people after six or seven days and asked them what the desert was like, you'd get two different answers." Bolles says. "One would say it was awful; the other not so bad."

Depending on their survival skills, unhappy employees will perceive today's job market in different ways too. Some, Bolles says, are frightened enough by employment conditions to stay where they are. "But others are making changes," he explains. "They know how to survive."

Some of the strategies he and other career consultants recommend include interviewing for information to learn more about potential career opportunities and networking among colleagues and friends.

If You Can't Move Up, Move Over

Training consultant and public speaker Beverly Potter agrees that there is more than one way for dissatisfied employees to change jobs. Moving laterally is one that is frequently overlooked.

"Most people don't realize that moving up the ladder is only one way to manage a career," she says. In this era of too many people for too few top management positions, it's a strategy that Potter believes could be a losing one.

She recommends that employees who feel trapped because there is no room for them to move up should look sideways. "While moving laterally may not bring increased income," says Potter, "a lateral move can provide new challenges and broaden an employee's capabilities." Becoming a generalist with a larger vision of the company can give an employee flexibility that Potter believes is important in today's market.

Be Prepared

The decision to change jobs may not always be that of the employee's. Consequently, whether an unhappy employee plans on looking for another job or not, career consultant Charles Prugh recommends he or she be prepared to do so.

There are factors in today's economy a person has no control over that still require a response," he explains, such as layoffs, mergers and bankruptcies. "Job changes are continuing, although the forces influencing them may be more external than before."

Play The Waiting Game To Win

Positioning for a job change may be the answer for some dissatisfied employees. For reasons of job security, company loyalty or future promotions, others will decide to wait. Already unhappy, the waiting game can become a losing proposition unless employees find ways to renew their enthusiasm for work.

Increase your sense of power: "What unhappy employees need to do if they're going to stay where they are," says Potter, who wrote *Beating Job Burnout*, "is to increase their feeling of power and control over their own work."

One of the simplest levels at which employees can begin to do this is by scheduling their work. Potter's rule of thumb is to start with unpleasant

tasks and follow with preferred activities. The implied reward provides the motivation to get things done.

Redesign your job: Besides altering how and when they perform their jobs, employees also can change what they do. "We're too locked into thinking of jobs as a fixed commodity," explains Potter. "But jobs change and evolve over time.

Organizational analyst Jo-Ann Intili recommends that employees look at job changes that will not only benefit them but the company as well. "Organizations are pulling back in terms of meeting employee needs for needs' sake," she says. "They are looking to increase profits."

An employee who can propose changes that are in line with the larger organizational picture will stand a better chance of management approval.

The difficulty is in finding out what that larger picture is. "When an organization is under stress," explains Intili, "employees are less likely to be kept informed about management directions." Consequently the dissatisfied employee must do his or her homework on what the organization needs, rather than relying on subjective ideas.

Keep your career moving: Career consultant Prugh agrees that the current job market has made employees more cautious about making career moves. He recommends they use this time to build transitional experiences such as education or training in order to be ready to move ahead when the time is right. "By re-investing their energies in the future," he explains, "they can keep their careers moving rather than stuck."

Intili echoes this advice. "It's important not to get caught short being obsolescent, she says. With company cutbacks in training, however, the burden of keeping up to date may fall heavily on the employee.

Indulge yourself: "There is a tendency when we're unhappy in our jobs to deprive ourselves of things," says Potter. Yet, that is the time employees need self-indulgence the most, so Potter recommends building it in.

By developing a "want list" from which they can reward themselves for accomplishing their goals, employees begin getting what they want. "That goes a long way towards feeling better about what we're doing," she adds.

Change your way of looking at your job: Employees who torture themselves with thinking, "I'm trapped," are bound to end up feeling that way. "The way we think determines our emotions," Potter explains.

"If you can't leave your job, you've got to change the way you think about it to tolerate it."

Following this advice, the trapped employee could redefine his or her situation as only temporary and decide that, "While I'm here I'm going to take advantage of this job and make some important contacts that will help me in the future."

Pursuing job satisfaction is a test of skill even during the best of economic times. It is even more challenging today, however, because of a value shift in the work environment. Workers are caught in what Prugh describes as "a contrast between the expectations that came about from an affluent economy and one that isn't." While the choices appear more difficult, Prugh sees a silver lining. "People are approaching job expectations with a greater sense of reality and thought," he explains, "and that is bound to produce better decisions."

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