

The Globe and Mail

April 12, 2006

Get help deciding what's most important in a job

By SUSAN PINKER

Dear Susan,

I've had a good 20-year career. The last decade I've held seven jobs, all progressively more senior, plus I've had several good contracts. I change jobs to move up but also, since I'm intense and creative, I'm easily drained and discouraged when under-appreciated by employers (the last time that happened I became ill).

The last four years I've been self-employed. I'd like to become an employee again -- for camaraderie and a pension. Can one change, or does my style of work define who I am?

-- Self-Actualizer

Dear Self-Actualizer,

This is an existential issue that boils down to two questions. If you can't have it all -- camaraderie, recognition, stable employment with great benefits and work that reflects your creative identity -- which would you choose? One job rarely has everything. You need to discern what's most important to you.

Which leads to the second question: If you can't decide this by yourself, who can help?

This is where a coach or a therapist comes in. Coaches are supposed to help people define and realize their life goals, says Dianne Stober, a psychologist who teaches evidence based coaching at Fielding Graduate University in Santa Barbara, Calif., and who recently published a book on the topic.

"The coach will help you figure out what you want and give you some direction. When you talk about developing the potential of healthy people, making the most of what they have, that's coaching," she said, trying to clear up my confusion between coach, therapist, and mentor. Healing past hurts or remediating a deficit is more in the purview of a therapist, she explained, whereas a coach acts as a sounding board who requires you to be accountable to your goals -- whether business or personal.

Clearly everyone could use one of these. But before you saddle up your browser and punch in the word coach, consider this. This field is "the wild, wild West," wrote two executive coaches in the Harvard Business Review in 2004, with more than \$1-billion (U.S.) a year spent on services that are diverse, unregulated and largely untested.

Perhaps some of this self-examination can be done on your own. If you know you need recognition to stay motivated, how can you be sure you'll get that from the next employer who offers team work and a pension?

Bosses and projects change. You can go in with the promise of feedback and creative autonomy, and find you're just one corporate shuffle away from toiling under a blinkered micromanager who likes to crack the whip.

If just the suggestion makes your stomach heave, no pension or office camaraderie will compensate. But if you can learn to ask for what you need and are willing to make tradeoffs to get it, you can try becoming a "company man again." Just make sure you have some support, so you don't get sick or die trying.

Dear Susan,

I read in this paper that eating at your desk is unhealthy because you eat too much and there's more bacteria on your phone than on a toilet seat.

I usually do eat at my desk because I'm always overloaded with work, but I also find outside lunches a waste of time. People gossip and it's complicated when the bill arrives. If we're going to talk about work anyway, why not have a regular meeting?

-- Charlie Brown

Dear Charlie,

Lunch is not just about ingesting a thousand calories so you can keep hammering away at your keyboard and lifting your germy handset for yet another few hours. I may not be an ideal model -- most days I absent-mindedly spoon yogurt into my face while staring intently at my screen.

But I'm well aware of the social and cognitive boons of exchanging ideas over food and drink and, when I do indulge, the benefits extend past the pleasures of risotto with shaved parmesan piled on top.

It's not just about the food. Having lunch out with colleagues and associates firms up bonds and spells out the usually unspoken rules of office politics, not only for the newcomer but for habitués for whom the sands might shift at any time.

Lunch out maintains your allegiances. Plus, there's some truth to the cliché that lunch can be a catalyst for opportunity.

An example: Just when I was getting good at my work but mighty weary of the routine, I attended a lunch for science fair judges at a local high school.

I didn't relish dashing out of the office to face a lacklustre hour of dry party sandwiches, carrot sticks and burnt coffee. But it was there that I bumped into a physician acquaintance who was starting a newspaper series on personal health. Would I be interested in writing a column or two on psychological issues, he asked?

That's how my writing began, over dog-eared Styrofoam cups beside an outdated Encyclopedia Britannica. A idea surfaced there that forever altered the rhythm of my work life.

Personal anecdotes aside, research supports the notion that work-related socializing and gossip can be good for you and often benefits the group.

David Sloan Wilson, a biologist and anthropologist at the State University of New York at Binghamton, did a study that tested how 195 people felt about a neighbour who gossiped. Contrary to what one would expect, most people strongly disapproved when someone was tightlipped and refused to share information, especially when his or her discretion might harm the group.

One scenario asked participants what they thought of a farmer who knew that a neighbour neglected to maintain his fence, so that his cattle were freeloading in other people's fields. Most people approved of him sharing this information with others in the community.

Indeed, refusing to participate in a common pool of information can be unhealthy and make you feel more marginalized, agrees Sarah Wert, whose research at Yale University focuses on gossip.

In a recent study she showed that gossiping with someone else at work relieves anxieties and provides essential information that one can't get otherwise, like who in the office is trustworthy and whether a problem is unique to you or endemic to the whole department.

Clearly, lunch out with colleagues lubricates the machinery of office interaction. You can call it networking, angling, weaving social capital or just gossiping.

Whatever you call it, it's like red wine, coffee and chocolate. Once it was bad for you. Now it's good for you-- at least once in a while.

Susan Pinker is a psychologist and writer.

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