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New Job, New Life

If you're starting to dread punching in every morning, maybe it's time to consider doing something completely different...

By Lisa Bendall

Catherine Fair had a dream job. At least, that's how it appeared: as a successful sales rep for a pharmaceutical company, she had flexible hours, pulled in a comfortable salary, and was considered a leader on her sales team. There was just one problem. "I was bored," she says. "I felt like my learning curve had flattened. I didn't know whether I even wanted to stay in the industry."

Her turning point came on a visit to Banff National Park. She overheard mention of an opening for a horseback trail guide. It was a tough job: physically demanding, poorly paid, and plagued by hazards like bears and falling hillside ice. So 35-year-old Fair was stunned to hear her inner voice suddenly shrieking, "Pick me!"

Two months later Fair had given up her Toronto-area job, packed up, and moved to Alberta. The job proved difficult and stressful – and she relished every second of it. A lifelong lover of the outdoors, Fair thrived on the pure air and breathtaking natural landscape.

When it comes to career changes, most would agree that sales rep to wilderness guide is a bit of an about-face. But Fair insists she's not normally impulsive. "I'm a very pragmatic person. The thought of throwing away a lucrative job and stability to come and work for six bucks an hour didn't fit with my m.o.," she says. On the other hand, "I didn't want to get to a point in my life where I said 'what if I had done that?' So I took a chance."

Taking a chance is pretty well unavoidable when one jumps from a stable career to a dramatically different one. But sometimes, it can feel like there isn't much choice. Unlike Fair, Jane Mundy of Vancouver wasn't bored when she decided to leave her job. On the contrary, she was kept hopping as owner and operator of Canada's largest film-catering company. But though she raked in the cash and got to work alongside movie stars, she was miserable and sick. "I didn't have a life outside of the company," she recalls. She couldn't escape the constant demands, not even while on vacation. Her blood pressure was skyrocketing and her doctor told her: "You've either got to sell this business or change your lifestyle around."

Mundy did both. Seven years later, Mundy, 53, is fulfilling a longstanding ambition to be a writer. She works at home, at a pace that suits her and leaves her with time to play tennis and work out. Her quality of life has improved "one hundred percent" and her health has soared. When Mundy recently bumped into someone she hadn't seen since she sold the catering company, the friend gushed, "My God, what happened to you? You look like you lost ten years off your life!"

People can definitely suffer physically when their job negatively affects them, says Janis Foord-Kirk, a career transitions expert in Kelowna, B.C. "It's virtually impossible to separate work and life." But that's why it's also important to isolate the problem before

making a major move, since personal troubles, too, can lead to general unhappiness or malaise. In those cases, calling it quits at work won't serve as a quick cure.

Pinpointing the source of stress, and deciding whether a different job will indeed enhance your life, may require some self-examination. "The soul-searching is seldom easy, but it's pretty essential," says Foord-Kirk. "There's no sense in making a change just for the sake of making a change."

Prepping for a career shift can also take some groundwork. When Graham Chandler of Calgary left an unfulfilling bank job at the age of 45 to become an archaeologist, he wasn't nervous—but he was organized. "I couldn't wait to hand in my resignation, but it wasn't a snap-of-the-fingers decision," he says. He knew he was headed for a much more modest income, so he began downsizing many months in advance. He stopped buying fancy suits. He traded in two vehicles for an economy car. He sold his house. Then there was a long wait while his savings added up, but the eventual thrill of going on a dig in the Arctic or Greece or Belize was completely worth it. "Every day I was up early in the morning, and I was just soaring. I was loving it," says Chandler. "It was a decision that I'd make all over again, in a heartbeat."

For emotional bolstering during the changeover, Chandler leaned on his partner, family, and friends. Halifax-based business coach Craig Kennedy agrees that setting up a strong and supportive personal network can make all the difference in the process. "It's vitally important, in any change initiative that you're undertaking," he notes. "Get people that you can talk these things through with."

With introspection, planning, and a circle of support, it's entirely possible to swap a dissatisfying career for a dream job. Chandler's advice to those who are considering a change? "Go for it," he declares. "It's like being reborn."

4 Questions to Ask Yourself Before Changing Jobs

1. How do I know if I need a change?

If you simply dread punching in every morning, you may be in need of a career redo. Perhaps work is wreaking havoc on your health. Or sometimes the sacrifices you make for your job, like missing out on family time, start to seem too great as your kids grow up. But before doing anything drastic, don't rule out revising your current duties or hours. You might be able to put things right without putting yourself out there.

2. Am I the kind of person who can pull this off?

It's true, many folks who jump from job to job seem reckless. But that doesn't mean those on the cautious side can't career-hop. Pam MacDonald of Victoria, B.C., claims she's not a risk-taker by any stretch of the imagination, and yet she traded in a stressful government human resources job to start her own business selling a line of ladies' clothing. The key is to do your research: MacDonald consulted mentors and counsellors and assessed her skills and interests, and only made the move when she had a plan and felt confident it could work.

3. How do I know the new career is right for me?

Kennedy says you should ask yourself hard questions: Will it be rewarding? Does it fit your strengths and values? Are the hours and vacation time workable? Will it allow you to meet other needs, like health or family responsibilities? You don't have to pull in big

bucks, but can you at least make ends meet? And, Kennedy adds, are you continuing to learn? “Am I growing? Am I feeling challenged by this work, in a good way?”

4. What will help me survive the transition?

Keep the people in your circle up to date, says Foord-Kirk. Let them know what you're going through, so they can support you. Connect with a mentor in your new field of work. Keep a careful financial plan, and be patient if it takes a few months or longer to reach your income goal. “The process of change is fraught with all sorts of complexities that you can't always anticipate. That's where personal resourcefulness becomes important,” Foord-Kirk notes. “Look at obstacles as challenges to be overcome, instead of letting them get you down.”

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