

How best to counter low job satisfaction

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Job satisfaction means different things depending on where you sit in the workplace arena.

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Employers, managers and executives sit in the elite seats and tend to view job satisfaction conceptually, as a facet of things like productivity, commitment and loyalty.

Sitting in the bleachers are employees, for whom job satisfaction is a highly practical concern affecting most aspects of their day-to-day lives. Who doesn't, after all, want challenging work that pays well in safe and commodious surroundings under the supervision of a respectful boss?

Louisa Jewell straddles the divide between the two. She's a career coach who helps people build satisfying careers and, at the same time, a corporate consultant to organizations in need of comprehensive retention strategies.

"I guess you could say I'm a specialist on knowing why people are leaving organizations," says Jewell, president of Crystallizers, a Toronto-based consulting firm.

Jewell and a colleague, Tracy Griffin are the co-founders of new website www.whydidyogo.com, which they created to gather retention data for their corporate clients but also, they say, as a resource for people in the bleachers struggling to deal with challenging situations at work.

Their overall objective, Jewell says, is to help people and organizations "improve happiness at work one workplace at a time."

Jewell and Griffin say there are five major reasons that people become unhappy on the job. Some find that their values and those of their employers are incongruent. Others run into personality conflicts or find that they can't leverage their strengths because their jobs don't allow it. Still others aren't internally motivated and can't get excited about the work they do. And sometimes, it's simply that the environment in which people work or the day-to-day requirements or their jobs don't suit them for one reason or another.

Low job satisfaction, even deep unhappiness at work, doesn't necessarily mean that you have to leave your job, says Jewell. You do, however, have to take some kind of action.

"People often don't do anything about their unhappiness, because they're afraid or they lack confidence," she observes. "And they get stuck."

If you're feeling stuck at the moment, Jewell and Griffin suggest a four-step process that can help build momentum.

Analyze why you're unhappy. "Look objectively at your own situation to see what the factors are," says Jewell. "Then talk it over with a friend, colleague or a coach to get their perspective." Isolating the root cause of job dissatisfaction can take some effort, she acknowledges, but it will pay off in the long term. "Until you understand why you don't love your job today, you won't know what to look for in the future."

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Determine a course of action. "This involves assessing risks and opportunities, pros and cons," says Griffin. "Before you challenge the status quo, you have to anticipate the consequences. Ask others for their feedback. Build a Plan A and a Plan B. And this is really important; consider the support system you have to help you."

Select and execute a specific strategy. This might include opening lines of communication with your boss, talking to someone in human resources, finding a mentor or looking for other opportunities in your organization, they say.

Evaluate and refine your plans. "Sometimes you don't get it exactly right," Griffin says. "So you need to build in some checkpoints to be sure that your strategy is working. And if it's not, go back to step one and analyze why."

There's nothing simple about this process, of course. And if you need help, this new website is a good place to start. If nothing else, completing one of the online surveys might help you vent your frustration.

Jewell and Griffin also host free radio podcasts each month, during which you can speak to them directly and ask specific questions.

Says Jewell "We do the podcasts to help people with challenging situations, so that they have more skills to be able to reduce stress and be happier at work."

"This is something that we're both passionate about", Jewell says. "We want to know what makes people happy and we will feed that information back to employers. That's what motivates us. It's a combination of our life's work."

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