

Work - career change - Q & A

This article lists a range of questions on career change which were posted by visitors to the Better Health Channel. Our experts provide the answers.

Q. I hate my job. What can I do?

Let's identify what's been going on first. How long have you been in this job, and how long have you felt like this? Are there specific concerns you can identify, or is it that you just don't want to get out of bed and go there each day?

For example, what is your relationship with your manager like? Other team members? Are you able to use the skills and abilities that you enjoy in this job? What else is going on in your life?

Keep a diary

To help you get a sense of all of these factors, it can be useful to observe a week's work and list everything that you do or that happens under the categories:

- Love it, and it gives me energy
- Indifferent
- Hate it, and it saps my energy.

From the patterns you observe, see if you can identify if it is:

- **A 'skills and interests' difficulty** - you feel you are stuck with no prospects and are intellectually bored, despite loving your field.
- **An interpersonal or environmental difficulty** - your work relationships or work environment are hampering your capacity to enjoy or be effective in your work.
- **Non-work-related** - not necessarily the work so much as other things going on in your life such as stress, lack of social life, or lack of fun and pleasure.

See if there's anything you can change

Are there any aspects of your work that you can control and improve? Could you volunteer for more interesting projects or a job exchange, or change who you report to? Many people find their actual work is okay, but that maintaining their values, ethics, life balance and sense of recognition is the problem. A poor relationship with your manager can cause problems. It's also a problem if you feel bored or overworked. Is there anything you can change?

Is it all bad?

What percentage of the day is acceptable to you, and how much is intolerable? Usually, people can manage with 30 to 40 per cent of 'good' in their day, and will flourish between 50 to 80 per cent. It's rare that any job is blissful all of the time. However, if you are not obtaining any sense of satisfaction, delight, creativity, completion or worth from your job, it may be time to consider other options.

New skills may help

Is there something you would like to do that may require further study? Try a few short courses or academic training, and establish new networks. Sometimes moving across or even downwards to have a better quality of life is worthwhile.

Make time for leisure

Is there space for pleasure and happiness in your life, or do you feel you are living in the salt mines seven days and nights a week? Sometimes we get into a rut because we deny ourselves any happiness or fun. List the things that give you pleasure and make you feel good, and check whether you still manage to do some of these things regularly. If not, get to it!

Then check to see if you still hate your work. If so, it may be time to move on -go to a different organisation in a similar role or change careers.

Personal issues

Is there something going on in your personal life that may be contributing to you feeling so miserable? It may be helpful to visit a psychologist or career counsellor, or talk with mentors and friends to explore this. Talking about the issues can be useful, because it helps you to see what is really going on and what you might be able to do about it. Professionals can help you identify your style, skills, passions and abilities, and relate these to labour market trends, further study options or career paths.

Q. I am 27 years old and still don't know what I want to do with my life. I was a secretary, and then I did a massage course. I am currently studying photography, but I am still unsure what I want to do. Is this normal? Will I ever know?

How wonderful that you are exploring different things you are interested in. It fits well with the new world of work. You do what needs to be done, what you want to do or what someone will pay you to do, until it doesn't need to be done anymore or until you want to do something else, and then the cycle begins again.

It's good to be flexible

It is perfectly normal and okay not to have a rigid career goal that has determined your life since you were five. In our current work world, I am more concerned about the people who have always wanted to be an 'X' since they were a child and who insist on pursuing their career, despite having been retrenched because there is no demand for that work any more.

Examine your choices

Are there any threads that run through your choices? This may help you understand what will best suit your interests, abilities, motivation and personality. What causes you to leave one thing and become attracted to another? For example, did you train in massage because:

- You are fascinated by anatomy?
- You enjoy touch and healing?
- You like solving problems, such as sports injuries?
- You want to be self-employed and set your own hours?
- You want to work one-on-one with people?

Did you stop massage work because:

- Your thumbs were injured or painful?
- You couldn't get any clients or make enough money?
- You got sick of being in a tiny room, perspiring in silence while a body on the table snored in bliss?
- You were bored with the repetition and lack of career development?

Why did you decide to study photography? Was it because:

- You are an observer of life and relish the thought of capturing unique moments?
- You want to express your creativity and technical expertise?
- You thought it would be fun, while you figure out what you could do to earn money?
- You find the work exciting and you take amazing shots?

Look at the themes in your work choices

I sometimes notice a theme running through the different work areas people are drawn to. They may want to:

- Help others
- Express creativity
- Structure and organise
- Research and investigate
- Be an innovator
- Be autonomous and independent
- Work with people in a team.

Your skills could take you in many directions

You may be 'tasting' various options, and learning to discard them before you can get a sense of what you want to do and what the labour market will pay for. On the other hand, you may find that, unconsciously, you are preparing yourself for a new career that doesn't exist yet, but will require all your various skills. For example, you might find yourself travelling overseas as a photojournalist who also makes documentaries on healing techniques around the world. You may end up running a stress relief café, where people can obtain a quick chair massage and afternoon tea between heavy work schedules. You may have a photo gallery on the walls and broker various artists.

There are so many ways we can put our skills together to create work. Our needs change over time, and we may prefer to explore our interests until something new captures our attention.

Get some outside input

Get information from the people around you. Talk to your friends. Ask them:

- How do they see your strengths and weaknesses?
- What do they notice that you do easily and effortlessly?
- What do they suspect you would enjoy and do well?

Project yourself into your future. Ask yourself:

- What sort of lifestyle do you imagine you will lead in your 50s?
- What would you need to start doing now so that it could happen?

If you are concerned about a lack of interest in doing anything, and worry that you always seem to leave a career before you get any reward, you might consider seeking professional assistance from a psychologist or careers counsellor. This can help you to:

- Discover possibilities that would suit you
- Look at demand within the workplace
- Locate the relevant training
- Design an appropriate job search/creation strategy to help you achieve your goals.

Q. I want a change of job, but I am currently getting paid pretty well and the people I work with are great. I feel I am in a real comfort zone, but don't enjoy my work. I don't have any qualifications in anything else. Should I take the risk and leave?

There are a couple of different approaches you could try first:

- **Exhaust all current possibilities** - try to inject creativity and 'stretch' into your current work. Try a change of environment; you may be stale and need a different organisation.
- **Have a long holiday** - you may need a refreshing break, such as annual leave or leave without pay for extended travel, or to do something completely different for a while.

If you still feel the same about your work after making these changes, it is likely that you have outgrown the field, and it is time to move on to something that will utilise other parts of yourself.

Explore other options and retrain

Get help to identify what you would like to do in the future. It is unlikely that you could move across to a new area without retraining or gaining work experience. Think of a career change as a two or three year strategy.

Given that you enjoy your colleagues, it may be possible to continue working there while you retrain part time for something else. Office camaraderie is a significant need we all have, and is highly prized as a major contributing factor towards work satisfaction.

If you plan a change and can place a time limit on your current role, it may be easier to endure the next year or so. The stimulation from your new studies may carry you through the boredom of your current role.

Some people negotiate for a four day week. This may give you the time to network and gain expertise by doing voluntary work or observing in your new field.

Some tips if you can't bear to plan and wait

Some people find that the longer term planning approach doesn't work. They need to quit, and be true to themselves immediately. They will not muster the energy to move forward while they are stuck in their current situation.

Scale down and save money

Brainstorm ways to keep your cash flow. You might find a housemate to share costs, rent your house out and move in with family, or reconsider your needs (for example, scale down to a cheaper flat).

While you explore what you would like to do next, and enrol in further studies or build up your new role, you might take on several part time jobs for cash flow. You may feel that anything would be better than fronting up to that ghastly office in the restricting little suit.

How much pain are you in? There is a point where the pain is greater than the comfort, and this is usually the time when we act. Get support from a professional or close friend who has made the transition or who has reworked a disappointing career and fallen in love with it again.

Q. I'm a trained accountant and very good at it but I'm bored. I feel bad because I've invested all this time (and my parents' money) on a profession that just doesn't suit me. I'm a very outgoing, fun-loving kind of person, but I've got no idea what I'd be good at. I just know the idea of being an accountant forever depresses me.

Before you make a radical shift, have you checked out the exciting range of career prospects for accountants in consulting firms? It is possible that the particular organisation you work with doesn't suit you, and has limited your exposure to the broad career avenues for accountants.

Research your options

Research various firms and see the diverse roles that accounting graduates are recruited for. You will find the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Australia (ICAA) extremely helpful. They have excellent information about where the profession is heading: Tel. (03) 9602 5844.

Take a look at the requirements for the CA program (formerly known as the Professional Year training). It is all about skilling up dynamic team players and consultant advisers to assist with business process re-engineering, entrepreneurial activities, public speaking and influencing, and creative problem solving.

Consider a management role

Have a look at the new roles that accountants are enjoying as management advisors and consultants (both internal and external). The accounting profession has undergone some radical change. Dynamic firms are recruiting accountants for their people skills, problem-solving abilities, potential for management consulting roles, risk taking, international suitability, team skills, ability to cope with the unexpected, and so on. Accountants who progress quickly usually have the personal qualities that you mention. Many firms can offer:

- Great opportunities for overseas postings, whether it is Canada or Hong Kong for a year, within a couple of years.
- Fun-filled social life with lots of graduates and members of the firm and clients, including sports (golf, water sports, footy), parties, Friday night drinks and weekends away.
- Mentoring systems and career development opportunities.
- Variety - different clients, different problems to solve, and different work teams.

Try another field

If these options don't suit, you may try an interim measure: for example, approaching recruitment and selection firms. Your knowledge of accounting, coupled with your people skills, may make you marketable in a recruiting role. This gives you a golden opportunity to make money and get a sense of what is happening in various organisations while you prepare for a career change.

Identify what you don't like

Try to identify what exactly depresses you about the thought of accounting. Is it the business field in general? You might explore the world of hospitality, education, sports, or arts and entertainment. All fields value someone with an accounting background. You don't mention what your qualifications are, but you might consider postgraduate training to enhance your job prospects in exciting and stimulating arenas. Explore how you can lever off your current skills base. Good luck.

Q. I work as a manager in the education sector but the organisational culture has changed a lot since I started here. It used to be innovative and exciting and now it's terribly restricted, with a big emphasis on numbers and being accountable rather than creative. I'd like to try something else but I don't have a clue what else is out there or if anyone would want me. I have a background in teaching and management.

If you are a creative, innovative person who needs variety and the stimulation of new ideas, then hanging around a number-crunching, restrictive environment where your skills and style are not valued can be extremely unhealthy. Such a work environment can only be tolerated for short bursts.

I assume you have exhausted all the possibilities when it comes to changing the culture or, at least, encouraging the culture to be tolerant and flexible of different ways of doing things and operating!

Look for other options

You need to explore whether there are other cultures or other roles where you would thrive. To make the change, you'll need to do some research. Firstly, review your achievements and feedback from others, then update your resume.

Check out other departments in case you could align yourself elsewhere in the sector. If not, you will need to find out whether you are ripe for a career change (that may involve retraining: for example, marketing, organisation change and development) or a sector change (for example, private business, creative arts or small business).

Do some research

The Careers Reference Centre (Bridge Road, Richmond, Melbourne) can be a useful starting point. They have information about courses (certificate to postgraduate), job titles, and labour market projections. Scan the newspapers for job vacancy themes and skills requirements. Become active in professional associations where your passions lie. Get a practical sense of the employment climate, and develop your networks. Find out how you are viewed at present. What would you need to do, learn or have in order to be attractive?

If your research indicates that things are grim at present, spice up your personal life with creative interests, quirky hobbies and fascinating friends until you are able to transform the place or leave.

Q. I currently work as an educational leader in a tertiary institution. I would like to work abroad for an NGO or aid agency but I'm not sure where to look and how to package my skills for such jobs.

The quickest place to start is the Graduate Careers Council of Australia (GCCA) located with the University of Melbourne. They have information on overseas aid opportunities, awards, grants, scholarships, overseas contacts and so on. You can also check with the Careers Service at the tertiary institution where you work. ACER (Australian Council for Educational Research) also posts vacancies that are education related. It would be helpful to speak to someone who has done an overseas aid stint in your area of expertise.

Where to get help

- Your employer
- Your union
- Your human relations manager
- Psychologist
- Career counsellor
- Careers Reference Centre Tel.
- Association of Careers Counsellors Tel. 1800 222 390
- Centrelink Tel. 132 490
- Job Network Information Line Tel. 1300 363 365
- Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA) Tel. (03) 9920 4777
- The Australian Psychological Society Tel. (03) 8662 3300
- Australian Psychological Society Referral Line Tel. 1800 333 497

Want to know more?

Go to More information for support groups, related links and references.

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