

Success E-Letter Vol. 8/2 Summer '08

Meaningful Work: Where do I look?

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Are you wondering if you're the proverbial person who has climbed the ladder of success only to find it's leaning up against the wrong wall? Is this all there is, settling in a career that has brought you success, perhaps, but leaves you hungry for something more? To be excited and challenged by your work, to believe it's adding in some way to the common good, may be a dream you're longing to realize, but you don't know where to start.

Here's a lament from a job searcher had that hunger and tried the wholesale job boards approach, only to come away frustrated.

"I've been in the corporate world for 15 years and I'm looking for something else. Looking at Monster, Hotjobs, LinkedIn, and Craigslist sends me to back to where I've come from.

I would like to find work in the environmental/green area or work on projects that are good for our society. Where do I find these jobs?

My career has been in organizational development and training, specializing in team development, strategic planning, and conflict resolution. Can you help me?"

In order to understand this woman's frustration, let's look at some assumptions she made.

1. Finding meaningful work requires a unique approach to a job search.
2. Major corporations won't be a resource.
3. A generic category like "green/environmental" should be sufficient to direct a search.
4. A summary of job experience and skills is the most pertinent information needed to direct someone to a "meaningful job" lead.
5. An analytic approach, rather than a "from the heart" approach, is what's called for.

In fact, looking for meaningful work is not basically different from any other career or job search. It must start by identifying what you want, or what's meaningful to you, not in the abstract but increasingly defined and precise as your search develops. Telling others about these emerging possibilities will be as important as describing your work experience as you ask for help with leads.

So where should Ms. Frustrated begin?

There's a simple first-level answer: The search for meaningful work must be guided by where you look for meaning. Some people find meaning by aligning with "meaningful causes", often those with socially responsible or service-oriented agendas. Let's call this an Extraverted Orientation. Other people look for meaning in work that aligns with personal values or strengths. Let's call this an Introverted Orientation. And some will want to find a combination.

Extraverted Orientation

You may already have some favorite causes. If not, consider the impact you want to have or be part of. As examples, it might lie in learning; in teaching or mentoring; in creative expression; or in providing care or protection to the vulnerable.

Here are some other questions if you're still wondering. What media stories are you specially drawn to? Why? What is the mission or commitment of the people you most admire? Which social problems make you most angry?

Jot down your observations. As you go, think about the application of your skills and experience to these areas, but don't eliminate any for this reason until you've done further research. There may be an application apparent to someone other than you, maybe a career professional. Or you may decide to fund additional training or education if it really lights your fire!

Introverted Orientation

Not all meaningful work is defined by work serving meaningful causes. Meaning for many is defined subjectively, linked to personal values and the opportunity for self expression or self development. If you're someone more inclined to look for meaning within yourself than externally, where should you begin?

In general you'll be well served by tapping your **values** or **strengths**, or by answering a personal **worthy challenge**.

Identifying key **values** - your non-negotiable platform of ethics or codes of conduct - is usually best done by inference, as they're often like the water you swim in, difficult to see directly. For clues, look at convictions you'd be willing to fight for, or stories that bring you to tears, or contributions made by people you most admire.

As for your **strengths**, you aren't born with them. You're undoubtedly born with talents, but by adding a knowledge base and competence you mature a talent into a strength. Strength = talent + knowledge + skill.

A surefire test for identifying a strength? Exercising it gives you pleasure!

There are numerous assessment tools available to help you identify your strengths, including career assessments and the Strengths Finder 2.0 book (<http://tinyurl.com/5a62bs>).

Answering a **worthy challenge** require you to stretch beyond your comfort zone or to master a limiting belief about yourself. As the sculptress Maya Lin puts it, “To fly we have to have resistance.” While values and strengths provide the foundation for meaningful work, a worthy challenge is the golden ring. Example: a confirmed introvert conquers the fear of public speaking to promote a cause she believes in.

And then there’s the Sweet Spot: work that furthers a cause that’s deeply important to you while engaging your strengths and values and challenging you to develop to your fullest.

Keep in mind that finding work that enriches you doesn’t necessarily mean changing the work you’re doing now, even if you’re bored or burned out. Meaning has so many dimensions and is so subjective that very few rules can be written about how to achieve it. Shifting an attitude or perspective, mentoring a younger staff member, challenging yourself to grow in some respect, may be all that’s required to find new meaning and satisfaction. Once you clarify where meaning lies for you, you can be intentional about creating it and savor the fulfillment of achieving it. Just get started: the world needs you!