

The 6 Keys to Finding Meaningful Work in Life

Roman Krznaric | [The Healers Journal](#)

Job satisfaction is at record lows. What does it take to overcome the fear of change, especially in tough economic times?

This essay is adapted from [How to Find Fulfilling Work](#) (Picador).

The idea of fulfilling work—a job that reflects our passions, talents, and values—is a modern invention. Open Dr. Johnson's celebrated *Dictionary*, published in 1755, and the word "fulfilment" doesn't even appear. But today our expectations are higher, which helps explain why job satisfaction has declined to a record low of 47 percent in the US, and is even lower in Europe.

If you count yourself amongst those who are unhappy in their job—or at least have that occasional niggling feeling that your work and self are out of alignment—how are you supposed to go about finding a meaningful career? What does it take to overcome the fear of change and negotiate the labyrinth of choices, especially in tough economic times?

Here are six pieces of essential wisdom drawn from some of the best brains in the field.

1. Accept confusion

First, a consoling thought: Feeling confused about career choice is perfectly normal and utterly understandable. In the pre-industrial period there were around thirty standard trades—you might decide to be a blacksmith or a barrel-maker. But now careers websites list over 12,000 different jobs.

The result? We can become so anxious about making the wrong choice that we end up making no choice at all, staying in jobs that we have long grown out of. Psychologist Barry Schwartz calls this the “paradox of choice”: too many options can leave us standing in one place like deer caught in the headlights.

Then add to this our in-built aversion to risk. Human beings tend to exaggerate everything that could possibly go wrong. Or as Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahneman says, “We hate losing twice as much as we love winning,” whether at the casino table or when making career choices. So our brains are not well calibrated for daring to change profession. We need to recognise that confusion is natural, and get ready to move beyond it.

2. Don't pigeonhole yourself

Many people are enticed by personality tests, which claim to be able to assess your character then point you towards a job that is just right for you. It's a reassuring idea, but the evidence for their usefulness is flimsy.

Take the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), the world's most popular psychometric test, which places you in one of sixteen personality types. Despite its ubiquity, it has been widely criticized by psychologists for over three decades, partly due to its lack of reliability. If you retake the test after five weeks, there is around a 50 percent chance that you will be placed into a different personality category.

Moreover, according to US psychologist David Pittenger, there is “no evidence to show a positive relation between MBTI type and success within an occupation...nor is there any data to suggest that specific types are more satisfied within specific occupations than are other types.”

So don't let any anyone tell you what you can and can't be on the basis of a personality pigeonhole they want to put you in.

3. Aim to be a wide achiever, not a high achiever

For over a century, Western culture has been telling us that the best way to use our talents and be successful is to specialize and become a high achiever, an expert in a narrow field—a corporate tax accountant, say, or an anesthetist.

But an increasing number of people feel that this approach fails to cultivate the many sides of who they are. For them, it makes more sense to embrace the idea of being a “wide achiever” rather than a high achiever. Take inspiration from Renaissance generalists like Leonardo da Vinci who would paint one day, then do some mechanical engineering, followed by a few anatomy experiments on the weekend.

Today this is called being a “portfolio worker,” doing several jobs simultaneously, often on a freelance basis. Management thinker Charles Handy says this is not just a good way of spreading risk in an insecure job market, but is an extraordinary opportunity made possible by the rise of flexible working: “For the first time in the human experience, we have a chance to shape our work to suit the way we live instead of our lives to fit our work. We would be mad to miss the chance.”

Ask yourself this: What would being a wide achiever encompass for me?

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