

Job Sculpting

The Art of Retaining Your Best People

The Idea in Brief

Finding and hiring top talent has never been tougher than it is today, but *retaining* star performers is tougher still. Unfamiliar with the psychology of work satisfaction, managers reward their best employees handsomely and assume they're happy. But when these employees leave, as they frequently do, managers conclude that there was nothing they could have done to prevent the departure.

That's where they're wrong. What's often missing from top performers' jobs are responsibilities that coincide with their "deeply embedded life interests." These are more than hobbies or enthusiasm for certain subjects—they are long-held, emotionally driven passions that bubble beneath the surface like a geothermal pool of water. Most people possess one to three of eight basic interests, which include theory development and conceptual thinking, counseling and mentoring, and application of technology. These interests don't determine *what* people are good at; they drive the *kinds* of activities that make people happy. Thus, people keep returning to these interests throughout their lives—even though they may not be fully aware of how the interests are subtly influencing their career decisions.

A manager can help uncover an employee's life interests by probing, observing, and applying a little psychology. That done, manager and employee can customize work with **job sculpting**—a process that matches the employee to a job that allows her deeply embedded life interests to be expressed.

The Idea in Practice

In the job-sculpting techniques listed below, the basic life interests appear in italics.

- Ask employees to play an active role in job sculpting, perhaps by having them write about their views of career satisfaction—an excellent starting point for a discussion.
- In some cases sculpting can begin simply by adding a new responsibility. An engineer who has a deeply embedded life interest in *counseling and mentoring* might be asked to plan and manage the orientation of new hires.
- A change in assignment provides another sculpting opportunity. A salesperson with an interest in *quantitative analysis* might be given new duties working with market-research analysts.
- Good sculpting results when a manager listens carefully and asks questions. When a pharmaceutical sales rep told her boss how much she enjoyed helping the company find and lease new office space, he probed further and learned she wanted work that met her interests in *influence through language and ideas* and *creative production*. Her sales job encompassed the former, so new responsibilities in marketing were added to provide an outlet for her creativity.
- Sculpting often calls for more substantial changes. When a star analyst in a Wall Street firm received an unprecedented pay increase, she angrily said the company "thinks it can solve every problem with money." Her boss discovered she wanted to direct the research group—an expression of her interests in *enterprise control* and *managing people and relationships*. She was made coordinator of research.
- Even greater sculpting changes are sometimes required—for example, when a manager can only meet a worker's interests with a transfer to another department. In other

cases, amicable separation is necessary, as when an engineering firm has no job for an employee with a life interest in *influence through language and ideas*.

In these days of talent wars, the best way to keep your stars is to know them better than they know themselves—and then use that information to customize the careers of their dreams.

By all accounts, Mark was a star at the large West Coast bank where he had worked for three years. He had an MBA from a leading business school, and he had distinguished himself as an impressive “quant jock” and a skilled lending officer. The bank paid Mark well, and senior managers had every intention of promoting him. Little did they know he was seriously considering leaving the organization altogether.

Hiring good people is tough, but as every senior executive knows, keeping them can be even tougher. Indeed, most executives can tell a story or two about a talented professional who joined their company to great fanfare, added enormous value for a couple of years, and then departed unexpectedly. Usually such exits are written off. “She got an offer she couldn’t refuse,” you hear, or, “No one stays with one company for very long these days.”

Our research over the past 12 years strongly suggests that quite another dynamic is frequently at work. Many talented professionals leave their organizations because senior man-

agers don’t understand the psychology of work satisfaction; they assume that people who excel at their work are necessarily happy in their jobs. Sounds logical enough. But the fact is, strong skills don’t always reflect or lead to job satisfaction. Many professionals, particularly the leagues of 20- and 30-somethings streaming out of today’s MBA programs, are so well educated and achievement oriented that they could succeed in virtually any job. But will they stay?

The answer is, only if the job matches their *deeply embedded life interests*. These interests are not hobbies—opera, skiing, and so forth—nor are they topical enthusiasms, such as Chinese history, the stock market, or oceanography. Instead, deeply embedded life interests are long-held, emotionally driven passions, intricately entwined with personality and thus born of an indeterminate mix of nature and nurture. Deeply embedded life interests do not determine what people are good at—they drive what *kinds* of activities make them happy. At work, that happiness often translates into

commitment. It keeps people engaged, and it keeps them from quitting.

In our research, we found only eight deeply embedded life interests for people drawn to business careers. (For a description of each one, see the sidebar “The Big Eight.”) Life interests start showing themselves in childhood and remain relatively stable throughout our lives, even though they may manifest themselves in different ways at different times. For instance, a child with a nascent deeply embedded life interest in *creative production*—a love for inventing or starting things, or both—may be drawn to writing stories and plays. As a teenager, the life interest might express itself in a hobby of devising mechanical gadgets or an extracurricular pursuit of starting a high school sports or literary magazine. As an adult, the creative-production life interest might bubble up as a drive to be an entrepreneur or a design engineer. It might even show itself as a love for stories again—pushing the person toward a career in, say, producing movies.

Think of a deeply embedded life interest as a geothermal pool of superheated water. It will rise to the surface in one place as a hot spring and in another as a geyser. But beneath the surface—at the core of the individual—the pool is constantly bubbling. Deeply embedded life interests always seem to find expression, even if a person has to change jobs—or careers—for that to happen.

Job sculpting is the art of matching people to jobs that allow their deeply embedded life interests to be expressed. It is the art of forging a customized career path in order to increase the chance of retaining talented people. Make no mistake—job sculpting is challenging; it requires managers to play both detective and psychologist. The reason: many people have only a dim awareness of their own deeply embedded life interests. They may have spent their lives fulfilling other people’s expectations of them, or they may have followed the most common career advice: “Do what you’re good at.” For example, we know of a woman who, on the basis of her skill at chemistry in college, was urged to become a doctor. She complied and achieved great success as a neurologist, but at age 42 she finally quit to open a nursery school. She loved children, demonstrating a deeply embedded life interest in *counseling and mentoring*. And more important, as it turned out, she was also driven by a life interest in

enterprise control, the desire to be in charge of an organization’s overall operations. It was a long time before she stopped remarking, “All those years wasted.”

Other people don’t know their own deeply embedded life interests because they have taken the path of least resistance: “Well, my dad was a lawyer.” Or they’ve simply been unaware of many career choices at critical points in their lives. Most college seniors and new MBAs set sail on their careers knowing very little about all the possible islands in the sea. And finally, some people end up in the wrong jobs because they have chosen, for reasons good and bad, to follow the siren songs of financial reward or prestige. Regardless of the reason, the fact is that a good number of people, at least up until midlife, don’t actually know what kind of work will make them happy. (For more on the importance of life interests, abilities, and values in job satisfaction, see the sidebar “It’s a Matter of Degree.”)

Let’s return to Mark, the lending officer at a West Coast bank. Mark was raised in San Francisco; his mother and father were doctors who fully expected their son to become a successful professional. In high school, Mark received straight A’s. He went on to attend Princeton, where he majored in economics. Soon after graduation, he began working at a prestigious management consulting firm, where he showed great skill at his assignments: building financial spreadsheets and interpreting pro formas. As expected, Mark left the consulting firm to attend a respected business school and then afterward joined the bank. It was located near his family, and because of its size and growth rate, he thought it would offer him good opportunities for advancement.

Mark, not surprisingly, excelled at every task the bank gave him. He was smart and knew no other way to approach work than to give it his all. But over time, Mark grew more and more unhappy. He was a person who loved running his mind over and through theoretical and strategic what-ifs. (After college, Mark had seriously considered a career in academia but had been dissuaded by his parents.) Indeed, one of Mark’s deeply embedded life interests was *theory development and conceptual thinking*. He could certainly excel at the nitty-gritty number crunching and the customer service that his lending job entailed, but those activities did nothing for his heart and soul, not to mention

Timothy Butler and **James Waldroop**, both psychologists, are the directors of MBA career development programs at Harvard Business School in Boston. They are also principals at Peregrine Partners, a consulting firm in Brookline, Massachusetts. They are the authors of *Discovering Your Career in Business* (Addison-Wesley, 1997) and “The Executive as Coach” (HBR November–December 1996). They are also the creators of Career-Leader, a computer-based self-assessment program used by more than 90 MBA programs and corporations worldwide.

The Big Eight

We have found that most people in business are motivated by between one and three deeply embedded life interests—long-held, emotionally driven passions for certain kinds of activities. Deeply embedded life interests are not hobbies or enthusiasms; they are innate passions that are intricately entwined with personality. Life interests don't determine what we're good at but what kinds of work we love.

Our conclusions about the number and importance of deeply embedded life interests have grown out of more than a decade of research into the drivers of career satisfaction. In 1986, we began interviewing professionals from a wide range of industries and functions as well as asking them to take a battery of psychological tests in order to assess what factors contributed to work satisfaction. Over the next dozen years, our database had grown to 650 people.

The results of our research were striking: scales on several of the tests we used clearly formed eight separate clusters. In other words, all business work could be broken down into eight types of core activities. By looking more closely at the content of the scales in each cluster and by cross-referencing this information to our interview data and counseling experience, we developed and tested a model of what we call "business core functions." These core functions represent the way deeply embedded life interests find expression in business. The following is a summary of each:

Application of Technology. Whether or not they are actually working as—or were trained to be—engineers, people with the life interest application of technology are intrigued by the inner workings of things. They are curious about finding better ways to use technology to solve business problems. We know a successful money manager who acts as his company's unofficial computer consult-

ant because he loves the challenge of unlocking code. Indeed, he loves it more than his "day job"! People with the application-of-technology life interest often enjoy work that involves planning and analyzing production and operations systems and redesigning business processes.

It's often easy to recognize people with a strong application-of-technology life interest. They speak fondly of their college years when they majored in computer science or engineering. They read software magazines and manuals for fun. They comment excitedly when the company installs new hardware.

But sometimes the signs are more subtle. Application-of-technology people often approach business problems with a "let's take this apart and solve it" mind-set. And when introduced to a new process at work, they like to get under the hood and fully understand how it works rather than just turn the key and drive it. In a snapshot, application-of-technology people are the ones who want to know how a clock works because the technology excites them—as does the possibility that it could be tinkered with and perhaps improved.

Quantitative Analysis. Some people aren't just good at running the numbers, they excel at it. They see it as the best, and sometimes the only, way to figure out business solutions. Similarly, they see mathematical work as fun when others consider it drudgery, such as performing a cash-flow analysis, forecasting the future performance of an investment instrument, or figuring out the best debt/equity structure for a business. They might also enjoy building computer models in order to determine optimal production scheduling and to perform accounting procedures.

Not all "quant jocks" are in jobs that reflect this deeply embedded life interest. In fact, many of these individuals find themselves in other kinds of work because they have been told that fol-

lowing their true passion will narrow their career prospects. Yet these people are not difficult to miss, because regardless of their assignment, they gravitate toward numbers. Consider the HR professional who analyzes his organization by looking at compensation levels and benefits and by studying the ratio of managers to employees. Similarly, a marketing manager who loves analyzing customer research data—versus the subjective findings of focus groups—is probably a person with quantitative analysis at her core.

Theory Development and Conceptual Thinking. For some people, nothing brings more enjoyment than thinking and talking about abstract ideas. Think of Mark, the West Coast banker who was frustrated in his position because he did not have the opportunity to ponder big-picture strategy. Like Mark, people with this deeply embedded life interest are drawn to theory—the why of strategy interests them much more than the how. People with this interest can be excited by building business models that explain competition within a given industry or by analyzing the competitive position of a business within a particular market. Our research also shows that people with this deeply embedded interest are often drawn to academic careers. Some end up there; many do not.

How can you identify the people with this interest? For starters, they're not only conversant in the language of theory, but they also genuinely enjoy talking about abstract concepts. Often, these are the people who like thinking about situations from the "30,000 foot" level. Another clue: these individuals often subscribe to periodicals that have an academic bent.

Creative Production. Some people always enjoy the beginning of projects the most, when there are many unknowns and they can make something

out of nothing. These individuals are frequently seen as imaginative, out-of-the-box thinkers. They seem most engaged when they are brainstorming or inventing unconventional solutions. Indeed, they seem to thrive on newness. The reason: creative production is one of their dominant deeply embedded life interests—making something original, be it a product or a process.

Our research shows that many entrepreneurs, R&D scientists, and engineers have this life interest. Many of them have an interest in the arts, but just as many don't. An entrepreneur we know has virtually no passion for the arts; his quite successful businesses over the years have included manufacturing decidedly un-sexy paper bags and sealing tape.

There are, of course, many places in the business world where people with this interest can find satisfying work—new product development, for example, or advertising. Many people with this interest gravitate toward creative industries such as entertainment. Yet others, like one investment analyst we know, repress this life interest because they feel that it is “too soft” for business. Creative production, they believe, is for their off-hours.

Fortunately for managers, most creative-production people are not terribly hard to recognize. They wear their life interest on their sleeves—sometimes literally, by virtue of their choice of unconventional clothing, but almost always by how excited they are when talking about the new elements of a business or product. Oftentimes, they show little interest in things that are already established, no matter how profitable or state-of-the-art.

Counseling and Mentoring. For some people, nothing is more enjoyable than teaching—in business, that usually translates into coaching or mentoring. These individuals are driven by the deeply embedded life interest of counseling and mentoring, al-

lowing them to guide employees, peers, and even clients to better performance. People with a high interest in counseling and mentoring are also often drawn to organizations, such as museums, schools, and hospitals, that provide products or services they perceive to hold a high social value. People like to counsel and mentor for many reasons. Some derive satisfaction when other people succeed; others love the feeling of being needed. Regardless, these people are drawn to work where they can help others grow and improve. We know, for instance, of a brand manager at a consumer goods company who was primarily responsible for designing her product's marketing and distribution plans. Yet she eagerly made time every week to meet one-on-one with several subordinates in order to provide feedback on their performance and answer any questions they had about the company and their careers. When it came time for her performance review, the brand manager's boss didn't bother to evaluate this counseling-and-mentoring work, saying that it wasn't technically part of the brand manager's job. It was, however, her favorite part.

People with a counseling-and-mentoring interest will make themselves known if their jobs include the opportunity to do so. But many people in this category don't get that chance. (New MBAs, in particular, are not asked to coach other employees for several years out.) However, you can sometimes identify counseling-and-mentoring people by their hobbies and volunteer work. Many are drawn to hands-on community service, such as the Big Brother Organization or literacy programs. People with a high interest in counseling and mentoring can be recognized by the fact that when they talk about their previous work they often talk fondly about the people who worked under them and where they are now—like a parent

would talk about his or her children.

Managing People and Relationships. Longing to counsel and mentor people is one thing; wanting to manage them is another thing entirely. Individuals with this deeply embedded life interest enjoy dealing with people on a day-to-day basis. They derive a lot of satisfaction from workplace relationships—but they focus much more on outcomes than do people in the counseling-and-mentoring category. In other words, they're less interested in seeing people grow than in working with and through them to accomplish the goals of the business, whether it be building a product or making a sale. That is why people with this life interest often find happiness in line management positions or in sales careers.

Take Tom, a 32-year-old Harvard MBA who joined an Internet start-up in Silicon Valley—mainly because that was what all his classmates were doing. Tom had an undergraduate degree and work experience in engineering, and so his new company put him right to work in its technology division. Tom had no subordinates and no clients and mainly spent his days talking to other engineers and testing prototypes. It was the perfect job for someone with Tom's background, but not for someone with his life interest in managing people and relationships. After six months, he was miserable.

Tom was about to quit when the company announced it needed someone to help set up and run a new manufacturing plant in Texas. Tom pounced on the job—he would ultimately be leading a staff of 300 and negotiating frequently with suppliers. He got the job and still holds it today, five years later. His desire to motivate, organize, and direct people has been happily fulfilled.

Enterprise Control. Sarah, an attorney, is a person who has loved running things ever since she was a child. At age five, she set up her first lemonade

stand and refused to let her older brother and sister help pour the juice, set prices, or collect money. (She did, however, let them flag down customers.) As a teenager, Sarah ran a summer camp in her backyard. And in college, she was the president of not one but three major groups, including the student government. People accuse her of being a control freak, and Sarah doesn't argue—she is happiest when she has ultimate decision-making authority. She feels great when she is in charge of making things happen.

Wanting too much control can be unhealthy, both for the people themselves and for their organizations, but some people are driven—in quite healthy ways—by a deeply embedded life interest in enterprise control. Whether or not they like managing people, these people find satisfaction in making the decisions that determine the direction taken by a work team, a business unit, a company division, or an entire organization. Sarah was not particularly happy as a lawyer—a career she pursued at the behest of an influential college instructor, and her mother, a lawyer herself. But she did eventually fulfill her life interest in enterprise control when, after coming back from maternity leave, she asked to run the company's New York office, with 600 attorneys, clerks, and other staff. It was, she says, “a match made in heaven.”

Enterprise-control people are easy to spot in organizations. They seem happiest when running projects or teams; they enjoy “owning” a transaction such as a trade or a sale. These individuals also tend to ask for as much responsibility as possible in any work situation. Pure interest in enterprise control can be seen as an interest in deal making or in strategy—a person with this life interest wants to be the CEO, not the COO. Investment bankers, for example, don't run ongoing operations but often demonstrate a very strong interest in enterprise control.

Influence Through Language and Ideas. Some people love ideas for their own sake, but others love expressing them for the sheer enjoyment that comes from storytelling, negotiating, or persuading. Such are people with the deeply embedded life interest of influence through language and ideas. They feel most fulfilled when they are writing or speaking—or both. Just let them communicate.

People in this category sometimes feel drawn to careers in public relations or advertising, but they often find themselves elsewhere, because speaking and writing are largely considered skills, not careers. And yet for some, effective communication is more than just a skill—it's a passion. One way to identify these individuals in your organization is to notice who volunteers for writing assignments. One MBA student we counseled joined a large consulting firm where, for three years, she did the standard analytical work of studying industry dynamics and so forth. When she heard that a partner had to create a report for a new client “that liked to see things in writing,” she quickly offered her services. Her report was so persuasive—and she had such a fun experience writing it—that she was soon writing for the company full-time. Had her deeply embedded interest in communication not been met in-house, she surely would have sought it elsewhere.

People with strong interests in influence through language and ideas love persuasion of all sorts, spoken and written, verbal and visual. They enjoy thinking about their audience (whether one person or millions) and the best way to address them. And they enjoy spending time on communications both outside and inside the company. One woman we know who is the head of strategic planning for an entertainment company says, “I spend at least 75% of my time thinking about how to sell our findings to the CEO and other members

of the executive team.” Clearly, the amount of mental energy this executive devotes to persuasion characterizes her as an influence-through-language-and-ideas person.

As we've noted, it is not uncommon for managers to sense that an employee has more than one deeply embedded life interest. That is possible. The pairs of life interests that are most commonly found together are listed below:

Enterprise Control with Managing People and Relationships. These individuals want to run a business on a day-to-day basis but are also challenged by—and enjoy—managing people.

Managing People and Relationships with Counseling and Mentoring.

These are the ultimate people-oriented professionals. They have a strong preference for service-management roles, enjoying the frontline aspects of working in high customer-contact environments. They also tend to enjoy human resources management roles.

Quantitative Analysis with Managing People and Relationships. These individuals like finance and finance-related jobs, yet they also find a lot of pleasure managing people toward goals.

Enterprise Control with Influence Through Language and Ideas. This is the most common profile of people who enjoy sales. (An interest in Managing People and Relationships is also often high among satisfied salespeople.) This combination is also found extensively among general managers—especially those who are charismatic leaders.

Application of Technology with Managing People and Relationships. This is the engineer, computer scientist, or other technically oriented individual who enjoys leading a team.

Creative Production with Enterprise Control. This is the most common combination among entrepreneurs. These people want to start things and dictate where projects will go. “Give me the ball and I'll score” is their mantra.

for his commitment to the organization.

Fortunately for both Mark and the bank, he was able to identify what kind of work truly excited him before he quit. Consulting a career counselor, Mark came to see what kind of work interested him and how that differed from his current job responsibilities. Using this insight, he was able to identify a role in the bank's new market development area that would bring his daily tasks in line with his deeply embedded interests. Mark's work now consists of competitive analysis and strategy formulation. He is thriving, and the bank is reaping the benefit of his redoubled energy—and his loyalty.

Career Development: Standard Operating Procedure

As we've said, managers botch career development—and retention—because they

mistakenly assume people are satisfied with jobs they excel at. But there are other reasons why career development goes wrong. The first is the way jobs usually get filled, and the second is the fact that career development so often gets handed off to the human resources department.

Most people get moved or promoted in their organizations according to a preset schedule—a new assignment every 18 months, say—or when another position in the company opens up. In either case, managers must scramble. If six employees are all scheduled to get new assignments on August 1, for example, a manager has to play mix and match, and usually does so based on abilities. Who is likely, the manager will ask herself, to do best in which jobs? Similarly, when a position opens up and needs to be filled right away, a manager must ask, "What skills does the job require? Who has them or seems most likely to develop them quickly?"

Sometimes people move up in an organization because they demand it. A talented employee might, for example, inform his manager that he wants to graduate to a new role because he's not growing anymore. The typical manager then considers the employee's skills and tries to find a place in the organization where they can be applied again, this time with a bit of "stretch."

Stretch assignments, however, often do little to address deeply embedded life interests. A research assistant at an investment management firm who performs well can stretch her skills into a credit analyst role, and after continued success there, she can move into the position of fixed-income portfolio manager. But what if her deeper interests are in managing others? Or how about the "spot news" reporter who is "stretched" into management when her real passion (discovered, perhaps, through a few years of misadventure as a manager) lies in investigative reporting?

Skills can be stretched in many directions, but if they are not going in a direction that is congruent with deeply embedded life interests, then employees are at risk of becoming dissatisfied and uncommitted. In such situations, employees usually attribute their unhappiness to their managers or to their organizations. They'll decide their organization has the wrong culture, for example. That kind of thinking often leads to a "migration cure" of leaving one organization for another, only to find similar dissatisfaction because the root of the career malaise

sis. One might pursue a career as a professor of finance for the intellectual challenge. Another might go straight to Wall Street to reap the financial rewards. And a third might pursue whatever job track leads to the CEO's office—driven by a desire for power and influence.

Like ability, values matter. In fact, people rarely take jobs that don't match their values. A person who hates to travel would not jump at an offer from a management consulting firm. Someone who values financial security won't chase a career as an independent contractor. But people can be drawn into going down career paths because they have the ability and like the rewards—even though they're not interested in the work. After a short period of success, they become disenchanted, lose interest, and either quit or just work less productively.

That's why we have concluded that life interests are the most important of the three variables of career satisfaction. You can be good at a job—indeed, you generally need to be—and you can like the rewards you receive from it. But only life interests will keep most people happy and fulfilled over the long term. And that's the key to retention.

It's a Matter of Degree

Over the past several decades, countless studies have been conducted to discover what makes people happy at work. The research almost always focuses on three variables: ability, values, and life interests. In this article, we argue that life interests are paramount—but what of the other two? Don't they matter? The answer is yes, but less so.

Ability—meaning the skills, experience, and knowledge a person brings to the job—can make an employee feel competent. That's important; after all, research has shown that a feeling of incompetence hinders creativity, not to mention productivity. But although competence can certainly help a person get hired, its effect is generally short lived. People who are good at their jobs aren't necessarily engaged by them.

In the context of career satisfaction, values refer to the rewards people seek. Some people value money, others want intellectual challenge, and still others desire prestige or a comfortable lifestyle. People with the same abilities and life interests may pursue different careers based on their values. Take three people who excel at and love quantitative analy-

Job sculpting is challenging; it requires managers to play both detective and psychologist.

has not been identified and addressed. One individual we consulted, a manager in the high-tech industry, went through three companies before realizing it wasn't the company he needed to change but his work. He had never wanted to be a manager but had agreed to a promotion because it offered more money and prestige. All he really wanted to do was design intricate machinery and mechanisms; he wanted to be an engineer again.

That story brings us to the second reason career development is handled poorly. The engineer was originally promoted to manager at the suggestion of the human resources department. Generally speaking, we have found that when career development is handed off to HR, problems arise. Many HR managers try to tackle career development using standardized tests such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. There is nothing wrong with the Myers-Briggs and tests like it. In fact, they are excellent when used to help teams understand their own working dynamics. But personality type should not be the foundation of career development. Some HR managers do use the Strong Interest Inventory to get at life interests, which is better, but it suffers from being too general. The Strong helps people who want to know if they should be a Marine Corps sergeant or a ballet dancer, but it does little for people who say, "I know I want to work in business. Exactly what type of job is best for me?"

The bigger problem with allowing HR to handle career development is that it cuts the manager out of the process. Career development in general, and job sculpting in particular, requires an ongoing dialogue between an employee and his boss; it should not be shunted to another department, however good it may be. HR adds its value in training and supporting managers as career developers.

The Techniques of Job Sculpting

Job sculpting, then, begins when managers identify each employee's deeply embedded life interests. Sometimes an employee's life interest is glaringly obvious—she is excited doing one kind of work and dismal doing another. But much more often, a manager has to probe and observe.

Some managers worry that job sculpting requires them to play psychologist. They shouldn't worry. If they're good managers, they already play the role of psychologist in-

tuitively. Managers *should* have a strong interest in the motivational psychology of their employees. In fact, they should openly express their willingness to help sculpt their employees' careers and to make the extra effort required to hold onto talented people.

Job sculpting, incidentally, can also be marketed externally to attract new hires. We have an unusual vantage point: we've seen close to a thousand new business professionals recruited and hired every year for the last 20 years. Without a doubt, the single most important thing on the minds of new MBAs is—not money!—but whether a position will move their long-term careers in a chosen direction. In fact, during a recent recruiting season, one employer—a Wall Street firm—gained a significant advantage over its competitors by emphasizing its commitment to career development. In both presentations and individual discussions, executives from the firm described its interest in and commitment to helping its professionals think about and manage their careers—a fact that many students cited as key to their choosing that firm.

If managers promise to job sculpt, of course they have to deliver. But how? Each change in assignment provides an opportunity to do some sculpting. For instance, a salesperson with an interest in *quantitative analysis* might be given new duties working with the marketing product manager and market research analysts—while remaining in sales. Or an engineer with an interest in *influence through language and ideas* might be given the task of helping the marketing communications people design sales support materials or user manuals—again, while retaining her primary role as an engineer.

But we have found that such intermittent patching attempts at job sculpting are not nearly as effective as bringing the process directly into the regular performance review. An effective performance review dedicates time to discussing past performance and plans for the future. In making job sculpting part of those conversations, it becomes systematized, and in becoming systematized, the chances of someone's career "falling through the cracks" are minimized.

Do managers need special training to job sculpt? No, but they do need to start listening more carefully when employees describe what they like and dislike about their jobs. Con-

sider the case of a pharmaceutical company executive who managed 30 salespeople. In a performance review, one of her people offhandedly mentioned that her favorite part of the past year had been helping their division find new office space and negotiating for its lease. "That was a blast. I loved it," she told her boss. In the past, the executive would have paid the comment little heed. After all, what did it have to do with the woman's performance in sales? But listening with the ears of a job sculptor, the executive probed further, asking, "What made the search for new office space fun for you?" and "How was that different from what you do day-to-day?" The conversation revealed that the saleswoman was actually very dissatisfied and bored with her current position and was considering leaving. In fact, the saleswoman yearned for work that met her deeply embedded life interests, which had to do with *influence through language and ideas* and *creative production*. Her sales job encompassed the former, but it was only when she had the chance to think about the location, design, and layout of the new office that her creativity could be fully expressed. The manager helped the woman move to a position at company headquarters, where her primary responsibility was to design marketing and advertising materials.

Along with listening carefully and asking probing questions during the performance review, managers can ask employees to play an active role in job sculpting—before the meeting starts. In most corporate settings, the employee's preparation for a performance review includes a written assessment of accomplishments, goals for the upcoming review period, skill areas in need of development, and plans for accomplishing both goals and growth. During the review, this assessment is then compared to the supervisor's assessment.

But imagine what would happen if employees were also expected to write up their personal views of career satisfaction. Imagine if they were to prepare a few paragraphs on what kind of work they love or if they described their favorite activities on the job. Because so many people are unaware of their deeply embedded life interests—not to mention unaccustomed to discussing them with their managers—such exercises might not come easily at first. Yet they would be an excellent starting point for a discussion, ultimately

allowing employees to speak more clearly about what they want from work, both in the short and long term. And that information would make even the best job-sculpting managers more effective.

Once managers and employees have discussed deeply embedded life interests, it's time to customize the next work assignment accordingly. In cases where the employee requires only a small change in his activities, that might just mean adding a new responsibility. For example, an engineer who has a deeply embedded life interest in *counseling and mentoring* might be asked to plan and manage the orientation of new hires. Or a logistics planner with a deeply embedded life interest in *influence through language and ideas* could be given the task of working on recruitment at college campuses. The goals here would be to give some immediate gratification through an immediate and real change in the job and to begin the process of moving the individual to a role that more fully satisfies him.

Sometimes, however, job sculpting calls for more substantial changes. Mark, the dissatisfied bank lending officer is one example. Another is Carolyn, who was a star industry analyst at a leading Wall Street firm. Carolyn was so talented at designing and using sophisticated new quantitative approaches to picking stocks that at one point the head of the entire division remarked, "Carolyn has brought our business into the twenty-first century." That same year, she was ranked as the second most valuable person within the entire group—out of almost a hundred very talented finance professionals. For the past several years, senior managers had sought to ensure Carolyn's loyalty to the organization by awarding her generous raises and bonuses, making her one of their highest paid people.

But Carolyn had one foot out the door. When she received a huge raise (even by the standards of this firm and her own compensation history), she was actually angry, commenting to a friend, "That's typical of this company; it thinks that it can solve every problem by throwing money at it." Although she loved analysis and mathematics, she had a strong desire to have a greater impact on the decision making and direction of the research group. She had definite opinions regarding what kind of people they should be hiring, how the group should be organized and the

One manager went through three companies before realizing it wasn't the company he needed to change but his work.

work assigned, and how the group could most effectively work with other departments—in other words, she had deeply embedded life interests in *enterprise control* and *managing people and relationships*.

A performance review gave Carolyn a chance to express her dreams and frustrations to her boss. Together they arrived at a “player-coach” role for Carolyn as coordinator of research. She was still an analyst, but she also had taken on the responsibilities of guiding and directing several teams, making decisions about hiring and promotions, and helping set strategic direction. A year later, all parties agreed that the research group had never been more productive.

Job sculpting allowed Carolyn’s firm to keep some of her extraordinary skills as an analyst while satisfying her desire to manage. But oftentimes job sculpting involves more sacrifice on the part of the organization. Remember that when Mark moved to his new job in business development, the bank lost a talented lending officer. Sometimes job sculpting requires short-term pain for long-term gain, although we would argue that in Mark’s case—and in many others like it—they would have lost him soon enough anyway.

And one final caveat emptor. When job sculpting requires taking away parts of a job an employee dislikes, it also means finding someone new to take them on. If staffing levels are sufficient, that won’t be a problem—an unin-

teresting part of one person’s job may be perfect for someone else. At other times, however, there won’t be a knight in shining armor to take on the “discarded” work. And at still other times, a manager may recognize that there is simply no way to accomplish the job sculpting the employee wants or even needs. (For instance, an engineering firm may not have activities to satisfy a person with a life interest in *influence through language and ideas*.) In such a case, a manager may have to make the hard choice to counsel a talented employee to leave the company.

Even with its challenges, job sculpting is worth the effort. In the knowledge economy, a company’s most important asset is the energy and loyalty of its people—the intellectual capital that, unlike machines and factories, can quit and go to work for your competition. And yet, many managers regularly undermine that commitment by allowing talented people to stay in jobs they’re doing well at but aren’t fundamentally interested in. That just doesn’t make sense. To turbocharge retention, you must first know the hearts and minds of your employees and then undertake the tough and rewarding task of sculpting careers that bring joy to both.
