



Book Escape from Corporate America

A Practical Guide to Creating the Career of Your Dreams

Pamela Skillings
Ballantine, 2008
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Recommendation

Martha Stewart worked as a stockbroker before she began catering. Walt Disney labored in advertising before he started the Walt Disney Company. Mary Kay Ash sold Stanley Home Products for years before she founded her woman-to-woman cosmetics business. You, too, might be dreaming of a work life you just can’t find within the corporate world. Corporate escapee Pamela Skillings provides the key to a different future. First, you need to understand what’s making you so unhappy. Is it your current job you hate or would you hate any corporate job? Perhaps you simply need a break. Skillings suggests exploring career alternatives, such as working for a small company or a start-up, going out on your own as a consultant or a freelancer, or fulfilling your entrepreneurial dreams by building a business. Skillings provides the tools to get you started. Her amusing, practical profiles of successful escapees, including gossip blogger Perez Hilton and restaurant reviewers Tim and Nina Zagat, will motivate and cheer you. *BooksInShort* recommends this career guide to anyone who is singing the workday blues.

Take-Aways

- Not all corporate jobs are bad – some companies are great places to work.
- However, six common factors cause dissatisfaction with corporate jobs: “Corporate Burnout, Terminal Boredom, Square Peg Syndrome, Balance Disorder, Meaning Deficiency and Toxic Workplace Blues.”
- Work stress can cause ulcers, anxiety, high blood pressure and other problems.
- Most people have more than one “true calling.” Explore different career paths.
- Your corporate escape strategy must include a “financial plan” and a “career plan.”
- Your financial plan is a realistic look at your current and future finances. Your career plan outlines the skills, resources and opportunities you need to change jobs.
- Before you quit, consider such options as working part-time, using a flextime schedule, telecommuting, job sharing or taking a leave of absence.
- Small companies and start-ups may offer you many advantages over large firms.
- “Solopreneurs” are freelancers other people who run one-person businesses.
- Being an entrepreneur involves conducting research, developing a network, writing a business plan and seeking investors.

Summary

Dilbert Is Not Alone

Would you be surprised to learn that half of all Americans are unhappy in their jobs and the vast majority dream about a better work life? This widespread dissatisfaction is not limited to those on the lower rungs of the corporate ladder; it affects executives, too. However, people who work for small companies or for

themselves are happier than their corporate counterparts.

“You don’t have to stay stuck in a job you hate, and you don’t have to starve to find work that you love.”

If you number yourself among the unhappy 50%, there may be several reasons. Perhaps you feel as if something is missing from your work life. Maybe you initially found a thrill in the fast pace but now feel burned out. Since, on average, people devote more than 100,000 hours to their jobs throughout their lives, shouldn’t work be fulfilling? Yet, even if you dislike your job, walking away from a steady income and a package of benefits is scary. However, your choices are not limited to a lifetime of corporate drudgery versus a bunk in the poorhouse. If you are unhappy, you can take control of your career and make a change without risking your financial security.

“The Phases of Corporate Disillusionment”

You might not have hated your job at first. Perhaps, in the beginning, its fresh opportunities made you feel excited, and you overflowed with energy and enthusiasm. However, after the initial glow began to fade, you went into the “denial” phase. You didn’t want to admit that your new job wasn’t everything you’d hoped for and that you might have made a mistake. After denial came “bitching.” Whining and complaining are common symptoms among the job-distressed. However, since the prospect of looking for a new position can be overwhelming, you entered the “bargaining” phase of job disenchantment. You tried to make small, positive changes or you looked for new projects. When this failed, you became depressed.

“Today work is more personal than ever before. Who you are is what you do.”

At this point, you should make a change. Such work dissatisfaction can affect your quality of life and cause problems such as ulcers, anxiety and high blood pressure.

You Know You Hate Your Job If...

Six factors commonly cause “corporate malaise”:

1. **“Corporate Burnout”** – Long hours, high stress levels and massive workloads all contribute to the mental and physical exhaustion you feel when you’re overworked.
2. **“Terminal Boredom”** – Working hard on projects that don’t interest and engage you compounds the problems of working too hard. Repetition and a lack of challenges and learning opportunities can contribute to that awful mind-numbing feeling.
3. **“Square Peg Syndrome”** – Layers of bureaucracy, interoffice politicking and conformist cultures are often the nature of the corporate beast. Creative spirits may find this environment stifling.
4. **“Balance Disorder”** – Recruiters may gush about work-life balance, but few corporate workers can achieve it. Their jobs are simply too demanding.
5. **“Meaning Deficiency”** – Even if you’ve received work accolades and financial rewards, you might feel that your contributions aren’t truly meaningful.
6. **“Toxic Workplace Blues”** – Finger-pointing, backstabbing, bad management and discrimination are just a few of the symptoms of a sick work environment. If you try to function in this atmosphere for too long, you will feel contaminated.

“True Callings and Wrong Numbers”

Although some people know what work they want to do from a young age, others cast about for the right career. The truth is that most people have more than one true calling. To find out what might suit you, try a three-step process. First, fantasize about anything you’d like to do. Don’t limit your thinking or edit your list; that will come later. Next, make three lists, titled “Interests,” “Skills and Talent,” and “Job Titles.” On the first, list every area of potential focus that you find appealing, like “animals” or “Hawaii.” On the second, list your abilities and talents; include specifics, such as “word processing,” and general abilities, such as “good with people.” On your job titles list, include as many alluring positions as you can think of, as well as their pros and cons. The third step is to sample your dream job. Dip your toe in the water by volunteering in your area of interest, taking a related class or talking to people who are already in the field..

Before You Walk Out the Door

Are you preparing to hand in your resignation? First, you might want to try “moonlighting,” which allows you to sharpen new skills and develop your network while continuing in your current position. Generating revenue through your new gig before leaving your old one is a good idea. However, don’t let the quality of your work slip. Avoid flaunting your outside work or becoming tangled in conflicts of interest. Behave ethically, and don’t poach clients or misuse your corporate employer’s resources.

“If you are truly unhappy in your corporate job, you owe it to yourself to make a change.”

Now develop your “escape plan,” which should consist of a “financial plan” and a “career plan.” Your financial plan centers around a realistic look at your fiscal numbers. Where do you currently stand financially, what are your monthly expenses and how much do you have in savings? You might need to cut spending while you get your new career off the ground. Once you know your financial position, you can begin to craft your career plan, which outlines the skills, resources and opportunities you will need to change jobs.

A Good Corporate Job

Just because you are unhappy in your corporate job doesn’t mean that all corporate jobs are awful. Many offer competitive salaries and benefits as well as opportunities to learn and collaborate with knowledgeable people. If you’re looking for good employers, read *Fortune* magazine’s “100 Best Companies to Work For.” For instance, the SAS Institute, a purveyor of software, has consistently made the top 100. Its executives believe in treating employees well. They retain people by providing engaging work, fostering work-life balance and offering lucrative benefits.

A Breather

If you're suffering from corporate burnout, or from an imbalance between your work and personal life, you might simply need a change of pace rather than a career overhaul. Solutions include working part-time, job sharing, or taking a leave of absence or a sabbatical. Technical innovations have made it easy to telecommute, so your firm may allow you to work from home.

“Today entrepreneurial ventures include everything from one-woman eBay weekend businesses to multimillion-dollar, venture-capital-backed start-ups.”

Flextime is now common in corporations and many managers see it as a necessary perk for retaining employees. It lets you create a work schedule that suits you. Manya Chait, vice president of public relations at VistaPrint, pioneered flextime at her company. She created a four-day work schedule when her daughter was young. She renegotiated her hours when her husband took a job that required a lot of travel. Make it easy for your firm to accommodate your needs by doing the research on flextime, developing a win-win proposal and selling it to your managers.

Think Small

Perhaps you want to jump the corporate ship but you don't want to work alone. Joining a small company or a start-up might be your best option. Such businesses may offer you advantages over large corporations. You can be more hands-on and experience the excitement of working with a team toward a common goal. By working for a start-up, in particular, you can make a direct impact and, perhaps, gain a financial stake in the firm's success. Alex Kay, an investment banker turned start-up president and chief operating officer, is a good example. The stock market crash of 2000 and the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, cost him his job and forced him to look for a new career. He began to work as a consultant for Word World, a children's entertainment company. He soon became its third employee. Now he manages more than 50 people and has a say in all aspects of the business. He benefited from concentrating on what he gained at a small company rather than dwelling on what he lost when he left the corporate sphere.

Do It Yourself

Freelancers, consultants and other people who run one-person companies are called “solopreneurs.” They account for three-quarters of all businesses. Their companies are making a lot of money, pioneering groundbreaking products and garnering national media attention. If you want to become a solopreneur, consider building a business around something you love to do. Would your favorite hobby make a good business idea? Blogger and TV personality Perez Hilton turned his passion for gossip into one of the most popular blogs on the Internet. Decide which professional skills you possess that you can make into a business. For instance, if you've worked as a graphic designer for a large company, becoming a freelance graphic designer is not a huge leap. Ask yourself if you have knowledge that other people want to learn. If so, you could tutor or teach. Can you provide a service people need by working as a wedding planner or a personal chef? Do you have an idea for a product that solves a problem? To develop your business, take these steps:

- **“Find your niche”** – Do market research and generate your business idea.
- **“Take action, any action”** – Test-drive your idea by taking a first step. Try to make a little money in your enterprise while continuing in your full-time job.
- **“Write your business plan”** – Include a “mission statement, business description, market analysis, competitive analysis, marketing strategy and financial plan.”
- **“Build your support team”** – Form a network of mentors, advisers and allies.
- **“Quit your day job”** – Now devote 100% of your efforts to your new business.

Start a Business

Lawyers Tim and Nina Zagat realized that they often disagreed with restaurant reviewers. For fun, they began to survey their friends about their dining preferences and mail out the results. Their project quickly into *Zagat's Restaurant Guides*, a moneymaking enterprise.

“If you're a creative soul stuck in a cubicle, you owe it to yourself to heed your true calling and stop suppressing your artistic talents.”

If you don't have a great business idea, think about purchasing an existing business or a franchise. You can always return to the corporate world if it doesn't work. Your corporate background can help you succeed as an entrepreneur. You've learned how to oversee projects, coordinate workers and manage budgets. You've also built a network that can support you when you are on your own. Your corporate success will lend you credibility when courting investors, vendors and clients. The entrepreneurial process is similar to starting a solopreneur business: Conduct research, develop a network, write a business plan and then look for investors.

Creativity and Meaning

If, as a child, you aspired to be an artist or musician, your parents might have told you to create a backup plan. People tend to think of art and music as hobbies rather than as careers. This is why many creative types end up fidgeting in corporate cubicles. You can still pursue your artistic passion. Let your day job provide the financial security you need to continue your art. Begin by making time to do what you love, even if it means getting up an hour earlier or committing time in the evenings or on weekends. Leave your work at the office – both mentally and physically. Don't devote too much energy to climbing the corporate ladder or negotiating office politics. Finally, consider alternatives like working part-time, going freelance or taking a leave of absence.

“When you encounter a particularly bumpy stretch on the road to freedom, try to remember that goals worth achieving are rarely easy.”

If you feel your day job isn't meaningful, consider teaching or switching to a nonprofit organization with a mission you admire. Many people want work that makes a difference in the world. For example, Genevieve Piturro came up with the idea for the Pajama Program, which donates nightclothes to needy children, as she was riding the train home from her corporate job. She eventually left her day job to run the program full-time, although three years passed before she was able to draw a salary.

About the Author

Pamela Skillings escaped from her corporate job in 2005 to start her own career and consulting business. This is her first book.

