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How to Find Fulfilling Work

Written by Roman Krznaric

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How to Find Fulfilling Work

Roman Krznaric

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The thought once occurred to me that if one wanted to crush and destroy a man entirely, to mete out to him the most terrible punishment, one at which the most fearsome murderer would tremble, shrinking from it in advance, all one would have to do would be to make him do work that was completely and utterly devoid of usefulness and meaning.
– Fyodor Dostoyevsky

I. The Age of Fulfillment

Three Career Tales

Rob Archer grew up on a housing estate in Liverpool where there was 50 per cent unemployment and the main industry was heroin. He fought his way out, studying hard and getting to university, and found a great job as a management consultant in London. He was earning plenty of money, he had interesting clients and his family was proud of him. 'I should have been very happy, but I was utterly miserable,' he recalls. 'I remember being put on assignments in which I had no background but was presented as an expert. I was supposed to know about knowledge management and IT, but it all left me cold, and I always felt like an outsider.' He did his best to ignore his feelings:

I assumed I should be grateful to just have a job, let alone a 'good' one. So I focused harder on trying to fit in and when that didn't work, I lived for the weekend. I did this for ten years, burning the candle at both ends. Eventually it caught up with me. I became chronically stressed and anxious. Then one day I had to ask the CEO's personal assistant to call me an ambulance because I thought I was having a heart attack. It turned out to be a panic attack. That's when I knew I couldn't go on.

The problem was that all the alternatives – changing career, starting over again – seemed impossible. How could I trade in the security of my comfortable life for uncertainty? Wouldn't I be risking all the progress I had made? I also felt guilt that I should even be searching for such luxuries as 'meaning' and 'fulfilment'. Would my grandfather have complained at such fortune? Life appeared to offer an awful choice: money or meaning.

At the age of sixteen, Sameera Khan decided that she wanted to become a lawyer. She was driven partly by her interest in human rights and Amnesty International, and by the enticing glamour of her favourite TV series, *LA Law*. But she also wanted to do something that would please her parents, Pakistani and East-African Indian immigrants, who had arrived in Britain in the 1960s, her dad working his way up from a factory job, and both of them becoming successful social-worker managers. 'For them, success is measured through tangible career rungs in a profession like law, medicine or accountancy,' says Sameera, who is now in her early thirties. 'Their expectations influenced my decision 150 per cent.' She followed her plan, getting a law degree, then spending her twenties qualifying as a solicitor. She found a position as an in-house corporate lawyer for a hedge fund. 'I had it all, I was a City Girl earning megabucks, and loved the way law used my brain.' But after five years in the job, it all suddenly changed:

I was on honeymoon, sitting on a beach in Sicily, when I had an epiphany. I realized something wasn't right. I'd just got

married, which was a huge right of passage in my life and I should have been ecstatic. I'd achieved my dream of becoming a lawyer, and I had my partner by my side. Yet I felt totally unfulfilled. Where were the 'my life is now perfect' sparks? And as I sat there I worked out that the problem must be my career. I could see its future so clearly laid out before me and it filled me with dread. I realized that I wasn't going to be happy sitting behind a desk for the next forty years – for the rest of my life – making rich people richer. I had worked really hard to get this qualification in a respected profession, but was now left thinking, 'Surely my career should offer me more than this. Is this it? Is this all I get from life?' When it dawned on me that my career to date felt somewhat meaningless, it was devastating.

I was really scared about contemplating anything but law. Law identified me; indeed, I thought it defined me. A lot of lawyers are like this – it's your label, it's who you are. To lose that identity was going to make me feel naked and completely empty. If you're not a lawyer, what are you? *Who* are you? When I got back from my honeymoon, I could see that I was getting myself into a downward spiral of job-related despair, but I didn't know how to fix it. I literally went to Google and typed in something like, 'What to do if you hate your career'.

Iain King has never been conventional. When he left secondary school, he spent a year busking around Europe – playing the guitar standing on his head. One summer while at college in the early 1990s, he and a friend crossed into northern Iraq from Turkey, where they befriended

a group of Kurdish freedom fighters, travelled around with them in a jeep full of machine guns and hand-held missile launchers, and narrowly escaped being kidnapped. Later, Iain started up a national student newspaper, which folded after half a dozen issues, then volunteered as a researcher for a political party. Never having had much of a career plan, he ended up as an expert on peace-building for the United Nations and other international organisations. He helped introduce a new currency in Kosovo and has worked alongside soldiers on the battlefield in Afghanistan. He has also found time to write a philosophy book, and to spend a year as a househusband in Syria, the lone father at baby groups in the Damascus expatriate community.

When Iain's wife was pregnant with their second child, he decided it was time to give up his precarious freelance career and get a steady job back in London to support his family. He found a post in the civil service, and now advises the government on its overseas humanitarian policies. He describes it with great enthusiasm: the issues are fascinating, the people stimulating, and he is using his first-hand knowledge of conflict situations. Yet there is a lurking discomfort. Somehow being a civil servant doesn't quite fit with how he sees himself. Work and self are out of alignment:

The job is interesting but it's rather conventional for the kind of person I am. I feel it isn't the permanent me. When I sit on the tube in the morning, I sometimes notice that I'm wearing a suit, and I'm forty, I'm middle class, I'm white, I'm male, and I live in one of the more conventional suburbs of London. And I think, 'Where's the guy who used to stand on his head in the tube and play the guitar?'

On the face of it I look like a very conventional person, yet I still regard myself as deeply unconventional. Paradox is too strong a word, but there's a tension there. At this time in my life, I have to accept the tension. I'm more conventional than I might otherwise be because I've got young kids and I'm the single breadwinner. I'm not about to leave my job, but I sometimes wonder, 'Should I really stick with this forever?'

Great Expectations

The desire for fulfilling work – a job that provides a deep sense of purpose, and which reflects our values, passions and personality – is a modern invention. Open Samuel Johnson's celebrated *Dictionary*, published in 1755, and you will discover that the word 'fulfilment' does not even appear.¹ For centuries, most inhabitants of the Western world were too busy struggling to meet their subsistence needs to worry about whether they had an exciting career that used their talents and nurtured their wellbeing. But today, the spread of material prosperity has freed our minds to expect much more from the adventure of life.

We have entered a new age of fulfilment, in which the great dream is to trade up from money to meaning. For Rob, Sameera and Iain, it is not enough to have a respectable career offering the old-fashioned benefits of a healthy salary and job security. Paying the mortgage still matters, but they need more to feed their existential hungers. And they are not the only ones. In the course of researching this book I spoke to scores of people, from over a dozen countries, about their

career journeys. From stressed bankers to tired waitresses, from young graduates burdened by student loans to mothers attempting to return to the paid workforce, almost all of them aspired to have a job that was worth far more than the pay check.

Yet for most of them, the task of finding a fulfilling career was one of the biggest challenges of their lives. Some were stuck in uninspiring jobs they felt unable to escape, trapped by a lack of opportunity or a lack of self-confidence. Others had, after trial and error, eventually found work they loved. Many were still engaged in the search, while there were those who didn't know where to begin. Nearly all had faced moments when they realized that work wasn't working for them, whether the trigger for this was a panic attack, an epiphany, or a creeping recognition that they were on a treadmill that was taking them nowhere. The wisdom in their career-change stories emerges from them not being golden tales full of smooth transitions and happy endings, but rather being complex, challenging and often arduous personal struggles.

Their experiences reflect the emergence of two new afflictions in the modern workplace, both unprecedented in history: a plague of job dissatisfaction, and a related epidemic of uncertainty about how to choose the right career. Never have so many people felt so unfulfilled in their career roles, and been so unsure what to do about it. Most surveys in the West reveal that at least half the workforce are unhappy in their jobs. One cross-European study showed that 60 per cent of workers would choose a different career if they could start again. In the United States, job satisfaction is at its lowest level – 45 per cent – since record-keeping began over two decades ago.² Added to this is the death of the 'job for life', now a quaint relic of

the twentieth century. In its place is a world of short-term contracts, temping, and nomadic career wanderings, where the average job lasts only four years, forcing us to make more and more choices, often against our wishes.³ Choosing a career is no longer just a decision we make – often frighteningly uninformed – as a spotty teenager or wide-eyed twenty-something. It has become a dilemma we will face repeatedly throughout our working lives.

The yearning for a fulfilling career may have begun to permeate our expectations, but is it really possible to find a job in which we can thrive and feel fully alive? Is it not a utopian ideal reserved for the privileged few who can afford fancy education, who have the financial means to risk opening a baby-yoga cafe, or who have the social connections required to win the coveted prize of a job they love?

There are two broad ways of thinking about these questions. The first is the 'grin and bear it' approach. This is the view that we should get our expectations under control and recognize that work, for the vast majority of humanity – including ourselves – is mostly a drudgery and always will be. Forget the heady dream of fulfilment and remember Mark Twain's maxim, 'Work is a necessary evil to be avoided'. From the forced labour used to build the pyramids through to the soulless McJobs of the twenty-first-century service sector, the story of work has been one of hardship and tedium. This history is captured in the word itself. The Russian for work, *robota*, comes from the word for slave, *rab*. The Latin *labor* means drudgery or toil, while the French *travail* derives from the *tripalium*, an ancient Roman instrument of torture made of three sticks.⁴ We had best take the early Christian view that work is a curse, a punishment for the sins of the Garden of Eden, when God condemned us to getting our daily

bread by the sweat of our brows. If the Bible isn't to your spiritual taste, try Buddhism, which upholds the belief that all life is suffering. 'Anguish', writes the Buddhist thinker Stephen Batchelor, 'emerges from craving for life to be other than it is.'⁵ The message of the 'grin and bear it' school of thought is that we need to accept the inevitable and put up with whatever job we can get, as long as it meets our financial needs and leaves us enough time to pursue our 'real life' outside office hours. The best way to protect ourselves from all the optimistic pundits pedalling fulfilment is to develop a hardy philosophy of acceptance, even resignation, and not set our hearts on finding a meaningful career.

I am more hopeful than this, and subscribe to a different approach, which is that it is possible to find work that is life-enhancing, that broadens our horizons and makes us feel more human. Although the search for a fulfilling career has only become a widespread aspiration in the West since the end of the Second World War, it has its roots in the rise of individualism in Renaissance Europe. This was the era in which celebrating your uniqueness first became fashionable. The Renaissance is well known for having produced extraordinary advances in the arts and sciences, which helped to shake off the shackles of medieval Church dogma and social conformity. But it also gave birth to highly personalized cultural innovations, such as the self-portrait, the intimate diary, the genre of autobiography and the personal seal on letters. In doing so, it legitimized the idea of shaping your own identity and destiny.⁶ We are the inheritors of this tradition of self-expression. Just as we seek to express our individuality in the clothes we wear or the music we listen to, so too we should search for work that enables us to express who we are, and who we want to be.



It is possible to find work that is life-enhancing, and broadens our horizons.

Some people, especially those living on the social margins of poverty and discrimination, may have almost no opportunity to achieve this goal. That I recognize. If you are trying to support your family on the minimum wage or are queuing up at the local job centre during an economic downturn, the idea of a life-enhancing career might come across as a luxury.

For the majority living in the affluent West, however, there is nothing utopian about the idea of a fulfilling career. The hardships that existed in the past have eased. You are unlikely to wake up tomorrow with no other option than working a fourteen-hour day in a Lancashire textile mill or to find yourself picking cotton on a slave plantation in Mississippi. As we will discover, the landscape of career choice has opened remarkably over the past century, offering a new vista of purposeful possibilities. Yes, the bar has been raised: we expect much more from our jobs than previous generations. But when somebody asks us the deadening question, 'What do you do?', let us set our sights on giving an enlivening answer, which makes us feel that we are doing something truly worthwhile with our lives, rather than wasting away the years in a career that will leave the bitter taste of regret in our mouths.

Grin and bear it? Forget it. This is a book for those who are looking for a job that is big enough for their spirit, something more than a 'day job' whose main function is to pay the bills. It is a guide for helping you take your working life in new directions, and for bringing your career and who you are into closer alignment.

My approach is to interweave an exploration of two vital questions. First, what are the core elements of a fulfilling career? We need to know what we are actually searching for, and it turns out that there

are three essential ingredients: meaning, flow and freedom. None of them are easy to attain, and their pursuit raises inevitable tensions. For instance, should we prefer a career that offers great pay and social status, over working for a cause we believe in, with the prospect of making a difference? Should we aspire to be a high achiever in a specialized field, or a 'wide achiever' across several fields? And how can we balance our career ambitions with the demands of being a parent, or with a longing for more free time in our lives?

The second question threading its way through this book is: how do we go about changing career and making the best possible decisions along the way? Although I offer no blueprint strategy that will work for everyone, there are three steps we ought to take. A starting point is to understand the sources of our confusions and fears about leaving our old jobs behind us and embarking on a new career. The next step is to reject the myth that there is a single, perfect job out there waiting for us to discover, and instead identify our 'multiple selves' – a range of potential careers that might suit the different sides of our character. Finally, we have to turn the standard model of career change on its head: rather than meticulously planning then taking action, we should act first and reflect later, doing experimental projects that test-run our various selves in the real world. Ever thought of treating yourself to a 'radical sabbatical'?

To help answer these questions we will seek inspiration in the lives of famous figures, amongst them Leonardo da Vinci, Marie Curie and Anita Roddick. We will look for insights in the writings of philosophers, psychologists, sociologists and historians, and encounter practical – yet intellectually imaginative – activities to help clarify our thinking and narrow down the career options, such as

writing a Personal Job Advertisement. We will draw lessons from the surprising stories of everyday workers, including a Belgian woman whose thirtieth-birthday present to herself was to try out thirty different careers in one year, and an Australian former fridge mechanic who found fulfilment by becoming an embalmer. I will also touch on some of my own career experiences and experiments, which have ranged from journalist to gardener, academic to community worker, with a smattering of telephone sales, tennis coaching and caring for young twins.

In a moment we'll launch our odyssey by exploring why it is so hard to decide which career path to follow. But before we do so, spend a few minutes thinking about the following question – or even better, discuss it with a friend:

- *What is your current work doing to you as a person – to your mind, character and relationships?*