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## The Dilemma of the Would-be Job Seeker

By Randy Hain, managing partner of Bell Oaks Executive Search

Have you recently received a call from a recruiter about a new opportunity that got you thinking? Perhaps you're feeling underappreciated by your boss. Are there few opportunities for professional growth at your company? Is it experiencing financial challenges that have impacted your income and benefits? Have the leaders failed to inspire you because of a lack of vision? Maybe you're just bored. All seemingly acceptable reasons to start polishing that resume ... or are they?

From hundreds of professional friends and acquaintances over the years, I have heard these and many other motives as why people want to leave a job. While advising all kinds of potential job seekers, I recently began pondering the question, "When is it time to not leave a job?"

It is a legitimate question that generally receives little thought or reflection. We are often quick to find an escape route, but don't spend enough time trying to improve our situation or change our mindset. Is this necessary? Absolutely. The reality is that people who change jobs often don't find the proverbial greener pastures with a new company. Some of the issues these professionals were hoping to escape also exist in their new organization ... because the problem or issue frequently lies within themselves.

Karen Steadman, president of Leadership Futures, shares this insight: "People sometimes mistakenly believe their strengths will be better understood by a new group of people and that their weaknesses will no longer stand out. However, the best predictor of future performance is past performance unless significant changes or learning have taken place. It may be unrealistic to think that the next organization is a magical, perfect fit if nothing else about the person has changed in the interim."

After a little self-reflection, would-be job seekers tend to realize they own many of the issues they have in their careers. So, perhaps leaving a job is not always the most advantageous route to take. Turn the eyes inward first.

### Shifting Our Expectations

Why do people work? The majority of us would likely say to support ourselves or our families. Many would say we work because we like our chosen field and find it intellectually stimulating. Others enjoy the challenge their jobs offer and feel they are making a positive difference. And there are those who enjoy the relationships they have formed.

Finding a job and a company that provides all of the above is a tall order. Sometimes we expect too much, and when we don't get it, frustration is a likely result. Is it naïve to think our jobs will bring total happiness? Among candidates ranging from recent college graduates to senior executives in transition to employed potential job seekers, a central theme runs through most conversations I have—the desire to "have it all" in their career. They want that next role to have a check next to all the boxes on the ideal job list. There are certainly exceptions, but generally speaking, very few jobs are able to meet these expectations. So, where does that leave us?

### Time for Practical Thinking

Leaving an existing job for another is not a step to be taken lightly. There is much to be considered and investigated before such a move is made. Consider this checklist before making a change:

- **Do a skills inventory.** Where do your strengths lie? What do you have to offer that is unique? Is your current job mining these skills or are you feeling underutilized?

- **Do a needs inventory.** What specific needs do you have that are not being met? Is it intellectual stimulation? Mentoring? More challenge? Higher income? Loftier title? More balance? Flexible hours? Whatever is on your list needs to be realistic (a new convertible BMW company car is unlikely!) and something you have the courage to discuss with your manager.
- **Identify repairs needed.** What are your development areas? Be honest about what you need to work on professionally and personally and consider if you are getting this assistance in your current role. Please realize that your manager is not clairvoyant, so be forthcoming about what you need if you ever hope to receive it.
- **Are you aligned?** Does your job utilize your education and training? Does your compensation align with your experience and market value (check out [salary.com](http://salary.com))? Are you on an appropriate and realistic career trajectory?
- **What are the expectations?** “One of the most common mistakes I see with people frustrated at work is the failure to clarify expectations from one’s boss,” says Brandon Smith, founder of [theworkplacetherapist.com](http://theworkplacetherapist.com). “It seems that most of us would rather guess, and when we guess wrong it causes frustration. So when was the last time you asked your boss what he /she expects of you this year ... and what is expected of them from *their* boss? Answers to those questions can help you immensely.”
- **What are you passionate about?** This is important. I think most of us want to feel that what we are doing is worthwhile and making a positive difference. Make a list of what is important to you and determine if your current job will allow you to pursue your noble, overarching goals.
- **Are your values in sync with your job?** This is an area we should never have to compromise, but too often people conceal their true selves and personal values for the sake of their career. Ask yourself if you are free to be your authentic self at work or if you feel compelled to make unhealthy compromises in order to fit in.
- **Influence Change.** Make a list of what you don’t like about your company or your job. Now, ask yourself if these are issues that you can help improve. Where can you influence or lead others to make positive changes? Where can your personal example make a significant difference in changing the behavior of others?
- **Do your homework.** If you are still determined to leave and have thoroughly and honestly gone through the previous eight steps, do some due diligence on the marketplace. What companies align with my values? Where will my skills be valued? What companies have an inspiring vision? Go beyond Google or company web sites; reach out to friends in your network and utilize LinkedIn to connect with people inside these organizations to get a more realistic picture. You owe it to yourself to not neglect this critical step.

Apply this process to your own situation or utilize it in guidance you may give a friend considering a career change. There is no place for “blind leaps of faith” in the crucial area of careers, especially in today’s economic environment.

### **Shift your Mindset**

Working in tandem with the nine-point checklist are *two significant mindset shifts* which will not only make this reflection process easier, but also make you more effective professionally (and personally).

1. **Practice self-awareness.** It is a gift granted to very few, but the good news is, it can be acquired. Comparing your current behavior to your internal standards and values, and acknowledging your strengths, weaknesses and desires can help you in every aspect of your life. There are countless personality tests available—DiSC, Birkman, Hogan, Myers-Briggs, etc. Become an objective evaluator of your job performance, how your peers and company leaders perceive your work, and how you interact with others. If not sure, ask them. Remember that if you find yourself considering career change every few years, the one obvious and constant thread through each change is you.
2. **You touch it, you own it.** Over a decade ago, I was Vice President of People for Waffle House, a national restaurant chain with close to 2,000 restaurants and more than \$1B in annual revenue. We had a saying embedded in the culture: “You touch it, you own it!” In a nutshell, you were empowered to act like an owner. Even if you had little direct responsibility for a particular issue or problem, you were expected to act like you owned all of it. No excuses, no complaining and no blaming others—just do what you could to

achieve the goal or fix the problem. It taught me the valuable lesson of taking personal responsibility for my actions and doing everything in my power to make things better. I also learned the importance of influence versus control and how I could make positive change, even when I did not have direct authority. In what ways can you influence better results?

Let's be honest, there are absolutely legitimate reasons why people change jobs. This article is not meant to dissuade you from doing that, but it is intended to help you think through the decision a little more carefully. Maybe you will pause and reflect long enough to realize that you can make a positive difference by staying, that an honest and open conversation with your manager might open new doors for you, and by practicing better self-awareness you will recognize those areas you can improve upon.

Respected executive coach, Dean Harbry, founder of Internal Innovations, had this to share: "The workplace is a great place for personal development as well as professional development. Moving to another job before attempting to resolve conflicts properly or engage in healthy debate pretty well assures us that we will face the same issues in our next assignment. Developing an owner mindset and enhancing our influence skills will help us stay in the game until a needed change becomes obvious."

You just might decide you are in a good job after all, and that it's worth investing in rather than leaving for greener pastures ... which may not be so green after all.

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#### About the Author

Randy Hain is Managing Partner and Shareholder of Bell Oaks ([www.belloaks.com](http://www.belloaks.com)), a nationally-recognized executive search firm. He has an established track record of leading successful searches and building teams in diverse industries and functional specializations ranging from individual contributors to C-level leadership. He has played the lead role in hiring, training and developing of one of the most successful search consultant teams in the industry, and has earned a reputation as a values-based leader who invests heavily in his colleagues, candidates, clients and the community. He may be reached at [rhain@belloaks.com](mailto:rhain@belloaks.com).