

The Search

THE CORPORATE CHAOS of the last few years has caused scores of employees to question what they really want out of life and work. Trainers may be able to help them find answers.

Christian Blackwell worked in international banking for seven years. Although based in New York, he traveled to Europe and Latin America regularly. For a while, it was an

“But over the years, I saw those lights go out. Eventually, I was surrounded by people who weren’t inspired by their work, but they made too much money to give it up. I didn’t want that to happen to me so I said ‘to heck with it.’”

Blackwell got out before kids and a mortgage trapped him in a job that had become meaningless and routine. Now, between ski trips, he is

outplacement company based in Chicago. Challenger, who has been in the business for 34 years, says he has never heard so many people talk about finding meaning in their work.

Why should training and human resource professionals be concerned with this soul-searching trend? Because a funny thing happens when people start devoting their

for Meaning

exciting and challenging job. He joined the bank just out of business school and by combining his youth, education, and enthusiasm, he was able to rise quickly. His last position was vice president of telecommunications and media corporate finance.

But last summer, he gave it all up and moved with his

searching for work that is more satisfying internally.

Is that all there is?

Blackwell is not alone. From San Francisco’s cable cars to New York’s subways, you can practically hear the chorus: “There has to be more than this.” American workers, en masse, are reevaluating

time to meaningful work. They become more energetic, open-minded, and creative. According to Barbara Sher, author of *Live the Life You Love*, people who do work that they are passionate about don’t feel as if they’re working at all. Roll all of those characteristics together, translate them into corporate par-

at Work

wife to a quiet little town in Vermont. Why?

“When I joined the bank, I was put through an international management training program with many bright people who had graduated from top business schools,” he says. “Sitting in the classroom, you could see the bright lights burning behind their eyes.

their lives, their jobs, and their employers. They are asking whether it’s worth it to spend time at companies where they feel no passion or commitment. Increasingly, the answer is no.

“Today, people want jobs that matter,” says John Challenger, executive vice president of Challenger, Gray, and Christmas, an international

lance, and what you have is increased productivity.

Yet, cynics will tell you that there are limits to what companies can do for their employees. After all, businesses exist to make profits, not to make sure that employees are fulfilled.

“There’s only so much a company can do to help a data entry clerk find meaning in

BY SHARI CAUDRON

work," says Daniel Levine, editor of Disgruntled.com, a Website devoted to employee issues. "People should give up the notion that work is everything and search for fulfillment outside of their jobs."

But that's just the problem. Few Americans have been conditioned to think of work as something that should be meaningful. We go to college, learn job skills, and then find companies that use those skills in exchange for a paycheck. Few college courses—or high school classes, for that matter—emphasize the importance of doing work that is satisfying. Consequently, generations of Americans have viewed work as a place to make a living, but the living itself takes place after hours.

Personal fulfillment

So why are we thinking differently about work now? Why are we looking for meaning on the job as opposed to after hours like we always have? There are several reasons. One, the average American is working longer hours, allowing for less time at the end of the day to search for personal fulfillment. How many times have you heard someone say, "If I'm going to be putting all of this time into work, I might as well be doing something I enjoy?"

Two, widespread layoffs have forced many people out of jobs during their prime working years. "At first, they feel fear, anger, shame, and self-pity," says Tom Welch,

president of Career Dimensions in Stuart, Florida. "But once they get past all the emotions, they want to take advantage of the opportunity to find work that is more meaningful." Challenger sees the same reaction in his clients.

"Most of the time," he says, "people are relieved that they have been let go because their jobs were not working out for them anyway."

Demographics also play a part in this widespread search

There's a soul-searching epidemic afoot in the workplace. Employees are no longer content with just a paycheck and good benefits; they want meaning and passion. Here's how fulfilling work can add up to more productive, happier employees and perhaps a healthier bottom line.

for meaning. Baby boomers, the largest group of U.S. workers, have reached a point in their lives at which they are naturally more contemplative. That's what is feeding the spiritual awakening in the United States and the accompanying boom in religious publishing, new age spirituality, personal growth seminars, and angel movies. As boomers search for something greater than themselves to believe in, they can't help but extend that search to their work lives.

But though boomers may be leading this movement, they have plenty of followers at both ends of the age spectrum. According to a recent article in the *Wall Street Journal*, recruiters on college campuses are now facing questions from first-time job hunters about such things as work-life balance. Before, such questions came during salary negotiations, if they came at all, not during first-round interviews. Apparently, today's college students view work as an important part of their lives, but not as their entire lives, and they want to make sure the companies they work for share that value.

It isn't surprising when you consider that many current graduates were latchkey kids who grew up in households continually stressed by work-life conflict. One 22-year-old information-systems graduate asked a recruiter from Ceridian about the company's "organizational values" on work and family. Apparently, he seldom saw his father while growing up and he was determined to avoid the same situation with his children.

At the other end of the age spectrum are senior executives who are dizzy from years of corporate turmoil. According to John Decker, senior vice president of The Executive Career Resource Group in Wellesley, Massachusetts, senior managers are increasingly willing to leave their jobs because of a mismatch between their values

and their company's culture.

"Some of my clients have been downsized," says Decker, "but most of them want out because of the lack of corporate stability, declining loyalty, and the fact that they are losing a voice in the decision-making process."

Part of the reason that people are searching for more from their jobs is because, quite frankly, they know that more is possible. With basic needs for salary and safety met, employees in the early 1980s started asking for higher-level benefits, such as work-family programs, flextime, telecommuting options, domestic-partner coverage, and tuition reimbursement.

Now that many of those needs have been met, employees are pushing the envelope by demanding that their work also be fulfilling. As psychologist Abraham Maslow explains in his Hierarchy of Needs theory, lower-level needs must be taken care of before a person can focus his or her attention on what Maslow calls "self-actualization." Think about it: Do you think that employees during the Great Depression cared whether their jobs were meaningful?

The search for meaning

OK, so maybe the search for meaning is due, in part, to the fact that employees are spoiled. That doesn't mean that companies shouldn't address the issue. Anything that may increase corporate productivity—and employees' happiness—is worth pursuing.

So, what makes work meaningful? What ignites passion on the job and makes a person want to leap out of bed in the morning? Well, that depends on who you ask. Sandy McAfferty, a Denver member of Forty Plus, an organization of workers age 40 and over who are in the midst of a career transition, says for that her, meaningful work involves developing and supporting other people. She's a corporate trainer, so her answer isn't surprising.

John Meeker, another Forty Plus member, has spent his career in a variety of manufacturing and engineering jobs. What makes his work meaningful?

"When management listens to employees and takes advantage of our views," he says. "For me, it's not so much what I'm doing that makes the

work meaningful, but whether or not the environment is supportive." (See the sidebar, *Creating a Meaningful Environment*.)

Ask five other people what makes their work meaningful and you'll get five different answers, including creativity, the ability to learn, a high salary, and being able to influence others. That's because meaning is as unique as our fingerprints. Given that, how can companies be expected to light a fire under all employees when the fuel is different for everyone?

"By helping employees discover for themselves what activities are meaningful," says Welch. "You see, most people don't understand how to go about finding meaningful work because they don't know what is important to them. We just haven't been taught to think that way."

According to Welch, trainers can play a valuable role in helping employees find meaning in their work by helping them identify their talents and skills, uncover their work and life values, and assess the environments and activities in which their values will be met while their talents are utilized. Typically, when employees devote their talents to projects and companies that support their values, the work is meaningful. "That kind of discovery process can be done easily in a classroom," says Welch.

Though some employers are helping employees uncover their talents and values, that usually happens during outplacement when an employee is already halfway out the door. Imagine the kind of commitment companies could generate by helping employees find and apply their passions while they're still employed.

"I did a values clarification seminar for a group of machinists who were being laid off and, without exception, they told me they wished the company had offered the workshop years earlier," says Welch. "They felt that maybe they could have done a better job for the company and prevented the downsizing altogether."

Because lifetime job security has evaporated, some enlightened employers have realized they need to help employees take responsibility for their careers before a layoff occurs. A few have even gone so far as to set up ca-

reer self-management programs that offer employees such resources as career libraries, networking groups, job counseling, and online job posting.

Finding passion

But Welch believes that many of those efforts suffer from the same problem college planning courses do: They don't teach people how to find work and careers that they're passionate about. Of course, if you help employees uncover what is meaningful for them, you run the risk of their leaving—unless you structure the discovery process in such a way that people stay focused on finding meaning in the current work environment. That is exactly what GTE's Information Systems Division—which is part of GTE Government Systems in Chantilly, Virginia—did last year when it launched an intrapreneur pilot program. In it, 22 employees were given resources to help them find something meaningful to create for the company.

According to Anthony A. Spadafore, the career and organizational development consultant who helped design the program, work on the intrapreneurship pilot began two years ago following a restructuring that failed to boost productivity. "The restructuring didn't catch on because people weren't passionate about their work," he says. "It was like operating like a car with no engine. We couldn't move the company the way we wanted." Searching for a solution, the company agreed to fund a pilot project in which employees would be given resources to find ways to pursue their passions in the workplace.

Help yourself, help your company

Last spring, 22 employee volunteers were chosen to participate in the pilot. They spent time with Spadafore assessing their talents, values, interests, and goals, and exploring ways to bring them together in a company project.

Employees who came up with workable business ideas presented them to a mentor council that decided whether to fund the proposed projects. Employees who were funded were then assigned mentors who could help them see their projects through.

Of the 22 participants, eight have

already proposed new projects, and several have been funded. One employee, Steve Batdorff, had been working as chief of operations for the company's FAA Duats Program, an online information system that helps pilots and flight instructors file flight plans, get weather briefings, and obtain other flight-related information. Batdorff, an electrical engineer, liked his position, but he wanted to be able to help people. "I like to help, not just me and my family, but my staff, customers, and the company overall."

Batdorff suggested that the flight information system include additional flight-related services and commercial advertising. It would be a great way for pilots to get information and for the company to increase revenue. It could also make the government program commercially viable, and the project would provide growth opportunities for his staff and increase his job security.

The project was funded on the spot. Now, Batdorff spends 15 percent of his time developing the new system. "This has given me a new career path and allowed me to help my staff grow while making money for the company."

Two other participants in the project created ways for the company's technical employees to gain marketing experience and for marketing employees to understand more about technology. Both participants are software engineers who want to get into marketing because they want to work more closely with customers. Their project to design new career paths for the company is allowing them to gradually gain the marketing experience they need while helping other employees.

Although still in its infancy, GTE's intrapreneurship program has been so successful that the company is considering offering it to other divisions.

"Today, when you look at employees who are participating in the program and compare their behaviors to what they were like a year ago, it's like night and day," says Spadafore. "Employees who once passively accepted their roles are now laughing, smiling, happy, and passionate about their work. You can see them becoming leaders."

CREATING A MEANINGFUL ENVIRONMENT

In a perfect world, all companies would have the resources to help each employee find meaningful work. But in the real world of corporate budgets and time pressures, that may not always be possible. That doesn't mean, however, that you can't create an environment in which work becomes more meaningful.

Robert Levering of the Great Places to Work Institute in San Francisco frequently conducts surveys for companies that want to gauge the quality of their work environments. He has found a direct correlation between employees who say their work is meaningful and companies that are considered to be great places to work.

"The statement, 'My work has special meaning,' does not score high in companies that aren't judged overall to be good places to work," says Levering.

What that means is that there *are* things companies can do to create meaning for employees. Using the criteria for judging the "100 Best

Companies to Work for in America" with suggestions from *The Search for Meaning in the Workplace* by Naylor, Willimon, and Osterberg and *Thank God It's Monday: 14 Values We Need to Humanize the Way We Work* by Kenneth Cloke and Joan Goldsmith, here are some suggestions on how to create a meaningful work environment:

- ◆ Share the company vision—in detail—with employees.
- ◆ Show how individual jobs contribute to achieving that vision.
- ◆ Include employees in decisions that affect their jobs.
- ◆ Foster a spirit of collaboration.
- ◆ Celebrate diversity.
- ◆ Promote open and honest communication.
- ◆ Don't punish employees for taking risks.
- ◆ Empower employees to share equally in decisions that affect the shape and direction of the organization.
- ◆ Provide ongoing growth and development opportunities.
- ◆ Encourage regular feedback.

GTE is interested in more than extending the program's reach. At Spadafore's suggestion, it is considering redesigning its entire hiring process so that new employees will be given six to eight weeks to learn about the company and decide what kind of job excites them most.

"Today, we hire based on hard skills and then slot people into a job," says Spadafore. "We're trying to find a way to give employees more of a choice—to help them research and find work here that is meaningful to them."

The project at GTE is an outgrowth of Spadafore's own experience as a GTE employee who found himself, at age 28, so depressed he was unable to get out of bed in the morning. "I was an engineer who had absolutely no interest in the work, yet I had no idea what else I wanted to do." After some extensive soul searching with a career counselor, Spadafore realized he wasn't cut out for engineering. "I want-

ed to work with people. GTE gave me the flexibility to pursue work that had more meaning for me. In return, I've been able to help the company."

Do what you love, love what you do

Spadafore's experience serves as a lesson for other companies struggling with disenfranchised, unmotivated workers. When you help employees find meaning in their work, you're helping to light fires that have a better chance of staying lit. Even if you affect only 5 percent of the population, imagine the productivity gains if more employees felt like Spadafore. He says, "Today, I love what I do so much that I don't feel like I'm working." Imagine that. ■

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