

Worker Contentment:



Facing the Realities of Today's Workplace

BY JEFF GARTON

Is it possible for graduating students to have a traditional career in the new millennium? How should they prepare for their careers when workers are being forced to take jobs they don't really want, and stay longer in jobs they don't really like just to have a job? This article proposes a holistic approach to career education that gives hope to students and their ability to have and enjoy their best career without depending on employers to make them happy.

Preparing students to enter the workforce has historically involved narrowing their career choices and enhancing their marketability with polished resumes, custom cover letters, and expert interview skills. Throughout this learning process students are conditioned to expect that in return for their investment in education, plus their good labor and loyalties on the job, employers will make them satisfied with wages, benefits, training, and so forth. Employers reinforce this expectation by leveraging the idea of job satisfaction as the principal carrot to attract, motivate and retain workers. This enduring approach to employment and career seems reasonable until an examination of new workplace realities reveals

gaps in education that can't be filled by apprenticeships or internships. Missing is the development of a student's mental and emotional abilities to compete for fewer jobs, and to persevere despite undesirable jobs and circumstances that employers can't or won't make satisfying.

It's surprising how students are still being conditioned to expect job satisfaction when employers are not committed to making workers satisfied. Over the past two decades employers have been criticized by the media, unions and the government for mistreating workers due to layoffs, eliminating jobs and benefits, freezing and reducing wages, and for scandals involving mismanagement, greed and corruption. These actions have contributed to record unemployment, disillusionment and dissatisfaction, and the lack of loyalty among workers who question the feasibility of having the type of career they originally imagined and were prepared for.

Management experts have observed that the employment relationship has become contractual, fragile, and short-lived. Downsizings have resulted in some people having far too much work and stress, while increasing numbers have no work at

all. According to the February issue of the *Pew Report*, nearly 37 percent of Millennials are unemployed, which is the highest share among this age group in more than three decades. As a result, people are taking jobs they don't really want and staying longer in jobs they don't really like just to have a job. Millions of unemployed and employed workers are suffering in fear and with little hope of a better future, except to reinvent themselves and their careers. The January 18 issue of *BusinessWeek* put it this way: "The workforce is now comprised of permanently temporary workers who are disposable."

These are the realities that new job-seekers entering the workforce are facing at the start of their careers, and they will continue to face throughout their careers. For career education to be relevant it should go beyond the traditional employment tips and tools that are freely available from thousands of Internet sites, and address the dynamics of managing a career amidst these new workplace realities. Rather than cause students to expect job satisfaction, give them a whole new **employment mindset** to achieve and maintain **career contentment**, with or without job satisfaction.

Employment Mindset

Curriculum that prepares a student's mindset for career focuses on employment from a holistic perspective that involves his or her core beliefs, clear intentions or purposes, performance enhancing emotions, and his or her resolved abilities and etiquette to establish relationships and achieve results. Because people act on their emotions caused by what they think, and because a person's career is not performed in a vacuum, his or her mindset is an important indicator of healthy self-esteem, non-negative thinking, self-motivation, propensity to engage naturally with work and other people, and his or her enduring resilience to persevere and maintain performance despite circumstances. When developed, jobseekers' right mindset and etiquette can open doors, eliminate barriers, and enhance their attractiveness and like-

ability, even if their qualifications are less than ideal. Employers alternately refer to mindset as "right fit and chemistry," and they can't explain what this means except to say they prefer some people more than others. Most importantly, the employment mindset is trainable, and this education is essential for students to compete for the jobs they desire.

With fewer jobs to fill and an overabundance of unemployed people to select from at reduced salaries, employers are not recruiting people simply because they have a good education, resume, cover letter, references or interview skills. These are merely the sorting criteria used to establish a finalist pool of qualified prospects. The person who is ultimately hired is the most liked from among this pool, and his or her likeability is directly related to his or her employment mindset and behavior in relation to the employer's cul-

ture and unspoken etiquette. In this case, etiquette does not refer to good manners, per se, but the expected behaviors associated with each step of the employment process. Do the right thing at the right time and the interview progresses smoothly to the next step in the process. But fail to demonstrate the correct attitudes or behavior when it's appropriate to do so and the process ends abruptly, and it doesn't matter if the jobseeker has the best resume, cover letter, references or interview skills.

Employers do not publicize their criteria for right mindset and etiquette because doing so would make it too easy for any interviewee to slip through the screening process. The criteria are unspoken and unwritten. Examples of the criteria include: having goals and plans to achieve them; a realistic but optimistic outlook on life and career; the ability to learn from past mistakes; high resilience to persevere and transcend challenges without complaining; ability to convert misfortune into opportunity; they easily attract the help of others; are not highly co-dependent on employers to make them satisfied; and they benefit from instances of synchronicity and serendipity—as if what they are seeking is meant to be, and it feels to employers like they are playing a role in the jobseeker's future success.

Employers measure the effectiveness of their recruiting by linking improvements in worker attitudes, performance and retention rates to the right mindset at the time of hire. Employers rely on this data to make decisions regarding where to recruit next or again, and which academic institutions warrant the greatest investment in their programs—because they produce more students with the right mindset, and who seem to instinctively know the employer's unspoken etiquette.

Career Contentment

Unless employers are committed to making workers satisfied on a continuing basis, a holistic approach to career

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education should not cause students to expect (expressed or implied) that employers will make them satisfied. The current workplace reality is that employers are reducing budgets used to make workers satisfied, and they are no longer willing to continue fixing the same dissatisfactions every year. Therefore, students must be taught how to recognize their own career contentment, and how to leverage it as a source of emotional resilience to persevere without depending so much on employers to make them satisfied.

Contrary to popular thinking that has existed for generations of workers, job satisfaction is not a human emotion that workers can control by choice. It is a condition that is: first, co-dependent on employers doing something or providing something; and second, it is provisional on whether worker expectations were fulfilled. Workers can't simply choose to have intrinsic or extrinsic job satisfaction, not without the job, which is budgeted for and controlled exclusively by employers.

It may seem that workers have control over their decision to be intrinsically satisfied with their work or coworkers, for example, but this is an illusion. They have no control over how these satisfying conditions came into being, or even how long these conditions will remain satisfying. The only control workers have over their job satisfaction is by their choice of work or decision to leave. Otherwise, they can stay and complain in hopes their dissatisfactions will be fixed, or they can reason to recognize their contentment (which they do control) despite work conditions (which they don't control).

Career contentment is not a condition that is controlled by employers, but an emotion that is controlled exclusively by workers to manage their lives and careers in a manner that is unyielding to their conditions. For example, by leveraging their thoughts to flex their emotions, workers can choose to be content even if conditions are less than satisfying—just like they can leverage the emotion of cour-

age when conditions are frightful or the emotion of enthusiasm when conditions are boring. The emotion of contentment related to one's career has been overlooked as the source of self-motivation, natural engagement and enduring resilience to persevere when conditions are less than desirable.

Ultimately, employers must remunerate workers for their time, talents and efforts, but they are not in business to make workers satisfied. Why employers invest in job satisfaction is to attract, motivate and retain workers to fulfill the employers' purposes for hiring them. If employers could, they would divert those dollars used to make workers satisfied to bottom-line profits, which is exactly what we see happening today.

Being made satisfied is important but secondary to the pursuit of one's most valued purposes for working. People experience *callings* to jobs and careers that fulfill their own purposes, not the employer's purposes for hiring them, and a truly career-minded person won't forfeit his or her purposes for artificial satisfactions that employers provide and may later reduce or take away. Ultimately, it's up to workers to fulfill their own purposes, which can be on the job and related to their work or even off the job and related to their personal and family life. Also, purposes can change unexpectedly and take people into directions they never anticipated or prepared for. They may also leave at any time and without regard to their employer or the job satisfactions they were provided.

The reality is that job dissatisfaction is inevitable because people's needs and wants are insatiable. As people age and their interests evolve, they eventually expect more, something new or different to keep them satisfied, making it impossible for employers to keep all workers satisfied all the time. Further, employers lack control over all the factors that can affect worker satisfaction. For instance, employers don't control how people think, their career choices, or the undesirable impacts

caused by the Great Recession, global competition, weather, war, terrorism, earthquakes, etc. The point being that neither workers nor employers are able to completely control the conditions for job satisfaction to exist or be maintained.

Education on the new topics of employment mindset and career contentment helps us to understand why people won't accept just any job, no matter how satisfying it's made to seem, why some people are content to stay in jobs and continue to perform well despite their lack of job satisfaction, and why some people leave good jobs despite efforts to retain them with new and improved job satisfactions.

A person's career is not the pursuit of transient job satisfactions that every employer provides, but the pursuit of contentment derived from work that is meaningful to the fulfillment of his or her own most valued purposes. While jobs and job satisfaction are subject to changes caused by fluctuating workplace realities, what remains constant is the control workers exercise over their emotion of contentment to manage their careers. In this there is the potential for increased hope during these difficult times. In order for career education to be relevant and effective in the new millennium, it must holistically prepare students to exercise control over their mindsets and contentment to manage their careers and transcend their challenges with less dependence on employers to make them satisfied. **I**

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is a career coach and bestselling ASTD author whose background is in global human resources with the Philip Morris Companies. He coined the term and published the first books and learning resources on the new topic of career contentment and the employment mindset to achieve it. For more information, visit www.careercontentment-thebook.com.



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