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Resisting Temptation to Jump Ship? Get Over It Already

Even Recession and a Dismal Job Market Aren't Excuses to Stay Miserable

By Jennifer Rooney

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Wondering if and when you can leave your job? Daydreaming of something different, better, more fulfilling? Feel shackled by the oppression of the recession? Fight the fear and move on, says Dr. Sharon Lamm-Hartman, an executive coach and life coach who also is a speaker and adjunct faculty member at Columbia University.



Dr. Sharon Lamm-Hartman

In fact, the recession is as good a time as any to break the ties to a job that causes you misery, she says. And if a recent Conference Board report is an accurate reflection of the current state of the employed, there are a miserable lot of you out there.

The report found that only 45% of those in 5,000 surveyed households expressed satisfaction with their jobs, down from just over 61% in 1987, the first year the survey was conducted. That's the lowest level of U.S. job satisfaction in two decades. While all age and income groups express that they are unhappy with their jobs, the cohort with the highest level of dissatisfaction -- the highest level ever recorded by the survey for that age group -- are those under age 25.

So we're collectively suffering at our desks. But is that our only option?

In a recent interview with Ad Age, Dr. Lamm-Hartman espoused the merits of an escape plan and getting the work you want to do and will actually -- brace yourselves -- enjoy.

What do you think are the three biggest factors contributing to the lowest job satisfaction in two decades?

One is the way we work in this country. Younger generations have watched their parents be miserable at work. And they're saying, "Enough. I really want to have work that's fun and inspiring and really connected with my passion." I also think the older generations are even saying, "Enough," because they've put in their time and now with the layoffs and downsizing, they are saying, "Wow, I put my life into this company and they are getting rid of me." If you look at companies in Europe,

they get six to eight weeks off and employers often support sabbaticals. Meanwhile, here we are working 12 to 14 hour days five to seven days a week, and we get two weeks off a year. It starts to affect negatively our family life and way of life.

The second factor is this lack of job security. Once security wanes, job satisfaction goes down, too. And trust [in employers] has diminished.

The third one is the fact that there are a lot of people out there not doing what they were born to do. They're not purpose driven. We're at a time in our world where people are asking themselves, "Am really adding value by expressing my most unique gifts and talents?" When we're not doing that, it really causes disruption in our systems. I've seen a lot of people I've worked with be depressed or sick or just dissatisfied. A lot of people know what they should be doing, but many are afraid to actually do it. Then there are others who don't know, they just know they're not happy doing what they're doing.

Isn't that kind of thinking, that sort of aspirational approach, a luxury that we cannot afford in this recession right now?

That's one way that you could look at it. Another way: There's no better time [to take that approach] than now. People who are in jobs where they're satisfied are not losing their jobs. If you're going to lose your job anyway, what better time to [look for what you want] than now?

I realize that often requires a certain level of finances. If someone has some months' salary in the bank, then they have some time to explore what they really want to do before they put themselves out in the job market again.

When people are really connected to their callings, they get the job they interview for.

The recession creates a movement because there's so much dissatisfaction. Often job loss or the threat of job loss is a trigger to transformation. I've talked to so many people who lose their jobs and years later say that losing their jobs was the best thing that ever happened to them, because they didn't have the courage to leave on their own.

And so you're recommending people take greater risks and leave without waiting to get kicked out?

If they are clear on what they want to do. If you're that dissatisfied, are you going to wait for the company to do something, or are you going to do something? If you're clear on what it is you really want to do, why not do it? If you volunteer to go, you're going to be saving the job of someone else who might really want to be there. And companies are looking for people who really don't want to be there anyway. So it's kind of a win-win. And even if you don't know what you want to do, but you're going to get six months' severance, that's a lot of time to figure out what you want to do. A lot of times, people who are electing to leave are actually going to ask for severance. They're saying, "Hey, if you guys give me a severance package, I will leave."

You're suggesting going without having another job lined up?

The ideal way to go would be to have something lined up. But that's not always the case these days. If you are dissatisfied, and your company is laying off or downsizing, and you know you want to be doing something else, then go. It's risky, it's giving up job security, but there's really no such thing as job security anymore anyway. And a lot of times companies are providing support, too, like outsourcing support where you can actually get some career counseling if you don't know what you want to do next. There are lots of companies out there right now that are helping people connect with what they really want to do.

The report found that the youngest employees, those under 25, are most dissatisfied. To what do you attribute that and how might that change?

They certainly grew up in abundance; Every need has been met, maybe they haven't had a struggle. Look at the book, "The 4-Hour Workweek." That's their work ethic. I think for them, too, [what matters is] how much fun they're having. That's why Google's brilliant, because they've brought fun into the workplace.

We're comparing [that generation's work ethic] to our work ethic, but maybe theirs is just redefined. Theirs might be, "If I'm having fun and am inspired and am having a good time and love coming to work, but I also love my life," maybe

they're more likely to give more if they have those things. Corporate America is stuck in defining work ethic the way baby boomers do. We have to redefine work and work ethic. The Googles of the world are the ones that are going to attract these younger generations and get the most out of them. We're going to face some sort of corporate revolution if corporations do not change. Otherwise I don't know how they're going to retain the best talent.

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