



# Keys to Job Satisfaction

*Understanding how and why you get motivated*

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Contributing Editor

**M**Y FATHER WORKED FOR THE SAME company for 40 years. I remember how shocked he'd be whenever I would make a job change or gripe about my circumstances. In fact, he had one piece of advice that he would repeat regularly and which I will always remember. To him, it was the reason he was able to stay with one employer for all that time:

"If you want to be happy on the job, you've got to work hard, stay loyal and keep your mouth shut."

I doubt that this counsel is relevant today. While the "work hard" part is still valid, the whole concept of loyalty has undergone dramatic change—as anyone who's had a pink slip could confirm. In fact, the entire arena of job satisfaction has been transformed. A paycheck in an envelope used to be all that an employer needed to keep people engaged in their jobs; this doesn't work any longer. While some enlightened organizations provide in-house exercise facilities and day-care, other firms still rely on their annual bonus program to motivate employees.

Job satisfaction is rarely assured by money. While these bonuses may have begun as an incentive to better performance, that sense of motivation has been lost as employees began to expect this payment; the bonus became the entitlement program that it feels like today. Job dissatisfaction often results from issues surrounding money.

In the old days of headhunting, recruiters would push these job dissatisfaction buttons as often as they could. When I went into that business years ago, my dad was very disappointed. I am sure that he pictured me hiding behind the potted palms at a scientific meeting, trying to lure candidates out of their companies with wild offers of increased salary and status. Today, however, there are more than enough applicants out there for most jobs. Recruiters have become talent scouts; it is by selecting the right candidate that they succeed for their clients. And what do recruiters look for when they are asked to select a winner?

Eileen Dougherty (Search Masters International, Downers Grove, IL) describes it this way: "We look for people whose passion for their work fuels their careers."

Passion is job satisfaction to the highest degree.

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## The Right Mix of Challenge and Mastery

Exit interviews typically take place on the last day of work, after a resignation. In these interviews with the boss and H/R, the outgoing employee is asked about the reasons for the departure. Responses generally include "a lack of challenge," or "I just needed something more." These reasons certainly are a bit hazier than the "I got an offer I couldn't refuse" response. This frustrates many managers because they realize that the company might have been able to do something to save the employee early on. Often this is true . . . assisting that employee to identify a position that fits that person's "motivators" could have been entirely possible.

But staying happy with one employer is a difficult task. Some people change jobs every few years as religiously as they put on new steel-belted radials. To avoid this, it is important to recognize how dissatisfaction begins and learn how to prevent it. No matter what you call the resulting problems—"plateauing" and "burnout" are two current terms—most of the job dissatisfaction for pharmaceutical scientists stems from their need for a continuous diet of new professional experiences. Scientists don't easily leave a company they like solely for money reasons. Instead, they leave because of what author and sports psychologist Robert Kriegel calls an "out-of-whack mix of job mastery with new challenges."

Mr. Kriegel, co-author of the books *Inner Skiing* and *Inner Tennis*, believes that all individuals who have perfected their skills in one area, whether on the ski slope or in the lab, deal daily with what he calls the "Challenge/Mastery Shuttle." To the scientist, this refers to the daily switch between new learning experiences and areas of personal mastery. A microbiologist who loves to cultivate new and unusual organisms also spends a certain amount of time each day involved in running mundane assays on which she is the company expert. As in that example, time on the job is spent in two areas—a fine balance between the excitement of something new and the use of skills that have long ago been mastered.

Mr. Kriegel's work describes several "zones" in which we work during the course of a workday. They include the "challenge zone" and the "mastery zone." Some people seem to prefer the constantly changing, risk-taking atmosphere of the challenge zone, while others enjoy the benefits of the studied approach to mastering a particular skill. An analytical chemist who is an HPLC expert would love to spend the entire day tweaking and improving her mastery of the company's chromatography tools. The opposite of this is the engineer who thrives on a diet of new

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challenges while building a huge production facility. For most people, however, a mixture of the two appears best.

Mr. Kriegel describes the correct mix as “the ability to shuttle between new challenges and areas of mastery.” It is when there is too much of one or another that we experience difficulties. How do you feel about your ideal workday? Do you see yourself enjoying a non-stop mix of new challenges, or perhaps digging further into your particular area of mastery? Each of us has a different set-point on this scale.

### **The Pharma Industry Fosters The Challenge Zone**

Many biotech and pharmaceutical companies place so much emphasis on getting new products through the pipeline and into the marketplace that they create a non-stop challenge zone for their employees. These challenges can result in quite a lot of pressure. Creative employees enjoy the learning process, but if challenges continue without respite, they have no opportunity to develop their personal areas of mastery—which leads them right into what Mr. Kriegel calls the “panic zone.”

The panic zone is an uncomfortable place to find yourself. Unfortunately, many organizations pushing their people through rapid change find their staff in the panic zone quite a bit more than the employees would prefer. Too many daily challenges, leading to the panic zone, can be one of the key reasons behind employee departures. The panic zone lies at one extreme of the job satisfaction scale and allows too little time for employee “mastery.”

But what happens if you find yourself with too much time spent in your area of personal mastery? This is the opposite end of the scale from the panic zone, and Robert Kriegel refers to it as the “drone zone.” He believes that too much emphasis on

mastery of a particular skill can lead to a sudden and quite unexpected feeling of job dissatisfaction stemming from boredom. Although it can sometimes feel great to escape the rapids of the panic zone for the slower waters of mastering a particular scientific technique, it is the opportunity to shuttle between challenge and mastery that keeps a job interesting.

### **Where Do You Stand On This Scale?**

Here are a few questions to help you decide in advance what kind of a working environment you would need in order to keep your job satisfaction at the highest level possible:

- What are the new areas you wish to add to your on-the-job experience?
- What are the areas you have developed into a high level of personal expertise?
- What is the right mix of these two as a percentage of your day?

Job satisfaction is a sense of personal growth most often measured by the extent of new challenges and “learning situations” experienced, combined with time that allows you to settle in on specific areas of personal mastery. People who have spent years developing a special area of expertise need a chance to keep those skills fine-tuned. But, they need to be learning something new throughout each stage of their career as well. It’s that Challenge/Mastery shuttle at work!

The next time you speak to a recruiter about an interesting job prospect, make certain that you have carefully considered these concepts of job satisfaction. If the new job doesn’t have the correct mix of challenges and mastery, it may be a career disaster hiding behind an increase in salary. ■