

WHAT IS YOUR WORK SITUATION?

AUTHOR: JULIE JANSEN

Chapter Excerpt from Julie Jansen's *I Don't Know What I Want, But I Know It's Not This*
Copyright © 2003 Julie Jansen. All rights reserved.

There are six work situations that represent a specific contemporary work-life challenge that you may be facing right now. Reading about these work situations will enable you to label and isolate the reasons for your desire to change your work and, in doing so, gain a clearer understanding about how to alleviate your dissatisfaction or discontent. While you probably will relate to one of the six work situations more than the others, it is highly likely that you will identify with two or three of them. They are:

Where's the Meaning? These individuals are looking for a new kind of reward and satisfaction. They may be seeking personal fulfillment or be driven by a strong desire to help others in need. Bill, for example, was an engineer for fifteen years, but never really enjoyed his work. After being downsized by his company, a telephone equipment reconditioning business, Bill took some time off, volunteering for five different organizations. He currently earns money by working several part-time jobs. His wife volunteers for many of the same organizations, and Bill tells me that they are both happier and having more fun than they ever had when they were earning substantially more money.

Been There, Done That, but Still Need to Earn. These people have been, and continue to be, successful in their work. They want, and probably need, to keep earning at the same level, yet can't conceive of staying in the same job for another ten or twenty years. Many of these individuals won't be able to change careers immediately, but with planning can do so eventually. A prime example is Melinda, who has worked as a computer systems programmer for most of her career. She stayed where she was for a while because she was making good money and financial responsibilities precluded her from changing. As her children started growing older, she began to work as a personal fitness trainer at night and on weekends. Once Melinda's life situation changed (her children grew up and she divorced her husband), she was able to launch full-time into her personal training business with established clients. Today, she is making very close to the same amount of money doing something she actually enjoys.

Bruised and Gun-Shy. These individuals are victims of the changing workplace. Having been laid off or discriminated against, they are hesitant to either join the corporate world again or take any kind of career risk, and yet they do need to continue working. Juan, after having been laid off, had a quadruple bypass during the transition period and decided to become what he calls a "job stress coach." Ambivalent about entering the corporate world, he now has his own practice helping others deal with the stress of working

Bored and Plateaued. Many people have worked hard for many years and are simply ready to make a change because they are bored and are looking for new challenges. Deborah, at age forty, had spent her entire career in consumer-products marketing. A vice president at an elite marketing firm, Deborah admitted that she was "bored to tears." She remembered the early years of her career as being exciting and fun. For at least four years, however, she had felt stagnant and finally became so miserable she decided to actively seek a new direction.

Yearning to Be on Your Own. These people dream of being on their own or starting a company. According to Helen Harkness, author of *Don't Stop the Career Clock*, in the early

nineteenth century, 80 percent of Americans were self-employed. By 1970, this number had fallen to 9 percent. But today self-employment is growing at a furious pace; in 2000, there were 12 million small businesses. By 2020, it is predicted that 25 percent of businesses will be small, privately owned companies. Another different type of self-employment is the "contingency workforce" – people who work temporarily on specific projects for many different companies – which has grown 57 percent since 1980. These workers don't have many of the responsibilities that a business owner has, yet they possess the flexibility that people experience in their own businesses. Some contingency workers receive benefits and some may not. With the increased stress of working for a company, more and more people are realizing that working on their own can satisfy their specific needs. After spending thirty successful years in teaching, sales, and human resources, Blanche started her own consulting firm several years ago. She says, "I always knew I wanted my own business and to have my stamp on something." She is having a lot of fun, and hitting every goal she sets for herself and her business.

One Toe in the Retirement Pool. These people are often baby boomers who want to semiretire or retire from their current work. What they do with the years ahead is a questions that many boomers are asking themselves – do they change careers completely, volunteer, scale down the time they are working in their current job, or just retire completely? Di retired when she was fifty-eight from a long career in sales because her exhausting travel schedule was affecting her health seriously. The first few years of her retirement, she took yoga, read books, and learned how to paint in oils. Recently, she has started doing some training seminars for a previous employer, and is enjoying the combination of retirement and part-time work.

Take a few moments and look at the descriptions of the six situations. The following list of questions will help you to identify your primary work situation, as well as the others that you fit within, and will provide you with additional clarity about why you associate with a specific circumstance. Taking this assessment may confirm what you already suspect about your reasons for being discontented with your work and allow you to gain further insights.

WHAT IS YOUR WORK SITUATION?

Read each question carefully and answer yes or no as quickly and as easily as you can. The questions are grouped by work situation, and while you may think you fit only into one or two categories, you should answer all the questions to get a complete picture of your own circumstance.

Where's The Meaning?

1. In the last year or so, have you ever asked yourself, "Why am I doing the work I'm doing?" Or "What is the point of the work I do?"
2. I'm not exactly sure what doing meaningful work means to me, but I'd be interested in finding out.
3. It is important that I directly touch or make a contribution to others as often as possible in my work.
4. I am feeling more and more that there is no reward or challenge for doing the work that I do.
5. I fantasize about "throwing in the towel" and going to work for a nonprofit organization or a specific cause.

6. There are several charities or special causes that I am very interested in learning more about, and perhaps getting involved in, even simply as a volunteer.
7. My family and friends don't believe that I am making a difference in the world with my work.
8. I've experienced a traumatic or sad event in the recent past that has caused me to think about what is really important to me as a person in both my work and life.
9. I have an interest or hobby that I am passionate about and that I wish I could become more deeply involved with.
10. At one time, it was important to me to meet my financial and achievement goals in my work, but this doesn't seem to matter to me anymore.

Been There, Done That, But Still Need to Earn

1. My work is no longer providing me with opportunities to do what matters to me, yet I'm used to my income.
2. I feel as if I have achieved a lot in my current career and would love to try a different kind of work but am afraid that I wouldn't earn what I do now if I did try something else.
3. Earning the same amount of money or more is important to me so that I can take care of my family, but I am a little bored.
4. I really enjoy my work but feel as if I've had every possible experience in my career. Despite this, I honestly can't see changing careers because it would probably mean earning less money.
5. I have a lot of financial responsibilities that cause me to feel insecure about changing careers and earning less money.
6. While money is a big reason that I am afraid to change my work, if I think about it, I can find a realistic way to reduce or even eliminate my expenses in the next year or two.
7. I'll admit that I've been pretty bored and unchallenged in my job lately, but I'm hard-pressed to think of anything else I could do and earn the same paycheck.

Bruised and Gun-Shy

1. I've had a tough job experience that has caused me to lose my job or derail my career for a period of time and find it's still hard to describe my experience or even think about it without feeling angry, upset, or having other negative emotions.
2. I don't feel optimistic about the future of my career, in part because of my past negative work experiences.
3. I have been fired at least once. I still feel a little bitter about my experience, and though I'm not thrilled with my work situation, I can't seem to think about making a change for fear it could happen again.
4. I am unemployed and can't seem to find the energy to focus on finding work that I enjoy, let alone a job or any kind.
5. I don't trust the corporate world anymore. When I started working, company loyalty was important. Joining a company meant you stayed there forever.
6. I've experienced some hard knocks in my career. I've been laid off, gotten caught in company politics, been discriminated against, or my company has been sold. How much more do I have to take?

7. It seems that what companies want from their employees keeps changing. I just don't know if I can keep up this pace any longer, but I can't afford to stop working either.
8. I've thought about becoming self-employed or changing careers, but I've been so burned that I'm afraid to make any changes.

Bored and Plateaued

1. I've been working in the same job for more than two years without a change in responsibilities and can perform my tasks effortlessly without stretching myself.
2. I've invested a lot of time and energy in my work and am considered an expert in my field, yet I feel the need to change something about it, however minor that change may be.
3. I am so busy with tasks and projects that I don't have time to "smell the roses."
4. I have been having trouble getting out of bed in the morning, especially during the week, and feel unmotivated when I'm at work.
5. I daydream about quitting my job and doing something entirely different because I don't feel passionate about my work anymore.
6. I am experiencing feelings of burnout (anger, frustration, depression, and anxiety) at work.
7. I guess after so many years in my field, I should think about doing something different. But what would I do?
8. Although I know that my peers respect me, I'm starting to wonder if people think that I have any passion for my job anymore. In fact, I have been wondering that about myself.
9. I moved from another firm a few years ago in my industry in hopes that I would feel reinvigorated. I am starting to feel the same way I did before I changed jobs – stale and unstimulated.
10. I've just begun to notice that I am not being included in important meetings regarding policy or strategy as much as I used to be. I'm feeling as if I'm not contributing anything new, either.
11. Meetings, employees, and clients are all starting to look the same. This feeling scares me, but I'm not sure what to do about it.

Yearning To Be On Your Own

1. I no longer feel fulfilled by working for someone else and just don't think another job will give me what I'm missing now.
2. I am increasingly dissatisfied with the way the company I work for is run, and I'm convinced that I can do things differently and better.
3. I grew up in an entrepreneurial family or am close to someone who is an entrepreneur. I can see the advantages of having my own business – more than I fear the disadvantages.
4. I'm so envious of people in their own businesses. I know it's not easy, but the thought of being my own boss is so appealing.
5. I've always dreamed of being in my own little business. I know there are plenty of resources out there for entrepreneurs, but I am not sure where or how to begin.
6. I know that being on my own doesn't have to mean starting a company. I would like to learn more about my options for self-employment because it's very attractive to me.

7. I know I want to go into business for myself someday but have never been a good salesperson. I'm afraid that not being comfortable with selling will cause me to fail.
8. I've thought a lot about the kind of work I'd like to do next, and I'm convinced that being an entrepreneur is my next move.
9. The idea of being an independent contractor or "free agent" is incredibly appealing.
10. I'm very independent and have always had trouble with politics and working on teams. I am beginning to think that some form of being on my own makes sense for me.

One Toe in the Retirement Pool

1. The truth is, I really would like to stop working right now. It just seems unrealistic to do so financially.
2. I never want to stop working completely, but I would like to slow my pace down a bit and do something different and less demanding.
3. I've been obsessing more and more about not working and spending more time with my family and with my hobbies and interests.
4. I'm stressed out from the demands of working and my health isn't what it should be. I'm seriously thinking about retirement.
5. I'm worn out from working. I've thought about my alternatives, and partial retirement seems like the best one for me as long as I can work part-time.
6. I've worked for a long time and would welcome ideas about structuring the next phase of my life.

Check below the categories in which you answered yes to four or more of the questions. These are the work situations that describe how you are feeling about work right now.

[Julie Jansen's book – which we highly recommend – then goes on to offer self-assessments, common roadblocks and opportunities, and action planning guidance for each of these distinct work situations.]