

Discover Your Real Work

By Clay Parsons

1. Work from your strengths.

This is an easy one, but it's surprising how many people overlook it. The universal man or woman who can do everything equally well is a myth, a creation of popular Western culture's fixation with heroes. We are actually all very different people. Each one of us has different talents, strengths and abilities. These are what I call our core comfort zones.

When we work from our core comfort zones, we create energy. When we work outside of these areas, we give it away. For example, an extrovert who loves being at the center of the action can do a job that requires constant socializing. An introvert would quickly burn out. The introvert was giving away personal energy while the extrovert was creating it. Having the necessary knowledge to do a task is of practical importance, but irrelevant in terms of achieving a fit. It's who you are as an individual that really matters.

Find a job where you are operating from your personal strengths and you will be happy. Find a job where you combine your core strengths with actual knowledge in a particular field, and you will be well on your way to achieving real career success.

2. Work from your core beliefs.

Our work-related core beliefs are a reflection of who we are as individuals. They are the foundation upon which we build our lives. They are not something we adhere to only when in church or helping out at the local Rotary Club food drive. Adhering to our work-related values in practice can bring great satisfaction and have a positive influence on all other areas of our lives. On the other hand, when our work conflicts with our core values, it can lead to a whole array of serious negative consequences.

For example, consider personal independence. Let's assume that an employee values his independence on the job. He is allowed to make important decisions and take action without close supervision. He is evaluated by the results he achieves, not by the process he uses to get there. He believes that his employer respects his ability and therefore gives him free reign. Let's change that scenario and assume that the same person must report all of his daily actions to a supervisor who allows him little freedom and no room to make decisions. Under these circumstances, what happens? Most likely he would become an ex-employee very quickly.

Another type of core belief might involve the value of conservation or preservation of nature. Could someone who strongly believed in protecting nature work for a major company with a long record of causing environmental damage? Regardless of your position on conservation, the answer is obvious.

There are always exceptions to this rule, but the values principle still applies. Find a job where the organization and your coworkers believe in and practice the same values that you do. You will be well on your way towards achieving Real Work.

3. Be creative/intuitive.

We use our creative ability to identify patterns, link them together and arrive at meaning. This enables us to solve complex problems and experience the excitement of discovery. You don't have to be a famous artist or scientist to be creative. It is an ability that all of us possess. It is also the same process, whether it is used by an astrophysicist in deciphering the secrets of the universe or by a former lawyer exploring her options for a career change at age fifty.

Our creativity also helps us avoid stagnation in our lives. It is a powerful guide that helps us adapt to new situations. For example, I knew a world-famous architect who had a distinguished career. He led a major university department and was the owner of a widely recognized consulting firm. When he retired, he sat around expecting to continue as a leading figure in the profession. When the profession moved on and new leaders emerged, he became withdrawn and bitter. He had refused to adapt. He had not used his creative talent to learn and grow. Despite his stellar accomplishments he was stuck in the past.

Find a job where creativity is respected and where you can learn and grow AND change. Also, pay attention to your feelings. That gut feeling about a new opportunity may tell you more than any in-depth, rational analysis ever could.

4. Finding meaning and purpose.

Most of my clients, at some point in our initial discussions, talk about the lack of meaning and purpose in their work lives. It is not that they are sitting around doing nothing. They may be very busy. Rather, the work itself means nothing to them. They are pushing paper, or selling something that they believe is irrelevant. There is no real benefit they can see from their work. This trend is particularly rampant because of the shallowness of our materialist culture.

The fuel that keeps us going has three components: seeing the results of our labors, knowing that what we do matters to other people, and receiving recognition for our contribution. Of course, meaning and purpose are different for everyone. Your own purpose may focus on a particular accomplishment or perhaps a process. For example, a well-known writer and lecturer told me that when he stopped writing, he felt empty and adrift. When he started writing again he felt connected. His life had meaning; he had a "purpose." Sometimes we also use the word mission as a synonym for purpose. One of

my former clients is now a member of the Kurdistan government in exile. When he came to see me he was bored, adrift in a job that was meaningless to him. After making a decision to return to his country of origin, join the opposition and work for change, he has found a powerful sense of mission in his life. He acknowledges the danger but says that it is well worth it.

You don't have to do something dramatic to find meaning in your work. Find a job where you believe in the mission of your work and where you know that what you are doing is making a difference. You want the word "work," with all its negative cultural connotations, to disappear from your vocabulary. Instead of "work," you have tasks that are important to you. When you have made this transition, you will be on the path of achieving Real Work.

5. Be of service to others.

All of the world's major religions believe that we find true fulfillment in selflessly giving ourselves to the service of others. In the Buddhist world, work that supports the common good is called 'rightliveliness' and highly respected. I am not proposing that we all should go out and sign up for Mother Teresa's Mission in Calcutta, India. However, most of us in our hearts are idealists and would truly like to help others. All we need to do is find a way and then incorporate it into our daily lives.

First, list all the major activities in both your work life and personal life. Then look for opportunities where you can be of service to others. If you can't find anything, research some possibilities and add them to your list. For example, volunteer to help at a children's shelter in your spare time. Start a holiday season fund or food donation box at your place of work and deliver the goods once you have collected them from your coworkers. Most importantly, start thinking about how you can incorporate more public service in what your company or organization does. If they balk, do it on your own or look for another job with a company that cares. You would be surprised what your options are. One of my clients works for a non-profit organization that helps homeless people, especially the elderly, find permanent housing. He formerly worked for a large real estate management company but left because of their lack of humanitarian values. Another client is a financial services consultant and active member of Big Brothers/Big Sisters. Believe me, opportunities to serve will appear wherever you look.

If you are looking for work, find a job where the work you do, the products you create or the services you provide help others either directly or indirectly. Make sure that your involvement is not peripheral and that you get to work with the recipients. The satisfaction you receive will be worth the extra effort. You will be making a difference. You will also be on a direct path to achieving Real Work.