Stay Employed—by Finding Work You Love and Preparing for Making Changes

By Rick Smith

Unemployment rates keep soaring, and you’ve seen lots of friends laid off. You’re wondering, “Am I next? Is there anything I can do to boost my chances of staying employed?”

I can’t answer the first question, but I can answer the second. And the answer is: “Yes!” You can -- and should -- take steps now, not only to keep your job but also to keep yourself employable. How? Identify your “sweet spot” and then test the changes you may need to make in your career. You may need to push out of your comfort zone, but you and your career will be thankful for the proactive steps.

Your Career Sweet Spot

Your sweet spot is work that engages your greatest strengths (abilities you possess that produce results) and your deepest passions (activities that excite and fulfill you). Studies show that when people work in their sweet spot, they deliver exceptional performance and draw immense satisfaction from their job. (To begin your personal discovery, visit www.primarycolorassessment.com)

That’s good news for you as well as your employer. Companies hate to lay off someone who’s contributing to the organization and intensely engaged in his work. Why? Engaged employees have boundless energy and creativity -- two things companies need most during tough times.

Sometimes You Need to Confront Big, Scary Risks

Migrating your career toward your sweet spot requires change, and change can be scary. Perhaps you’ll need to take on new roles at your current organization or move in an entirely new direction. That’s unsettling, because it surfaces four types of risk:

- **Passion Risk**: Will you love the new work?
- **Competency Risk**: Will you be good at it?
- **Opportunity Risk**: Is anyone out there interested in what you have to offer?
- **Life-Change Risk**: Will you be better off once you’ve jumped into your new life and can’t turn back?
If considered holistically, these risks can seem paralyzing. To shake off that paralysis, you need a way to safely test the changes you have in mind. That’s where the Spark Sequence comes in.

The Spark Sequence: A Way to Test the Waters

The Spark Sequence is a process I developed of taking low-danger, exploratory steps to gain exposure to new types of work and alternative paths for your career. By activating the Spark Sequence, you gain insights and confidence while managing the risks associated with career change.

The Spark Sequence consists of three steps:

1. **Educate** yourself about the kinds of work that would evoke your strengths and passions. Read all you can about that work. Find someone familiar with that work who could mentor you and explain the ins and outs. Just ask!

2. **Experiment** with the work activities that interest you. For example, suppose you’re interested in project management. You like to organize things, and you think (based on other life experiences) you could be great at it. The next time you’re involved in a project at work (pick a not-so-important one), take on some project management tasks, such as developing a schedule.

3. **Experience** the types of work that interest you. For instance, let’s say you are creative, and believe you would excel at developing new products or services. To gain valuable experience (and information about yourself), pitch in with a local community organization that’s looking for new ways to serve its constituencies.

Sparking lets us answer the questions that hold us back. Answering those questions enables us to believe. Once we believe, we can act. And once we act, so many of our fears and perceived risks fall right away.

Moving toward your sweet spot doesn’t require crashing through brick walls. It’s not an all-or-nothing jump to something new. Rather, it’s a matter of simultaneously building information and experience; of using mentoring, modeling, volunteering and perhaps part-time work to educate yourself and build exposure to whatever you are leaning toward.

Take a moment now to identify work activities that draw on your strengths and passions. Start learning about, experimenting with and experiencing those activities today. You’ll gain crucial insights, skills and confidence that you’re heading in the right direction. And you’ll vastly enhance your employability.

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