

Working Toward Achieving Life-Career Satisfaction

BY CAROL A. VECCHIO

None of us will really ever be able to achieve life-career satisfaction; achieving implies that there is an end point for which we are striving. If we could just reach that target, then we will live “happily ever after” and feel satisfied in our lives and work. Instead, it may be necessary to broaden our understanding of this concept and envision life-career satisfaction as something that is dynamic, constantly evolving, and crafted from the inside-out over the course of one’s entire life.

Defining or identifying exactly what life-career satisfaction is may be difficult. There is an assortment of articles in a wide range of professional journals that attempt to describe as well as measure it. It is referred to by different terms, including well-being, quality of life, and happiness, and can be measured either subjectively (by asking people directly) or objectively (by examining items like income, longevity, and education levels).

Satisfaction and Happiness

Some researchers base satisfaction levels of a country’s population on economic indicators, such as the gross national product (GNP) or gross domestic product (GDP). The basic assumption underlying this approach is that the more wealthy and productive a nation is, the more satisfied are its citizens. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (www.oecd.org) has questioned this methodology. Its mission is to promote policies that will improve the economic and social well-being of people around the world. Believing that the GNP index is a limited method of defining well-being, they have, instead, designed a *Better Life Index*, outlining eleven factors – housing, income, jobs, community,

education, environment, civic engagement, health, life satisfaction, safety, and work-life balance – which they deem are essential to people’s happiness. Kudos to our Australian readers: your country was named the happiest place to live in 2013!

The fourth King of Bhutan, a small country located in South Asia and bordered by the eastern Himalayas, declared that a measurement of gross national happiness (GNH), was also more important than GNP in determining progress and satisfaction. This king was a true visionary leader, having professed this back in 1972. From then on, the country and government set out to develop a method for studying and measuring happiness of its citizens. Each year, the prime minister frames his report to the National Assembly in terms of progress toward the “four pillars” of GNH: good governance, sustainable socio-economic development, cultural preservation, and environmental conservation. As the concept of GNH has expanded, the four pillars grew into nine domains with 33 indicators. The results they obtain from this extremely detailed survey of the population are the foundation for the government policies that they set (for more information go to www.grossnationalhappiness.com).

We have to recognize that the way the Bhutans

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define happiness is very different from the western notion of happiness. As the publication, *A Short Guide to Gross National Happiness Index* (which is not so short, by the way) outlines: "...[GNH] is multidimensional – not focused only on subjective wellbeing to the exclusion of other dimensions – and second, it internalizes responsibility and other-regarding motivations explicitly." As the first elected Prime Minister of Bhutan under the new Constitution of Bhutan adopted in 2008 [stated],

"We have now clearly distinguished the 'happiness' ... in GNH from the fleeting, pleasurable 'feel good' moods so often associated with that term. We know that true abiding happiness cannot exist while others suffer, and comes only from serving others, living in harmony with nature, and realizing our innate wisdom and the true and brilliant nature of our own minds."

With Bhutan leading the way, other countries have also developed their own indices, such as China, the United Kingdom, Thailand, and the United States. However, some researchers have questioned the focus of these measures. Can applying a macro view of a society truly represent the satisfaction levels of its population? Do the scales that have been designed to measure personal satisfaction truly capture the right information? What does all this mean and does it really matter to the individual?

From the many people we have assisted at Centerpoint Institute for Life and Career Renewal (www.centerpointseattle.org), which I founded in 1992, I'd like to share with you some of what we've learned from our courageous clients.

Life-Career Satisfaction ...

▲ *Originates From The "true self"*

The essence of who a person really is has been labeled the "true self," and an emerging area of research suggests that this self-concept plays an important role in the creation of a fulfilling existence (Schlegel, Hicks, King, and Arndt, 2011). Thus, life-career satisfaction originates, essentially, from the true self. Throughout millennia, human beings have heard this ancient Greek adage: *Know thyself*. It is probably the one, most challenging thing for us to accomplish in life. How many of us and our clients tend to disregard this counsel? Of course we do; it is a bit less overwhelming to focus outwardly instead. For example, choosing a college to attend because of its rating in the latest edition of U.S. News and World Report or a career based on a field that appears to be growing entails our cognitive abilities like learning the facts, developing probability charts, deciding on a course of action, and planning. While this isn't at all a simple process, it is still easier than looking inward and asking the more vague yet vital questions such as "*What's my purpose in life?*" or "*What would a meaningful life look like for me?*"

So, how do we access the true self to answer these questions? Deep active listening to feelings and intuition are essential, both for ourselves and those we assist, and working from a narrative approach allows language and stories to be construction tools for making meaning (Savickas 2010). In assisting clients to construct their personal and unique stories, we help them see that their lives truly matter. When people feel that their lives matter, they inhabit their true selves.

Pavot and Diener (1993) stated that life satisfaction is achieved when people evaluate their life and find that their current life is meeting their self-defined standard for their life. Lavalley et al. (2007) found that creating a stronger reference to feelings and requiring respondents to consider whether their life was meeting their aspirations would elicit more honest evaluations of life satisfaction. According to Schlegel et al., the true self is an important contributor to psychological well-being.

But a dilemma in this crazy-busy world of ours is that many of us find it difficult to hear our own true voices. The following is a simple exercise used by Centerpoint Institute that helps people to remember to slow down and create a little space to listen.

SOURCES OF RENEWAL:

My Ways of Stepping Back and Stepping In

Below list big and little things that:

- *help me gain perspective...*
- *bring me into the moment...*
- *bring back hope...*
- *make me peaceful...*
- *help me sort through something...*
- *help me get in touch with myself...*
- *help me "refill the well"...*
- *help me take care of myself...*
- *allow me to relax...*
- *seem to feed something in me...*
- *are environments that I love...*
- *open my heart...*

From what I listed, what one small step can I take today to create some space for renewal for myself?

After completing this worksheet, people often share that they had forgotten about what helps them renew and that this was a helpful reminder. They especially need to engage in these activities when they're in transition because it is then that they most frequently get distracted and overwhelmed.

“YOUR VISION WILL BECOME CLEAR ONLY WHEN
YOU CAN LOOK INTO YOUR OWN HEART.
WHO LOOKS OUTSIDE, DREAMS; WHO LOOKS
INSIDE, AWAKES.”

—Carl Jung



▲ *Requires Redefining Success*

The messages with which we are bombarded on a daily basis urge us to think about our lives in terms of external success—how much do we earn, what size house do we live in, what school(s) do we and/or our children attend—and how does it compare with the success of others—are we keeping up with the Joneses? This is a very linear, climb-the-ladder approach to life and work. The thinking here is that everything a person does should build upon what came before and our livelihood should grow exponentially in order to accumulate more and more, so that our lives will always advance in an upward direction.

There seems to be a “formula” that keeps us on this straight and narrow path: set clear goals, work hard, be persistent, think positively, and keep one’s nose to the grindstone. All of that is great advice and, at times, will be just what’s needed to progress in life. But now from the career ladder, we look down to find the rungs below are crumbling under our feet, and the rungs above are disappearing. The economy tanks, there’s massive lay-offs, and we can’t count on the old rules because they are quickly becoming extinct. With about one-third of the U.S. workforce now considered to be freelancers, the psychological contract between employer and employee - based on loyalty and stability - is vanishing.

If, as found by Sheldon and Lyubomirsky (2012), people for whom it is highly important to amass wealth, present an attractive image, and become popular or famous tend to report ill-being, (including greater anxiety, depression, narcissism, psychosomatic symptoms, conduct disorder, and high-risk behaviors, as well as poorer self-actualization, self-esteem, vitality, and social functioning), then we must recalibrate our own internal compass to point to what is personally meaningful. In so many ways then, life-career satisfaction requires a redefinition of success.

Last year, when I spoke on navigating uncertainty and finding purpose at an all-day training for a state Career Development Association, I was asked a question that I found challenging. A man asked how someone who was just out of prison or a person who is living on the street could focus on meaning. Wasn’t it very white, middle-class of me to think that this was universal? Intuitively, I knew there was an answer because accessibility and social justice are key issues of mine but, at the time, I really didn’t know what to tell him. Since then I ran across a post on the

Harvard Business Review blog called *Wanting Meaning is Not a First World Problem*, by Umair Haque, that addressed this very concern.

“To suggest that the slum-dweller, the migrant worker, the forgotten billions, can’t and shouldn’t be concerned with meaning is to ... rob them of their fuller potential; to reduce ‘them’ to less than fully human — and so, in the process, to draw a crude distinction, to dehumanize ‘us’ as mere vessels of need, rather than authors of destiny — in the rawest sense.”

The suggestion is that wanting meaning is a universal human need, not based on socio-economic standing. We *all* want our lives to matter. Thus, it is evident that we can no longer look externally for our answers. Success must come from how we feel about our lives and how we personally define it.

“THE GOOD NEWS IS THAT THE MOMENT
YOU DECIDE THAT WHAT YOU KNOW IS MORE
IMPORTANT THAN WHAT YOU HAVE BEEN TAUGHT
TO BELIEVE, YOU WILL HAVE SHIFTED GEARS IN
YOUR QUEST FOR ABUNDANCE. SUCCESS COMES
FROM WITHIN, NOT FROM WITHOUT.”

—Ralph Waldo Emerson



▲ *Necessitates Embracing Uncertainty*

To feel satisfied in our life and work, we have to learn how to embrace uncertainty. As we shift to new ways to cope, dealing with and learning how to navigate uncertainty has become a fundamental skill. Our volatile global economy, together with our confusing and fast-paced, day-to-day lives, require continued adjustment as we move from uncertainty to uncertainty. It is the individual’s ability to deal with uncertainty that characterizes career in a contemporary society and that affects their general well-being, career success, and effectiveness within their organization (Trevor-Roberts 2006).

At Centerpoint Institute, we’ve developed the Natural Cycles of Change to help people reframe their perspectives on uncertainty. It gives them a tool or “map” from which they can reorient their views, not just on their careers but on all parts of their lives. Instead of a linear and solely cognitive approach, this takes into consideration feelings, intuition, identity, vision, purpose, and energy. By examining the natural internal process of self-discovery and using available energy, a person finds meaning and

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insight into her/his transitions. This is then translated externally to make effective life and career decisions and take appropriate actions.

“UNCERTAINTY IS A QUALITY TO BE CHERISHED,
THEREFORE — IF NOT FOR IT, WHO WOULD DARE
TO UNDERTAKE ANYTHING?”

—August de Villiers de L’Isle-Adam



▲ *Involves a Continual Life-Long Pursuit*

We don’t ever arrive at life-career satisfaction and live happily ever after, no matter how many fairy tales we’ve read! Satisfaction and well-being are not static experiences. I believe it was the comedian Paul Reiser who said, “Happiness is the lull between problems.” We can never have too many reminders about just how messy and unpredictable life can be.

ILP is called *Integrative* Life Planning, not *integrated* because career development is a continual process that weaves our lives into a meaningful whole (Hansen 1997). Also, we need to acknowledge that at different stages of life, life-career satisfaction will appear very different. When building our adult life in the 20- and 30-something age group, we tend to immerse ourselves in our chosen vision; at 50- or 60-something and beyond, life looks quite different and, it continues to change and shift, as reflected by the emerging encore career movement (www.encore.org). With the turbulence in the economy, many cannot afford to retire and others, looking forward to a longer number of productive years, are choosing not to retire. Instead, they are finding ways to utilize their wisdom and experience to solve problems, add value, and make a positive contribution in their communities and in the world.

At all ages, Sheldon and Lyubomirsky (2012) maintain that people seeking greater well-being would be well-advised to focus on the pursuit of (a) goals involving growth, connection, and contribution rather than goals involving money, beauty, and popularity and (b) goals that are interesting and personally important to them rather than goals they feel forced or pressured to pursue. This would indicate that creating satisfaction entails an on-going awareness and unfolding of the internal—*who am I?*—and the external—*what do I want to accomplish?* It is a never-ending dance of stepping in and stepping out on the cycles of life. As career professionals who are assisting others on their path to wellbeing, the best we can do is to listen compassionately, help them to see and appreciate their uniqueness, and normalize the confusing roller coaster ride that is life.

“SATISFACTION LIES IN THE EFFORT, NOT IN THE
ATTAINMENT. FULL EFFORT IS FULL VICTORY.”

—Mahatma Gandhi



The New and Confusing Terrain of Life-Career Satisfaction

Career professionals play an essential role in assisting others to navigate their life-career satisfaction desires. Whether we are educating counselors, counseling clients, or coaching students, our profession has never been more needed than it is right now. The twenty-first century is an extremely confusing place, with the world of work in a constant state of flux and where we are forced to define our own paths. No longer can we rely on one employer to provide us a living for the whole of our lives. Each person must uncover his/her unique story and purpose that will guide the choices on the circuitous path that is life.

And that’s where our profession comes in: we are the specialists who are qualified to assist others on this important journey to finding their true selves, redefining success, and embracing uncertainty over the course of the entire lifespan. At the same time, we cannot ignore our own life-career satisfaction as we continually grow our personal authenticity and genuineness, understand what success means to us, and accept the inevitable ambiguity throughout our lives and careers.

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REFERENCES

A complete list of references is available from the author.

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