

Have You Found Your Niche?

by John West Hadley

My son is a junior in high school, and we have begun the exhausting process of considering his options for college. During a recent visit to Boston College, I was struck by the similarity of a statement by the admissions officer to something I often tell clients: "We believe strongly that students need to first explore what they are really good at, and what they are passionate about, then consider whether the world needs that."

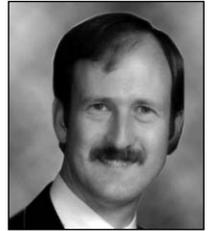
I firmly believe that the greatest success comes from first aligning what you are best at with what you love to do. That is where you are going to bring true passion to your career, where you can really set yourself apart from others. Only after you have determined where those intersect, should you concentrate on figuring out how to achieve your life goals within that area. My experience is that with a little creative thinking you can always figure out a way to satisfy your life goals if the first two criteria are met. (Sometimes this is partially through the realization that doing something you are passionate about is so important that some of what you previously might have assumed were your life goals just melt away from your consciousness.)

For example, many would say that I am now on my third career. I started out as an actuary, and fully enjoyed what I did for that "first" career, which lasted 20 years. Over the years, I found that I loved recruiting, interviewing, training and giving presentations. I also always found myself drawn to the systems elements of my work, taking personal responsibility for an increasing variety of systems-related projects. I was no longer particularly drawn to one of the natural aspirations for many younger actuaries—to be chief actuary of the company. (I actually had that experience in my last corporate job, which served to confirm what I had long known.)

My next move was to seek a systems-related role that would take advantage of my actuarial background. I had the advantage of an executive outplacement program to aid me in that transition. As I went out talking to people about my new passion, I came across selected positions that fit very well my passions, skills AND compensation goals. Ultimately, this led to a successful consulting practice that was much more systems-related than actuarially based, career number two.

As it turns out, my exploration with my career counselor also led me to my current practice, as I found that what they were teaching came quite naturally to me, and I began helping some of the other people there with their own transitions. I wasn't yet ready to make it my new career, but it began germinating in my mind. During the next five years, I continued to help selected people with their career searches as a sideline to my consulting practice, essentially as a hobby. And although I really enjoyed my systems consulting work, more and more I found career search counseling calling to me, and a new passion required me to embark on my third career.

This didn't mean simply jumping into the unknown with total disregard of my life goals, but moving forward aggressively with goals in mind, and checkpoints as to where I needed to be to have confidence that it would support our needs (and ultimately, our wants). Naturally, that has meant continually examining what I am doing, and how I am doing it, being open to change and opportunity. And it has led to expansion of what I originally saw as my core competency and practice as I saw opportunities to apply my skills in new, but related, ways. Thus I grew beyond career-search counseling into the broader arena of teaching people how to be more effective in their chosen careers, and



John West Hadley, FSA, MAAA, is principal of John Hadley Associates, in Somerville, N.J. He can be reached at John@JHAcareers.com.

To subscribe to his free Career Tips newsletter, visit his Web site at: www.JHAcareers.com.

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even into business coaching. (I was very pleased the first time I began helping a client with business issues and was told that I really “think out of the box,” something I’m not sure I was often accused of during my 20 years as an actuary!) While career search is still a cornerstone of my practice, the expanded areas have allowed me to serve clients even more effectively, as they shift focus between whether they want a corporate role or their own business, or even simply getting ready for the next move sometime down the road.

This also points to another key: Focus! I often observe people sabotaging their career searches by lack of sufficient focus. They waste a lot of time and energy going after pretty much anything that moves, which makes them less impressive to hiring managers and draws out their search dramatically. The same is true in exploring new opportunities. Had I started out deciding to be a career-search counselor, a career-enhancement counselor and a business coach, I would have been struggling for a long time, and probably would have folded up my tent and gone back to a corporate role after a few months. Sure, I would have managed to get some clients in each area over time, but it would have been a lot harder to convince people that I had the expertise to help them, and it would have taken a lot longer to build the level of my skills in any one area, such as happens naturally through concentrated attention and focus.

I meet people all the time who have reached a point in their careers where they no longer are very excited by what they do. They continue in their jobs because it’s what they have always been told they are good at, because it supports their family’s lifestyle, because they don’t know what else to do! Those are terrible reasons to keep doing something you aren’t passionate about. Take stock, think out of the box, and take action to incorporate what you love in what you do, even if it’s on a volunteer basis! Use that to explore new avenues more thoroughly, and you will begin to see the possibilities, as I did with my current practice.

I think back to a conversation I had last year with an actuary who had been working part

time for a few years as her children were growing up. She told me confidently that by year-end she wanted to be back on a full-time basis in a traditional, financial actuarial role! As we explored this further, suddenly it came out that her long-term passion was to work in human resources. I asked her how going back to a traditional, financial actuarial role would help her in any way achieve her passion. She stopped short, and then we began to brainstorm on ways she could explore that.

My advice is to stop and think periodically about what you really want from life, from your career. It may seem like a risk to step beyond your comfort zone, but what “risk” are you taking by continuing to follow a path you don’t love?

We often worry about providing our children “the best” of everything. But where in that equation is providing them the best of you? What message are you sending to your children about their futures if you regularly come home from the office feeling drained, showing little enthusiasm for what you do? And how much energy do you then have left to invest in family, hobbies and your true passions? With risk comes rewards, and even if you ultimately need to compromise on more traditional measures of success like income level, size of house, age of car, etc., what is “happiness” worth to you? □

