Love Your Job or Leave It? Maybe There's Another Way

How to find meaning in any job and steer your career in a new direction.

Finding meaning in your work isn't just about loving what you do. The reality is there are many ways to experience fulfilment, even in what might seem like a mundane job.

In this INSEAD Knowledge podcast, Winnie Jiang, an Assistant Professor of Organisational Behaviour at INSEAD, explains how financial security, connections with colleagues and even the satisfaction of doing a good job can all contribute to a sense of purpose.

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But what can we do if we feel our job lacks meaning? Jiang suggests taking a step back and reflecting on what's causing this disconnect from your work and why it no longer feels fulfilling. Is it some shift at work, like an organisational restructuring or a change in leadership that has altered the
nature of your work? Or is it something that has changed in yourself or your personal life?

Once you understand what has brought about the loss of meaning, you can explore whether there are ways to bring the meaning back, for example, by moving to a different team. You may consider engaging in job crafting - such as adjusting tasks, choosing to work with certain colleagues or changing how you view the overall meaning of your work.

For instance, you can shift from viewing your work as a simple means to earn a paycheck to a job that makes your family proud, shows your children the value of hard work or creates a positive experience for others.

Importantly, Jiang emphasises that while passion and purpose can be cultivated in almost any role, you ultimately have control over your experience. You can either change your perspective and approach to a situation or, if necessary, remove yourself from it altogether.

**How crises trigger career changes**

Jiang’s ongoing research, conducted with Yuna Cho from the University of Hong Kong, suggests that crises can trigger a reevaluation of life's meaning. This reflection often leads people to consider different ways of living, such as working less or more, or even changing careers entirely.

However, this search for meaning might not always translate into a long-term career shift. While some might finally pursue their dream jobs, many others simply crave a change. For instance, someone who previously valued work primarily for financial gain might now prioritise helping others.

Importantly, they found this shift in perspective to be temporary. Most people in their study returned to their pre-crisis views on work within three to four years.

Relatedly, Jiang’s recent research examines why some people find it difficult to move to a new role, while others seem to switch occupations with ease. The key is to recognise what gives your work meaning - such as particular tasks or the opportunity to build relationships with certain groups of people - and identify how those elements might be transferable to new roles.

Before making a career transition, it is helpful to reflect on what parts of your previous job you consider most meaningful, and whether and how your new
role could provide that. The important thing is to have self-awareness and the courage to be honest with yourself about what truly matters to you.

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INSEAD Knowledge is the expert opinion and management insights portal of INSEAD, The Business School for the World.

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