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Finding Your Dream Job

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Berch Parker traded pixels for a pistol, quitting his job as a vice president at an educational software company to become a sheriff's deputy.

Many people fantasize about chucking it all to follow their heart, launch a new career and begin a better life. Parker did it. He'll soon move from his current assignment at the county jail to the patrol division, fulfilling his dream of being a street cop.

Before making the switch, he discussed it with his wife of 14 years. Since she's an executive at another software company, Parker's transition to a lower-paying job was a little easier. Her biggest issue was safety. Law enforcement officers are regularly killed in the line of duty.

"Jobs can kill you in different ways," says Parker, 37, a member of the Contra Costa County (California) Sheriff's Department. "I didn't look forward to a slow death behind a desk--I wanted to be enthusiastic about going to work every day."

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Parker, a college athlete who swam competitively and worked as lifeguard during the summer in Southern California, began his career as a high school

English and history teacher. From there, he moved on to educational software. The money was great, but he wanted something more than the slog of office politics and cranking out the next product on deadline.

Leaving the comfortable life of management took some thought and discussion. He called in a pro, Joel Garfinkle.

Garfinkle, founder of Dream Job Coaching in Oakland, Calif., says studies have found that 87% of workers are unhappy with their job.

He says there are many barriers to finding a dream job, including money, prestige and security. But the price of being stuck in an unfulfilling job can include alcoholism, divorce and deteriorating physical or mental health--not to mention chronic ennui.

"How much are you willing to pay emotionally to stay in a job that's unfulfilling?" Garfinkle says. "Ideally, you want to incorporate your values into your work, making your job fit more effectively into your life."

Garfinkle, who holds a degree in psychology and has worked for **Ernst & Young** in Hong Kong and Accenture in San Francisco, says once his clients get past the perceived pressure to remain in their current position, many find the path to their dream job in three to nine months. Most hold on to their current jobs until they've built the foundation for a new career.

His clients include an accountant who became an advertising copywriter, a marketing pro who became a writer of children's books, a personnel director who became an interior decorator, a management consultant who became an outdoor adventure leader, a bank vice president who became director of a zoo's resource center, a software engineer who became a biologist and a personal athletic trainer who became a therapist.

Geography is rarely a major issue in tracking down the dream job, but if you dream of dumping life in The Big City for Maine, Montana or the hills of Tennessee, your dream job has got to be portable unless it's home grown.

"Finding your dream job comes down to two things," Garfinkle says. "First, it's something you're passionate about and, second, it matches your talents."

That sounds simple enough, but for some, it's a long twisting path filled with doubts. Garfinkle says he doesn't use any psychological or aptitude tests and simply talks at length with his clients. He says about 60% of his clients aren't surprised with their decision because they've carried a similar, if half-formed idea, in their heads for years and just needed help to bring it into focus. About 30% are surprised by the discovery and about 10% ponder the conclusion carefully before agreeing that it makes sense and should be pursued.

"In general, I've found that women are more open to exploring the possibilities of their dream job than men," Garfinkle says. "While both may be providers in the family, men tend to see themselves as the principle provider. Women are more emotionally open to re-thinking who they are and making a change. Men tend to be more driven and more reluctant to step back and reevaluate."

Most of his clients are in their late 30s or early 40s, well-educated, established and successful in their current field. Many have families, and this makes their spouse a key element in their search for a dream job.

"In some fashion, my clients have to ask their spouse if switching careers is OK," Garfinkle says. "The spouse's initial reaction is often fear, especially if the individual thinking about a career switch is the principle breadwinner. This raises fundamental questions about income and altered lifestyle."

Sheriff's Deputy Parker spoke with Garfinkle for about four months. He then began the necessary steps to become a deputy, including required training, and got his badge 11 months after deciding to quit his job as a software company executive. He began running again to prepare for his police training and lost 65 pounds.

He plans to build a career with the Contra Costa County Sheriff's Department, located northeast of San Francisco, and would like to handle criminal investigations in the future.

He says putting on his uniform gives him a sense of accomplishment and pride, an emotional attachment to the job he couldn't find managing software developers and artists in the rush to assemble the next product.

Parker also likes the hours of his new job--three 12-hour shifts Friday, Saturday and Sunday, freeing him to spend the rest of the week with his children, aged two and six.

"Last summer, we went to the pool every day," he says.

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