

# On finding fulfilling work

A self-coaching guide



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How to find fulfilling work is one of the most urgent questions in modernity. A question that we all face, particularly living in expensive, competitive and hectic urban environments. This basic question of modern life is, then, something that we really ought to consider if we are to live well. In this self-coaching guide, I offer a simple framework for engaging in this enquiry. A framework that is built around four fundamental questions, whose exploration almost certainly will yield a conclusion.

These ideas were born out of numerous career-related sessions I have done as a coach over the past 5 years. And, out of my own experience of deciding to work for myself after 9 years in the City as a Private Equity investor.

The four questions explored are:

- 1) What are my real motivations for working?
- 2) What would I do if money wasn't a problem?
- 3) How will I put food on the table?
- 4) What do I definitely NOT want to do?

Together, they form a guide for creating your own personal path towards fulfilling work.

As you read, allow yourself to really take the time to think through the four questions and the various sub-questions therein. For, the fruitfulness of the reading will be proportional to the extent and depth of your enquiry.

So, let me cut to the chase straightaway, as I despise writing that beats around the bush.

## Question 1: What are my real motivations for working?

There can only really be TWO fundamental motivations for doing any sort of work, or for doing anything at all for that matter:

- 1) You are seeking something external (e.g. money, status, achievement)
- 2) You are doing it for its own sake (a love of the process)

And, these two reasons are all exhaustive. If you are seeking something outside of yourself — the achievement of some external benchmark, whether money or status — you are in category 1. If not, you are in category 2.

This may be easier to grasp if restated in the opposite:

*All work that is not done for its own sake is motivated by external rewards.*

Needing to make money to put food on the table is one thing (we will come on to the matter of not bankrupting yourself in Question 3), but chasing after achievement or status is quite another thing altogether.

Let's see how.

## Proving yourself

Often, work and career become about desperately trying to achieve and prove yourself against arbitrary benchmarks — benchmarks that you (and others) believe are so very important. Benchmarks that you have *pinned your self-worth to* and chase in the hope of someday being able to feel good about yourself. But, this is like the mythical pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. We risk achieving and achieving, but never feeling fulfilled. We risk seeking and seeking, but never finding. And, the scary thing is that this behaviour often goes on without you even realising it, outside of your conscious awareness.

Even everyday speech is littered with apparently harmless phrases that condition us into blindly chasing achievement. “She’s going places. He will go far. They’ve made it!”. But, these little phrases hide something deeply disturbing. Something about the way we relate to success and the good life that poisons everyday living.

## Going where exactly?

What do these everyday phrases actually mean? What ‘place’ are you really trying to get to? Where is this destination that is apparently so desirable? What does ‘making-it’ look like?

The sad reality is that behind these words is an idea of the good life that is all about externally-measured achievement. That puts the good life *outside* of yourself, somewhere out there to be reached. On some pinnacle or mountain top in the future where you are supposed to find real happiness. Happiness, which you believe you cannot yet experience because you have not got there — because you have not yet ‘made it’. **And, work and career can so easily become vehicles for chasing such achievement.**

This is why being honest to yourself about WHY you are seeking a particular career path matters so much. If you are in Category 1, then I invite you to consider the pressure of such striving and the inner tension that it creates. Ask yourself:

*How do I really feel about chasing achievement?*

*What am I trying to prove and to whom (e.g. friends, family, peers, society)?*

(Oh, by the way, ‘proving to yourself’, is just proving to others by the back door. Because proving anything to anybody, including yourself, requires some external framework for validation. And is this not inevitably conditioned by experience?)

*What deeper beliefs underlie my desire to achieve?*

*Why defer feeling good and living with meaning, when you can readily find it today by doing something for its own sake?*

If you recognise that being in Category 1 is a fallacy, this naturally leads to the question of WHAT to do? How can you do something for its own sake if you don’t know what that is?

## Question 2: What would I do if money wasn't a problem?

Realistic or not, this simple thought experiment helps identify the things that really inspire you — things perhaps forgotten because of the busyness of your daily routine. The reason for removing the constraint of money, is to explore the *art of the possible*. We need money to live and money is thus an undeniable constraint. But, if you orient yourself principally around money, you risk missing what *really* matters to you. Like Chuang Tzu's wild fowl, you might accidentally trap yourself in a golden cage.

### The trap

“Wild fowl get a peck once in ten steps, a drink once in a hundred. Yet, they do not want to be fed in a cage. For although they would thus be able to command food, they would not be free.” This story, attributed to the Chinese Philosopher, Chuang Tzu (4th century BC), speaks of an official who traps himself in a golden cage. The official takes office for the sake of self-glorification, but gets himself into trouble. He suffers the (apparently) then common punishment of losing a foot! He enters the golden cage of an official's life, only to lose much more.

Many centuries later, Chuang Tzu's wild fowl is perhaps more apt a description of much of modern corporate employment. Employment that offers the *apparent* stability of a monthly wage, but that takes away your freedom at a fundamental level. I say 'apparent' here because you could easily lose your corporate job too, perhaps due to changes in the market, cost cutting, or simply because your boss doesn't like you — so where is the stability?! The point is that while we need money to live, we can trap ourselves if we make money the central objective.



## What inspires you?

Now back to the question of how you would spend your time if you had a million billion dollars in your bank account. Close your eyes and imagine what that might look like. Really go there. Perhaps, project yourself into the future and imagine what you might be doing.

*Where are you?*

*Whom are you with?*

*What are you doing?*

*What is going on around you?*

*What is the feeling of this experience?*

Don't worry about your mind's image not being a specific role or occupation. I mean, who said it even has to exist? That's how innovation happens, right?! Simply focus on the big picture experience of what you are doing. For example, you might be building things in nature with people you love, or you might be poring over ancient manuscripts alone in a library somewhere with a cup of coffee next to you!

Start big, you can always narrow it down later.

The next thing to ask is *what about that experience attracts you to it so much?*

*What about it makes it so inspiring to you?*

And, there will be something **irreducible** about the experience if you've hit on that which really inspires you. You will be lost for words — you will want to do it, just because...for its own sake.

And, each one of us will be attracted by different things, depending on our life experiences, inclinations and skills. That's the beauty of the world. For me, it is music and the exploration of human dynamics. For another, it may be horticulture or carpentry.

The key is to follow your interests, to go deeper into those things that you are enthusiastic about and that bring a twinkle to your eye.

## Different avenues for expression

Remember too that the things that really inspire you can express themselves in varied forms. For example, my interest in human dynamics and the mind is expressed through, writing, coaching, contemplating, reading and simply observing. Many avenues fulfil the same deep interest.

And, this is very good news because it opens up a whole world of possibility.

## What about the whole 'career success' thing?

Let me ask you this. Have you noticed that people who either love what they do, or are really making money, never talk about "career success"? Why? Because they are too busy loving what they do or making money! Career success is, then, a kind of sucker's game.

Career success, career development, career growth, whatever you want to call it, these are all names for the *second best*. The second best of not daring to seek out that which really inspires you. Not

daring to do something for its own sake, rather than for some status achievement of becoming a high-ranking bureaucrat in a large enterprise. This is usually about being locked in Category 1 (see Question 1).

The reality is that climbing the career ladder in corporate bureaucracies is much more about politics and CYA (covering your ass). The higher up you go, the more mediocrity you are likely to encounter because the whole system is optimised around politics and CYA.

Of course, all this brings into question much of the career coaching field, which pushes such BS as 'career growth' and how to develop 'executive presence'. The truth is that career success is the last refuge of those who have given-up on trying to find real meaning and inspiration in their work and are going down the route of being over-paid PowerPoint presenters.

Career success is just a glorification of work you would rather not be doing. Rather than call it career success then, it is far more honest to call it 'what I have to do because I just have to pay the bills'. Or, 'what I have to do because I haven't dared to really put my heart into something'. Or even, 'what I have to do because I haven't looked into what I'd rather be doing'.

That brings us on to Question 3.

### Question 3: How will I put food on the table?

"Ok, ok," you might say. "Fine. But, what about money? How will I eat?"

Great! Now we are really getting somewhere. Because this really is the basic question of modern life:

*How to make the minimum (money) you need to live, whilst having a good time?*

But, arriving here requires the somewhat radical perspective that joy and contentment are readily accessible to you. That their source is actually *within* you — an inner state, not something out there. It is then quite different to arbitrary, changeable benchmarks of achievement that require you to jump through hoops to prove your self-worth.

If you see this truth, that is more than half the battle. The rest is about logistics.

#### The minimum you need

And, logistics are super important! It is about the practical reality of making enough to live, *while* doing the things that you love. And, it goes without saying that the **lower is the minimum you need**, the more flexibility you will have! The simpler is the life style that you *want*, the more freedom you will create.

There are many ways to carve out something that works, from working part-time and dual-tracking your passion, to having a *sinecure* (i.e. a low intensity, but well-paid job) that gives you ample time to do what you love. The archetypical sinecure is perhaps being a bank clerk in times gone by. You shuffle a few papers, clock-off at 4pm, collect a decent pay cheque and then go home and write poetry or whatever. Part-time and remote working in modernity can fulfil the same function.

## Time and energy

Whether sinecure or part-time work, it is vital that you are left with sufficient time and energy to do that which inspires you. If your sinecure leaves you drained, then it is not a sinecure. If your part time job leaves you exhausted, then you are not part time. You are, in fact, full-time!

Another thing to consider is whether your circumstances make you *cash rich* or *time rich*. Usually (though not always), the more highly-paid the role, the less time you will have for things outside it. You may be cash rich, but your employer owns you. The opposite is sinecure territory, where you are time rich. I myself was cash rich when I took a 6-month sabbatical to consider what I wanted to do with my life. Savings allowed me to explore what I just didn't have the time and energy to do in my employed role. Had I been more time rich, I may have been able to engage in the same exploration without a sabbatical.

The important thing is to look at your own circumstances and see what you can do. There is more than one way to slice the cake.

## No free lunch

You have to remember that there is no free lunch (or dessert) in all this. For example, giving up a full-time, corporate job for more freedom might mean less money, but perhaps the extra money is *not necessary* with a new life style where you do things that inspire you? Going further, you can't both desire the control over your life that self-employment offers, whilst craving the security of a monthly salary. **That's called wanting to have your cake and eat it.** Sorry, but there's no free lunch.

You have to decide what YOU value the most. You have to decide what you are prepared to fight for.



## Question 4: What do I definitely NOT want to do?

I've always had a strong sense for what inspires me, for what I want to do with my time. The key constraints in my life, once upon a time, were time and energy. This was fundamentally why I decided to do my own thing a few years ago. What has become clearer to me over the years as a coach however, is how not everyone has a clear sense of what they would rather be doing! If that is you, you might benefit from a slightly different approach. Don't worry, not having a calling is more common than you think. And, these things can't really be forced, either.

### At least neutral

If you can't find something that inspires you, questions around what work to do can feel tricky. You may find yourself in a kind of limbo, with no real direction, even when you want change. But, all is not lost. Just because something that calls you has not emerged (yet!), does not mean that you must stagnate.

Rather than seeking the ultimate vocation, a different approach lies in avoiding what you *definitely don't want to do*. This is the path of finding (fulfilling) work through negation. For example, I know that I definitely don't want a bureaucratic desk job that involves a lot of paper work, presentations etc. In fact, I am not sure I could ever work for someone in a corporate white-collar role — I don't feel I have the stomach for pseudo-intellectual analysis, office politics and mediocre bosses. I would rather do something physical, perhaps become a fork-lift operator or a barista. I may be paid less, but it would be much better for my wellbeing.

So, I am very clear about what I don't want to do. And, if you aren't clear about that which really inspires you, perhaps you too can become clearer about what you *don't like* — about what goes against your values and who you are as a person.

If you are unsure, look for visceral physical reactions. If it makes your stomach churn and like you want to pull your hair out, that's a sure sign that you don't want to be doing it!

### It doesn't have to be 'perfect'

It is not necessary to find the perfect thing straight away. Maybe the 'perfect' thing doesn't really exist either? By having a clearer sense of what you don't want to subject yourself to, you can at least find work that is neutral, if not positive. You can put food on the table without it being soul destroying.

For, why be stuck somewhere that makes you hate yourself? Simply finding something that is *less-worse* can free-up all sorts of psychological and creative energy!

## Final words

The whole idea behind finding fulfilling work is not really about work per se — it is about living a fulfilling life. This is why I have described the basic question of modern life as:

*How to make the minimum (money) you need to live, whilst having a good time?*

Having a good time is about doing things that inspire you, for their own sake. Not for some status achievement. The game is then about how to not end-up on the streets in the process. This is where sinecures, part-time work and considerations around time and energy come in.

And, even if you have no burning desire to immerse yourself in something specific — say start a cake shop — remember that you don't need to keep doing something you find completely unfulfilling!

If you hate it, at least try something neutral. It may even be worth accepting a pay cut for.

In all of this, remember that there is no free lunch.

Freedom is never free.

Each path will have its own costs and benefits. In the end, you must ask yourself:

*What is truly important to ME?*



*Harsha is a 1:1 coach and independent thinker based in London. He empowers people to find more clarity, confidence and focus in their lives — to cut through the noise, in a world so full of it. Harsha's new book, Machine Ego — Tragedy of the Modern Mind, is now available in paperback and Kindle through Amazon.*