



Escaping Corporate America
Changing Your Career Can Change Your Life

Pamela Skillings

If you're like most Americans, you're going to spend more than 100,000 hours at work over the course of your lifetime. That's probably more time than you'll spend with your best friend, the love of your life, or your cherished offspring. So, wouldn't it be a shame to waste the majority of those hours on work that annoys you or, even worse, makes you downright miserable?

Unfortunately, far too many smart and talented people stay trapped for years in corporate jobs that suck the life out of them. I know because I was one of them. It took me years to work up the courage to walk away from a six-figure salary and a successful corporate career to follow my dream of starting my own business.

Along the way, I learned that there were more corporate malcontents lurking in the cubicles and corner offices of Corporate America than I ever imagined. You see, it turns out that a nice benefits package and a healthy salary don't automatically translate into job satisfaction, no matter what society may try to tell us. However, it becomes harder and harder to make a change as your paycheck gets bigger.

Harder, but certainly not impossible. I'm not saying that you should flounce off and quit your corporate job without making a transition plan. But you also don't have to settle for a career that isn't fulfilling. Don't buy into the myth that job satisfaction is a luxury for the lucky few. You deserve a job that inspires you (at least most of the time) and you can have one if you're willing to put in the work. Here's how:

Search for Meaningful Work

But wait. Your job isn't supposed to be fun. After all, that's why they call it "work," right? Wrong. There's a big difference between work and torture (or at least there should be). Unless you've been blessed with a big fat trust fund or a doting sugar daddy, you're going to have to work for a living. That's actually a good thing. Most people want to work—they want to contribute—but they also want their work to be meaningful. Not everybody spends their days feeding starving children or looking for a cure for cancer. But we can all do work that has personal meaning for us.

You can find meaningful work in corporations, but if the company values are too different from your own, or if you are stuck in a job that doesn't tap into your talents, it's probably time to escape. Too often, corporate jobs revolve around meetings and bureaucracy and don't offer you enough opportunities to do work that you can truly feel good about. Over time, the stress of staying in a job you hate can lead to burnout, depression, anxiety, ulcers, chronic back pain, high blood pressure, and even serious heart conditions.

You may think that this is the price you have to pay for stability. But make no mistake, whatever job stability you think you enjoy is an illusion. Layoffs are standard operating procedure for corporations these days. No career choice is completely stable and risk free anymore. So if you're going to take a risk anyway, shouldn't you at least do it in pursuit of your passion?

This Is Not My Beautiful Life

Over the years, I've talked to a lot of disgruntled corporate employees. I worked in the corporate trenches myself for more than a decade and spent several more years interviewing and coaching corporate escapees. I've learned that people tend to stay stuck in jobs that don't inspire them for one of five common reasons (and sometimes it's a combination of a few). Do any of these scenarios ring a bell for you?

- **You believe that it isn't possible to actually love your work.**

Some of us have been taught, by conservative parents or disapproving guidance counselors, that jobs are strictly ways to earn money. You're not supposed to enjoy your time in the salt mines, really. As a result, you may have ended up in a career that looked good on paper, but offers little fulfillment.

- **You're not sure what you want to do with your life.**

For many of us, our careers just sort of happened. We took a "temporary" gig until we could figure out what we wanted to do for our "real" careers. Then, we woke up years later to realize that we were stuck in careers and lives that we never planned or wanted.

- **You're having a mid-career crisis.**

Maybe you once loved your career, but the thrill is gone. You've stopped learning and growing, lost interest in your current field, or are otherwise ready to move on. But you're afraid to take a chance on something new—or you're confused about which direction to take from here.

- **You're too busy working to make time for a career change.**

If one of your complaints is that your job is overly demanding, it can be difficult to carve out enough time to eat and sleep, let alone start working toward a new career. Instead, it can be tempting to put off change until some imagined day when you will magically have plenty of time.

- **It's all about the money.**

There is no shame in caring about money. We all need money to live—some more than others. It isn't shallow to enjoy what money can buy. We all have different priorities and different ideas of what makes life good. You may value a high salary because it gives you the ability to put your kids through college, support your favorite charities, or just take nice vacations and see the world. The problem comes when you trade too much for a high salary. There are ways to make money that don't require selling your soul.

Escape Corporate America

Whatever the reasons you ended up in job purgatory are, I can assure you that you don't have to stay there. For some people, a dramatic escape from Corporate America may not be necessary. A change in company, industry, manager or job description may be enough to make you happier. After all, there are corporations out there that offer work environments and employee benefits that might tempt even the most hardened anti-corporate heart.

Then again, some of us are just not cut out for the typical corporate culture. Business has evolved in countless ways since the 1950s, but most big corporations still expect us to work like the Organization Man of yore.

As much as companies like to talk about commitment to work-life balance and flexibility, most large corporations still expect employees to put in long hours of face-time and toe the company line to get ahead. Innovation, creativity, and brilliant work mean less than who you know and how well you can navigate internal politics.

Of course, all of that may be changing. Despite today's scary recession headlines, experts are predicting major long-term workforce shortages as the Baby Boomers continue to retire or switch career directions for their golden years. As a result, companies will have to compete to attract and retain the best and brightest (that would be you, right?). That's likely to mean better benefits, more flexible work options, and other nice perks. But do you have the patience to wait around for CEO enlightenment?

Do What You Love, Then Make the Money Follow

Luckily for you, there are also plenty of ways to make a living outside the cubicle maze. Today, there are more career options than ever before, and making a career change has never been easier. Advances in technology have made it possible to start a business or a thriving freelancing career from your kitchen table. Small businesses are creating new jobs in record numbers and there is increasing demand for qualified professionals in the nonprofit sector.

At the same time, there is no longer a stigma attached to making a dramatic career change, even if you eventually change your mind and want to go back. The average person now makes several career changes over the course of a lifetime and nobody expects you to stay in the same job forever.

Among the corporate escapees that I have interviewed are famous entrepreneurs, successful freelancers, teachers, filmmakers, nonprofit leaders, a celebrity blogger, a sitcom star, a spa owner, and a recording artist—just to name a few.

If you're truly unhappy, there is no better time than now to start thinking about your career change plan. Don't use the possibility of a looming recession as an excuse to postpone taking action. In fact, a recession may actually be the BEST time to get serious about your Career Plan B. That way, if your company gives you an escape package (in other words—lays you off), you will be ready to hit the ground running.

You can do most of your preparation while you're still collecting a salary. Then, when the time is right and your safety net is in place, you can make your leap. Many of the successful career-changers that I know found their new vocations after getting laid off during the last economic downturn. If they could succeed on their own with no preparation, imagine what you can do with a little bit of planning.

Four Steps to Freedom

Ready to make a change? The important thing is to take some action—any action—and start building momentum. Don't quit your job yet. Think about your career change as a second job and start moonlighting. With some savvy moonlighting (that means you continue to do your corporate job well and don't take advantage of your employer), you may even be able to make a dramatic career change without missing a single paycheck.

Here are the four steps to get you moving toward career bliss:

1. Take a clear look at your current situation.

What is it about your job that makes you crazy? Is it the wrong job, the wrong manager, the wrong company, or all of the above? What are the work issues that really push your buttons? Are there any aspects that you actually enjoy? Take the time to think about what's really missing. The purpose is not to revel in a kvetch session (though that can certainly be therapeutic), but to get really clear about what it is that you need to be happier at work. It may be that a slight change in job duties is all you require. Or perhaps the time has come for a more dramatic change.

2. Explore your options.

What is your dream career, and what would it take for you to make it happen? If you don't know, it's time to get serious about figuring it out. You can't just sit around and wait for your true mission in life to reveal itself to you. Get out and do your research. Talk to people who are currently working in the fields that interest you. Browse job boards for listings that inspire you. Work with a career counselor to identify careers that tap into your strengths and fit with your values.

3. Make a plan.

Once you have a sense of what you want, it's time to decide what you're prepared to do about it and when. You need to put a plan in writing and commit to it.

Even if you're not ready to change careers, but simply want to make some minor adjustments to your current situation, you still need a plan. Don't just make vague promises to "volunteer more," "spend more time with the kids," or "take a real vacation." Put a detailed plan together—commit to a volunteering schedule, book more family time into your weekly calendar, or make reservations for your next getaway.

If you're committed to moving forward with your career change, it's time to decide exactly how you're going to get from Point A to Point B. Is it simply a matter of updating your resume and getting out there to interview, or will you need additional training or experience before you can score the gig you want?

If your goal is to leave Corporate America for a career that's likely to be less lucrative (at least at first), it is essential to have a solid financial plan in place. That plan could involve continuing to work at your current job—even if only part-time—while you make the transition. Or it could mean socking away some money in an Escape Fund to help cover your bills during the switch.

4. Get out

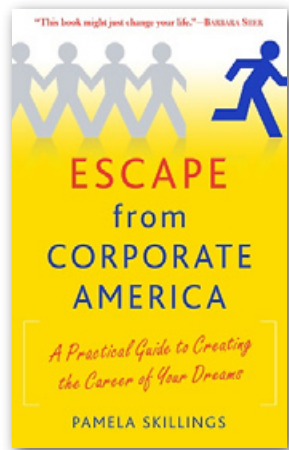
If you plan well and work your plan, you'll soon be ready to say goodbye to that crappy corporate job and learn what it's like to love what you do for a living.

Are You Ready?

Major changes aren't always easy. Only you can decide if you're willing to do what it takes to make that dream career a reality. Just remember that the rewards can make all of the hard work worthwhile. As Confucius reportedly said, "Choose a job you love, and you will never have to work a day in your life."

But don't take an ancient Chinese philosopher's word for it. I can tell you from personal experience that changing your career can change your life. I still work hard and I still have occasional crappy days. But I love what I do and I feel like I'm making a difference. I even earn more from doing work that I love than I did in the corporate job that I walked away from. Today, I'm thankful for all of the job stress that I experienced because it motivated me to get off my butt and make a change.

Don't you owe it to yourself to explore your options? You deserve to spend those 100,000+ hours of your life in a career that inspires you. You don't have to stay stuck in a job you hate, and you don't have to starve to find work you love. All you need is a plan and a little bit of nerve. **Go for it!** 🚀



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Get more details or buy a copy of Pamela Skillings' [*Escape from Corporate America*](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Pamela Skillings walked away from the security of a six-figure job and a twelve-year corporate career to start her own business in 2005. Her company, Skillful Communications, provides consulting and coaching on communication and career development issues for organizations and individuals. Pamela frequently lectures around the country on career topics and is a regular contributor to [About.com](#) and print publications. She holds a bachelor's degree in journalism and a certificate in adult career planning and development, both from New York University. Pamela currently lives in New York with her husband. For more information, please visit www.escapefromcorporate.com.

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