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5 Career Questions To Ask Yourself Instead Of, "What's My Passion?"

There's a much more practical way to chart your career path.



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ALLISON JONES | 09.11.15 | 5:00 AM



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For a while now, young jobseekers have been encouraged to find their passion and follow it.

Lately, though, it seems as though that advice is falling by the wayside. And for good reason. It isn't that being passionate about what you do doesn't matter—far from it. It's that when the notion is offered up as career advice, it can reek of elitism and ignore the, well, *work* aspect of work.

Still, many people do nurture a deep desire for a career that fulfills them in some way. After all, a widely cited Gallup study recently found that less than a third of American workers feel engaged at work. So we can hardly be surprised that so many of us are yearning for more.

Think more concretely about your motivations, needs, skills, and what you're willing to do—or give up.

But when it comes down to actually going after a more fulfilling career path, there are better questions to ask than, "What's my passion?" You need to think more concretely about your motivations, needs, skills, and what you're willing to do—or give up—in order to find that great opportunity. Here are five alternative questions to ask yourself instead.

1. WHY DO I CARE ABOUT FINDING MY PASSION?

I've met a surprising number of people who want to find their passion because it's what their peers are doing or because that's how a career counselor started a conversation with them.

Because of its ubiquity, that idea makes those who *aren't* "doing what they love" feel like failures. It's important to realize that your motivations determine the actions you take. That sounds simple—until you really try and get down to the bottom of your motivations.

Try asking yourself "Why?" five times until you get to the center of a really difficult problem. You might discover, for instance, that you don't want to follow your passion per se; you really just want to compete with your peers. Or maybe you dislike your job because of your manager, not because you feel like you're on the wrong career path altogether.

2. WHAT ROLE DOES WORK PLAY IN THE KIND OF LIFE I WANT?

You haven't failed simply by deciding not to get all or even

"Follow your passion" implies that work has a greater value than just being a means to an end—in other words, living to work as opposed to working to live. But it's totally okay if this is not your approach to work.

a continuum between your job and hating it—between a job as a duty and fulfillment, and a drudgery.

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thing that pays your bills.

Indeed, much of the debate around work-life balance and work-life integration centers on finding where you are on this continuum. In other words, you first need to decide what sort of life you want and what role work will play in it. You can then adjust your expectations and needs regarding your career. The fact is, you haven't failed simply by deciding *not* to get all, or even most, of your fulfillment from the thing that pays your bills.

3. WHAT OPPORTUNITIES EXCITE ME—AND HOW COME?

When we talk about finding our passion, we tend to reflect primarily on what we enjoy, which causes us to flail around a bit. While there's some value to casting a wide net and keeping an open mind, it helps to stay grounded in what our needs are right now. We rarely have a full understanding of what opportunities are out there and the skills and experiences required for them.

As a result, even if we identify our passion, we might not know how to go about pursuing it or the full range of ways we can work our interests into our work lives. For example, you might love writing and want to work with kids. But writing what? Working with kids in what way?

I'm a huge fan of the NYU Career Tracks exercise that encourages you to bookmark jobs you like and, after you collect at least 50, go through them to identify what they have in common. What are

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you drawn to? Why? Does that line up with your existing interests or point toward new ones? What's required to get to those jobs? Where are those jobs located? These questions will help you ground your interests and paint a clearer picture of your next steps.

4. WHAT DO I WANT TO GET REALLY GOOD AT DOING?

In his book *So Good They Can't Ignore You: Why Skills Trump Passion in the Quest for Work You Love*, Cal Newport argues that success and fulfillment are largely about quality of work and the skills you develop. Focusing on skills—actually *doing* things (rather than on ideas and subjects) that excite you—can be beneficial for three reasons. First, it gets at what research has shown makes us happy at work: mastery. Second, it puts our work into context: the greater cause (whether charitable or commercial) that our work contributes to. And third, it helps us on the work itself: the actual tasks you perform day in and day out. Figuring out the skills we want to use and develop and the work we'd like to do takes time and experimentation, but it's a far more practical way to get closer to what we actually want out of our jobs.

5. WHAT AM I WILLING TO GIVE UP?

**Even if we
identify our**

I learned about this question from Marci Alboher, vice president of marketing and communications at Encore, a nonprofit that helps people 50 and older find social-impact careers. Alboher

**might not
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pursuing it.**

developed it as a way to help older professionals—who might have to consider a pay cut and other changes in order to make a switch to the nonprofit sector—but it's a

useful way for anyone to consider the tradeoffs we need to make anytime we're faced with a career decision.

The classic tradeoffs, of course, focus on pay and leisure time, but there are also some others that don't usually get enough consideration. What about a better commute? Better location? Better use of your skills? Faster- or slower-paced culture? Think about what made previous jobs either great or intolerable, and what aspects you'd like your next move to improve upon.

Distinguishing between your non-negotiables and your nice-but-not-necessary items can give you some clarity. And be honest with yourself: Something that may seem frivolous (like 25 minutes off your travel time) might not be at all. If it'll make you happier, don't dismiss it.

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