

CHAPTER TWO

Fit

“Let your past guide you, not decide you.”

A recent study indicated that half of U.S. workers are unhappy in their current job. The primary reason is bad fit, which is what happens when a job does not match up with someone’s personality, skill set, or interests, or when the company culture is inconsistent with an individual’s core values. This mismatch causes anxiety and stress, resulting in disillusionment and disengagement. If neither the career nor the company is a good fit, it is the worst of both worlds.

You will spend much of your life at work. You owe it to yourself to understand what inspires and motivates you, and to match those beliefs with your personality, skill set, interests, and values, since only then will you be able to optimize your prospects for success, fulfillment, and happiness.

Deciding on a career is part art and part science. It is an art because it is personal. It is a science because it is a five-step process requiring assessment, investigation, alignment, career choice, and company choice. Combining the science and art will point you in the right direction.

Assess

“Know thyself,” the Greek philosopher Socrates stated. This principle particularly applies when choosing a career path, as the better you know yourself, the greater your chances are of finding the right fit.

Self-assessment requires introspection and an objective look at yourself. Not being objective, not being honest with yourself can develop into an avoidance trap, which can subsequently lead you in the wrong direction—or nowhere at all. Conducting a self-assessment enhances your ability to identify your interests, skills, personality, and values. *Interests* are what you enjoy doing. *Skills* are abilities you acquire or what you do best. *Personality* is the set of characteristics that determines your behavior. *Values* are what is important to you.

Ask yourself, “What do I enjoy doing? Where have I excelled?” The answer lies in recognizing those activities you find interesting, satisfying, and stimulating. Conversely, admitting what you do not enjoy strengthens and balances your assessment process. Do not take lightly the statement, “We are best when we are doing what we enjoy most.” Too often, this observation is ignored or underestimated. It is an important factor for career choice and satisfaction, and will keep you engaged and motivated throughout your career.

Analyze your skills and how they fit your interests. Your skill set is a combination of factors contributing to your ability to perform a certain task or accomplish a specific goal. Your skill set can be broken down into three categories. The first category is skills you have acquired through either education or past work experience; these are referred to as “technical” or “hard” skills. The second category is skills that reflect your personality and behavior, referred to as “soft” skills. The third category is “transferable” skills, which are skills that you can take with you wherever you go. Soft skills are transferable, whereas technical skills may or may not be transferable to your job, since they are specific.

Personality plays an important role in your success and affects your professional performance, personal life, and overall success. Understanding your personality and choosing a career that fits you improve your prospects for performance and job satisfaction. There are various methods to assess personality traits, for example, the Meyers-Briggs personality assessment and other similar online tools. Solicit input from high school or college career counselors, and take advantage of feedback from those closest to you as they observe you in various situations. They can provide input on their perception of your strengths and weaknesses.

Values are beliefs and ideas that are important to you. Your choice of a career and a specific company should mesh with your values. Values such as selflessness, honesty, and integrity are intrinsic values or core beliefs. Values such as wealth, position, and title are extrinsic values and byproducts of your work. Determining your values and aligning them with your career are

important. A mismatch of personal values and employment is one of the greatest sources of frustration in the workplace, as you end up having to constantly compromise, which can potentially spill over into your personal life.

Investigate

Investigate and explore your specific areas of interest once you have taken a personal assessment. Research sources include the web, books, journals, career fairs, and industry professionals. Take career-specific tests as necessary to further identify targeted professions. Join various clubs, do volunteer work, or get a summer job.

While in college, research your degree. Look at careers others have pursued, and talk with graduates to learn the pros and cons of the profession. Internships can be valuable firsthand experience, as it is difficult to know if you are going to like something if you have never done it. If internships are not available, take the initiative and make contact with companies, and ask to meet with or shadow individuals who are in your targeted profession.

Keep an open mind, and don't hesitate to consider opportunities to explore other options. In high school, I went on a number of recruiting trips to colleges and universities, but I wasn't convinced any of them were a good fit. That changed in March of my senior year, when I was contacted by the Naval Academy and was urged to make a visit. The thought of going there had never crossed my mind. However, I had never been to Annapolis, so I kept an open mind and agreed to visit. Upon arrival, I noticed that a schedule of meetings had been arranged with not only football coaches but also company officers,

professors, and midshipmen, in addition to an extensive tour of the campus. Discussions focused on what would be required, the training involved, and what commitments would be necessary. Topics such as duty, honor, and discipline were stressed. I took everything in, reflected that evening, and realized everything I'd heard that day were values and principles I believed in. I knew I belonged there. I felt that the training and education would help me develop in many ways and make me a better person. The next day, before leaving for home, I said, "I'm in. Tell me what I need to do." In hindsight, keeping an open mind and taking the opportunity to explore this option resulted in one of the best decisions in my life.

As you go through this process, don't be nearsighted. You may think one way but end up going another. There are career choices out there today that did not exist a year ago. Do not be beholden to conventional choices. Think outside the box, and explore multiple options.

Align

Knowing yourself, understanding your strengths and weaknesses, and aligning them with your career choice and work environment add up to a win, for both you and the company. Studies have shown that matching a career with your interests and personality results in greater satisfaction and fulfillment. Individuals who are successful, fulfilled, and happy in their careers are motivated and energized when they go to work. They look at their job as a venue in which they can apply their talent and skills, and as a place where they find more meaning and purpose, with less stress and better health. "Alignment" refers

to balance. Lack of balance between your personal values and your work environment can lead to a lack of motivation. No matter how good the money, if your work is not meaningful and rewarding, you will lack the motivation and passion necessary to sustain yourself day in and day out throughout your career, to weather challenges and adversity, and to achieve great success.

Consider both your personal and work values as you contemplate various careers. As mentioned earlier, a mismatch in values is a formula for conflict. Pursuing a career path that matches your values will result in a more fulfilled life, as work helps determine your self-image and self-worth. While there may have to be trade-offs, it's a two-way street: ensure that the right balance is struck, concentrating on those values and aspects of your work that deliver the greatest satisfaction. Once you have decided, the next step is to pursue your career choice.

Develop

Develop a career plan together with a communication and networking plan, including short- and long-term goals, with specific actions. Do not underestimate the importance of the résumé. It should differentiate you by conveying those traits that make you a unique candidate for their organization. If you require assistance with your résumé, engage the services of a professional.

Sending out dozens of unsolicited résumés each week via the Internet can give one a false sense of accomplishment; it is not the most effective way to find an opportunity. The most effective method is networking via established contacts, existing professional organizations, and forums used for recruitment. LinkedIn is a good example: 87 percent of all employers use

LinkedIn as a recruitment tool. Employment agencies are also an option for industry-specific opportunities. Do not sit back and wait for something to happen. Take the initiative, and do not be afraid to cold-call.

Geographic considerations are important when making career-choice decisions. A larger, urban environment will present more options, with specific industries located in certain hubs. Having the flexibility to relocate provides additional choices, with the further benefits of making more personal connections and enhancing your ability to network, which could bear fruit in the future.

Lifestyles and priorities change over the course of your career. Ideally, by the time you are in your mid-thirties to early forties, you will have found your stride and can focus on job enrichment, increased proficiency, and further opportunities within your chosen field, striking a balance with your personal life. If you ever find yourself disillusioned or dissatisfied, that does not mean you cannot make a change. Regardless of what stage of your career you find yourself in down the road, it is always possible to reassess and explore other opportunities utilizing the steps outlined in this chapter.

Identify

A company's culture reflects their values, practices, and beliefs. Research to determine if the culture is a good fit for you, starting with the company's website. Look at the mission statement, the section that describes the company and why it was founded. Review recent articles or press releases. Research social media for employee and customer comments. When looking at some

of the comments written by employees, former employees, or customers, bear in mind that not everything you read is true.

Look at the leadership team, and read their biographies, noting their education, work experience, and background. The leadership team determines the culture in mid- to smaller-size companies. For example, if a company is led by people with a military background, and you are a laid-back, type-B individual, it is conceivable that the company may not be a good fit.

Is the company large, small, established, or a start-up? There are pros and cons to each one. Your personality, goals, and what you are looking for in a company will determine the better fit for you. If you are a structured individual, want to focus on a specific area, and value a predictable career path with stability, a larger company may be a better match.

If you are more entrepreneurial and adventurous, consider a smaller company or even a start-up, especially if there is an opportunity for ownership. You will be exposed to and involved in more aspects of business than in a larger, more-structured environment. You may wear a number of different hats and will not be as shielded as you would be in a larger company. A smaller company will magnify what you do, both good and bad. In this environment, you will gain a better understanding and appreciation for the various aspects of business. You will learn to analyze and solve problems in a different way, since this environment often requires unconventional solutions, encouraging innovation and creativity.

Having worked all throughout the spectrum, my preference is a smaller, nimbler environment with an entrepreneurial flair. You may find it to be the case for you as well, but ensure

that it is at the right time in your career. I chose to join a larger company upon entering the workforce after my military service. I was regimented and disciplined by virtue of my previous experience, and at that time, it was a good fit. This helped to lay the groundwork for me to transition to different business environments throughout my career.

Once you have done your research and selected potential companies, the next step is the interview. The interview is not only an opportunity for employers to assess you; it also allows you to assess your potential boss and colleagues to determine if the position would be a good fit. How your interviewers conduct themselves in your interview could be a window into what it would be like to work with and for them. Do they greet you with a smile and a firm handshake or remain seated behind the desk? Do they shut the door and give you their full attention? Do they listen to what you have to say, or do they do most of the talking? Do they talk mostly about themselves? Do they seem distracted, constantly checking their watch, phone, or email? If they don't give you time and attention during your interview, they will likely not give you time and respect when you work with them.

The same holds true when meeting with other managers and employees of the company. What is their demeanor? How would you classify the interactions with the people you meet? Are they friendly, energetic, and enthusiastic? When you ask questions, are the answers consistent, using positive terms to describe the company and their role in it? Is the visit properly organized? Even if it is a smaller company or a start-up, they should still be able to operate efficiently. Take note of the surroundings. Are

there offices and cubicles, or is it more of an open workspace? What is the dress code?

What type of vibe do you get? What is your initial reaction to the possibility of working in such an environment? Position, salary, and benefits are important considerations; however, you need to consider how much time you'll be spending there. If it is a bad fit—if it is inconsistent with your personality, skills, interests, or values—you will not look forward to going to work, which will negatively affect your performance. If you have any doubts, your instinct is telling you something—listen to it, and continue with the process:

1. *Assess*: Identify your interests, skills, personality, and values. Know yourself.
2. *Investigate*: Research and explore your areas of interest. Keep an open mind.
3. *Align*: Determine which career fits you. Stay balanced.
4. *Develop*: Craft a career plan. Stay organized.
5. *Identify*: Determine which company is the best fit for you. If the shoe fits, wear it.