

# Navigating the NEW JOB MARKET

A conversation with career counselor Phyllis R. Stein

by Frances Lefkowitz

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**Frances Lefkowitz: Philosopher Joseph Campbell was fond of saying "Follow your bliss." Can this idea be applied to the job search?**

**Phyllis Stein:** I absolutely try to encourage people to do something like following their bliss. Look at least seriously at their wildest fantasies. Even if it turns out that you don't get all the way to the fantasy, which is what "following your bliss" is. At least looking at it takes it seriously and gives it a place in your exploration. For example, I have a physicist with a Ph.D. who really wants to be a carpenter. Now it's not my responsibility to tell him, "What--you're crazy; you have a Ph.D. in physics and you want to be a carpenter?" It's my responsibility as a career counselor to say, "All right, let's look at what you really want out of your life. If carpentry and working with your hands gives you pleasure, then who's to say that you shouldn't do that?" And then for him to explore what that would really mean for him. Then if he chooses not to do it, that's his choice, but at least he's looked at it. [\(Insert read more\)](#)

**Are workers in a better position these days to ask for more from employers?**

I've been in this field for twenty-two years, and from my perspective certainly things are a lot better than they were in 1976, which was just the beginning of women entering the workforce in any large numbers.... We've seen a huge change in women's participation, affirmative action, and an emphasis on diversity. We have more opportunity for flexible scheduling and telecommuting. There are also things that are worse: some places are taking better care of employees, and then there are other places that pretend that they never heard of the Family and Medical Leave Act. Some companies can be consistently family-friendly and have child care, and some kind of flexibility.... In other cases, what I see is a swing that goes back and forth. I think that as we approach full employment, you'll see a lot of friendly things happening in the workplace, because now the employer is beholden to the employee. So they're more flexible, more willing to accommodate to a good employee. And when the market is better for employers, and there's a large unemployment rate, then you see some of those things disappear. Now, because we're close to full employment, employers are going to have to look seriously at people who want things like flexible time and part-time options.

**Let's talk about the new job market. If the employment rate is so good, why is there all this downsizing?**

There are a couple of things happening simultaneously. At the moment, we have a continuation of downsizing, but we also have the lowest unemployment rate that we've had in a very long time. So this new job market has a number of components that I think will carry through for

awhile that have to do with the lack of loyalty from the employer to the employee and vice versa. There's a lot more people being thrown out or leaving and there's no long-term tenure in any place. We have to ask: How do people learn how to cope with the kind of market we have now where you can't go to AT&T the way you could twenty years ago and expect to have a whole life there? How do you think about your career in the kind of a market where you have to be ready to go to the next job without a lot of warning or without a long length of time at a job so you're building your skills? And then there's also the increase in contract work, where employers are eliminating departments and then hiring the same thing done by an external person rather than having it done in-house. What does that mean about benefits and other things? Those are the questions we have to ask in this new job market.

**Can you respond to some of those questions, and tell us how to navigate the new job market?**

It's important to realize that a job in this market might not be forever. So, people should keep their résumé polished. They should realize that any people that they meet professionally may be part of their network, so they should treat everybody thoughtfully and as if this person is somebody that you might want to talk to as you make a future move. And you should keep yourself in training--sort of like continuing education--so that you're continually upgrading your skill set, so that you feel quite current in what you're doing. Also, you should look at work for opportunities for growth for yourself, so that while you're on a job, you can be not only a good employee, but you can also be adding to your skills. I have a couple of clients who, when they see an opportunity, they may even volunteer to do it, so that they can learn a new skill. In other words, take some initiative. I guess the bottom line on this is, continually think about your own career, where you're going to go next, and what initiative it would be a good idea to take at this particular point in time.

**In *Working*, Studs Terkel says that working people are searching "for daily meaning as well as daily bread, for recognition as well as cash, for astonishment rather than torpor; in short for a sort of life rather than a Monday through Friday sort of dying." Do you agree?**

Yes, and I think that is an attainable goal. It's really important that people not sell themselves short.... I think everyone, in a way, unless they've really numbed themselves out, is trying to find whatever modicum of satisfaction they can with their work. And people are looking for--well everybody's looking for different things--but I think one of the common things they are looking for is the recognition that he talks about. And they are looking for some kind of meaning.

**What are the most common complaints about work?**

Maybe that "I'm not challenged." That they're not using the skills that they really want to use. Second might be, "I want my work to fit with my lifestyle and not the other way around." So that's the need for flexible scheduling. That is another thing that I hear a lot: "I have a life and I don't want my work to not allow me to have it."

**What are some of the solutions that people are coming up with, for having both a good job and a good life?**

I'll tell you, people struggle. Some people actually choose to look for their next job where they're going to be able to put some parameters on the amount of time they're spending on the job.... This is an issue for at least seventy percent of the people I see. And it's not just for family; it's for outside activities, community or volunteer work--lots of different things. How do people do it? That's a question that people struggle with, and at different times in their life, they find different solutions to it. What might work for you as a single person might not work when you have a family. How much can you put limits on what you're doing? What is the nature of your work? If you're self-employed, can you put limits on it? It's an ongoing challenge.

**What is the process that you take people through when they come to you and say, "I don't like my job and I'm feeling stuck in it?"**

Feeling stuck is often a warning sign that something else is going on. Some people may not be clear on how to proceed, and then once you show them, they understand how to do it. But if they can't do it, then I often try to figure out what else is going on for them, and it may be that they need therapy rather than career counseling--or therapy in addition to career counseling. That doesn't mean everybody who's stuck needs that, because sometimes people who are stuck just need a push and encouragement or some sort of clear idea of how to proceed. So there's stuck and *stuck*, there's different kinds.

The first step I take them through is "self-assessment." That's really trying to figure out who they are, and what they want from work. It looks at what it is that you value in work, what skills you have that you want to use or like to use or need to learn further. And what it is that interests you. Then we try to figure out, given these skills, these interests, and these values, what kind of work might that be. So there's a self-understanding process and then a sort of trying to figure out what it might be that fits into who you are.

**Do you ever work with people who you feel are unhappy in part because they're working at a job for the money only?**

Yes, sometimes I see people who are quite unhappy in what they're doing, but it's paying them very well, or it's paying them comfortably. And what they might be looking at might not pay them as well. And so they feel trapped by the lifestyle that they've grown accustomed to, and the income that they've grown accustomed to, and they have to deal with how they will feel if they don't earn that money. It's funny because I've had a client say she can't live on twenty thousand dollars a year and I've had another client say she can't live on two hundred thousand a year--in the same week.

**Have you dealt with clients who've come in and said that, and then actually "downshifted" themselves?**

Yes. I have dealt just this year with a client who downshifted. Moved from being a corporate vice president into the nonprofit world and took almost a fifty-percent pay cut. And guess what? She's surviving.

**But is she more than surviving? Is she happy? Is she glad she did it?**

She's glad she made the move, but it's not the ultimate job for her. She didn't necessarily land the perfect long-term job when she made the move, but she took the first step.

**Anything else you'd like to tell us about making work workable?**

The process of "following your bliss" involves being open to the many ways in which your understanding of what exactly is "blissful" for you changes over time, and being able to search out opportunities at work and in other areas of life which allow you to evolve accordingly. The disappearance of "lifetime jobs" opens up possibilities for disasters and for unanticipated joys. Turning disasters into new opportunities is the name of the new game. \*

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