

Turning around when your job feels like a dead end Elizabeth Garone



(iStockphoto)

It is nearly a career certainty: that unpleasant feeling of being stuck and not really knowing what to do about it comes around at least once over the course of a working life. Colleagues and new hires are being picked for plum positions while you sit by. Perhaps your job starts to feel like a dead end with little room for creativity or advancement.

If you think that everyone else is happy at work, think again. One-third of employees around the world say they are dissatisfied at work and nearly as many say their jobs are just “ok”, according to a Glassdoor.com ongoing company review survey with data from companies in 190 countries. Of course, there are circumstances beyond your control that can cause your career to sputter: economic downturns, unanticipated restructurings, and bad bosses, to name a few. But for that plain old feeling of stuck-in-place, there are solutions.

Make a lateral move

While some career coaches do not recommend a lateral move within your current company, since it can leave lingering doubts when you look for another job, many consider it an excellent way to jumpstart a stagnating career — if you will be adding new skills or setting yourself up for a future promotion.

“A lateral move into another group can offer you the excitement and the challenge of a new position without the bigger risks of changing organizations,” said San Francisco Bay Area executive coach Joel Garfinkle and author of *Getting Ahead: Three Steps to Take Your Career to the Next Level*. “It can help you avoid that overwhelming feeling of being stuck in a dead-end job,” and allows you to bring relevant and valuable experience from your past group to the new position.

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A lateral move can also help when a more senior position eventually opens up. Having diverse experience in the organization should give you “a leg up on your fellow employees” when it comes to getting a promotion, Garfinkle said.

Keep your eye on postings internally and ask colleagues in groups you are interested in transferring to whether there are openings upcoming that might not be posted. It also pays to take the temperature of people in the target work group — make sure they, too, do not feel stuck in their jobs.

Back to school

During the recent recession, many people in the United States and across Europe returned to school, believing it was the easiest and best way to jumpstart their careers. But that isn't always the case, said Al Stewart, founder of Business Mentors with offices in Atlanta and Paris. "I watched many individuals enroll in coursework that was going to do little for them after their graduation," he said. The main problem: many people do not do critical research before enrolling in a particular major. "In a market where there are few jobs, even an additional degree doesn't help if the market is stagnant or slow," he said.

That's not to say going back to school for a degree program or a certificate is not a good idea. The key is to focus on fields that are "hot" and in need of talent, such as healthcare or information technology. There are also no guarantees that the market won't have changed by the time your schooling ends.

Your best bet? Don't drag the coursework out too long and go to school part-time while keeping your job. Having the safety net of a job while going to school will make "a big difference in your attitude and approach," said Stewart. Plus, your career track will stay on course, handy in the event it takes longer to make a career move.

Is the grass greener somewhere else?

The most direct way to get your career on the upswing: find a job with another company. You would not be alone. According to the 2012 Candidate Behavior Study from employment site Careerbuilder.com, 74% of the 1,078 American and Canadian workers surveyed were either actively searching for a new job or were open to a new opportunity.

Get your resume or CV and online profiles in order before you begin digging into job postings. Make sure they are up to date and reflect the sorts of skills you want to use in your next job.

"It's important to hold onto your job until you get the next job so that you are perceived as more valuable, can ask for more money and can pay your rent," said Dan Schawbel, author of the upcoming book *Promote Yourself: The New Rules for Career Success*. So, for instance, don't send out an email blast to everyone you know telling them that you are looking or post it on Facebook, Twitter or LinkedIn – short-sighted moves like these could end up costing you your job. Privately message people you trust in your network to find out who is hiring and if they can refer you.

Whether you decide to make a lateral move, go back to school, or seek a position elsewhere, you'll need to take a more proactive approach to those things you can control to lessen your chances of feeling stuck again. Make yourself into a well-rounded team player willing to take on new roles and challenges, said Garfinkle. "Learn as much as you can, not only about your job, but other facets of the organization and the industry. Become the "go to" person for information and advice," he said. By doing this, you'll be the first person higher ups consider when an advancement opportunity does arise.

Career Coach is a twice-monthly column on BBC Capital in which we consider the career turning points and questions many professionals face. We welcome questions from readers at careercoach@bbc.com.