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An Interview With Rockport Founder Nicholas Lore About Career Fit and Satisfaction

Everyone has friends and relatives who are not satisfied with their work. Are they in the wrong career area or just in the wrong job?

It may be either one, or both! Many work environments are so unpleasant it is difficult to imagine anyone's being satisfied. There is no shortage of incompetent managers who use the stick instead of the carrot; who do not have a clue how to support and bring out the best in their people. Little wonder that *Dilbert* is so popular. But, often there is a deeper and less obvious problem. A fairly large percentage of capable, intelligent people are in a career that does not fit them.

What do you mean by "does not fit them?"

Every one of us is a complex and unique individual. Each of us is a constellation of innate talents, personality traits, quirks, passions, points of view and intentions. People who both love their work and are very successful manage to combine all these elements so that their career fits them like a custom-made suit. Their work is a natural expression of who they are, what matters to them and what they are naturally good at doing.

For most people, work falls short of expressing all the parts of their nature. So, it is fair to say that the vast majority of people are not doing something that suits them perfectly. Maybe it is asking too much to expect absolute perfection. But for many people, there is a serious enough mismatch between their nature and their work to cause problems both on the job and in their life outside of work.

What sort of problems?

When you are forced by circumstance to go to work to earn a living, and you have to process a large, daily dose of stress because you dislike your job, feel it is a struggle or meaningless, find it difficult or boring, there are obvious consequences. In a recent study, it was shown that people with significant job-related stress are five times more likely to get common colds. Think about it. Why would they be more susceptible to colds? Their immune systems have been compromised by stress. So, you can infer that this stress makes them much more vulnerable to many more serious

diseases, such as cancer. The same study showed that people who suffer from stress caused by their non-work lives have only twice the incidence of common colds. That makes it pretty clear how important it is to have a career that is satisfying, meaningful and fulfills your goals.

And, that is just the tip of the iceberg. A significant portion of an individual's sense of self worth comes from their work. Whether we like it or not, we are what we do. A career filled with clock watching, resentment, resignation, fear, boredom, routine, lack of use of our natural talents causes suffering that extends throughout our lives. It erodes self-esteem. This affects the quality of our lives and our relationships. Instead of moving our lives forward we have to give our free time to recovering from the stress of the job. For the 10% of people who are in what I call "career hell" it is worse. These folks have careers that fit so poorly that their lives are on a downward spiral that may be invisible to outsiders, but are all too obvious to their loved ones.

We all are aware of the benefits of a well chosen career direction. Would you please talk about some of them specifically?

You enjoy better health, a longer life, more vitality. Read a few issues of the obituary notices on *Time Magazine's* "Milestones" page. Notice how many celebrated (and notorious) people live into their eighties and nineties. Other than inheriting good genes and taking care of your body, leading a satisfied, purposeful life is the most effective thing you can do to live a long, long life. Most of the people whose deaths are reported in *Time* dedicated their energy to the wholehearted pursuit of something that mattered to them. That's why they became so successful that their death was worthy of mention in a national magazine. You may also infer that they must have found an elegant fit for their talents to have become so accomplished in their field. Even the gangsters and dictators must have excelled at their evil-doings to generate such worldwide notoriety. People whose work is fulfilling are more resistant to disease and heal more quickly when they do get sick. Why not turn your sick days into vacation days? People die in disproportionate numbers within three years of their retirement because they have nothing exciting to live for.

You have enhanced personal and professional relationships and are more fun to be around. If you want great relationships, live your life fully. Others want to be around people who lift their spirits out of the petty pace of day-to-day routine. Your enthusiasm will spark those around you, who then become better company themselves. Having your working life be a major source of satisfaction and self esteem has a powerful positive effect on the other areas of life, including your relationships. You're more fun to be around.

You're more successful and more productive. There is a close relationship between career satisfaction and material success. People who enjoy their work put their heart and soul into their careers. How much do you accomplish when you are completely immersed in a task that you are

really enjoying? Compare this with your productivity when you are forced to do something you don't want to do.

You have heightened self-esteem. We have managed to turn self-esteem into something mysterious and complex. Simply said, self esteem is the reputation you have with yourself. How much do you admire people who grumble about their lives, blame their circumstances and resign themselves to a life of mediocrity? If your career is not satisfying and your self esteem is low, you're probably not neurotic. You're just being honest with yourself!

You become a better role model for children. How can you teach your children, or any young person who looks up to you, to live their lives fully if you don't live yours fully? They watch your actions. When your words don't match your actions, they know instantly that you are full of caca del toro. Your children will model themselves after who you are being and what you are doing. If you want to be proud of them, live so you are proud of yourself!

You lead a life that counts. Your career is your best opportunity to make a contribution. Doing something that you feel makes a contribution to others is a wonderful feeling.

You look forward to life. Just as laughter is infectious, so is listlessness, dissatisfaction and boredom. This ennui will follow you home from work and infect the other parts of your life. Having a career that fits perfectly restores that enthusiasm that came so naturally early in your life. As Joseph Campbell said:

I think that what we are seeking is an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonances within our own innermost being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive.

You have a deeper, richer, more authentic sense of humor. Humor that wells up from a core of well-being and satisfaction is very different from the cynical jokes of those trapped in a life of resignation. Wouldn't you rather have your wit sourced in happiness than in desperation? You might even find yourself smiling and snapping your fingers on the throughway during rush hour.

Many people would say that you aren't supposed to enjoy your work. Since so many people do not seem to be wildly excited about going to work, maybe it is just human nature to be somewhat dissatisfied. Isn't it overly idealistic to assume that people can have a career they love?

Most of us assume that the people we know who love their work are blessed by luck or possess some special talent we don't have. I look at it a bit differently. I assume that a fulfilled life is every person's birthright. After all, we are supposed to be the most intelligent of creatures. All the other creatures on the planet seem to like what they do. The birds wake up in the morning

singing, not bitching about the coming day. Only we humans suffer from career dissatisfaction. So, we should be able to use this marvelous intelligence we are blessed with to figure out how to be at least as happy as the average duck.

For more than 20 years at Rockport Institute, we have been doing research on career satisfaction and success, and have worked with more than 10,000 clients. From all of those years of experience, I can say with absolute certainty that it is not terribly difficult to make the right career choices. The problem is that most people (and most career experts) do not have a clue how to go about it in a highly effective way.

Why do so many people wind up in careers that do not, as you say, “fit them elegantly?”

The American way of career selection goes something like this. During your junior year of high school, the tribal elders, consisting of your parents and your guidance counselor, initiate you into ancient secrets learned empirically over many generations. They whisper the secret in your ear: “Start to think about what you might want to do.” You, as green as the jolly giant, don’t notice that this meager advice might be insufficient to plan a brilliant future. You begin your quest. That night you pry your attention away from teenage angst and raging hormones long enough to follow their sage advice. You “think about what you might want to do.” Perhaps some ideas for potential careers appear out of the mist, like distant, mysterious mountains. Perhaps they don’t. You get no really useful guidance from school guidance counselors or your parents, none of whom realize that such an important and personal decision must be based on knowing much more about yourself and the world than you do at this tender age.

Much later, you find yourself in a line. It is the close of your sophomore year of college and you are queued up to pick a major. You remember the mantra, “Start to think about what you might want to do.” By the time you reach the head of the line you have decided. Years later you tell friends that your major in Polynesian philosophy “seemed like a good idea at the time.” Years pass. Like the majority of college graduates, you are embarked on a career that has nothing at all to do with your college major. How did you make that final choice? “Well,” you say, “It seemed like a good idea at the time.”

I do not know of a single college that has a competent career direction program. The ones that think they do are just deluding themselves. If you took your car to a mechanic to be fixed and it was successfully repaired only one time out of 100, you would be justifiably upset. A one percent success rate is just about what college career centers produce when students who have no idea what to do with their lives go to them for help.

What about people in mid-career who feel they might need a change?

There are literally millions of intelligent, gifted people who have somehow found themselves in a career that they suspect may not be the right one for them. In the past, it has been difficult to figure out what new career path would work better. These days, leading-edge career coaches have become much more responsive to the complexities of guiding people through changing careers.

Approximately 10% of people report that they love their work. This significant minority has somehow managed to pull together all the important elements to have their dreams come true. So often, we imagine things going well for a distant and mysterious group of people, the ones we see on TV - the movie stars, writers and Nobel Prize winners. To have fully 10% of people operating at the highest levels of career satisfaction gives hope that anyone can do it. After all, how difficult can it be to be in the top 10% if you dedicate your energy to achieving that end? Now that we have figured out the components of choosing a career direction for both satisfaction and success, there is no reason why anyone should put up with anything less than having it all. It is just a matter of making the decision to make a change and then finding a person or a book to guide them through the process. This coaching is extremely important. Often people who try to make career decisions without expert advice focus on answering the obvious questions. They forget to consider many questions that may be even more important than the ones they are trying to answer. To choose a really excellent career takes considering everything that has an effect on how well the new career will fit. After all, the goal is to have it fit you like a custom-made suit.

What are those areas that need to be considered?

Natural talents and innate abilities are the first and most neglected of these important areas. Everyone is born with a unique group of talents that are as individual as a fingerprint or snowflake. These talents give each person a special ability to do certain kinds of tasks easily and happily, yet also make other tasks seem like pure torture. Can you imagine comedian Robin Williams as an accountant? Talents are completely different from acquired knowledge, skills and interests. Your interests can change. You can gain new skills and knowledge. Your natural, inherited talents remain with you for your entire life. They are the hand you have been dealt by mother nature. You can't change them. You can, however, learn to play the hand you have been dealt brilliantly and to your best advantage. This is one area that people usually cannot work out on their own. At Rockport Institute, we do highly sophisticated testing programs that measure these important traits. The test interpretation has gotten so advanced that medical students go through these testing programs to pick an area of specialty. People from all over the planet go through our career testing program.

Personality traits and temperament - Many people are engaged in careers that make it necessary to suppress themselves at the job. An elegant fit between you and your work includes and supports the full self-expression of your personality. Telltale signs of a career that doesn't fit

your personality include: the necessity to assume a different personality at work, restricted self-expression, activities that conflict with your values.

Purpose, meaning, mission - People who are enthusiastic about their work are usually engaged in something they care about and are proud of what they do. They feel they are making a contribution. They may need to go to work to pay the bills but that is not what gets them out of bed in the morning.

Willingness to stretch your boundaries - One of my clients was a forty-year-old woman who decided to pursue a career in medicine. Her previous college record was insufficient for entry into medical school. She had no money to finance a medical education. Her willingness to stretch beyond what seemed possible was so strong that she went back to college and completed pre-requisite courses. She gained admission to a fine medical school and managed to creatively finance her education. Other clients are unwilling or unable to make more than a modest stretch in a new direction. I encourage you to stretch as far as possible toward a career choice that will not be a compromise. At the same time, be completely realistic. It makes no sense to make plans you are unwilling or unable to achieve.

Fulfills your goals - To have something to shoot for is an important part of the joy of working. A custom designed career supports you to fulfill your life goals and gives you a sense of challenge on the job.

Rewards fit your values - Like the biscuit you give the dog, rewards are the motivators that help keep you happily performing your tricks at work. Some rewards mean more to you than others. That is because they are linked with your values. If recognition for doing something well is a value important to you, then it may also be a necessary reward to motivate you to keep performing well. Doing without adequate recognition will slowly erode your well-being on the job.

Compatible work environments - Each person flourishes in some work environments and finds others stressful or otherwise inappropriate. Several different aspects of the environment that surrounds you play a vital role in the quality of your work life. You live in a certain geographical environment. The company you work for has a particular organizational environment, style and corporate personality that affects you every minute you are at work. On a smaller scale, your immediate work environment includes the physical work setting, the tone or mood of your office, and your relationships with others including your supervisor, fellow employees and clients or customers.

The bottom line. Is what you are considering realistic? Within the range of how far you are willing to stretch? Are the careers you are considering really suitable, do-able and available?

Do they really fit you? The decisions you make about your career direction are no more than pipe dreams unless they are achievable and actually turn out as you hope they will. Research is the key to understanding the reality of potential future careers.

What is it people want from their work besides a paycheck?

The answer to this question is a little different for each of us. Everyone has their own, unique goals and desires. At the bottom of those differences, I think we are all much alike in what we want.

Remember back to your childhood, back to the beginning of the journey. If you were like most of us, you dreamed of an exciting future where you were passionately engaged in life. Perhaps you dreamed of being a rock star or a professional athlete, a detective or the first empress of the galaxy. You might have envisioned yourself as a brilliant surgeon, an artist or swinging from a vine over a bottomless chasm. Wiser now, you might smile at the naïveté of childhood dreams. Your vision may not have been reasonable or practical but it was certainly passionate. It put you in the midst of a life that was fully lived.

How well does the word "work" fit with your childhood dream job? Doesn't it seem strangely out of place? The way these fantasies usually occur seems to fit better into the category of "adventurous vacation" or "getting paid to play". Our dream jobs are more play than work. When people dream of becoming a lawyer, they aren't thinking about being buried under endless piles of deadly dull paper work or having to defend an unscrupulous client. In our dreams of becoming a fireman, we are fighting the fire, not re-packing the hoses or passing long nights in the firehouse playing endless games of pinochle with two cards missing from the deck.

When you get down to the very skinny truth, under all the sophisticated conversation and pretense, no one really wants to work. One definition of the word "work" that is not in the dictionary, but nevertheless is a part of our internal dictionary, goes something like, "Work — something I would rather do less of" or "something I have to do when I would rather do something else." Underneath all the serious reasons people give to explain why they want to change careers, write a book, drive an eighteen wheeler, there is an essential, powerful motivation that's not discussed in polite, sophisticated company. They want to do something they are passionate about. They want satisfaction. And, they want to have fun.

I don't mean idle, frivolous fun. Usually the visions we had as children were high on the enjoyment scale and somehow useful to the world around us. We savored life, we were brilliant at what we did and we made some sort of contribution. Our dreams were shaped by our own individual inner templates of what matters the most to each of us: self expression, adventure, power, enjoyment, being a member of a team that's going for it 100%, making beautiful things,

personal growth, solving problems, healing, teaching, machismo, raising a family. As Mark Twain said:

The secret of success is making your vocation your vacation.

How can someone tell if the problem is an ill-fitting career or that they are just in the wrong job?

There are some basic indicators that anyone can use to sort this out. If you can answer YES to most of these, then you are, most likely, in a career that fits you like a custom made suit. Here are a few of them:

- ? You feel like a duck in a pond. Your work is a natural expression of your talents and personality.
- ? You often experience your work as play. You are like a kid in a sandbox, completely engaged, totally turned on.
- ? You are proud of what you do and enjoy telling other people about it.
- ? You are highly respected because you are so good at what you do.
- ? You do not have to pretend to be someone else at work.
- ? Your own best and most natural forms of creative expression are what you are paid to do.
- ? You enthusiastically look forward to going to work most of the time.
- ? The result of your efforts makes a contribution that personally matters to you. You don't spend your days working for something that you don't really care about
- ? A day on the job leaves you feeling energized, not burned out.