The New York Times
nytimes.com

July 5, 2008

Need Help Finding Your Bliss? Hire a Coach

By SUSAN MORAN

Correction Appended

BOULDER, Colo. — A 43-year-old man is weary of teaching high school but has no clue how else to make a living. A 67-year-old man wants to leave banking but does not want to retire before leaving a more positive mark on the world. A 52-year-old woman is an emergency room doctor who loves her work but pines for more downtime.

All of them took part in a workshop in Boulder recently that was led by a career "intuitive" named Sue Frederick — a former career counselor who draws upon her dreams, ancient numerology and conversations with spirits to "see your dream job."

As the economic slump continues, many workers, even those who hate their jobs, are reluctant to look for more satisfying work. But others are turning to nontraditional career counselors and coaches to help them navigate transitions in their lives and careers.

These workers have read the umpteenth edition of "What Color Is Your Parachute?" by Richard Nelson Bolles and have mastered the Myers-Briggs personality test. Now they crave something more offbeat and probing.

Lucky for them, there are as many flavors of career counselors — and more recently coaches, including "psychic" and "intuitive" ones — as there are careers. Career counselors tend to explore psychological undercurrents with clients, and they often have a master's degree in counseling. Coaches typically come from the corporate world and focus on goal-setting.

It is not just residents of Boulder, a mecca for all things organic and spiritual, who flock to Ms. Frederick's "career intuition boot camp" and individual sessions in person or over the phone.

"I don't want to come across as a new age-y kind of guy with my head in the stars, because as a New Yorker type that's the last thing I am," said Gary Purnhagen, 55, who started his own management consulting business in Manhattan a few months ago after spending 20 years working for companies. "But going to Sue was probably the best decision I've ever made in terms of reaching out."

Several months ago Mr. Purnhagen left a financial printing company that was laying people off. He trolled the Internet for counselors and coaches. When he saw Ms. Frederick's Web site he was drawn to her big smile and her message that your dream job should make you giggle when you speak of it.

Then, call it coincidence or destiny, a consultant friend of his in New York suggested that he check out a

career coach named Sue Frederick, and Mr. Purnhagen tossed his skepticism aside. Four one-hour phone sessions and $500 later, he said he is more focused, confident and trusting in his ability to build a lucrative clientele.

Ms. Frederick, 58, trained as a career counselor in the 1970s at the University of Missouri. She worked at the university and later in the private sector. But she yearned to add to her repertoire her self-described clairvoyance, which she says she discovered when she was a child who would dream about things that would often happen later that day.

Her husband warned that she would lose corporate clients if she called herself a career intuitive, but she did anyway. "Soon I had more clients than I knew what to do with," Ms. Frederick told the 29 people at a recent workshop.

When career coaches jumped onto the scene two decades ago they were looked upon suspiciously by career counselors as inexperienced, brash interlopers. But since 1999, when the International Coach Federation began offering certification training for coaches, their reputation has risen steadily.

Today, roughly 3,700 people in the United States are certified by the federation. But anyone can call herself a coach; in fact, roughly 30,000 people do just that, estimates Diane Brennan, president of the federation. Hundreds of organizations offer some form of coaching certifications.

"A lot of people call themselves coaches because it's the hot thing to do," Ms. Brennan said.

This factor is reflected in the rates coaches charge — up to $400 an hour. For many clients, seeing a coach feels far more upbeat, even more upscale, than working with a counselor. This makes some traditional career counselors fear they may become obsolete.

"A lot of people see having a coach as a prestigious thing, whereas going to a career counselor is often associated with having a problem," said Maria Greco, a licensed professional counselor in Boulder with a Ph.D. in university administration.

A coach is more like a personal trainer, who coaxes clients to set and meet their job or career goals. A sure sign that you are talking to a coach is "five steps to" or "seven rules for." The cover of Ms. Frederick's 2004 book, "Dancing at Your Desk: A Metaphysical Guide to Job Happiness," promises "The 7 Secret Steps to Finding Work You Love."

Joel Garfinkle, a career coach in Oakland, Calif., said his seven-step formula to finding a dream job sets him apart.

"It's all about aligning your natural gifts and talent to your passions that will equal a career that is 100 percent about fulfillment," said Mr. Garfinkle, with the turbo-charged delivery of a football coach.

What draws people to a career counselor or coach depends on their age, their location and the industry they work in. For instance, even though Silicon Valley has averted the worst of the economic slowdown, some people who have lost their job are asking whether the long commute and the grueling workdays are worth it before they start interviewing for a new job.

"I'm seeing more people looking for quality of life, balance and a change that will give them something that'll be more enduring and more of a natural expression of who they are," said Norm Meshriy, a career counselor in Walnut Creek, Calif.

Career counselors and coaches also say they are seeing more college students and recent graduates.

"Students are very concerned about the amount of debt they are graduating with, the sluggish economy, loss of jobs in numerous areas due to the housing bust, skilled jobs going overseas and fewer opportunities outside the service industries," Linda Bates Parker, president of Black Career Women, a nonprofit devoted to the career development of black women, wrote in an e-mail. She is also director of career development at the University of Cincinnati.

At the other end of the career lifeline, a small but growing number of baby boomers are summoning career counselors and coaches.

Keyren H. Cotter, 67, is a loan officer at a bank in Denver. With a Ph.D. in materials science, Mr. Cotter, known as Casey, worked for years in engineering before moving into mortgage banking. But it was not the mortgage crisis that recently sent him to Ms. Frederick's career workshop.

"I ask myself, 'What's my legacy? Why am I here?' " Mr. Cotter said. "I'm at a period where I'm no longer motivated by money. I'm looking for something with more substance and more meaning."

In the weeks since the workshop, Mr. Cotter saw Ms. Frederick for a one-hour session. He recalled that when he walked into her office she said, "I've been meditating on you. I think you should make movies." Now he is considering combining his interest and experience in financing with documentary filmmaking.

"It's too early to know," Mr. Cotter said. "But I know I'm getting unstuck."

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: July 12, 2008
An article last Saturday about the growing popularity of career coaches misstated the history of the term. "Career coach" has been used for at least two decades — not one — for people who offer counseling in job development.