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New millennium means time for career check

East Bay Business Times - by [David Goll](#)

Joel Garfinkle says the exploration of new careers surges at the start of every year. And when it's as momentous as the start of a new millennium, there may be an even greater focus on making life better.

"Notable passages of time, like New Year's, cause people to take stock of themselves and make some decisions," said Garfinkle, founder and owner of San Leandro-based Dream Job Coaching. "The number of clients I'm working with has doubled in the past six weeks. When someone's work lacks excitement and they're not using their gifts, dissatisfaction with the situation can become even more magnified at this time of year."

While Darryl Petersen, a Lafayette-based career counselor, said he usually observes the same phenomenon every January, he's actually seen less of it this year than in the recent past.

"Even though I don't believe it, you have a lot of people saying the economy is going down the tubes," said Petersen, who started his business, Strategic Career Services, 23 years ago. "Since most people associate changing careers with a massive reduction in personal income, they tend to stay put when they perceive economic problems on the horizon."

That's a shame, Petersen added, since, in his experience, people tend to make more money when they're happy in their work.

"Anyone who decides not to explore making changes in their career and their lives because of a newspaper story is looking for an excuse not to do it," Petersen said. "If someone identifies a career path that deeply connects with who they really are, they will almost always end up making more money."

When consumer confidence index numbers started decreasing in September, Petersen said he began to see a drop in the number of people willing to embark on examinations of their professional and personal lives.

"It's not just because of so many dot-coms going out of business or the stock market dropping in value, but those things have contributed to it," he said. "People do tend to cut off what they consider discretionary spending when there's an economic downturn."

Both Petersen and Garfinkle say they go beyond just testing their clients for career aptitude. Work is so integral to the lives of most people that jobs and careers are closely intertwined with people's sense of self-esteem and overall happiness.

So whether it's January or July, they regard this kind of self-examination as something everyone should go through at least once during their lives.

"I always tell my clients that careers are not just jobs, but a way of life," said Garfinkle, who started his company in 1997. "When I work with them, we look at the entirety of their lives. I tell them that if they start this process, I don't want them to have to go through it again."

However negatively they feel about their present jobs, 80 percent of Garfinkle's clients remain employed during the weeks or even months they work with him.

"It's great if someone has enough money not to have to work during this process because then they can put all their energy into finding what they really want to do with their life," he said. "But that's not practical for most people."

Garfinkle said the same percentage of workers nationally eight of 10 express dissatisfaction with their jobs, according to U.S. Bureau of Labor statistics. Both he and Petersen concur that what keeps most of them in jobs they don't like is fear of change.

"Changing jobs is considered one of the most stressful things that can happen to someone, right behind losing a loved one or moving," Garfinkle said.

But people may invite more serious problems by remaining stuck in what they consider a dead-end or inappropriate job, Petersen said.

"Being unhappy in one's work often contributes to depression, heart disease and damaged relationships with family members," he said. "But it's human nature that most of us don't take any action until we almost hit bottom."

Petersen said he gained that knowledge from personal experience. Over a 20-year period, he climbed the corporate ladder and was an executive when he hit the wall in the late 1970s.

"I just got sick of the rat race and, after taking stock of my life, decided to help other people find their life's work," he said. "I think that sentiment is even more prevalent among people today. More and more of them are waking up to the importance of doing work that truly

fits their interests, personality and values. Otherwise, they end up walking on thin ice, emotionally and physically."

Equal Time focuses on workplace issues. To comment or suggest stories, contact David Goll at dgoll@bizjournals.com or 925-598-1436.

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