

## CAREER

# HOW TO GET UNSTUCK

Are you in a career rut? Here's how to figure out what you need from your job and how to take action to get it.

Were you once on the fast track, but now your career slowly sputters along? Do you go through the motions on the job, but have lost that spark? Is the afternoon Starbucks run the high point of your day? And on Sunday nights, do thoughts of work descend like storm clouds, leaving you with a distinctly unpleasant and anxious feeling?

If these symptoms sound familiar, you may be in a career rut. Professional plateaus occur far more often than people think, says Julie Jansen, author of the career book "I Don't Know What I Want, But I Know It's Not This: A Step-by-Step Guide For Finding Gratifying Work." Jansen notes that sluggish economic conditions have caused more people to struggle on the job and, ultimately, to reach an impasse in their careers. "The professionals who remain standing in the aftermath of the recession often are overworked, fearful or burned out," she says.

Although burnout is one reason you may find yourself in a professional quagmire, it's not the only issue that can cause your career to stall. To regain professional momentum, you must get to the root of the rut and identify steps to climb out of it. Here are several common types of ruts and advice for how to get out of them and get happy.

## RUT NO. 1: WEARY AND WOUNDED

The recent recession has given rise to a number of design professionals in this rut, which occurs when there's too much work and too few rewards. In this situation, your to-do list may stretch longer than "War and Peace." Although you put in 110% every day, your paycheck doesn't reflect your effort. You may be doing

the work of two or even three people. Because of the stress involved, you feel depleted, rather than energized, by your job.

While a career rut can be the result of changes in your attitudes or needs, this one is caused by external circumstances: You might be happy, for example, if things went back to how they were prior to the recession. Because outside factors are affecting your satisfaction, staying and trying to reshape your job might be the best course of action.

"This situation might be temporary," Jansen says. "The thing to look at is whether the issue is tied to how the economy has impacted your company, or whether it's bigger than that. I think it's important to try to make your situation work if you can."

If you feel there's hope for your workload to become more manageable as the economy improves, look for ways to temporarily ease the strain, such as delegating responsibilities, taking a day off or working with your manager to prioritize assignments.

## RUT NO. 2: DAZED, BUT NOT CONFUSED

Unlike the previous rut, in which outside factors render work unpleasant, this situation involves your feelings about your job; in short, you've lost interest in it. The passion that you once had for your industry or position has died, and your duties bore you. Although you might think this problem would be more common for clock-watchers, it often strikes those employees who have climbed fairly high within their organizations. "You may feel like you've achieved what you wanted to and don't have anything to look forward to," Jansen explains.

This was the situation Julianne Shrank found herself in about four years ago. Having worked in interactive marketing for more than a dozen years, Shrank was a director at a mid-size agency when she realized she was in a rut. "I wasn't getting excited about new technologies," she said. "I also felt like I wasn't being creative, since I was focused more on strategy than the creative process."

When Shrank moved with her husband to England and had her first child, she took a break from the industry and gained valuable perspective. "I stopped using the internet as a marketing tool and started using it as a person again," she said. "By not thinking about marketing all the time, I got interested in it all over again."

Shrank found that her interests shifted to small business. "I started talking to some friends who run small businesses, and I began to realize how social media really worked for them because it's inexpensive and involves word of mouth," she says. "I thought I could really help these business owners, and that got me excited about my career again."

These days, Shrank runs a consulting firm in Virginia Beach, VA, specializing in interactive marketing for small businesses. "Now my experience feels more like a benefit than a weight, and I feel energized by my career," she says.

### **RUT NO. 3: WHAT'S THE PURPOSE?**

Shrank was able to rekindle the passion for her field by taking a hiatus and viewing her industry through a new lens. However, a rut that's more challenging to overcome occurs when your job is out of sync with your values. You might question your purpose and feel like your day-to-day duties aren't as meaningful as they once were. In essence, work that once felt relevant and engaging leaves you empty.

When faced with this problem, some creatives look for work in the nonprofit sector or for projects that support a worthy cause. But this can be a mistake, Jansen cautions. "It's more about figuring out what's meaningful to you," she says.'

In other words, you must identify the types of tasks or contributions that make you feel engaged, relevant and useful—and those might not necessarily be found in cause-related work. Figuring out your needs in this area requires some introspection. (See "Your Values Assessment" on page 39 for help with the process.)

### **RUT NO. 4: THE MISSING LINK**

If you're in this type of rut, you feel like your job is going nowhere. Perhaps you have a reputation in your company that you just can't shake (e.g., "the person who can't interact with clients" because of a one-time misunderstanding). Or maybe you've been pigeonholed into a certain type of role (e.g., Sarah is wonderful at production work but she lacks the creativity to be a designer). Alternatively, it's possible that you don't possess certain skills you need to advance (e.g., all the designers who are moving up in your firm have advanced Flash skills, and you don't). Although these can be hard realities to face, self-awareness is essential

## **5 TIPS FOR GETTING OUT OF A CAREER RUT**

- 1 Reframe the question. Instead of asking yourself, "What should I do?," which often can lead to panic and paralysis, start asking yourself, "What am I interested in?" or "What am I good at?"**
- 2 Break away. Take a day off to explore an interest. For example, you might spend the day shadowing someone in a profession of interest to you.**
- 3 Seek wise counsel. Talk with a mentor or career counselor about your options, or read a book about career transitions.**
- 4 Branch out. Pick a networking meeting that you typically wouldn't attend and show up. Introduce yourself to people, even if it feels uncomfortable. (LinkedIn and your local newspaper may provide listings.)**
- 5 Make a plan. Plan one activity each week designed to help you get out of the rut. For example, it could be arranging an informational interview with someone in an interesting career or taking an online course to acquire new skills.**

if you want to get to the heart of the problem and make significant changes.

For independent graphic designer Kym Fisher, getting out of a rut first meant admitting she was in one. Having opened her own business when she graduated from design school, Fisher found herself struggling to bring in a constant flow of new clients while learning the ins and outs of the industry. "At first, I was almost belligerent about it not being a rut," Fisher says. "I wanted to believe that something else was going on, that next month would be better."

After a while, though, it became apparent that change was needed, so Fisher moved from her small town in Ohio to the bigger city of Columbus, where she felt there would be more business opportunities. Once there, she signed up with a specialized staffing firm that matched her with clients, easing some of the pressure to generate business and providing gigs that doubled as learning experiences. "During my first contract, I was able to work with an in-house design team, sit in on project-planning meetings and work with engineers," she says. "I learned a lot about interacting with non-designers, something I hadn't done before."

Over the next few years, Fisher immersed herself in the industry, acquiring the skills and expertise needed to run a successful design business. Fisher also joined a young professionals network that helped her meet people and bring in new clients. For Fisher, the biggest takeaway from the situation was to not be afraid to shake things up when necessary. "I've spoken with a

lot of designers who've been in ruts, and most of them say they're afraid of the change that's going to happen, even if it's going to help," she says.

### **ACTION: THE ULTIMATE ANTIDOTE**

Indeed, doing something—anything—is the universally agreed-upon cure for a stalled career. Unfortunately, many people who are stuck become paralyzed with fear, making it difficult to change course. One of the most common anxiety sources is money, particularly in the current economic climate. But Jansen says that some of this fear may be unfounded.

"It's fascinating that if you ask people exactly how much money they need to live, they don't know," Jansen says. "So, here's someone feeling fearful about something they don't have their arms around. You have to have all the data before you jump to conclusions."

Knowing the minimum amount of income you must have can inform your options. You'll be aware of the sacrifices necessary to pursue a new line of work or course of study, or to take a hiatus from your job. Once you have a clear sense of your financial picture, it's time to do some information gathering.

"Most people don't know a lot about other jobs or industries," Jansen says. "For example, graphic designers may not realize the skills they have that could be applied to other industries."

An inexpensive way to learn is by networking, but not with the usual suspects. Instead of attending meetings with other designers, look for opportunities

to hobnob with people outside of the industry, such as Chamber of Commerce functions.

Finally, take time to explore your interests. Set aside a few hours each week to research other potential careers and discover what interests you, no matter how off-the-beaten-path these interests may seem.

Incremental changes such as these can eventually provide a path to a more fulfilling career. "The only thing that helps someone through a rut psychologically is success," Jansen says. "That could mean doing a little research and learning something, taking self-assessments or simply reminding yourself about who you are. It doesn't matter what type of action you take, just do something, one step at a time. By doing something, you'll give yourself hope for the future." **HOW**

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### **>> WEB EXTRA**

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