

Taking Stock of Your Career

by Elisabeth Hendrickson

IT'S TIME TO TAKE STOCK. NO, I DON'T mean it's time to inventory the items in your workspace. I mean it's time to take a look at where you are and where you want to be. Do you like what you're doing? What do you want to be doing several months from now? What's your ideal job? Whether you think you already know what you want or are still trying to figure it out, it's a good idea to take stock on a regular basis. Direction setting is something I do at least twice a year. Here's how.

If you're an introvert like me, grab a notebook and pen and find yourself a private place where you won't be disturbed. If you prefer to think out loud to an audience, grab a trusted friend. I strongly recommend a change of perspective: do this exercise somewhere you don't usually go. Try the library, a nice restaurant, a museum, or any place you don't frequent under normal circumstances where you can sit down, in relative peace, alone or with your companion. Now, make two lists.

Things I Like about My Job

You'll want to refer to your list later, so whether you are by yourself or with a friend, it's important to write it down. Add to the list for as long as you can.

Things I Hate about My Job

Here's why it's important to do this exercise in a private place and, if you bring a friend, with someone you trust. You want the freedom to be brutally honest. It's okay to say you hate the coffee they serve in the kitchen, the

project manager who nagged you every single day of the six-month project asking, "Izzit ready yet?" or anything else that bugs you. Just make sure you don't lose that notebook when you're done.

When you've run out of things to add, review both of your lists again. Do you notice any patterns? Now, start two more lists.

Things I Want More Of

List anything that you want more of. It might be more money, more time off, more flexibility, more influence, more space, more visibility, more opportunity, etc. Include whatever comes to mind. Put away your mental editor for now. Write down everything you think of even if it doesn't make sense as you're thinking it. You can figure out what "more kumquats" means later.

Things I Want Less Of

Once again, list anything that comes to mind. Maybe you want less chaos, less micromanagement, less work, less hassle, less criticism, less responsibility, etc.

Now check for patterns in these two lists. Your goal in doing this is to help you define your ideal job. At this point, you should have a pretty good idea of what that job would look like.

Now, before you hand in your resignation and go in search of this ideal job, take stock of your current position with another list.

I'm a <Title> Who...

Use the title that appears on your business card or on official company documents, even if you think it's misleading. Then, describe what you do.

Now compare all your lists. Does your "What I Do" list even come close to your "Things I Want More Of" list? What

would you like to add to your "What I Do" list? Are there items from your "Things I Hate" and "Things I Want Less Of" lists that you would like to remove from your "What I Do" list?

After analyzing this information, you are ready to create two final, but very important lists:

I Would Like to Be a <Title> Who...

You may not know what title to use yet. That's fine. It's more important that you discover what you'd like to be doing on a day-to-day basis.

List all the things you want to do. Some of these may be repeated from your current "What I Do" list, perhaps slightly reworded. Some might be from your "Things I Want More Of" list, and some might be things you just thought of.

A caution: Don't include anything on the list just because you think you should. You're crafting your ideal job, not expressing someone else's idea of what your job should be.

Now revisit the title issue. Your company may have a preset list of titles. If so, consult the list of official titles to find a close match to your ideal. In other cases, you may have more flexibility about your official title. I've known people who have titles like "Chief Test Geek," "Faceless Minion," and "Senior Jiggler" on their business cards.

Things I Could Do to Make My Current Situation More Ideal

Here you want to list changes you can make that will get you closer to your ideal, either with the help of others or unilaterally. Look at your "What I Do" and idealized "I Would Like to Be" lists. Mentally note the differences between them. What would you most like to change? They may be changes you can make today, or they may be slow changes that could take months.

Most of the time, we can steer our careers within our current situations. It's

INFO TO GO

- It's a good idea to periodically assess your career and establish new goals.
- Asking yourself some simple questions and analyzing the answers can help you define your dream job.
- Use lists to steer your current situation toward your ideal.

rare to find such a huge disconnect between what you're doing now and what you'd like to be doing that you can't take at least some steps toward where you want to be.

If, in doing this exercise, you discover there's no way to make your current situation match your ideal, don't despair. You can still achieve your ideal. It just may take longer and require some radical changes. Make the changes one step at a time, aiming for no more than a ten percent improvement each step of the way. And if you decide that you have to leave your current situation, it's a good idea to find your new job before you quit your old one.

Also, remember that time of year or other outside factors may affect your perception of the difference between your current situation and your ideal. When I lived in New Hampshire, I found myself itching to make huge changes in my life in the middle of winter. With snow piling up outside, I felt confined inside. My cabin fever affected my judgment. So I came up with a guideline to ensure I didn't make changes for the wrong reasons: "When living in areas with deep snow, don't make any life-changing decisions in February. The world will look a lot different in June." [STQE](#)

Elisabeth Hendrickson (esh@qualitytree.com) is an independent consultant specializing in software quality assurance and management with twelve years of experience working with leading software companies. You can read more about her ideas on quality and testing at www.qualitytree.com.

Jean Takes Stock

Jean works in the IT department of a large grocery chain. She was feeling a vague sense of dissatisfaction with her job and decided to do this exercise as a way of uncovering the specific areas in which she could improve her job. Check out Jean's lists.

Things I like about my job:

- the opportunity to learn new technology
- challenges that keep me on my toes
- co-workers I respect and like

Things I hate about my job:

- management apathy about quality practices
- penny-wise, pound-foolish policies
- long hours during crunch time

Things I want more of:

- time to learn automation tools
- appreciation
- money
- influence in what bugs get fixed

Things I want less of:

- overtime
- non-working software delivered to test
- blame for bugs in the field
- commute time

I'm a *Software Analyst* who

- designs and executes tests against both our software and third-party software
- sets up test configurations
- identifies problems before they affect our users and store customers
- picks up dropped balls and hands them back to management
- dabbles in test automation

I would like to be a *Senior Analyst* who

- designs and automates tests against both our software and third-party software
- gets problems fixed before they affect our users
- helps prevent problems from occurring in the first place
- has a great deal of influence with project decision-makers
- is recognized for outstanding contributions

Things I could do to make my current situation more ideal:

- learn how to communicate effectively with management
- make a case for spending more time on automation
- become involved in projects earlier so I could help spot potential problems earlier
- know what it takes to get recognized around here
- be promoted to Senior Analyst

From this list, Jean highlighted two things she could do immediately. Her manager agreed that more automation and earlier involvement were both good ideas and gave Jean the go-ahead. She decided not to ask for the promotion to Senior Analyst until she'd proven her value with increased automation and earlier involvement.

Jean also recognized two other things she could do slowly on her own. In order to discover what it takes to make management notice her contributions, she could observe who, if anyone, did receive recognition. She could also read books on management to help her understand more about how managers think.

By creating her dream job on paper, Jean was able to form a plan to shape her current situation to match her ideal more closely. Jean was lucky. She didn't have to make enormous life-sweeping changes to make her current situation better. Jean's story has a happy ending. She continued to consult her lists and make the appropriate changes, and Jean got that promotion!