

Introduction

Thinking back to the kind of careers advice I received at school and university – the kind that is still received in schools and colleges everywhere – it seems incredible that I trusted this advice at all. I may not have had a high opinion of the teacher offering the advice – generally a bored individual who repeated by rote the same information to student after student, who appeared anything but enamoured of their own career choice – but I certainly took on board the subtext of what I was told: work hard to pass exams, in order to go to university, to get a good degree that provides you with a more prestigious career. I drank in the automatic conclusion that a more prestigious career meant work that I enjoyed, that I loved to do; and that such work would make me happy. Full-time paid work in my chosen profession would be the foundation of a fulfilled life of self-esteem.

But my trust of traditional careers advice was not simple naivete. There was no other advice to trust. There were no alternative suggestions – these were unlikely, since the teachers and university leavers who offered the advice had traditional careers themselves. Everything suggested that without full-time employment, without ‘a career’, you had somehow failed, because paid work was of the highest

importance. An idea symbolised in the instinct when meeting a new acquaintance to ask, ‘so what do you do?’ – meaning, ‘what paid work do you do?’. Even without such careers advice I would have wanted a full-time career. This was what all adults did, or at least all the adults I knew as a teenager.

Even when I tried to find a career in work that I loved, and fulfilment and self-esteem were not forthcoming, still I did not consider the careers advice faulty. In my twenties I had career jobs in television, film and publishing, where I thought there a greater chance of enjoying the work, as these industries sent products into the world that I admired and personally valued. But when these careers were not fulfilling I did not blame careers themselves – I simply thought I had not yet found the right one.

But this was not the reason. Because although I loved to tell other people I worked in television or film or publishing, the reality was that it was little better than any other job. In any career, regardless of the actual tasks involved, it is the work culture – the work environment, the relations between staff, the organising principles, the amount of work – that affects the possibilities of fulfilment more than anything else. All of my careers, however prestigious, suffered the same problems: boredom, frustration, and lack of control of my life outside work.

I was not the only one disappointed: many of my friends with other great careers seemed even more disappointed. The doctors and teachers with socially-rewarding work appeared to have forgotten the promise of fulfilment just as quickly, in professions where the reward was supposedly built in. They rarely spoke of reward – when they did mention their work it was to bemoan the stress, organisational problems or idiotic managers. Our careers were sometimes exciting in theory, if we considered them at times when not actually doing the work. But they did not make us thrilled to get up in the morning.

If my peers and I had forgotten the promise of careers advice, had forgotten the reason we worked so hard to find this disappointing career job, the fact that our paid work dominated and controlled our lives had a more serious consequence: if there was little fulfilment and self-esteem forthcoming, there was also no time left to search for it anywhere else. Our careers, and recovering from our careers, took up all of our time.

It was only in my thirties that I began to understand that any career, any job that involved full-time work for someone else could never be fulfilling. Full-time work for someone else always came with certain features that meant fulfilment and self-esteem were unlikely – whatever the actual work involved. This led me to the idea that if the prestige

of a career made no difference to fulfilment from the work, then why bother competing for the prestigious career in the first place? I would be better off earning money in work that left me time for other areas of life that did fulfil me. The ‘good’ careers are so all-encompassing they leave little room for all the small actions that contribute to your own well-being, and to a healthy society: keeping up with family and friends, playing a part in your community, and most of all doing work of your own (probably unpaid), of whatever kind, that is valuable to you.

Because work *is* the source of joy, of a fulfilled life – if this work allows for innovation, and is work that you yourself genuinely value. This book is for anyone who desires to do this kind of work, who desires to spend a portion of their week engaging their brain in a manner that does not feel wasted, for the joy of it, not just to make a living. It is partly a memoir of why my careers were so unfulfilling, my experience of how work culture makes innovative work within companies so difficult. And it is partly my solution to this problem. I found my working life needed to consist of two different types of work: unpaid fulfilling work devised from my own ideas and interests; and then the less important work, for money, that I needed in order to survive. The combination of these two types leads to what I think of as a self-made career, that balances the needs of both – but always treats the fulfilling work as the more

important.

As with all advice, this is simply what worked for me. Not everyone desires innovative work of their own to find fulfilment – some people crave a career working for someone else for the structure it gives their life. But it took me a long time to realise what I had given up for this structure. And I think there are a lot of me's out there, people with ideas and ambitions who took on full-time careers without any real knowledge of the bargain they struck, and who wonder what happened to their lives. A self-made career could work for many people, people who deep down know there is other work they would rather do. When I look at the lives of the adults I know, the ones who appear happiest, who have the most self-esteem, are very rarely those with high-pressure full-time jobs, whatever profession they work in. They are those with self-made careers, where at least a proportion of their week is set aside for innovative work more important than the work they do for money.

This alternative advice feels even more relevant now when more and more schoolleavers are under pressure to go to university, to mire themselves in five-figure debt in order to secure one of these traditional careers. For many self-made careers university is not essential, and the important lessons learnt there, about confidence, self-reliance, sociability and so on can be found elsewhere at a fraction of the price.

Desperately applying for an elusive graduate career job straight from university is not part of a self-made career.

The urge to write this book was the urge to go back in time and hand it to my younger self, just graduated from university and hopelessly oblivious to the realities of a traditional career. I hope it goes some way to granting permission – to emphasise that you do not need permission – to people like my younger self, to encourage them to go ahead and focus on the work in which they are truly interested. Not for money, but because it is valuable to you in other ways. Perhaps it applies mostly to graduates, because graduates are at the sharp end of this argument: the most educated, and so with the greatest expectation of fulfilment from a career. To those told at school they are clever enough to be doctors, or lawyers or engineers or whatever, but who have their doubts whether *being* this thing, a doctor or lawyer, is really what they want for their life. But joy from work is not limited to graduates at all – whilst it is certainly dependent upon learning, this does not necessarily mean learning in formal education. Nor is it dependent on academic ability, the ability to pass exams. But I hope it is also of use to those who find themselves stuck in an unfulfilling career, at whatever age, to emphasise that the same permission still applies.

Traditional careers advice is right about one thing: work is the source of fulfilment and self-esteem. But it must be innovative work, and work that is valuable to you, from your ideas. It may (or may not) be rewarded by money, but this is not why you started it. When you have a proportion of each week set aside for work that you value, be it paid or not, how you earn money to support yourself becomes much less important. This is the life of the happiest people I know.