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Sanity Seduces Successful Off Fast-Track

Peggy Pennington was over 50 when her doctor gave her a tough choice, face a 25% greater risk of heart attack or stroke or change her lucrative, established career. She chose a career change and never looked back.

Pennington is part of a quiet revolution sweeping America-- the country that works more hours and take less leisure time than any country in the world. The yardstick of success used to be winning through dying with the most toys. However, when people work so hard to earn those toys that stress hastens death, one has to ask – are the toys worth it? Pennington remembers her motivation to get off the fast track as a highly successfully paralegal making over six figures. “I’ve worked with too many people who died. I worked closely with one attorney I adored. We were often working till 1-2 in the morning. A month after he turned forty he died of a heart attack.”

A 1992 Survey by Northwestern National Life Insurance Company found 40% of American workers feel their jobs are “very” or “extremely” stressful. Stress-related disability claims by American workers doubled from 1982 to 2006 and are still on the rise according to the Employee Assistance Professionals Association in Arlington, Virginia. The American Institute of Stress (based in Yonkers, N.Y.) reports as many as 75-90% of visits to physicians are related to stress – with an estimated cost to industry of \$200 billion to \$300 billion a year. The factors that cause stress aren’t just the obvious; long hours, travel or juggling home and work. Other stress factors include fear of violence in the workplace, powerlessness and workplace conflicts.

Eric Downs, (34) is currently the Managing Partner of his own home-based business, Foothills Outsourced Accounting. During his twenties he worked in four different Californian high-pressure starts ups (three of them went under). He recalls the worst stress of his fast track career was, “Not being able to influence the outcome. My managers often didn’t know how to manage. Our team would shift from playing solitaire all day to long hours. I could see the writing on the wall and not be able to help.”

Pennington chose to leave her job and Downs was handed the opportunity to get off the fast track in the form of a layoff. Downs remembers thinking, “If I go back to work for somebody else I’ll get comfortable and never get an opportunity to drive my own ship and use what I’ve learned. I had seen others fail at business and had a wealth of information about mistakes. If I didn’t give it a try all that knowledge would go to waste. Pennington’s moment of enlightenment came in an unlikely location -- Las Vegas. She went for relaxation and was getting a facial. She remembers, “Skin care was always interesting to me. I started to grill this poor esthetician about working conditions, where do you go to school, and salary. Then when I came home I found one of the top schools in the country right where I live.”

People like Downs and Pennington are getting off the fast track because they’ve evaluated their priorities and decided that quality of life; health, relationships and peace of mind

deserve a permanent place in their daytimers. As Pennington now says, “A lot of friends who worked in the legal profession thought I was out of my cotton-picken mind. Now they come and I give them a facial with a massage. Afterwards they feel human again. Now they say it’s the best career move I’ve ever made. My digestive issues have cleared up and my inner ear problems. I’m having fun again.”

Downs chuckled when I asked him about the life balance benefits of working at home. He observed one of the best parts is the commute -- down the hall past the toddler. Also being home has allowed him the flexibility to watch and bond with his baby daughter. He added, “Being able to take my dog for a walk in the middle of the afternoon and being at home so you can let repair people in are also great perks.”

So what steps might you take if you’re re-evaluating your life priorities? As an executive coach I’ve seen hundreds of successful people through effective career transitions and each successful transformation involves four basic steps:

- 1) **Think carefully about the pros and cons of making a career change.** Make plans to deal with the downsides. Shifting to part-time work, setting money aside, or putting a business plan together before you quit all will smooth your transition.
- 2) **Consider how your career change will affect your family or those close to you.** Both Downs and Pennington talked about how invaluable a supportive spouse was to their successful career change.
- 3) **Pick work you find fascinating, read books about, or would pick as a hobby.** No one can pay you enough to do something you hate for the rest of your life. When you do something you love you get two paychecks – an emotional paycheck and a financial paycheck.
- 4) **Don’t wait too long.** There will never be a day you wake up and say, “today is an easy day to take a risk.” Even if you plan and take baby steps, it is easy to give up because change generates anxiety.

When I asked Pennington what she’d tell other potential fast-track escapees she quoted Ray Bradbury, “If we listen to our intellect, we’d never have a love affair, we’d never have a friendship, we’d never go into business because we’d be cynical... well that’s nonsense you have to to jump off cliffs all the time and build your wings on the way down.”

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