

Is it Time to Make a Career Change?

Practice Management

by Diane M. Eade

You leap out of bed everyday, refreshed and ready to tackle the day's challenges with enthusiasm! You know that you can – and will – make a difference in people's lives, and you are proud of the caring environment that you help to create.

Does this sound like your life? Do you wish it did?

It *is* possible to feel great about your work again. Let's examine why you become a nurse practitioner or physician assistant in the first place. What was it that attracted you to your profession? Think back to your first exposure to the health care industry. Were you drawn by an opportunity to help people in need? Did you want to nurture others? Did you see your job as a positive way to make a good, reliable living – while remaining geographically mobile? Or, did you reach your current position through a less well-defined path?

Whatever your story, it's a good idea every so often to question yourself, to make certain that you continue to feel happy and fulfilled. After all, there are lots of different ways to make a living. You may as well select one that is both personally fulfilling and professionally stimulating!

How are you doing at work?

1. Do you look forward to going to work at least three days a week?
2. Do you enjoy at least half of your daily activities?
3. If you are currently dissatisfied, have you felt that way for more than two months?
4. Do you have a positive working relationship with your immediate supervisor?
5. Do you respect the goals and methods of your organization?
6. Have you learned something new at work in the past six months?
7. Do you really *care* about your patients?
8. Have you taken at least one uninterrupted week of real R & R in the past year?

WHAT TO ASK YOURSELF

A few simple questions, shown in the table, will help you evaluate your current level of satisfaction. If you answer "Yes" to most of them, you are probably feeling reasonably satisfied with your work and don't need to consider a move right now. If your responses were positive to the first three questions, but negative to the next four, it may be that your career suits you – but, for some reason, your current position is the wrong one. If you can't imagine yourself answering the first three questions favorably so long as you remain a PA or NP, perhaps it's time to consider a new career direction.

The toughest question to answer when it's time for a career adjustment is obvious: "What should I do next?" Since most people will have multiple careers over the course of a lifetime, it's smart to develop a couple of viable options to consider. Begin by evaluating your personal preferences. Take an inventory of your current duties and sort them into three categories: "Likes," "Dislikes," and "Neutral." Few of us enjoy all of our responsibilities at work. But if you classify most of your duties as "Likes" or "Neutral," your odds of long-term compatibility with a position rise dramatically.

THE TRUE PICTURE

Of course, it would be very shortsighted to limit your horizons to your current work responsibilities. Talk with people who now hold positions that you think might interest you. Be sure to ask them what they really spend their time doing.

I remember talking with a young woman about her interest in becoming a flight attendant because she wanted to see the world. I arranged for her to talk with several flight attendants, and her attitude changed rather quickly. She learned that they actually spend much of their time taking monotonous trips to the same few cities. Add to that the fact that their primary duties are serving people meals that they don't even enjoy and then cleaning up the ensuing mess.

She quickly saw that there must be a better way to fulfill her dream! The glamour of any position wears off very quickly. Be sure to take off those rose-colored glasses before you consider a real career change seriously.

"PEOPLE PERSON" OR "LONE RANGER"?

Emotionally, some people are better suited for isolated positions than socially integrated positions, and vice versa. If spending time with people wears you out, be certain to note that in your list of "Dislikes." If you thrive on being with people, add that to your list of "Likes."

Be aware that these feelings may shift over time. If you ordinarily enjoy interacting with others but currently find that people irritate you or drain you of energy, you may be experiencing burnout. Did you answer "No" to question No. 8? If so, don't solve a short-term problem (needing a break) with a long-term solution (changing careers). That happens far too often. Instead, take a good rest to revive your natural sociability. The best way to prevent burnout is to vacation somewhere relaxing for at least one uninterrupted week, at least once every year – enjoying new scenery, with few responsibilities. Taking time off to work around the house or run errands will not suffice, and long weekends are just not long enough! Give your psyche a real break – now.

A LONG-TERM CHANGE

But perhaps you're sure it's time for a career shift. What else belongs on your list "Likes," "Dislikes," and "Neutral"? Everything. Take your list beyond the obvious, everyday things. What activities did you like and dislike as a child? Write them down and dissect them into the most finite steps you possibly can.

For instance, "shopping" is too vague. Just what is it about shopping that you enjoy? Do you like new stores or more familiar shops? Do you usually look for one particular item, or would you rather browse? Do you like to shop alone or with others? Do you consult with store clerks or are you annoyed when they offer to help you? Do you insist on making purchases or is window-shopping more to your taste? The more specific you are in this exercise, the more objective and complete your self-portrait will become.

How about raising children? Parts of it are fun and interesting. Write them down. However, you find other tasks to far less engaging. Write them down.

What are your hobbies and why do you enjoy them? What aspects do you find tedious? Write down all of your answers. Use this process to review every facet of your life.

Once you feel the list is exhaustive, examine it for patterns. These may be easier to recognize if you group related activities together. Don't be influenced by what you think should be on your list; have someone you trust review it and give you some perspective. They may realize that there are things you've overlooked – because of subconscious biases.

At this stage, you need not have any jobs in mind. All you are looking for is some type of pattern in the activities you "Like," "Dislike," and are "Neutral" about. Once you have pushed this exercise as far as you can, set it aside.

AREAS OF EXPERTISE

Next, ask yourself: "What am I good at?" We know that long-term success at any job is tied to our ability to perform the work well. This satisfies both our ego and our supervisors, setting us up for emotional *and* financial success. The headings I suggest for this list include "Expert," "Competent" and "Some Exposure." Again, start with your current position, and consider every job you've had. Ask people who know you for their observations, too. Their perspective may allow them to offer insights that you would not otherwise have.

After taking a thorough inventory of all your work-related skills, look once again for patterns. If you've been successful in your current career, you will see the picture of an expert appear there. But other pockets of expertise may come to light, too. For instance, did writing make your "Competent" or "Expert" list? What about coaching new hires or interviewing job applicants? Are you experienced at researching specific health issues? How about creating efficient office procedures? Are you "Competent" on the computer? Do you have a knack for resolving difficult interpersonal situations? Are you great at demonstrating new procedures to other practitioners? Be sure to give yourself ample credit for your abilities. You deserve at least that!

Are you aware of strengths and talents that you're not getting to use? If so, a wholesale change may not be what you need; adding one new challenge to your existing duties may suffice.

Once you've completed this exercise, compare these results with those from the first list. Are there any matches? Any insights? Do the patterns in your lists point toward any careers that you are familiar with? Health care offers a wide variety of work options, and you may be able to make a change that builds on your past experiences and training – rather than start all over again in an unfamiliar field.

Avoid an immediate jump toward one career idea. Instead, use this exercise as a point of departure to consider all of the alternatives. If you use it to confirm any preconceived notions that you may have about your next career move, you will be limiting yourself.

The more you put into this effort, the more you will get out of it. Keep an open mind, and you may soon find yourself transcending the self-imposed boundaries that limit your current reality.

We are amazing beings, and each of us is capable of incredible accomplishments -- if only we believe in our own abilities and permit ourselves to dream. Use this exercise as an opportunity to do just that!

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