

Business

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EMPLOYMENT » *As the county's economy improves, more workers turning to counselors for guidance on how to create new opportunities*

Educated moves when transitioning careers

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THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Ken Haynes gained new career skills managing a Santa Rosa dental lab's operations for more than two years. But looking back, he said, "my heart was just not in it."

The Montgomery High School and Sonoma State University grad became intrigued with property management and began talking to people who knew the field. Then with the help of a career counselor, he revamped his résumé, took a sharp turn on his career road and got hired last fall as a property management assistant at Keegan & Coppin / Oncor International in Santa Rosa.

"This is exactly what I wanted to do,

and my life has completely changed," Haynes said last week. He credited career counselor Dena Lash, who "inspired the confidence in me that I could do this."

Most Americans aren't satisfied with their jobs, according to surveys by the Conference Board Inc., an international business research organization. Experts say that as companies have increased hiring over the past five years, more such workers may be inclined to consider a career change.

"When the economy's better, people are more willing to take risks," said Rich Feller, a professor in counseling and career development at Colorado State University in Fort Collins.

In 2014, only 48.3 percent of Americans were satisfied with their jobs, The Confer-

ence Board reports. That compares with a high of 60 percent in the late 1980s. The last time a majority of workers expressed satisfaction about their jobs was 2005.

For such workers, career counselors offer this advice: Figure out what you'd rather be doing in your work life. If needed, turn to a career coach or counselor for assistance.

"I help people get clear about what they want and then put a plan together to get it," said Susani Cook, a career counselor in Santa Rosa. She often asks clients, "Aside from the money, what is it that you really want in your next work opportunity?"

The counselors and other experts sug-

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CYNTHIA STRINGER, Santa Rosa career counselor

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gest a new era in the workplace has brought less job security and that in turn calls for a new mentality on the part of employees. Their advice for all workers: Don't get comfy. Gain new skills, and watch for new opportunities. And, when needed, find satisfaction in using your innate strengths and talents in ways not tied to a 9-to-5 job.

"It's the shift from the employee perspective to more of an entrepreneurial perspective," said Cynthia Stringer, a Santa Rosa career coach.

Stringer, who also teaches classes for Sonoma County Job Link's employment development program, recommends workers keep building themselves up through education, volunteering and networking.

It's hard to know whether more workers are changing careers, largely because the government doesn't track such movement, despite perceptions to the contrary. (The Wall Street Journal in 2010 noted the oft-cited figure that the average American will have seven careers, but it reported that the source of that pronouncement remains a mystery.)

The Bureau of Labor Statistics states on its website that it never has tried to estimate such a number because "no consensus has emerged on what constitutes a career change."

The bureau does track how long workers stay with the same employer, a length that in recent decades has decreased markedly for middle-aged males. For men aged 45 to 54, the median job tenure declined to 8.2 years in 2014 from 12.8 years in 1983, according to a report using the bureau's data by the Employee Benefit Research Institute, a public-policy group based in Washington, D.C.

For that same period, the median tenure for female workers of the same age rose to 7.6 years from 6.3 years, while the tenure for all workers 25 and older rose slightly to a median 5.5 years.

Feller, a past president of the Oklahoma-based National

Career Development Association, said technology continues to decrease the need for labor and has pushed more people to become private contractors.

"I'm quite convinced there's a major shift toward independent work," he said. For a decade, he has written about the "nervously employed," the large number of workers whose jobs are marked by accelerated demands to perform and to retool their skills and who live with the specter of one day being let go.

Pam Hayne, an employment and training counselor at Sonoma County Job Link, which provides employment assistance to job seekers, said she has encountered many underemployed workers since the recession. And hourly wages still haven't recovered from the downturn.

"Fifteen (dollars) is the old \$20," she said.

But of late, job postings have become more numerous, so much so that a few clients recently sought her advice about choosing between competing offers. As such, the times are better for those considering a career change.

"It's much safer to put your toe in the water and take a chance," Hayne said. "Things are better, for sure."

Those who succeed in shifting to a new line of work, said Hayne, do so because they basically have done their homework in two areas: "Know yourself, and know the labor market."

For those unsure what they want to pursue, the counselors can help clients assess their skills, talents, temperaments and goals.

But they also help workers, especially the unemployed, deal with doubts about their worth to possible employers.

"Looking for a job, you're vulnerable," said Dena Lash, Ken Haynes' career counselor and former manager of Job Link.

Clients said the counselors also provide key insights.

Haynes, 41, had worked various jobs when, with the encouragement of his wife, Jennifer, he enrolled in Sonoma State University and in 2012 graduated with an economics degree.

Haynes said Lash opened his eyes to how the skills he had

developed managing the dental lab could benefit him in property management.

"You are doing so much more than what your old title was," he recalled her telling him.

Similarly, the counselors can help prepare clients to interview workers in their chosen field and to take part in official job interviews.

Lynn Kwitt, a former social worker in New York, said coach Stringer has helped her think through what questions to ask and how to conduct oneself in formal and informal interviews. She still uses those skills in running her own Santa Rosa business, Wholistic Approaches, at which she provides reflexology, reiki and "raindrop technique" massage.

"She gives you tools, and the tools are really important," Kwitt said of Stringer. "It gives you the strength to know you can do it."

Part of the work involves helping workers think like hiring managers, the counselors said.

Employers likely won't be impressed by past job titles alone, said Cook. When looking at a résumé, she said, they expect the job seeker to "translate for me how what you've done helps me."

Once a client has selected a possible field of employment, the counselors send them out to talk to people who work in that industry.

Some, especially the introverted, at times balk at the assignment, but the counselors maintain the "informational interviews" are the best way to learn the good, the bad and the ugly about any field of work. In so doing, the meetings give the clients a chance to rehearse for the eventual sit-down with the hiring manager.

"They're getting practice in the interview process," said Lash.

The practice also expands their clients' networks and can help lead to finding job opportunities, sometimes before an opening is even posted.

"That's still how people get jobs," said Hayne of Job Link. "It's still about relationships."

Many of the clients seeking advice from counselors don't

want a regular full-time job. Instead, they are looking for preparation to help them obtain part-time or consulting work.

Jennifer LeBrett of Santa Rosa had worked more than 10 years as a title company escrow officer before taking time off to raise children. But while working, she took some training that got her interested in the field of organizational development. She went on to get a bachelor's degree in the field from the University of San Francisco.

She now does a range of consulting, including organizational development, project management and community building projects. Speaking with counselor Lash and talking with those in the field helped her better articulate both her past accomplishments and the type of work she now wants to pursue.

"I can't say it's all easy all the time," LeBrett said, "but it feels right."

Considering a career change can lead workers to ask bigger questions about their purpose and goals in other areas of life. Feller said some will decide not to climb the corporate ladder, or to seek satisfaction in work. Rather, they will find meaning through their "purposeful commitments" in other areas of life, whether raising their children, caring for elderly parents or volunteering.

Those who can use their natural strengths and talents in their careers will stand out in a workforce that a Gallup survey last year reported included nearly 51 percent American employees who were "not engaged" at their jobs and another 17 percent who were "actively disengaged."

In contrast, Gallup's past research suggests that those who use their strengths every day are six times more likely to be engaged, enthusiastic and committed to their work.

For the dissatisfied, the counselors suggested looking for better opportunities.

Said Lash, "When you're unhappy at work, it affects your whole world."

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