

By **Becky Roberts**

Having recently just quit a job I had held for nine years and four months, I have given the topic of job-changing a great deal of thought. However bad a job may be and however much you dread Monday mornings, making the decision to leave the job--especially one you have held for some years--is never a simple process. Even if your boss is an ogre, your pay raises haven't kept up with the cost of living, and your skills haven't been relevant for six years, you know you can handle this job.

There's a large degree of comfort in your current responsibilities and the company you're familiar with. Part of your brain knows you're capable of more, but another part is fraught with self-doubt and wakes you from sleep at 2:00 AM in a cold sweat, beaming an image of you in your new job frozen by ignorance, out of your depth, and facing termination. So how do you know when it's time to go? Based on my recent experience, here are my top 10 indicators that it's time to make the change.

1 You know you aren't performing to the best of your ability

We all go through slumps, bad days, even bad weeks when we just don't care, don't give it our best... but what if that week turns into months? If you just don't have what it takes to give it your best, something needs to change. This is a common sign of burnout or of being overworked, underworked, underchallenged, or out of your depth.

If lack of motivation is the only issue, it may be possible to effect change within your current company by requesting different responsibilities, more training, or another position. But if none of these options is available, it's time to update your resume.

2 You start gravitating toward coworkers you can be disgruntled with

Think about the people with whom you choose to socialize at work. Whose company do you seek out? Are you drawn toward the malcontents, the people who derive pleasure from complaining about their boss, the declining benefits, and the unreasonable overtime? When people ask you what you like about your job, is it rather like when Uncle Bob asked, "What's your favorite subject at school?" and all you could think of was recess?

3 You can't picture your future with your current employer

Do you remember those irritating questions the last time you were interviewed: "Where do you see yourself in three years? Five years? Ten?" Perhaps it's time to ask yourself those questions again. But this time ask, "Do I see myself HERE in three years? Five years? Ten?" If the answer to any of these questions is "no," what is your plan? Where do you want to go? When were you planning to make your move?

As much as we'd all like to simply wake up one day to find ourselves in the perfect job, the chance of it happening is probably slightly slimmer than a one-eyed, polka-dotted aardvark materializing in your trash compactor. If you know that you want to be working someplace else at some point in the future, it's never too soon to make a plan.

4 You take inventory of your job's pros and cons... and the cons win

If you're having a hard time deciding whether to change jobs, try this simple exercise. Create a document with two lists--things you like about your current job, the pros, and things you dislike, the cons. Next, apply a weighting to the items. This can be as simple as a value from 1 to 10 to rate the importance of each factor. For example, if the stringent dress code is on your list of cons but it isn't that important to you, give it a 1 or 2. But if the excellent health insurance is a pro, it would probably warrant at least a 7 or an 8.

Next, add up each list. If the cons outweigh the pros, it's probably worth at least considering a change. If nothing else, this exercise will force you to focus on what you specifically do and do not like about your current position and give you a more concrete idea of what to look for in a new position.

5 You look for ways to improve your current situation but you can't turn it into what you really want

Another useful exercise is to take your list of pros from the previous exercise and expand upon it. Elaborate on the items already on the list and add other items you wish you could claim about your current position. When you're finished, review the list for items you may be able to make happen at your current company. If you want more responsibility or more flexible hours, you might be able to work that out, whereas if you work for a missile manufacturer and happen to have developed pacifist beliefs since accepting the position, your only reasonable option is to seek a position in a different company. In other words, before jumping ship under the assumption that a new position will make all your problems vanish in an instant, make the effort to effect improvements in your current position. If trying to make changes proves futile, you'll be more confident that seeking a new position is the right thing to do.

6 Your skills are lagging and your position offers no opportunities to update them

How is your skill set? Are you able to keep your skills up to date? What would happen if your company went under today and you were forced onto the job market? Would you struggle to find a better or even an equivalent position because your skills are out of date? If this is the case, is there anything you can do to rectify the situation in your current position? Are there training opportunities you haven't been taking advantage of?

If it's not possible to stay employable in your current position, it's definitely time to make a change, even if you enjoy the job and your company seems stable. You may be able to supplement your company's deficit by paying for your own training, but without the opportunity to use your new skills in a work environment, such training will be of little value. To determine the current marketability of your present skill set, try searching for jobs equivalent to yours. Do you meet the minimum requirements?

7 You can't get enough positive reinforcement to keep your spirits up

Do you feel valued? Feeling valued in your job is one of those almost indefinable benefits or forms of compensation that can't be measured by any objective means. The degree to which someone needs to feel valued to be happy in a job varies greatly from person to person. Some people are perfectly content never to receive a word of praise or public acknowledgment of their achievements. For others, this type of recognition is more important than a generous salary.

The first step toward obtaining an appropriate position in this respect is to become aware of your own needs. The next step is to develop some techniques for determining whether these needs will be met when considering a new position, perhaps by asking appropriate questions during interviews or by finding current employees willing to talk. If you're already in a job that you otherwise like, figure out what you need in order to feel valued and find ways to communicate these needs to the appropriate person.

If the only time your boss talks to you is to tell you that you need to do better or improve your attitude, try explaining that it would also be helpful to know when you are doing something right. Try being proactive and ask your peers, your users, or your superiors to let you know if there's more you can do to help them. This could have the pleasant side effect of eliciting some positive feedback when they tell you that they're perfectly satisfied with your current level of service. If you still can't get the validation you need, it could be time to seek it elsewhere.

8 Your salary just isn't enough

Are you paid what you're worth? Although receiving inadequate financial compensation for your efforts is rarely the sole or even the most important reason that people change jobs, it's a significant factor. For most people, being paid what they're worth--at or above the going market rate for their job function--is an essential aspect of feeling valued. Don't know what you are worth? Try looking at comparable positions on job hunting Web sites, review compensation surveys, or update your resume and submit it to a headhunter to solicit feedback.

Being paid inadequately can be particularly galling if you happen to find out that one of your less experienced and/or less qualified co-workers is being paid more. Early in my career, I was given the task of training a new employee, an assignment I took on quite willingly until I learned that despite her lack of experience, her salary was almost exactly double mine. Although I continued to train her, my enthusiasm definitely waned. My request for a mere 5 percent pay increase was denied, so I took the only reasonable course of action and secured a position with a different company. In this case, salary was not the only factor, but it was the one that finally persuaded me to make a change.

9 You want to live somewhere else

Have a great job but hate the location? Even if you have the perfect job, unless your career is the single most important aspect of your life, disliking the area in which you live or having a burning desire to live someplace else is an important factor in deciding to change jobs. Since accepting my first IT job, the need to relocate has been a significant force in my decision to change companies three out of four times. In fact, of those three, I relocated twice without even having a job to go to.

10 Your company or work situation has changed radically since you were hired

Your job used to be perfect, but now it has changed. Maybe your company was bought out or your boss retired or got reassigned. Or perhaps your company had a significant shift in operating philosophy or in its mission, and now you're no longer working in the same environment into which you were originally hired. If such changes occur, you basically have three choices: Go with the flow and make the most of the situation, quit, or stay and complain. These types of changes can be so far-reaching in their impact upon your daily life that the result is not dissimilar to being forced to change jobs and companies. You may be going to the same physical location each day, but every other aspect of your job has been transformed. Even if you're not unhappy with the changes, this is a good opportunity to reexamine where you are in your life and make sure you take full advantage of the new circumstances.

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- "[Downsizing and a platform change create a career dilemma](#)" (TechRepublic article)
- "[Get a better picture of a potential job by asking these 14 questions](#)" (TechRepublic download)

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