

The First Job Blues: How to Adjust, When to Move On

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Two months into her first job after college, Tanya Lüthi was miserable. She found her work at an education foundation to be frustrating, filled with endless, pointless meetings.

Like many college graduates suddenly plunged into real life, she wasn't sure whether she was simply struggling to adjust to the working world, or on the wrong career path.

"When it's your first job out of college, you don't have anything to compare it to," says Ms. Lüthi, who graduated from Princeton University with a degree in politics in 2000. "Part of me thought that I was in the wrong field but part of me felt that maybe I had just been in the Ivory Tower for too long and now I was being a whiner."

It's a common feeling for people a few months into their first real jobs: They hate them, but they don't know why. For this spring's college graduates, the sentiment may be starting to emerge now. But how to determine the root cause of the misery?

Brad Karsh, president of JobBound, a Chicago career-counseling service, suggests grads examine the duties of more-senior colleagues. Are their jobs appealing? If so, stick out the entry-level drudgery in hopes of attaining more rewarding roles. But if the senior jobs also seem awful, that's a sign you're in the wrong career, company or job.

Another strategy is to find a slightly older mentor at the company, coaches say. Ask that person: Did you go through this? Is this normal? When does it change, if at all?

You should be prepared to accept some normal, and difficult, aspects of working life, coaches advise. For the first three to six months, expect to feel overwhelmed: Many tasks will be brand new, and you won't always understand how your efforts fit into the bigger picture.

For entry-level positions, many duties may be fairly menial, including data-entry and filing, Mr. Karsh says. Don't fret if your meatier assignments get radically rewritten, rechecked and criticized. What should concern you is if your boss criticizes you personally, rather than your work.

Another thing recent grads struggle with is not having control over their schedules, notes Barbara LaRock, a career coach in Reston, Va. That may mean giving up weekends and working late nights on short notice. "You really have to be flexible," Ms. LaRock says.

Unless a first job is unbearably awful, coaches recommend grads persevere for six to 12 months.

Sometimes, though, a chosen field may prove to be a bad fit. That's what Ms. Lüthi discovered. At her job with the education foundation she helped out with marketing, public relations and strategy. But she found herself in too many meetings that she thought didn't accomplish anything. The education-reform work of the foundation, while worthy, also seemed too abstract; she prefers more tangible, concrete projects.

She asked her boss for more tangible assignments, and got some. She redesigned the foundation's Web site and wrote a newsletter. But the job was still unsatisfying.

After about nine months, she visited career coach Peg Hendershot of Glen Ellyn, Ill. Ms. Lüthi took several tests and discussed the results with Ms. Hendershot. The assessment revealed an obvious gap between Ms. Lüthi's interests and her work at the foundation.

"The first thing she said to me was, 'You hate your job, don't you?'" Ms. Lüthi recalls. She needed a job that would give her more structure and more tangible measures of success. She had strong quantitative and spatial skills. One field Ms. Hendershot suggested was architecture.

Ms. Lüthi took an unpaid leave from her job to attend a summer architecture program at Harvard University. She loved it, but wanted something even more quantitative. Structural engineering, she realized, might be a perfect fit. Structural engineers engineer the structural skeleton of a building. She talked to "every structural engineer I could find" to learn more about their jobs, she says. Then, "I took the plunge." She enrolled in graduate school at the University of Texas at Austin.

She graduated in spring 2005. Today she's a structural engineer at a firm in New York. "It's a perfect fit -- it's detail-oriented, it's problem-solving, it's obviously very spatial," she says. Before, "I felt like I spent all my time in meetings talking in circles."