



Do What You Want to Do, Not What You Think You Should Do

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

I know two men who worked in New York City, each of whom made millions of dollars and immediately quit their jobs, taking up completely different careers as gas station owners in New Jersey. I learned about one of these men when I was in college, and I heard about the other man several years later, when I was a recruiter. For the past several years, I have puzzled over the stories of these two men because the similarities between them just seemed so unbelievable.

- One man had originally been a financial trader with a bunch of Ivy League degrees. He made his fortune by selling some trading system he had developed for \$10 million or so.
- The other man had been an attorney with an impressive pedigree as well. One day, he won a huge settlement and made around \$5 million.

Both men were in their 40s, and after these major career victories, each of them quit their jobs and bought gas stations on the New Jersey turnpike. These men did not know each other and were of no relation, yet they both ended up migrating into the same profession. How does one transform from being a person with incredible qualifications to a person who simply owns a gas station on the New Jersey turnpike?

From what I understood, these guys were incredibly happy after leaving their careers and taking on new positions as gas station operators. Running a gas station that sees a lot of business can be very profitable. Most gas station operators make around 10 cents a gallon in profit from every gallon of gas that they sell. In addition, they make a lot of money on the concessions that they sell inside the shop. Also, a lot of customers pay with cash, and the gas station owners often do not declare and pay taxes on their cash sales.

Owning a gas station is much different from being a Wall Street lawyer or trader. You report to work in jeans, not a suit. You often work with people who are not highly educated. Selling refreshments and gas is something, it would seem, that almost anyone could do. Why, then, did these men both plan such a drastic change in profession? Here are some likely possibilities:

- They wanted to be happy.
- They enjoyed working in the gas station.
- They could earn decent money in the gas station business and could maintain a high quality of life.
- They wanted to be independent, and having their own businesses allowed them this independence.
- They realized that much of what is going on and is expected of people in the working world is just complete nonsense.

The idea has always fascinated me: If you could rise up through the ranks in your company and become incredibly successful, hypothetically making enough money to retire--would your very next move be to purchase a gas station? Most people would probably not do this. Instead, they would choose to keep on doing exactly what they had been doing before. It takes a lot of courage to walk away from a prestigious job to do something viewed as much less prestigious.

One of the most interesting things that I have seen in all my years in the [recruiting industry](#), and as someone who has personally hired hundreds of people, is that many people out there seem to have been brainwashed into doing certain types of jobs and living certain types of lives. Most often, these people want to have the jobs that are considered the most prestigious, which pay the most, and are perceived as offering the most security. At the same time, the people who end up following all the rules to obtain careers and lives like this are often the most unhappy.

If you have a job or are pursuing a certain career primarily because you think you should, or because others think you should, you are making a huge mistake. You need to understand that if you keep doing this, you are never going to be truly happy. You need to be living the life and having the career that makes you happy. The voices that you hear inside yourself, which tell you to pursue a certain profession or be a certain thing, are often not your own voice. They are the voices of your parents; they are the voices of your peers in school; they are the voices of the people you associate with at work.

Around a year or so ago, I hired an investment bank to raise capital for one of the businesses I run. Despite the fact that the bankers have not yet raised the amount of money I am seeking, it has been an enjoyable year working with them so far and I have learned a lot. In addition, these people have raised awareness of our business in the market, simply by talking to certain key people in the industry. They have done a good job, and I have certainly learned a lot by watching how they operate.

I have noticed that the venture capital firms I am dealing with have been laying off lots of people. So have the investment banks. Since I chose to raise money at an inopportune time, the offers I have received so far have not been all that good. One deal that I was hoping would go through ultimately fell apart because the investors could not come up with the money. Nonetheless, I feel good about having at least gained some attention in this market.

Meetings with venture capital firms are fun and educational because the firms are typically run by pretty strong businessmen who know how to make deals happen. I have enjoyed speaking with these people because they have made me question many of the assumptions I have had about the businesses I operate.

A couple of months ago I received a voicemail from someone at one of the venture capital firms, asking me to call him back.

I was enthusiastic and assumed that he had called to make me an offer. Perhaps our company expansion would quickly come to pass.

"I have been very impressed with your business," he told me. "As a matter of fact, I cannot stop thinking about it. I do not think our firm is going to be able to get you the money you are seeking, but I would really like the opportunity to work with you," he said.

Given his enthusiasm, I asked the man to send over his résumé--and it was very impressive. In fact, it had all the right schools and all the right previous jobs leading up to the present one. Since he seemed so enthusiastic about working with me and my company, I invited him to come and meet with me in person.

"Are you actively **looking for a job**?" I asked him.

"No. In fact, if this is what you think, then I am not even sure it makes sense for me to come down and interview with you. I am just very impressed with the business and feel like it is a natural fit for me."

After having a few meetings with this fellow, I started to get the sense that he was probably looking everywhere he could for a job, and that he had probably been laid off. In addition, I got a distinct sense that he actually had no interest in me, or the business in particular, and was really more concerned with making sure he stayed on a certain track, wherein he would be making a certain amount of money per year and in a job that had a certain level of prestige.

While it was unspoken, I also understood that he was extremely unhappy in his current job and did not feel comfortable doing it. Finally, this man voiced to me that his real interest and desire was to start his own business. This was clearly what he was most interested in doing with his life, no matter where he worked along the way, acquiring all the necessary skills. There is nothing wrong with any of this, of course, but it was not what he had represented in his initial conversations with me.

Notwithstanding all this, I liked the guy. At the same time, I also realized that he was confused and did not really know what he wanted to do with his career and in his life. Many people, like this individual, end up getting "shook up" at some point and do not necessarily know what to do. This is often more problematical for people who have the best backgrounds, because they believe and have been taught that they need to be and operate on a certain path.

While this guy was probably making at least \$200,000 a year in his previous position, I decided to take a chance and I made him an offer to be a consultant for six months at \$10,000 a month. During his time as a consultant, I told him, he could basically work on whatever projects he wanted to, as long as it helped our company. I told him to try to create projects and tasks for himself that he would enjoy. After the six months, if he worked out and was enjoying the job, I would be prepared to make him a more permanent offer. I made the offer on these terms because I knew that whatever job the man ended up taking (whether with me or someone else) it would be experimental and might not be something that would last for very long.

As a side note, there is an obvious danger in hiring someone who wants nothing more than to have his own business. Namely, if you are training him in your business, he could possibly become a competitor. Several years ago, I had two legal recruiters working for me who I knew wanted to start their own businesses. Since I did not want to compete with them in the United States, I started telling them every time I spoke with them that Asia was the best place to be a recruiter, and this would be a great business to get into over there. Incredibly, when they eventually started their own recruiting businesses, they were both dedicated to recruiting in Asia. It was among the most humorous things I have ever seen, and these two recruiters are now currently handling almost all placements in Asia (10,000+ miles away from where our company concentrates its efforts).

I figured this man might have had a lot to teach me and vice versa, and that this would be the best way to proceed with him until he figured out what he was going to do. I was pretty confident he would not take the offer and I was right. A few days after receiving the offer, he called me and declined. The reason was that I was not offering enough money, or any stock options, or other types of perks--things that he typically would have expected.

"It sounds to me like you are at a real crossroads in your career. You are going to need to decide if you want to be a bureaucrat or an entrepreneur," I told him.

He knows that he has a choice to be one thing or another. He knows that he is at a crossroads. But my guess is that he will stick with doing exactly what he was doing before and will spend his entire life and career in a role that is not satisfying to him.

Life is too short to be doing things you do not want to do. You should be doing what you want to do, whatever is in your heart. Maybe this means owning a gas station--maybe it does not. It can be anything that you enjoy. If you do not yet know what it is that you enjoy doing, you had better get out there and find it. As Marsha Sinetar says, *"Do what you love; the money will follow."*

THE LESSON

It is important to have a career that makes you happy, rather than pursuing a career simply because you or others think that you should. Life is too short not to be doing the things that you really want to do with your life. If you do not yet know the kind of work that makes you genuinely happy, you need to go and find it.