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# 10 Things You Should Know About Career Coaching

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By *Demetrius Cheeks*

It's no secret that it's still a pretty tough job market out there—both for people who are completely without work and those who have jobs but certainly not the dream *careers* that they desire.



For some perspective, according to the [latest unemployment data](http://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/empsit.pdf) (<http://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/empsit.pdf>), some 11.8 million people are out of work in the U.S. And although there are no real stats to measure these folks, there are likely millions more who have gigs that they'd very much like to leave. Yes, that kind of tough.

Fortunately, there are a growing number of professionals out there who can help make your search a bit easier—people like [Donna Sweidan](http://www.careerfolk.com) (<http://www.careerfolk.com>), a certified career coach with over 15 years of experience in the field and the founder of careerfolk.com.

LearnVest sat down with Sweidan to uncover the art and science of career counseling—as well as to better understand how a career coach can help prep you to compete against those millions of fellow job-seekers.

## **LearnVest: First off, what exactly is career coaching?**

**Donna Sweidan:** In my work, I approach it as a discipline comprised of two similar but distinct tracks: coaching and counseling. The goal is to support people in making informed decisions about their career development and trajectory, as well as offer various tools that they can use—résumés, cover letters, LinkedIn profiles—to meet those goals.

Although not all career coaches have clinical training, as I do, definitions of the field—and the work—may still vary among more conventionally trained coaches. In general, “coaching” tends to be a solution-oriented approach, which involves working with clients to see what concrete steps they can take to achieve career objectives. “Counseling,” however, is more process driven—you look at whether there are any behavioral, emotional or psychological issues that could be impeding a person's desired career ambitions.

But the core virtue of career coaching is to help people assess their professional situations with a greater degree of honesty, curiosity, empathy and compassion.

### **What are the most common misconceptions about career coaching?**

My top three? That a well-done résumé is all you need to conduct an effective job search—and that career coaches will actually *find* you a job. There's also the popular notion that you only have to attend a single career-coaching session ... and your job challenges will be resolved. It actually takes about eight to 10 hours of counseling for the typical client to begin internalizing the key benefits of coaching.

### **What can the average person expect to get from working with a career coach?**

By and large, clients can reasonably expect to gain career confidence, insight, encouragement and inspiration. They should also feel as if the coaching relationship grants them some permission to relax a bit. The job search can create a fair amount of anxiety, fear and vulnerability in people, and I often work with clients to unwrap those emotions so they can better understand how these factors may be keeping them stuck in their careers.

A recent client of mine couldn't break the pattern of just submitting resumes to online job postings—even though little came of it. After some prodding, she revealed that, because her parents both had bold personalities, it was her tendency to hold back. She struggled with being assertive, she was reluctant to ask for help and she was scared of rejection. I had to encourage her to develop the confidence that's essential for networking—the piece of the job search that she was avoiding.

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There are also a number of assessments that career coaches can use to help clients, such as personality tests, interest inventories, accomplishment exercises that identify what people are most proud of and job-description analyses that can pinpoint the kind of work and workplaces that are the best fit for someone.

I also use what I call “360s,” which involves getting constructive feedback from family and friends. I often ask clients to circulate a list of questions to colleagues and loved ones, and then I have the replies sent directly to me, so I can compile a report for the client to review—and hopefully contemplate.

### **At what point in a person's professional life is career coaching likely to be most useful?**

While I believe that career coaching can be helpful at *every* point of someone's professional path, I would say that good career coaching in the early years of college or immediately post-college can put individuals on more solid footing—

not just with a well-crafted résumé and a suitable career path, but also with a mindset that helps them understand that the career path of today is not as direct as it might have been in previous generations.

### **Are there certain career frustrations that you hear most often from clients?**

It should come as no surprise that I hear, “I hate my job, but I don’t know what else I can do!” But what might be a bit surprising to some is that I also tend to hear things along the lines of “I have no idea what I can do with these skills,” and “I need help pinpointing what exactly I want to do—and how to get there.”

Job-search anxiety is also something that I frequently encounter. And, as of late, an ever-increasing number of clients expresses frustration with using social media, especially LinkedIn, as an aid in their career goals.

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Take a recent client of mine—a former stay-at-home mom who was motivated to return to work, but was reluctant to use social media in her job search because she doubted its usefulness. After a few sessions of showing her how a community of like-minded people used such networks to get their message out, she came around to the idea. Within a year of working together, she landed a coveted job as a national outreach director—and she attributes it largely to her social network.

### **Organizational culture or employee attitude—which bears more on a person’s sense of job satisfaction?**

In my opinion, organizational culture is the greater factor. Zappos, LinkedIn and Google are all organizations that are proactive in fostering a positive, relaxed, non-hierarchical and generally enjoyable work environment. These companies encourage employees to do things beyond the work, whether it’s active volunteering, getting coaching or simply creating better work-life balance. All of these factors are bound to improve a person’s sense of work satisfaction, provided that they are in the right job to begin with.

### **Be honest. What’s your dream client?**

Someone who is open to new ideas, willing to step out of his or her comfort zone and motivated to embark on the work that makes up the job-search-and-career-change process. What’s more, a good client allows the coach to be a partner in that process. It’s actually essential because there are so many tricky steps along the way, whether it’s the tough job market or a very lengthy career change. So clients should reach out for as much help as possible—from the coach and from everyone else in their personal or professional networks—in order to succeed.

### **At what point might the usefulness of career coaching diminish?**

There are certain factors that can impede the utility of the career-coaching process from the outset, like unchecked anxiety, depression, low self-confidence, fear or general resistance to change. I will often ask, “Do you think that you may be depressed?” And the person will acknowledge it—often for the

first time. I had one client whose spouse didn't even recognize the severity of his depression! I recommended that he seek medical attention, and within about a month, he was truly motivated to focus on his career.

Aside from those things, if and when—for whatever reason—clients are no longer doing the work required to conduct a thorough job search or make the desired change, the utility of career coaching will also decrease.

I have a client who's currently in this situation. He knows what he wants to do, but for some reason, he's sabotaging the process by not heeding my advice to revamp his resume and network effectively. He applied to what he considered to be his ideal job, but because he failed to follow up and network, the opportunity disappeared.

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### **What brings you the most satisfaction as a coach?**

Nothing compares to having clients gradually recognize that there's hope in their situation, particularly after having started the process feeling lost and hopeless. I've seen people go from feeling completely disenchanted with their career or job prospects—even apathetic and unmotivated to change their circumstances—to feeling freshly inspired and motivated to move forward with new ideas.

### **If you could identify a “Golden Rule” of career satisfaction, what would it be?**

If you are doing something you really, truly enjoy, it shouldn't feel like work at all. Ideally, you should feel a sense of alignment between your work and your values. It's only in that space of overlap—which may or may not relate to your sense of purpose in the world—that a genuine sense of career gratification or fulfillment becomes possible. If you want a job that brings fulfillment, then aligning your work with your values is essential. If you already derive fulfillment from work, then your work is probably already an extension of your values.

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