When it's time to move on in your career

In outplacement coaching, I often meet clients who, looking back, are surprisingly relieved to have been made redundant. Many had not felt comfortable in their role or organisation for quite some time. So why do so many people remain in work situations that have long become a burden?

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Being dismissed is a heavy blow: pride is hurt, and uncertainty about the professional future triggers fear. Even those who are dissatisfied often find it easier to endure the familiar — even if it's frustrating — than to face the uncertainty of something new. Yet fear and inertia only explain part of this passive behaviour.

People often struggle to pinpoint when exactly their work situation began to deteriorate; the change was gradual. When circumstances shift abruptly, for example due to a major restructuring, people generally find it easier to take action and initiate change.

Everything changes — constantly

It's like the well-known boiling frog parable: throw a frog into boiling water, and it will jump out immediately. But place it in cold water and heat it slowly — it will stay put until it's boiled alive.

We tend to assess our work situation subconsciously. If the positives outweigh the negatives, there seems no reason to act. Yet we often perceive our situation as more stable than it truly is — the framework conditions are constantly shifting. Managers come and go, company strategies evolve, technology transforms job profiles, and markets keep moving.

And not least, we ourselves change — often without noticing it. Our life goals and values may shift. We grow older, our needs evolve. Or we may simply outgrow a role and suddenly find ourselves under-challenged. Over the years, many small changes can silently tip the balance into the negative.

The search for someone to blame

Many people respond to this by withdrawing and doing the bare minimum. Those who tackle the situation actively often exhaust themselves searching for someone to blame. The self-confident tend to fault their environment, believing it should return to how it once was. The self-critical, in turn, believe they must change themselves to fit back into the organisation.

Yet the truth is often simpler: employer and employee have simply grown apart — as I described in my article "Change the situation, not yourself."

So how can you tell when the balance has turned negative? Reflect on your professional situation regularly — even in good times — and take stock consciously, ideally in writing. You'll realise that every job involves compromises. That awareness will help you accept when the balance has shifted and it's time to move on. And if you maintain your employability, you'll be able to face upcoming changes with confidence.

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