

Follow-up Work. Play of Misery?

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One reader's story:

I worked for a pharmaceutical giant for almost 30 years ([company1], which became [company2] which merged in 2000 with [company3] thereby becoming [company4].

I loved working for [company1], it was commonly regarded as a job for life and the salary and rewards were second-to-none and envied widely. We felt valued, and were shown we were valued with regular gifts and bonuses. As employees we had a tongue-in-cheek reputation in the business world because things were so relaxed. And relaxed they were; we wandered around the hallways, chatting and drinking coffee, took 2 hours for lunch and often visited one of the 4 bars on-site for a beer or 3 with lunch. On a Friday we would often go to a nearby pub, and sometimes didn't bother coming back. BUT, if there was ever an important deadline that needed to be met, the offices would be buzzing with activity at 6am, and still buzzing at 10pm. Because we knew our value, and we were proud to perform, and we were rewarded. We felt like a family, all working towards the same goals. The pharmaceutical division was so successful as a result of this work ethic it branched out on its own to become [company2]. Life became a little less relaxed, but it was still an employer to be proud of. The bonuses became a bit tighter and less frequent, and expectations of our performance became more closely monitored.

Then in 2000 we merged with [company3], and along with most of the corporate world they embraced Performance Management as the bible of driving the company's goals and successes, and a conduit to climb to the top of the pharmaceutical company global-rating ladder. Daily life became intolerable. We came to live by the mantras, 'did not meet', 'met', and 'exceeded' expectations, which were monitored constantly and measured, with evidence, twice every year in the form of interim and end-of-year summaries, which were directly related to our bonuses, salary and share allocation. And every year, like many, I grew tired, and expectant to be told over and over again. . .

1. 'your performance is good, but you are in a high-performing group, and there is only so much money to go around'
 2. 'you are currently earning above your market rate which will be reflected in your bonus and salary consideration'
 3. incredibly; 'although your reviews describe your having exceeded expectations, you only met the same targets that you did last year, so by default you have under-performed'
- . . .and many, many similar descriptions which gradually whittled away what was initially a competitive salary into something I was barely able to live on.

We got more and more in debt due to stretching ourselves on a mortgage at the start of the 1990s, the interest rate was around 10%, so yearly 10% salary increases would eventually make finance management increasingly easier, but then with the recession the interest rate plummeted to around 1% and has stayed there ever since; the yearly wage-rises we were relying on to make life more affordable

were not forthcoming, and we were faced with living above our means indefinitely. We borrowed to make ends meet and I spiraled into a depression which led to my drinking, heavily, which took its own toll on my relationship with my family. Each morning I woke, hung over from the night before and as the realization dawned that another day at work was ahead, I was filled with dread, but went ahead anyway, until after a few years of this recurring cycle, anxiety reared its ugly head and I reached the point where I was experiencing upwards of 20 serious panic attacks per day. Leaving the house became terrifying and some days I couldn't bring myself to go outside, so I stayed in bed. One morning my manager and her manager came to my house. In my addled state I had left the front door open. They walked into my bedroom to find me asleep. We had a conversation about my problems and I dismissed them, claiming I wasn't feeling well. I couldn't sleep at night until I had self-medicated with half a bottle of JD plus at least 2 bottles of wine, often 3. I was on a collision course to self-destruction. Fortunately, my manager noticed my decline, and had me admitted to The Priory rehab center, which turned things around for me. I was signed off work for 6 months. I didn't touch the booze for 2.5 years, and the absolute best thing was that I was selected with many, many others within the company for compulsory redundancy; the company was struggling, we were in a depression and they were trying to align all roles with the main activity of the business; i.e., pharmaceutical research & development. The pipeline was non-existent and when I was offered the opportunity to apply for another role within the company (for less money), it took all of my powers of self-discipline to not tell them where to stick their offer. I took the redundancy package and walked away, and it was the best thing I have ever done, I should have done it a decade before, but I was a victim of imposter syndrome and had a young family to provide for, and a regular income seemed to be the sensible choice over the fear of leaping into the void of another job, or working for myself, despite my loathing the company I had once been so proud to work for.

Things have been very different since then. I took the opportunity, and redundancy money, to pay off most of our debt and I started freelancing my skills to the many people I had worked with in the 30 years I had worked for my former employer. I doubled my [company4] salary and have been in control of my life for 9 years and counting, and I bow to no man. I work when I want to work, and work for who I want to work for, and don't work for people I don't want to work for. And my performance is managed by how much work I do; the more I work, the more I earn; finally, the deal is fair and financial recuperation is directly relational to my productivity. As I've mentioned to you previously, the pandemic has afforded me the working life I could only dream of; prior to the lockdowns most of my clients preferred me to go into their offices so I could access their internal logging systems, but for almost 2 years now I have worked exclusively from home, and what a joy that has been; I often start work in my pajamas at 56am and sometimes don't bother getting dressed until lunch time. Then I might take a couple of hours off to go grocery shopping, and manage my working day how I want to.

I haven't forgotten those last 10, painful years prior to my going solo and they serve as a reminder that indeed, having a job is not necessarily better than not having one, particularly when it is driving your decline and adversely affecting your mental health, with or without your knowledge and acceptance.