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Stay employed: Find work you love and prepare for change

Unemployment rates keep soaring, and you've seen lots of friends laid off. You're wondering, "Am I next? Is there anything I can do to boost my chances of staying employed?"

I can't answer the first question, but I can answer the second. And the answer is: "Yes!" You can – and should – take steps now, not only to keep your job but also to keep yourself employable. How? Identify your "sweet spot," and then test the changes you may need to make in your career. Migrate your career toward your "sweet spot." You may need to push out of your comfort zone, but you and your career will be thankful for the proactive steps.

Your career sweet spot: Your sweet spot is work that engages your greatest strengths (abilities you possess that produce results) and your deepest passions (activities that excite and fulfill you). Studies show that when people do work in their sweet spot, they deliver exceptional performance and draw immense satisfaction from their job. (To begin your personal discovery, visit www.primarycolorassessment.com)

That's good news for you as well as your employer. Companies hate to lay off someone who's contributing to the organization and who's intensely engaged



RICK SMITH

in his work. Why? Engaged employees have boundless energy and creativity – two things companies need most during tough times.

Take big, scary risks: Migrating your career toward your sweet spot requires change, and change can be scary. Perhaps you'll need to take on

new roles at your current organization – or move in an entirely new direction. That's unsettling, because it surfaces four types of risk:

Passion risk – Will you love the new work?

Competency risk – Will you be good at it?

Opportunity risk – Is anyone out there interested in what you have to offer?

Life-change risk – Will you be better off once you've jumped into your new life and can't turn back?

If considered holistically, these risks can seem paralyzing. To shake off that paralysis, you need a way to safely test the changes you have in mind – safely. That's where the Spark Sequence comes in.

The Spark Sequence way to test the

waters: The Spark Sequence is a process I developed of taking low-danger, exploratory steps in order to gain exposure to new types of work and alternative paths for your career. By activating the Spark Sequence, you gain insights and confidence while managing the risks associated with career change.

The Spark Sequence consists of three steps: Educate yourself about the kinds of work that would evoke your strengths and passions. Read all you can about that work. Find someone familiar with that work who could mentor you and explain the ins and outs.

Experiment with the work activities that interest you. For example, suppose you're interested in project management. You like to organize things, and you think (based on other life experiences) that you could be great at it. The next time you're involved in a project at work (pick a not-so-important one), take on some project management tasks – such as developing a schedule.

Experience the types of work that interest you. For instance, let's say you are creative and believe you would excel at developing new products or services. To gain valuable experience (and information about yourself), pitch in with a local community organization

that's looking for new ways to serve its constituencies.

Sparkling lets us answer the questions that hold us back. Answering those questions enables us to believe. Once we believe, we can act. And – the miracle of the whole process – once we act, so many of our fears and perceived risks fall right away.

Moving toward your sweet spot doesn't require crashing through brick walls. It's not an all-or-nothing jump to something new. Rather, it's a matter of simultaneously building information and experience; of using mentoring, modeling, volunteering, and perhaps part-time work to educate yourself and to build exposure to whatever you are leaning toward.

Take a moment now to identify work activities that draw on your strengths and passions. Start learning about, experimenting with, and experiencing those activities today. You'll gain crucial insights, skills, and confidence that you're heading in the right direction. And you'll vastly enhance your employability.

Rick Smith is the author of *The Leap: How 3 Simple Changes Can Propel Your Career from Good to Great*, is co-author of the *Wall Street Journal* and *Business Week* bestseller *The 5 Patterns of Extraordinary Careers*, and is the founder of *World 50*, one of the most influential executive networking companies in the world. For more information, please visit leapbuilder.com.

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