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What have I done?

Sometimes, a new job turns sour in a hurry

By Laura Raines
For *ajcjobs*
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You took the job because you were desperate, eager or inexperienced. A week or a month later, your instincts tell you that this is a lousy job.

Lousy jobs come in many flavors. You may have signed on with a rotten boss, a toxic culture or a sinking ship. You may have been victimized by the bait and switch: The job description says one thing; you are expected to do another. Or, the job itself may be perfect, but it doesn't fit your personality and skills, so you are miserable.



If you stay in the work force long enough, chances are you'll encounter one of these situations.

The lousy boss

"It could be the best job in the world, but if you're reporting to a lousy boss, you aren't going to be happy," said Roberta Chinsky Matuson, president of Human Resource Solutions in Northampton, Mass. "The person could be inept, a micromanager, a jerk or just incredibly stupid."

In her consulting work, Matuson uses her previous bad-boss experience as a prime example of what a boss shouldn't do.

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Leanna Adams works in public relations at Flourishing Business, a management consulting firm. In one of her previous, less-than-perfect jobs, she dodged a stapler that her boss threw at her.

"Working for that kind of boss can suck the life out of you. It can have a psychological impact," she said. "If someone tells you you're a poor worker and no one else would want to hire you, you may begin to believe it after awhile."

People get stuck because it takes so much energy to work at a lousy job, and there's no confidence left to find a different position.

"It takes a strong person to make the break," she said.

Her advice: "Do such a great job that you get promoted; ask for a lateral transfer within the company; or find a new job and quit."

If the company has an employee assistance program, talk to a counselor who can help you. Find a mentor you admire. Ask human resources for help, but be prepared to quit if negotiations don't work.

"As in marriage, if two people aren't willing to work at a problem, it isn't going to get solved," Matuson said.



If there is ethical wrongdoing (embezzling, sexual harassment), make sure you have taken good notes and can make your case.

The toxic culture

Robin Jay is an award-winning author and inspirational speaker based in Las Vegas. Earlier in her career, she sold advertising for TV and radio stations. As a self-motivated go-getter, she usually exceeded her sales goals by 150 percent, she said.

In 1999, a friend lured her into becoming the advertising saleswoman for a magazine, with a terrific guaranteed salary for the first six months and a larger-than-asked-for commission after that.

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Roberta Chinsky
Matuson



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Lisa Earle McLeod, author and speaker, learned an important lesson in her first job after college: Sometimes there's nothing wrong with the job or the company; it just may not be a good situation for you.

"It started out great. The first day, I was given my very own computer, but halfway through the day, the CFO came over with an adding-machine tape, wanting to know if I knew what I made an hour," she said. "He'd divided my monthly guarantee by 160 hours [implying that it was too much]. I knew then I'd made a mistake. I don't appreciate pettiness."

She discovered that her first commission check was for that month only; there was no commission for her sales while she was making the guaranteed "salary." She also learned that there was no sick leave, and no one ever got the benefit of the doubt. When someone made a mistake, he or she paid for it. The company culture was micromanaging and cheap.

"But I had priced myself out of the market by taking the deal. I couldn't change companies or go back, so I took an entrepreneurial route," Jay said.

For five years, she made millions for that company, tended a garden to retain her sanity and wrote a business book on Sundays.



([ENLARGE](#))

Sharon DeLay

She self-published "The Art of the Business Lunch" in 2004; picked up a distributor and agent in 2005; and signed a publishing deal with Career Press. The book has sold in 10 languages, and Jay speaks, writes and contributes to various creative projects.

"Those five years, I saved enough to live without income for three or four years," she said. "If I hadn't been so unhappy at the magazine, I would never have pursued my passion [her writing]."

She prefers to see "mistakes" as "learning experiences."

You hold the power to make a change, she tells audiences. "Look at your options, and create a plan of attack," Jay said.

Once, when hearing a Circuit City employee complain about the noise at the electronics store, she suggested he go next door and sell books at Barnes & Noble. "There are always alternatives," she said.

The sinking ship

In 2003, a year out of college, Leanna Adams took a job with a start-up software company that had big plans.

It had rented an entire office floor on Peachtree Street, but the offices never filled up, and the CEO left, as did the investors.

"One month they didn't pay me. Then they told me I could have my computer. Then

I was out on my tail," Adams said.

She took a series of jobs without thinking through her long-term career goals.

Finally, she followed a lifelong dream and went to China to teach English. It gave her the time and clarity to figure out what she wanted in a career.

She knew she wanted to write, and she landed a job doing public relations with Flourishing Business, a management consulting firm. It's a good fit, she said, and she was able to co-author, with Elizabeth Gordon, "The Chic Entrepreneur: Put Your Business in Higher Heels."

"My advice is never to take a job out of desperation, because you need the money or because you feel pressured by your parents or partners. Waitress or tend bar, but don't rush into a career position," Adams said.

When you're desperate, you might not look closely enough at the company, fully understand the position, or ask for the salary and benefits you need, she said.

The wrong fit

After graduating from the University of Georgia's business school, Lisa Earle McLeod got a coveted job offer from Procter & Gamble.

"I was so excited about getting the offer [great salary and company car] that I never asked myself if it was a good fit or if I wanted it," McLeod said. "Too many college grads know their skills and talents, but they don't know their own inherent personalities or the job market."

Isolated in a sales job, calling on intimidating and demanding customers, she dreaded getting out of bed in the morning. She developed health problems and gained weight.

"I thought it was me. It never dawns on you when you're young that not being a good fit for a job is OK," she said.

McLeod stayed more than four years and was promoted into the management track. She finally left for a commission-only job with a small training company.

"I was born for sales but needed to feel part of a team and that what I did mattered," she said.

There was nothing wrong with the corporation or her boss. It was just the wrong job for her. She found her right path when she discovered that she was more excited about writing a company skit than about the product it promoted.

Today, as president of Forget Perfect, she writes humorous books and columns, conducts workshops and coaches sales managers.

She advises, "If you're unhappy in your job, take a Myers-Briggs or other personality assessment and figure out who you are." It will help you find a job that fits.

Reading the signs

Some warning signs are obvious.

"When your boss takes you out for an eight-martini lunch on the first day, beware!" said Jan McInnis, a corporate comedian known as "the Work Lady," who spent 15 years in marketing. Other clear signs are when your predecessor's office space has been downsized to a cubicle or when the human resources manager complains about the company and gossips about the employees.

Sometimes, the signs are subtle.

"Learn to read the nonverbals," said Sharon DeLay, president of Permanent Ink, a professional-development services firm in Columbus, Ohio. "Does the hiring manager look you in the eye when answering your questions? If you're told your first priority will be to restructure the department, that could be a red flag. You need to ask why."

To avoid taking a bad job, DeLay advises clients to do research and ask questions in the interview. Read about the company on the Internet, especially what is said about it in the media and on blogs. Use LinkedIn, an online professional-networking site, to find people who work there and talk to them.

"If you're exhausted at the end of the day, and it's not from a feeling of being productive; if, in interacting with colleagues and leaders, your ideas aren't given consideration and respect; if you feel embattled and agitated — those are all warning signs," DeLay said. "Listen to what your gut is telling you, because a lousy job can cost you emotionally and physically."

If you suspect you've made a mistake, talk to someone you can trust, such as a coach or mentor, to gain some perspective.

"Look at your options," she said. "If you can't find a way to work through it, try and hang on until you can find another job."

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