

The Episodic Career: How to Thrive at Work in the Age of Disruption

By Farai Chideya

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Find your most rewarding place in today's economy. Award-winning author, researcher, and analyst Farai Chideya offers a practical guide to the ways in which work in America is changing and how you can navigate today's volatile job market.

Since the Great Recession of 2007–2009, America's work landscape has changed dramatically. Many people experienced long-term unemployment that eroded their savings, and the globalized economy means that not just jobs but entire career tracks are created and destroyed in front of our eyes. We're living in an age of rapid disruption where we can barely adjust to one new reality before a new new reality comes along.

So how are we supposed to live a rewarding life—working fulfilling, stable jobs that also cover our monthly expenses—in such a chaotic economy?

In *The Episodic Career*, Farai Chideya explores the landscape of employment in America. Profiling the rich, the poor, and people from every strata in between, Chideya seeks to understand the many kinds of work we do—for example, not just job fields, but whether we seek to build institutions or seek social change while earning money. In addition, Chideya provides a self-diagnostic tool to help you find your work/life "sweet spot." You'll see how different types of people have navigated their careers and forged their own paths even in times of hardship. As a young reporter at *Newsweek*, CNN, and ABC, Chideya realized that her working-class Baltimore childhood and factors like Ivy League education affected how people viewed her, and she takes a frank look at stereotypes, employment discrimination, and how to create healthy workplaces. Ultimately, she asks how we as a country can sustain the American Dream.

Knowledge of the workplace is power over your career. *The Episodic Career* provides the big-picture vision of the world economy, as well as the particulars of salary, family, health, and lifestyle that you need to thrive in a rapidly changing world.

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Editorial Review

Review
“*The Episodic Career* provides an unfettered view of how the world of careers has evolved today--and how to work it to your advantage. Farai Chideya shares personal stories from across America that explain how we face real job challenges and create opportunities for ourselves and others. A must-read before you leave for work tomorrow.” (Gail Evans, author of Play Like a Man, Win Like a Woman)

"Careers that once promised stability and security are imploding. The concept of the lifelong employer is receding into legend. The reality is in the title of Farai Chideya’s excellent new book: Your career will be episodic and multi-faceted. Fortunately, Chideya offers guidelines and real-life examples to help you march across this new terrain. This book is a must-read for anyone seeking to navigate the new world of work." (Daniel H. Pink, author of DRIVE and TO SELL IS HUMAN)

"The rapidly changing world of work is both confusing and exhilarating. ***The Episodic Career*** will help you make sense of what’s happening and give you great tools for navigating the new world of work. Chideya’s personal experiences coupled with in-depth research makes this valuable to anyone wanting more satisfaction and joy in their working life." (Barbara J. Winter, author of Making a Living without a Job)

“With eye-opening data and insightful, real-life stories, *The Episodic Career* is a must-read on navigating careers in an era of disruption and globalization. Our workplace has changed forever, and Farai Chideya shows how to make the new world of careers work for you.” (John Gerzema, author of The Athena Doctrine and CEO of Young & Rubicam BAV Consulting)

"The globalized, disruptive world of work presents dangers and opportunities. Simply put, job searches and job security don't work the way they used to. This practical, well-researched book is a guide to a better way for all who seek to navigate the new landscape." (Chris Guillebeau, author of The Happiness of Pursuit and The $100 Startup)

“In this smart and savvy book, journalist Chideya surveys the ever-changing American workplace, showing how to forge the best and most fulfilling career path.” (*Publishers Weekly*)

"Numerous interesting stories about people in a wide range of careers... are woven through this well-written book, which has at its center a Work/Life Matrix that Chideya says will help you "Know yourself, set your goals, play by your own rules." ...Chideya's research on the changes in America's work culture and economy provides context, and there are plenty of role models via the book's wealth of stories about people who took risks, bounced back and found unexpected satisfaction in the unanticipated." (*BookPage*)

"Journalist and policy analyst Farai Chideya tackles how to survive in a time of broadening inequality and dwindling job market prospects... The Episodic Career is part policy summary, part journalistic narration, part self-help book." (*The Guardian*)

About the Author
Farai Chideya has combined media, technology, and socio-political analysis during her twenty-year career as an award-winning author, journalist, professor, and lecturer. She is a senior writer at the data journalism organization FiveThirtyEight, and has taught at New York University and Harvard. She frequently appears

on public radio and cable television, speaking about race, politics, and culture. She was born and raised in Baltimore, Maryland, and graduated magna cum laude with a BA from Harvard University in 1990. Find out more at Farai.com.

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The Episodic Career

1

Work and the Pursuit of Happiness

WORK IS THE linchpin of American life. We work the longest hours among the biggest developed economies in the world, having outstripped most European nations and Japan, among others. Sure, we complain about not getting enough time off—yet collectively we left 577 million earned vacation days unused in 2013.1 Many of us are anxious, worried that if we don't work those extra hours, someone else at our job will and win favor for doing so. We also worry that we won't have enough to make ends meet. That's real. But there's also an emotional and even national component to what some people call a strong work ethic and others call the rat race. In America, work is not just a means of earning a living but also a form of self-definition and a cultural obsession.

If you were to walk into a cocktail party in Paris and, right after being introduced to a stranger, ask, "Qu'est-ce que vous faites comme travail?"—"What do you do for work?"—it would be considered très désagréable. Yet in many parts of America, that's our opening gambit. Why? We see jobs as the human equivalent of computer data meta tags; ways to neatly sort people and decide if they're valuable or desirable to us. If you're single, hearing doctor might make you think "Good catch!" If you're a job seeker, you might be focused on meeting someone in your field and head to the other corner of the room to see who else is more useful. That's natural, at least in our culture. Still, after my own career ups and downs, as well as our nation's job crises, I've become less likely to judge someone based on current or past employment. I definitely don't presume to know whether he or she is happy or not.

"The pursuit of happiness" is written into the founding documents of our nation. Yet our society puts so much emphasis on work and money as the cornerstones of our dreams that many people imagine that happiness is a luxury they can't afford. (Think of those millions of unused vacation days.) A focus on success by the numbers can undermine the satisfaction that we might gain from a more balanced workstyle.

This book is divided into four parts. In the first, I lay out the landscape of American jobs present, past, and future. You might find this edifying, terrifying, or tedious (if the latter, bear with me—this is crucial). There's no way we can figure out how to plot and navigate our course without good landmarks. In the second section, you get to explore your own desires with a self-diagnostic tool, the Work/Life Matrix. It will give you greater insights into how you want to use your skills and how you want to position yourself within a corporate or independent work structure. You'll take a simple quiz about your desired workstyle and then get to see how people who fit different patterns and archetypes based on the answers succeed. This storytelling-rich center of the book allows you to learn from others' hard-won wisdom. You'll see how different people have navigated their careers; overcome family and cultural programming that no longer suited them; or forged their own paths even in times of hardship. Part three looks at some of the hard decisions that require us to blend head and heart. How do we connect our intellectual knowledge with our intuitive, soulful knowledge? (The Work/Life Matrix will help.) This section covers issues such as the critical role of emotional resilience—that is, how to bounce back from hard times—a skill that you can learn and cultivate.

We'll also look at questions such as when job retraining or additional higher education is worthwhile and when it's a potential waste of money and time. Finally, part four examines success, both on your own individual terms and how we can build healthy employment options for America as a whole.

Throughout this book, I'll also speak frankly of the challenges that different demographics face, including employment discrimination. The idea of a modern labor market, with a reasonable degree of protection for people of all races and sexes (though not yet for gay and lesbian Americans on the federal level) is only a few decades old. America's roots include inspiration as well as exploitation. "The pursuit of happiness" wasn't designed for all.

One of the big questions facing this country is whether, in a time of rising income inequality, we can sustain the American Dream. While we focus on the ways that you can maximize your position in the US workforce, we also have to acknowledge frankly the systemic challenges and look at ways that individuals as well as groups can confront them.

Let's start, though, with that vast territory held within our minds and memories. We each bring to any situation a set of expectations about how things should be and how things could be. Those expectations can cloud our ability to see clearly, evaluate our options, and make the best decisions. Even jobs we love—perhaps especially jobs we love—can break our hearts. So let me share one of my own stories from a career that has taken me to Nelson Mandela's house and onto Air Force One but has also tested my limits of endurance and sometimes my finances. I share here for a reason—because I want you to see that I approach the topic of careers and society not just from an intellectual perspective but also from a human perspective.

A few years ago, I was totally ambushed and sabotaged on the job by someone who should have been my strongest ally. She worked me senseless, burned me out, and knew every button to push to make me feel angry or sad or defeated. Yet today I feel nothing but compassion for her. Of course, that woman was me.

September 2006: I had just become the host of the NPR show News and Notes, a daily live program encompassing African American issues as well as digital community, national politics, arts, and culture. It was such an honor, and the connection I felt to the audience is still one of the highlights of my career. News and Notes had been hosted from the East Coast originally, but since I was out west, taking the host seat initially required waking up at three in the morning Pacific time. Then, after writing and reading through scripts and adding the latest news to the rundown, I had to be lucid at six to talk to hundreds of thousands of public radio listeners. It was the second time in my career that I had unexpectedly gone from reporter to host. Although I was thrilled, I didn't anticipate how profoundly the sleep deprivation and pressure of daily production would affect my body, down to what foods I craved.

My routine changed entirely. Instead of going to see a band or cooking dinner with friends in the evening, I ended my weekdays mindlessly shoving food into my mouth. I remember standing late one night outside Ralphs supermarket in Culver City, a municipal peninsula surrounded by the vast sprawl of LA. It was dark, and the cool night air was a good forty degrees warmer than winter back east where I'd grown up. I was clutching a plastic bag filled with red velvet cupcakes, my drug of choice. And I didn't even like sugar—or so I thought, until my crazy work schedule upended my life.

My first seven months as a host, I worked from four in the morning until one in the afternoon. I'd been dating a guy. I'd be lying if I said we were serious, but he was great: a creative professional and loving dad whom I'd met at a conference. Heck, my mother, visiting from Baltimore, had even met him and his daughter. My regular shift had bonus midafternoon pretapes plus "homework": hours of daily interview prep (including reading up to three books a week). Now catch this: the man I was seeing worked from three to

eleven at night at a film production company. And he had his daughter on weekends. So with our schedule mismatch, it's no surprise the wheels fell off that bus, which left me dating Red—Red Velvet, that is.

Red was as seductive as a bad college boyfriend; the kind you know is lifting you up just to watch you fall down. I'd been a stress-driven eater since childhood, but the sleep deprivation changed my patterns from salty-fatty (like mixed nuts or cheese) to sugars. I used the sugar rush as fuel for doing my radio homework, but I had to be in bed by nine. Early bedtime was so not my style. I started working at Newsweek magazine full-time the summer after graduation, right before I turned twenty-one. I became a fact-checker by day, club kid by night, and went to bed at three in the morning. So going to bed at nine o'clock in LA made me bitter.

Another part of the job I had a hard time accepting was not being in the field—that is, traveling to interview real people with amazing, fresh stories. After joining NPR, my first job as chief correspondent and backup host at News and Notes gave me some great opportunities to see the country and tell our stories. In 2005 I covered Hurricane Katrina and its heartbreaking aftermath, and also filed a series of feature stories while driving cross-country. The downside of becoming host was not just the hours (which after several months shifted to a more reasonable start time) but also being lashed to my desk. Instead of making peace with the pros and cons of my job, or leaving, I literally swallowed my resentments in sugar form.

I gained forty pounds in the four years I worked at NPR, which I am still working off. That certainly wasn't the company's fault. I haven't heard of a job yet that doesn't have potential for stress. In my case, I had to help lead coworkers through editorial and emotional changes, as we lost staff positions and worked for more than a year under rumors that the show might be canceled. In 2009 it ultimately became part of a Great Recession wave of cancelations that took out three NPR shows and dozens of staffers. After the cancelation, I knew I needed to spend some time getting healthier. Yet I didn't understand until I began researching this book how harmful on-the-job stress is to your physical and mental health. Stress even explained the biological basis of my food cravings.

Once I moved back to New York in 2009, I found a new physician, Dr. Roberta Lee, who'd authored The SuperStress Solution. In it, she wrote of the recent emergence in many developing countries of the same stress- and diet-related illnesses that Westerners have long experienced, such as obesity, diabetes, insomnia, and heart disease.

"Chronic job stress is as bad for you as smoking a pack of cigarettes a day," Dr. Lee told me. "Your cortisol level rises, and your body goes into fight-or-flight mode." Cortisol is a steroid hormone that our bodies produce in reaction to stress. It's a normal part of our physiology, and when we need it as a "spot treatment," it can be beneficial, giving us energy. But prolonged stress and cortisol production can weaken our immune system, making it harder to recover from illness and injury. Excess, prolonged cortisol also increases our chances of developing osteoporosis, or bone loss, and it can even impair memory.

Sometimes job stress is inevitable, but we can always change how we deal with it. According to Dr. Lee, just taking a five-minute break in the middle of your day—"a walk, or quiet time with no devices" (no smartphone, television, or computer)—can reset your entire system and allow you to be more productive. Stress can cause the body to crave sugars, which exacerbates inflammation and generates layers of belly fat. That's exactly what happened to me, and because both my mother and grandmother had double knee replacements due to hereditary arthritis (not from their weight), I knew I was headed for joint complications that could greatly diminish my quality of life. This alarming realization pushed me to lose weight and follow Dr. Lee's advice. I'm certainly no triathlete, but I use my bicycle now for both exercise and transportation, and take time to do high-intensity workouts with a local boot camp. At the height of my job stress, I could have used the calm that follows an intense workout, but I'd convinced myself, quite wrongly, that a cupcake

was better for me than a hike. Exercise also produces endorphins, natural pain and stress relievers; and other research shows even a slow, meditative walk in nature without high calorie-burning value is good for our mental health and mood.2

To investigate stress-related issues further, I interviewed Dr. Elizabeth Blackburn, a Nobel Prize winner in medicine whose research has centered on cellular aging and telomeres. Telomeres are parts of our DNA that protect our constantly dividing and renewing cells from becoming corrupted copies of themselves, which can lead to diseases including cancer. She compares telomeres to the little plastic pieces at the ends of shoelaces that keep them from being frayed. In this case, telomeres keep our DNA from fraying as our cells divide. Telomeres naturally get shorter and less protective as we age, but stress accelerates the process. Studies of caregivers, for example—mothers caring for seriously ill children or spouses caring for a partner with dementia—found that meditation can reduce stress-based damage to the cells.3

Sadly, people under extreme job stress sometimes make irrational decisions. Unemployment and job stress are linked to depression, substance abuse, marital problems, and many other difficulties that can destroy lives and families. In July 2015 I ran into a friend at a Maryland arts festival. He told me that a man he knew had just killed his two sons and then committed suicide, despondent after losing his temporary job after years of unemployment. The next day, I read about the incident in the newspaper, and saw photographs of the heartbroken friends and relatives grieving the tragedy. Thankfully, incidents like this are extremely rare, but depression and health problems are common.

In a 2015 nationally weighted survey for this book that I conducted, 61 percent of respondents agreed with the statement “At times I have sacrificed my health and wellness for my job.” In truth, stress is always gunning for us. We have to decide how we can mitigate it, or if we simply need to choose a different job or workplace. I thought about searching for a new job when the strain of hosting a show that was clearly on the chopping block proved more than I could handle gracefully. But a voice in the back of my head said, “Good employees fight for their team! Leaving would be a betrayal of everyone on the show! And it would show you’re not tough enough to mount a proper fight!” Some of that was my own ego and pride, and some was my family programming. With parents and elders who were independent African Americans on my maternal side, and strivers raised in apartheid-like Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) on the other, we as a family are not quitters. I was able to go to Harvard University and have a career because I was supported by my ancestors—the ones still alive, the ones I knew as a child, and the ones who fought for freedom and independence before I was born. I believed at the time that leaving my job would betray my family’s values.

Once the show was actually canceled, however, I learned that our team’s loss was part of a much bigger fiscal picture, both for the company and for the nation in its Great Recession. Three shows ultimately were canceled as part of the overall budget readjustments, all of them based in locations other than the DC headquarters. Like so many people do, I overpersonalized the systemic issues at my company and made the mistake of thinking that championing my own well-being was somehow disloyal to others.

One of the people I admire deeply both for his work and for embodying a positive approach to work/life travails is Barry Johnson. Barry worked in the music industry as an executive, did international business development in President Barack Obama’s administration, and now is in the private sector and runs a nonprofit. He grew up in the 1960s in Birmingham, Alabama, a deeply segregated city where in 1963 four little girls were murdered when racial segregationists bombed the 16th Street Baptist Church during Sunday services. His family was middle class, but circumstances still could have limited his opportunities. Yet he kept growing through adversity. As one of his friends put it, “You were pushed into mud and came up dipped in chocolate.” That resilience is key to succeeding—and finding happiness—in today’s economy.

Barry uses a daily practice to keep himself focused and his career growing. Every single day, he writes down on a note card a vision of what his life will be like in the near future. Then he sets it aside with other cards in a dedicated space in his home. “There’s something profound when you put it on paper, and it gives you something to interact with outside of your own head on a daily basis,” he says. “I write in the present tense. It’s short, but I actually describe the details of the scene—like reading from a script.” He paraphrases: “?‘I’m working in this space. There are many people around me. They’re thrilled about working on the projects around us.’

“Sometimes I will put a date by something,” he continues. “I wrote: ‘I work for President Obama in this kind of role . . . I start no later than October 19.’ I wrote that on August 9. I started work on October 13.”

Not everyone will experience the same direct linkages between vision and action as Barry Johnson does, but writing exercises are a powerful way to explore your own heart and desires. Scripting what you envision for your life can be a powerful—and sometimes surprising—way of tapping into your most deeply held feelings. You might not want to write a page or a note card every day, but consider taking a week to write this type of envisioning-the-future every day. Are you writing more about the details of a job you want to have, or do you find yourself drawn to broad ideas about moving into a new field or even a new workstyle? For example:“I work doing commercial gardening four hours a day, which keeps me in great physical shape even though it’s hard; and two days a week, I work for the catering company. This gives me enough time to spend with my family most of the week.” When you look at your note cards, do your dreams seem too small? Too unrealistic? If the latter, what can you do to envision a series of steps between what you’re doing now and your desired workstyle?

Learning to focus not just on work but also on workstyle—how work and pay and time spent on the job integrate into your life—is something you can do with a variety of tools, including ones found both in traditional job search guides and in creativity programs such as the book The Artist’s Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity, by Julia Cameron. Some people plan through calendars and spreadsheets, knowing the timetables will inevitably change. Others use artwork as a way of visualizing the life they want. Whether you are methodical and have a five-year plan or you want to see where the winds of change take you, it’s important to stay in touch with what you envision as well as the realities of day-to-day life. In the resource section of this book, you’ll find lists of works that lead you through visioning-as-planning, and how that can help you identify true happiness and fulfillment.

The pursuit of happiness and life/work synergy is vulnerable to your hidden agendas—particularly internal clashes of values, such as “Obey thy parents” versus “To thine own self be true.” Elaine Chen works in corporate marketing communications, which requires learning new digital technology platforms and having managerial skills. She also earned a law degree primarily to please her parents, scientists who immigrated to the United States from China. Like her older sister, she was admitted to Harvard. Her mother and father made it clear that their support of her education was based on her pursuing a traditional high-status, high-skill trade. Liberal arts alone would not cut it.

“My parents told me they would take me out of Harvard if I did not basically have a major and have a career path they approved of, which is a lot of pressure to put on a seventeen- or eighteen-year-old who’s been killing herself to get into this kind of school,” Chen reflects. “As I grew older, I came to understand that that was pretty typical” in Chinese and other Asian immigrant families, “and that they didn’t understand why I was so resistant to their demands. I picked law with the full understanding that I was being told, ‘If you have interests, and you enjoy music or art, you can do that in your spare time, but work is for making money. Law is a stable career and it’s a profitable career and that’s what you’re going to do.’ So I entered law with the belief that I was here for the money, and I wasn’t going to enjoy it.”

Eight months after Chen got her first job as a lawyer, the firm downsized due to economic pressure and let her go. She had entered a field that promised security; but the economy after the 1990–91 recession proved that promise false. Today there is an even greater oversupply of lawyers. As Forbes contributor Paul B. Brown wrote:

Let me go back up 30 years.

I went to Rutgers Law School at night and it was ridiculously hard to get into back then . . .

There were 60 of us who started. Some 40 graduated and 30 of us passed the bar on the first try.

Of those 30 kids, only three of us should have been lawyers . . .

A random survey shows they think it is an okay way to make a living, but with the exception of Rob, Karen and Bill, no one seems emotionally fulfilled.

So, why then did they (and I) go to law school? Well, then—?like now I believe—the majority of students went because they didn't know what else to do.4

There are many reasons for what's now being called the "lawyer glut," including that law schools ramped up enrollment and the number of lawyers in America tripled in the past forty years.5 Consequently, law school enrollment has been dropping. Elaine learned early on in her career what our nation is learning collectively now: that relative job security, even in long-respected fields, changes constantly. Elaine went through many understandable moments of fear and anger—after all, she and her family spent tens of thousands of dollars paying for that law degree, and yet she had not reaped the expected high-status, high-paying career.

Ultimately, she turned an experience that could have left her bitter into a launching pad for new careers: first as a reporter covering the mobile technology industry; and then in marketing/digital strategy. In a sequence common to episodic careers, Elaine used skills she had already to gain new skills and find new career directions. Improving her writing as an undergraduate and during her brief time as a lawyer positioned her well to become a writer-reporter. The tech insights she learned from reporting on mobile technology allowed her to shift into marketing for companies with a strong technology base. Her current field offers her a good chance of remaining well employed as long as she continues to update her skills. And if or when that is no longer the case, she remains the kind of practical and self-analytical employee who is willing to seek out new skills and opportunities in different fields. (We'll hear more of Elaine's story later on.)

Happiness is certainly not the only goal of work. Some people would argue that it is trivial compared with the financial aspects of earning a living. But of course, the two are related. The Gallup organization estimates that worker disengagement—or people being mentally and emotionally "checked out" of their jobs—costs $300 billion per year in lost productivity. Harvard Business School professor Teresa Amabile and researcher Steven Kramer looked at that finding as they ran a study of thousands of daily diary entries by a cohort of workers. As they wrote in the New York Times, "The results [of our research] were sobering. In one-third of the 12,000 diary entries, the diarist was unhappy, unmotivated or both. In fact, workers often expressed frustration, disdain or disgust . . . Conventional wisdom suggests that pressure enhances performance; our real-time data, however, shows that workers perform better when they are happily engaged in what they do."6

"The pursuit of happiness" on the job can be frustrating when we feel consumed by external pressure from peers, partners, or family; financial constraints; or internal pressure about what constitutes success. And

episodic careers—where many of us switch fields or jobs more often than in the past—place more responsibility on us to be flexible and resilient, and also to champion our health and happiness. But just because we sometimes find ourselves mercilessly teased by this elusive thing called happiness does not mean that we shouldn't pursue it. True happiness, as the Gallup study and many more indicate, is a key factor in productivity and creativity. This is not the trivial form of happiness, but the deep pride that comes from a job well done and fairly compensated, whether that job is minding small children, serving customers in a deli, or running a research lab.

Employers have to take responsibility for their side of the bargain. As Kramer and Amabile wrote, "Unfortunately, many companies now keep head count and resources to a minimum, and this makes progress a struggle for employees. Most managers don't understand the negative consequences of this struggle. When we asked 669 managers from companies around the world to rank five employee motivators in terms of importance, they ranked 'supporting progress' dead last. Fully 95 percent of these managers failed to recognize that progress in meaningful work is the primary motivator, well ahead of traditional incentives like raises and bonuses." They concluded, "Working adults spend more of their waking hours at work than anywhere else. Work should ennoble, not kill, the human spirit. Promoting workers' well-being isn't just ethical; it makes economic sense."

I think of "the right work" as work that suits you. It's ethical, and you're fairly compensated for it. The phrase is inspired by the Buddhist tradition of "right livelihood," a version of which is found in every major religion and secular humanist tradition. For example, the Bible's Book of Proverbs includes the statements "Better is a poor man who walks in his integrity than he who is perverse in speech and is a fool" and "Wealth obtained by fraud dwindles, but the one who gathers by labor increases it." In a time of repeated financial scandals—from negligent lenders who took people qualified for traditional loans and pushed them into subprime mortgages to gain higher fees, to banks that hid money belonging to dictators and terrorists—it's easy to be cynical about money and ethics. But most of us have the opportunity to shape the ethical environment of our workplaces in ways big and small, and we shouldn't take that lightly.

Of course, paid work is, fundamentally, a transaction between employee and employer. We are living through times where workers are increasingly productive, but employers are not raising wages. And in many cases, they are also shrinking benefit packages—sometimes even changing pension and retirement health care benefits retroactively. For example, shortly after buying the venerable but financially vulnerable newspaper the Washington Post, billionaire Amazon founder Jeff Bezos ended the pension system that older employees had relied on for their retirement years. Yes, he offered them a fund in exchange, but it was not expected to have the same stability or dollar yield as the pensions. Employees who usually covered the news made news by picketing in the streets.7 Without Bezos's purchase, the paper as a whole might have faced a less promising future, but with these retirement changes, certain employees felt they personally faced a less promising future.

Professor Carl Van Horn directs Rutgers University's John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development. In his 2013 book Working Scared (Or Not at All): The Lost Decade, Great Recession, and Restoring the Shattered American Dream, Van Horn wrote, "[Most] American workers want more than just a good day's pay for a good day's work. Rather, they expect their steadfast contributions to a company to be rewarded with a 'permanent job' that enables them to retire with dignity. Naturally, employees hope for reciprocity from their employers. If they are loyal and work hard for the firm, they expect loyalty and honest dealings from their employer." But according to data from the Heldrich Center's surveys, which tracked twenty-five thousand people between 1998 and 2012, "More than eight in ten (85 percent) workers said that they were loyal to the organization where they work, but only 63 percent said that their employers were loyal to them." The news is even worse when it comes to overall job satisfaction, which according to its data dropped from

59 percent in 1999 to 25 percent in 2009. (Admittedly, 2009 was during the worst of the shock of the Great Recession.)

Research such as Professor Van Horn's raises plenty of questions for anyone seeking satisfaction through work. First of all, the concept of the "permanent job" is yielding to new realities of episodic employment. That can be sequential: one job or career path following the other, as in my mother's case. Or, as is my case right now, episodic careers can also involve doing different types of work simultaneously. I am currently a journalism professor, an author, a media consultant, and a freelance broadcaster. I get paychecks, and I write paychecks. I worry, quite often, about matching the ambitions of my ideas with the realities of my budgets. I have flexibility and freedom but constantly have to ride herd over demanding projects and give each of them its due. And, of course, all of this affects my own personal finances. For now I am a writer at FiveThirtyEight.com and a visiting professor at New York University. The job decision I had to make that I mentioned in the introduction would not take me from academia but complement it, although it would require constant long-haul travel for me to do both. Nothing is perfect, and certainly it never will be, for me or for anyone.

But "happy" doesn't rely on "perfect." It's a paradox. Happiness, in work and life, is a state of being that comes ultimately from within, yet most of us (except the most highly emotionally trained) need certain minimum external requirements to sustain our inner glow. That can include a minimum income. For example, research by economist Angus Deaton and psychologist Daniel Kahneman suggests that there is little difference in happiness between people who earn $75,000 a year and those who earn more. (Of course, the spending power of $75,000 in Canton, Ohio, is very different from $75,000 in Los Angeles.)8 It can also include feeling respected or feeling a part of something (an employee peer group, a local community, a family, or a circle of friends as "chosen family") as opposed to apart from something.

Elaine Chen, for example, says one of the things she loves most about work is feeling part of a community of peers and, as she becomes a more senior manager, being a fair manager and mentor to younger employees. She enjoys organizing social and holiday outings for her company, and employees tell her regularly how much it means to them that she treats them as a community. Yet she switches jobs every few years, usually remaining friends with some but not all of her former colleagues. Her attitude toward "work community" is that you create a collegial environment wherever you go, but she doesn't expect that environment to remain the same. It changes through attrition and addition even as she remains at a company. She has a permanent attitude toward work and employment, but not a permanent job.

So: Do you feel as if you have a "permanent job"? If so, what would it mean to you, financially and psychologically, if that job disappeared or changed radically? Do you have sufficient savings to weather a period of transition? How would it affect you to change how you describe yourself to people? (Think again about how often we ask, "What do you do?")

When I got laid off from my radio hosting job, I felt at a loss for how to describe who I was and what I was doing. I threw myself frenetically into multiple projects in an effort to reclaim some sense not just of what I did but also of who I was. In the intervening years, I found out something delightful: even though I faced financial challenges by not working full-time for one employer, I began to see more clearly what happiness actually meant to me, on and off the job. I returned to old personal pursuits, like visual art. I took up some new ones, like Cuban salsa. I visited several more countries and began doing travel writing. I got serious about examining my options for adopting a child.

When it came to work, I realized how much mentoring of young journalists I'd done and how much it meant to me. I applied to teach at Harvard's Institute of Politics for a semester, an honor I was thrilled to receive.

Being back at my alma mater and teaching the current crop of young leaders—who took me to an improv show by a troupe I'd belonged to two decades before—filled my soul. And so I began to search for a faculty position and was delighted to get one at New York University.

This is where my life can start to sound charmed and magical and privileged. It's certainly privileged, but not easy. Even given the happy "ending" to my still-unfolding story, I've had to accept a level of uncertainty about my work and career path that seemed unthinkable when I was a cub journalist in the early 1990s. I've never faced life-altering financial distress, but I've drifted into and out of credit card debt when I made bad bets on how I would earn a living. Journalism, a vocation I fell in love with—and that allowed me to see the world and grow as a person—has lost thousands of jobs since I started my career. Newsweek magazine, the first place I worked and where I was trained by a series of extraordinary journalists, passed through a series of owners and redesigns, ending up with a much smaller audience and circle of influence. Journalism turned out to be even more volatile than the labor market at large. Academia fulfills my calling to teach and mentor—and, unlike my current journalistic work—offers direct deposit. I appreciate both.

If I had to sum up the job market today in one word, it would be volatile, the result of technological and economic disruptions. Disruptive innovation changes entire markets, which can provide new jobs and means of growth but often displaces workers in existing industries. We humans have a tendency to romanticize or demonize the past as the "good old days" or the bad old days. As we'll explore in the next chapter, the American workplace has simultaneously become more diverse and legally fair, and also more divided by income and wealth. How well we understand work today shapes our choices and options profoundly. After all, unless you know the current state of play—both the challenges and the opportunities—you can't effectively pursue happiness on the job, or off.

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