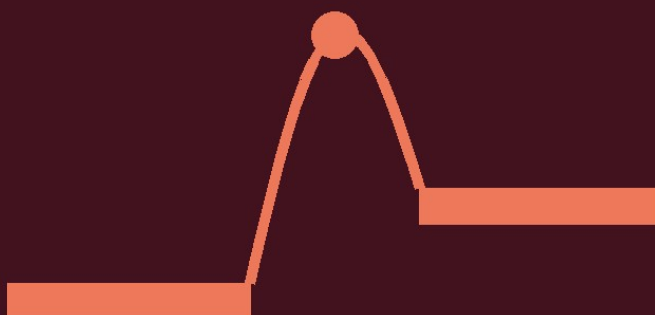


VERITY E-BOOKS

A RESEARCH-BACKED GUIDE · 159 VERIFIED SOURCES

THE FULFILLMENT GAP

A GUIDE TO KNOWING WHETHER TO STAY, RESHAPE, OR LEAVE



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159 INDEPENDENTLY VERIFIED SOURCES

How to Use This Guide

This guide is built to be worked through, not just read. Chapters 1 and 2 lay out what the research actually says about why achievement and fulfillment aren't the same thing, and what reliably predicts the second one. Chapter 3 gives you five structured self-diagnostic tools — rate yourself honestly, since the value of a diagnostic depends entirely on that. Chapter 4 turns your results into a decision: stay and craft the role you have, or start planning a real exit. Chapter 5 packages all of it into a 30-60-90 day plan so you leave with next actions, not just insight.

Every claim in this guide is backed by a real, independently verified source — 159 of them, spanning peer-reviewed psychology research, government and international-body data, professional-body standards, and recognized institutional publishers. The full bibliography is at the back if you want to go deeper on any specific claim.

Introduction: The Fulfillment Gap

Somewhere along the way, you were handed a formula. Get the degree. Get the job. Get the promotion. Get the title that makes your parents relax and your peers a little envious. Follow the formula long enough, the promise goes, and one day you arrive — and arriving is supposed to feel like something.

For a growing number of people who've actually followed that formula, arriving doesn't feel like much of anything. They're not failing. On paper, they're doing fine, sometimes better than fine. And yet there's a nagging, hard-to-articulate sense of being stuck — not stuck as in trapped in a bad job, but stuck as in unclear why this doesn't feel like enough, and unsure what to do about a problem that has no obvious external cause.

This isn't a rare glitch, and it isn't just a feeling — it shows up as a measurable gap in the data. Pew Research Center's 2024 survey of American workers found that half describe themselves as extremely or very satisfied with their job overall. But Gallup's 2025 research asked a sharper question — not 'are you satisfied' but 'does your work have a purpose you personally believe in' — and only 18% said yes, even though 30% said they'd want that from an ideal job. That twelve-point gap between wanting purpose and having it, sitting quietly underneath overall satisfaction numbers that look fine, is the fulfillment gap this guide is named for.

This guide takes that gap seriously and answers it with research instead of platitudes. It is not going to tell you to 'follow your passion' — that phrase is nearly content-free, and, as you'll see in Chapter 2, the psychology research on what actually predicts career satisfaction barely mentions passion at all. Instead, this guide walks through:

- Why achieving a goal so rarely produces the lasting fulfillment we expect from it, and why staying stuck can feel safer than it actually is (Chapter 1) — this is not a personal failing, it's a well-documented feature of how human psychology works.
- What the actual, evidence-backed predictors of career fulfillment are, drawn from the full range of career and organizational psychology research — and title, salary, and prestige are conspicuously not on the list (Chapter 2).
- A structured way to diagnose what YOU specifically need from work, including whether what you're feeling is actually burnout or impostor thoughts rather than unfulfillment — they need different fixes (Chapter 3).
- A decision framework for what to do next that isn't just 'stay' or 'quit' — there's a well-researched middle option most people never consider, plus an honest look at what actually works and what the decision science says about why leaving feels riskier than it is (Chapter 4).

- A concrete 30-60-90 day plan to act on all of this instead of just thinking about it (Chapter 5).

None of this requires you to blow up your life. Most of it can start this week, privately, without telling your manager, your partner, or anyone else that you're doing it.

Chapter 1: Why 'Making It' Doesn't Feel the Way You Expected

The treadmill you can't see

In 1971, psychologists Philip Brickman and Donald Campbell proposed what they called 'hedonic relativism' — the idea, since become one of the most replicated findings in well-being research, that humans adapt startlingly fast to both positive and negative changes in circumstance. Their original work, and the research tradition it launched (including later studies comparing lottery winners to accident victims), found the same pattern again and again: people recalibrate what feels 'normal' remarkably quickly, needing a new win just to feel the same lift as before. This is the origin of what's now popularly called the 'hedonic treadmill.'

Your career runs on the exact same mechanism. The promotion that felt like it would change everything gives you a real, genuine lift — for a while. Then your baseline resets, the new title becomes 'just your job,' and the goalpost quietly moves to the next title. This is not a sign that you picked the wrong promotion, or the wrong career. It's what brains do to literally any achievement, and it means that chasing fulfillment through the next external milestone is, by design, a race that never finishes.

The pleasure that fades, and the kind that doesn't

There's a reason the treadmill works the way it does, and it comes from a distinction well-being researchers Richard Ryan and Edward Deci laid out clearly in a widely-cited 2001 review: psychologists distinguish 'hedonic' well-being — feeling good, pleasure, a positive mood in the moment — from 'eudaimonic' well-being — a deeper sense of meaning, growth, and self-realization that comes from living in line with your values and using your real capacities. The burst of satisfaction from a promotion or a raise is almost entirely hedonic. Hedonic states are, by nature, exactly the kind of thing the treadmill adapts to fastest.

Psychologist Alan Waterman's research backs this up directly: in a 1993 study, people reported feeling more of what he called 'personal expressiveness' — a eudaimonic state — than simple pleasure during activities that were genuinely aligned with who they were, and the two experiences were measurably distinct, not just two words for the same thing. Carol Ryff's well-known six-factor model of psychological well-being (autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance), validated across large samples, gives eudaimonic well-being a concrete, measurable shape — and none of its six factors is 'achievement' or 'income.' The practical takeaway: if you're chasing fulfillment through the next hedonic hit, you're pushing on the lever that fades fastest. Chapter 2 is about the levers that don't.