

## MOTIVATION

# That old job may seem better, but nostalgia will take you only so far



## SUSAN PINKER PROBLEM SOLVING

### Dear Susan,

Eight months ago, I moved to the United States to fill a permanent position with a company that had employed me on contract in Europe for the previous 18 months. Even though this is a big promotion, over the past few months I've had difficulty getting motivated, which is unlike me as I have rarely had work ethic problems before. I find myself missing my old work and being in Europe. I'm distracted with thoughts of leaving and pursuing opportunities abroad again. My wife said she'd support my decision as I'm the major wage earner, but I'm worried that if I leave I might be giving up too early and burning bridges, plus forcing my wife to leave a new job she likes. But I'm 26 and fear that if I don't pursue other opportunities now, I may not be as mobile in the future -- with children, a house, etc. I'm an analyst and economist by profession, so I tend to think with my head more than my heart. My head's saying: "Don't be stupid, you have a good job;" and my heart says: "Go to Europe and do what you enjoy while you're still young." How can I remotivate myself in my current position if this is the right decision?

--Torn Between Head and Heart

### Dear Torn,

It's not my job to convince you to want what you don't want -- only advertising can do that. But, for

starters, I can prompt you to face up to your heart-felt desires. In this transitional, new-job state, you may still hanker to look at stately architecture on your way to work or eat the best gelato in the world on your way home. Maybe you imagine that while working on contract you weren't as committed, or that you'll never get as old as your parents are if you buy your groceries every evening and tote them home in a string bag along a cobblestone road. Whatever it is that's causing this restlessness has to be recognized for what it is, or this so-called right decision won't ever feel right to you.

It's probably nostalgia, or what Harvard psychologist Daniel Gilbert calls presentism, the tendency to evaluate past experience with today's glasses on. In his new book, *Stumbling on Happiness*, Prof. Gilbert describes how you cannot imagine the exact features of a penguin if you are actually looking at an ostrich "because vision is already using the parts of your brain that imagination needs."

Our brains give priority to present over imagined experience, which Prof. Gilbert calls the Reality First policy. This mechanism is quite handy because it forces us to stop at red lights even while imagining green ones. But it also prevents us from conjuring up the true taste of marshmallows while chewing on liver. In your case, it also means seeing future European opportunities with rose-coloured glasses -- lenses better suited to examining the present.

Prof. Gilbert marshals a lot of empirical data to show that predicting the future is always distorted by your current state of mind. Add in our tendency to remember only the high and low points of an experience -- and nothing in between -- and you get an

idealized (or jaundiced) version of your past that might have little to do with what it was actually like, or would be like if you tried to relive it.

Better to live in the present, says Joe Rich, a Toronto therapist featured on CityLine TV. I've lived in Europe, and remember that, although the farm cheeses were amazing, the washing machines were way too small and no one ever picked up after his or her dog. In other words, my current Canadian experience of sidewalks and appliances has coloured my version of the past.

Instead of allowing such distortions to sway you, Mr. Rich suggests taking "a six-month period during which there's no more thinking about where I could be, should be, or want to be and think about what you can do about the present to make it right." He adds that it's hard to get motivated about the here and now if you're fixated on the future. Standing still and reaffirming why you first made the decision to move to the United States is a good idea. At least that way you won't be tempted by versions of the past that are unfaithful to the future.

### Dear Susan,

I am a software engineer looking for employment opportunities. I frequently come across the phrase "demonstrated ability" while reading job descriptions and responsibilities. I have searched dictionaries and the Internet, but cannot find any definition, explanation or illustration that catches the essence of this phrase. How can I apply for positions if I don't know what they're asking?

--Searching for Meaning

### Dear Searching for Meaning,

Demonstrated ability means you have a skill that you've used before. So

if you've worked with a software platform in another job, that's a demonstrated ability. But if you can apply your past experience and analytical skills to learning new programs, that's a potential ability. I checked this out with high tech maven, IT head hunter David Perry, and he confirmed that "demonstrated ability" is human resources jargon for a specific skill. "Failure to say you have the demonstrated ability in your cover letter will likely get you screened out because the functionary assigned to screening résumés doesn't understand

the job specs and is just looking for key words. If the ad says C, you'll get screened out for saying C++. Don't make them think, just wink and give them what they want," says the author of *Guerilla Marketing for Job Hunters and Career Guide for the High-Tech Professional*.

It's unfair that recruiters use opaque language in a field that draws internationally trained candidates. But every discipline has its jargon, and human resources, the new kid on the block, is no exception. Journalists have skyboxes, breakout boxes and turn

lines, and lawyers have usufructs and testatrixes. Doctors check for full codes, no codes and suitcase signs, and psychologists refer to ADD, ASD, FLK and FAS. It's shorthand to be sure, but it's also about demarcating insiders from outsiders. You're right to want to get the lingo down as you try to climb the ramparts. Too bad they don't aim to get the good ones inside first and teach the code words later.

*Susan Pinker is a psychologist and writer.*  
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