When Work Isn't Working: An Honest Assessment

There are research-based indicators of thriving in the workplace that can help you assess your paycheck work. In fact, because organizations definitely have a vested interest in figuring out how to support human thriving at work, there's a robust body of evidence on the topic.

A 2017 review of literature on human thriving noted that, in addition to family support, positive attachment, and trusting relationships, our work environment can have a significant impact on our overall thriving.[10] First, and not surprisingly, our place of work can impact our thriving via the quality of support felt by colleagues and supervisors. But also work can provide another key enabler of human thriving: an environment with an appropriate challenge level. Having this appropriate challenge level (the work is interesting and hard enough, without being overwhelming) can support feelings of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (positive relationships with others, feeling that you make a difference), which can promote feelings of accomplishment and growth.[11] Researchers recommend clear goals and feedback, opportunities for self-expression, flexibility to meet human needs, along with a supportive community and meaningful work. (Sounds like a Montessori classroom to me!)

So if you're in the place where Abby was when she called me, asking "how do you know when it's time to quit your job," it's time to take stock of whether your paycheck work is living up to its potential. It's time for an honest assessment, because once we can pinpoint where the challenges lie, we are empowered to focus on a solution.

I created the following assessment to help us think through to what extent our work is or isn't working for us. Unless otherwise stated, consider your paycheck work over the last three to six months.

1 I feel a lot of anxiety or sadness the night before starting my workweek or several consecutive shifts.

5: less than 10% of the time
4: 10–25% of the time
3: 25–50% of the time
2: 50–75% of the time
1: 75–90% of the time
0: 90–100% of the time

2 I have colleagues who make work joyful; we laugh with and support each other.

0: less than 10% of the time
1: 10–25% of the time
2: 25–50% of the time
3: 50–75% of the time
4: 75–90% of the time
5: 90–100% of the time

3 At some point on a day off, I find myself resentful that I am not doing the things I want to because I am either recovering from my work or doing more work to catch up/get ahead.

5: less than 10% of the time
4: 10–25% of the time
3: 25–50% of the time
2: 50–75% of the time
1: 75–90% of the time
0: 90–100% of the time

4 I feel that I can successfully manage most of the challenges that I face in my work.

0: less than 10% of the time
1: 10–25% of the time
2: 25–50% of the time
3: 50–75% of the time
4: 75–90% of the time
5: 90–100% of the time

5 I enjoy thinking about or planning for my work.

0: less than 10% of the time
1: 10–25% of the time
2: 25–50% of the time
3: 50–75% of the time
4: 75–90% of the time
5: 90–100% of the time

6 I generally receive positive feedback, appreciation, or recognition for my work.

0: once or twice per year or less
1: once every month or two

2: once or twice per month
3: most workweeks
4: more than once per workweek
5: pretty much every day that I work

7 I feel confident that at least 40% of the time I spend at work is contributing to making the world a better place in some way.
0: once or twice per year or less
1: once every month or two
2: once or twice per month
3: most workweeks
4: more than once per workweek
5: pretty much every day that I work

8 My work is a source of friction in my personal relationships.
5: once or twice per year or less
4: once every month or two
3: once or twice per month
2: most workweeks
1: more than once per workweek
0: pretty much every day I work

9 I know where to get support at work when I need help managing my responsibilities.
0: less than 10% of the time
1: 10–25% of the time
2: 25–50% of the time
3: 50–75% of the time
4: 75–90% of the time
5: 90–100% of the time

10 I sleep as well as I usually do the night before starting my workweek or several consecutive shifts.
0: less than 10% of the time
1: 10–25% of the time
2: 25–50% of the time
3: 50–75% of the time

4: 75–90% of the time
5: 90–100% of the time

11 I feel that I have or can ask for opportunities to grow and try new things at work.
0: less than 10% of the time
1: 10–25% of the time
2: 25–50% of the time
3: 50–75% of the time
4: 75–90% of the time
5: 90–100% of the time

12 If I find myself thinking about or planning for work, it's enjoyable:
0: less than 10% of the time
1: 10–25% of the time
2: 25–50% of the time
3: 50–75% of the time
4: 75–90% of the time
5: 90–100% of the time

13 Depending on my type of work:
- If I average five or more days of work per week, I have energy to manage my nonwork goals and responsibilities (such as exercise, healthy eating, paying bills on time, and returning personal phone calls) through the week; I don't have to save all these elements for my weekends.
- If I work longer shifts for an average of less than five days per week, I have energy to manage all my nonwork goals and responsibilities (such as exercise, healthy eating, paying bills on time, and returning personal phone calls) on all my days off.

0: less than 10% of the time
1: 10–25% of the time
2: 25–50% of the time
3: 50–75% of the time
4: 75–90% of the time
5: 90–100% of the time

14 My most important people are proud of and support the work I do.
0: less than 10% of the time

1: 10–25% of the time
2: 25–50% of the time
3: 50–75% of the time
4: 75–90% of the time
5: 90–100% of the time

15 Time generally passes quickly for me when I am working.
0: less than 10% of the time
1: 10–25% of the time
2: 25–50% of the time
3: 50–75% of the time
4: 75–90% of the time
5: 90–100% of the time

16 I feel like I am generally good at the work that I do.
0: less than 10% of the time
1: 10–25% of the time
2: 25–50% of the time
3: 50–75% of the time
4: 75–90% of the time
5: 90–100% of the time

17 I feel physically and psychologically safe at work.
0: less than 10% of the time
1: 10–25% of the time
2: 25–50% of the time
3: 50–75% of the time
4: 75–90% of the time
5: 90–100% of the time

Scoring

Before you tally, take a hard look at that last one, number 17. Everyone has the right to feel safe at work. Regardless of your other scores, number 17 might be the dealbreaker. It's time to find another option if you're in a truly toxic or unsafe workplace. More on that at the end of the chapter.

That said, tally the rest of your scores and use the descriptions below to get a sense of where you are right now. Try on the descriptions; see if they fit for you. It's possible that you might find a different description that fits you better, and that's because some questions, and your responses to them, may be more important to you than others or may have a bigger impact on your life's healthy alliance.

It's also important to realize that alignment is a process and not a permanent destination. How you feel about things today might be different from a week ago or a month from now. But, if we can gain clarity on where we are, and to what extent our paycheck work isn't serving our life's alignment, we gain important clues about how to move forward. This is brave work!

Score set one, 0–34 range:
There's a major problem here. It's time to unpack what's going on. If your scores were in the 0–34 range, then your work and nonwork pieces are definitely not supporting one another right now. And while no job is perfect, there are some major elements missing that are required in order to thrive. Assuming that emotional or physical safety is not the issue, you only need to find a first step. It is time to get curious about what you most want your work and nonwork to look like. Where were your scores the lowest? What would change those scores? And are there any brighter spots that you can build on?

Score set two, 35–51 range: *Things could definitely be better. But there might be some bright spots, too.* If most of your answers were in the 35–51 range, then your work and nonwork have elements of misalignment that need your attention. This is completely normal, at different times, for almost everyone. Most of us did not grow up with a framework that can support a healthy life alignment; we've absorbed a lot of messages about the role our work *should* play in our lives or what our personal values *should* be. But alignment is about uncovering our own truths and crafting a life of meaning and thriving that works for us. In the next chapter, we'll take the first steps of the alignment process, so that we can discern where we need to make some changes. For now, you might note where your scores were higher and lower, to see if you can find any trends.

Score set three, 52–68 range: *Things seem mostly good. But there's always room for improvement*. If most of your answers were in the 52–68 range, then your work and nonwork show signs of alignment. Hurray! There are many elements of your work that are healthy and contributing to your overall well-being. You've got some of the bigger pieces under control, but there appears to still be some room to tweak and improve. For you, small adjustments might have a huge impact on your alignment. You might also need to really tune into yourself to unpack

what might be behind the lower scores. Looking for any trends that appear where your answers were higher or lower can be helpful, too.

Score set four, 69–85 range: *Congratulations! Your work is supporting your life's healthy alignment.* If most of your answers were in the 69–85 range, then your work and nonwork are mostly aligned. Remember, too, that alignment is a process, not a permanent destination. Change is inevitable in our lives, and we all have different seasons. The good news is that maintaining our alignment through every stage is possible.

A 2017 review of literature on human thriving: Daniel J. Brown, Rachel Arnold, David Fletcher, and Martyn Standage, "Human Thriving: A Conceptual Debate and Literature Review," *European Psychologist* 22, no. 3 (July 2017): 167–179, https://doi.org/10.1027/1016-9040/a000294.

Having this appropriate challenge level: Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci, *Self-Determination Theory: Basic Psychological Needs in Motivation, Development, and Wellness* (New York: Guilford Press, 2018).