

Career Coaching Today: Forget the Corporate Ladder and Find Yourself

The pandemic created a great reckoning among workers. Here to serve them is a raft of newfangled career coaches.

By Lauren Mechling

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Ana Sarnoski quit her job in the development office at the University of Florida in 2019, shortly after she gave birth to her second daughter. The frequent travel and the expectation that she attend events on nights and weekends were getting to be too much. Once the pandemic hit, she found herself missing the income, and the self-confidence that came with it. She started to wonder what her return to working life would look like given her disinclination to return to a job like her former one.

Ms. Sarnoski considered hiring a traditional career coach, the kind that could help her identify her ambitions and break them down into quantifiable goals and actionable steps. Ultimately, though, she reached out to Lindsay Morlock, a New Jersey-based spiritual coach who has seen a barrage of work-related questions that “speak to something much deeper than a career.” Ms. Morlock said that her business had quadrupled over the past 18 months, and in September she quit her job as chief operating officer of a fund-raising consulting firm in order to coach full-time.

Working with Ms. Sarnoski over Zoom, Ms. Morlock led full-moon breath-work sessions and palm readings of hand prints that Ms. Sarnoski had mailed to Ms. Morlock. “According to Lindsay, your hands are basically the blueprint to your life purpose, and you just need somebody to read them,” said Ms. Sarnoski, 40. Per her hands, her life purpose was not to return to the fund-raising cocktail party circuit but “to be a healer,” specifically of service to new mothers who are vulnerable to the spiral of postpartum depression. “It was mind-blowing to me,” said Ms. Sarnoski, who enrolled in a Pilates teacher training program and recently launched a custom healing macramé business called Guided Knots.

The pandemic, and the layoffs, closings and remote work that followed, set off countless professional identity crises. In September, 4.4 million people quit their jobs — a record. Women were elbowed out of the work force in particular and have been undergoing a monumental reassessment.

Here to serve the needs of the great reckoning of the remote-working class is a raft of newfangled career coaches. These professionals are far more like personal dream-catchers than data crunchers, relying on the powers of journaling, body work and stream-of-consciousness voice memos. Career coaches are tilting away from talk of performance and parachutes and who moved whose cheese and are helping clients navigate a career ladder that, for many, seems to have turned sideways.

“I don’t believe in five-year plans — I’m much more into a vision or intention,” Alyssa Nobriga, a Los Angeles coach, said of her work with individuals. Her clientele includes Hollywood actors, and she also runs a training program for 200 other coaches that sells out in a heartbeat.

All this soul-searching landed on an already-thriving industry: Between 2015 and 2019, the number of professional coaches worldwide increased by 33 percent globally, according to a 2020 report from the International Coaching Federation, a nonprofit dedicated to the profession. There are an estimated 71,000 professional coaches worldwide and 23,000 based in North America.

The \$2.85 billion coaching industry is unregulated, and the work that it entails is rather loosely defined. Coaches, who charge widely varying rates, are increasingly borrowing jargon and techniques from the therapist’s tool kit, but it’s not therapy — a distinction coaching experts and mental health professionals both make clear.

Dr. Anandhi Narasimhan, a Los Angeles psychiatrist, said she understands that coaching has the potential to help patients, but she worries about coaches without medical training navigating difficult issues. “Sometimes you need mental health care, and that’s different from finding your inner truth,” she said.

“Therapy helps people address unfinished business, like trauma and habits we have trouble breaking,” said Terrence Maltbia, the faculty director of the coaching certificate program at Columbia. “In coaching, there has always been an element of helping people discover their purpose, but the pandemic has amplified that aspect of it.”

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This paradigm shift is seeping into corporate domains where seeking one’s true purpose in life hasn’t always been seen as a priority. Katie Burke, the chief people officer of HubSpot, a Boston-based software company, said her company’s human resources department encourages employees to tap into their innermost desires and move around — and not necessarily *up* — the chain of command.

“If you’re trying to think about how to prevent people from finding their passion,” she said, “you’re fundamentally doing it the wrong way.”

What Coaches Do

The questions Rana Rosen asks her clients are both practical (“What’s the next micro-step?”) and geared at “unlocking knots” and “finding your deeper truth,” such as: “Tell me who you’re jealous of,” or, “Tell me what you do when you’re distracted?”

Ms. Rosen and the company she founded, “Henceforth,” are highly sought out by media professionals, some of whom are looking to escape the contracting industry. Magazine editors pass around her phone number as if it were a buzzy restaurant’s secret reservation hotline. (For her part, Ms. Rosen chalks up her popularity to her “knack for seeing people’s essence.”)

The two most popular programs that Ms. Rosen, who recently moved from New York to Dover, Del., offers are “Align” (\$555), which she calls “a concise deep dive,” and “Potent,” (ongoing, \$333 per month), which includes more access to Ms. Rosen and the regular exchange of text and voice memos.

In conversations with more than a dozen career coaches, every one said that the pandemic had profoundly shifted what clients were looking for. Ms. Rosen said she had seen a newfound sense of resilience in many workers. “I’m finding people are more open to taking the perceived risk of finding work they like and care about,” she said.

While clients seek out the help of coaches in order to make radical changes, the road to that destination can be winding, often pleasantly so.



Georgia Irwin, a coach, at her home in Ladbrooke Grove in West London. “If a client’s values are closely linked to productivity, then we will align their goals accordingly, but usually this isn’t the case,” she said. Mary Turner for The New York Times

“As a coach, I’m not interested in productivity for productivity’s sake,” said Georgia Irwin, who studied English literature at the University of Edinburgh and was, until she retrained as a coach two years ago, a communications and brand consultant. She said she works to understand her clients’ principles and core skills. “If a client’s values are closely linked to productivity, then we will align their goals accordingly, but usually this isn’t the case.”

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Dara Dubinet, a former raw food expert and jewelry designer turned life-direction specialist, encourages her clients to follow their “North node.” Her field of expertise, astrogeography, uses the date, time and place of a client’s birth to help identify their North node, which, she says, is their destiny. For \$265, a lost soul can purchase access to her Complete Life Tools program and watch a bundle of personalized videos about their planetary energies and life’s purpose and direction. The aim is to help clients stop “being so South node” (in their comfort zone) and move away from habits that don’t serve them well.

Shirin Eskandani has seen a threefold rise in career-related queries over the past year. Ms. Eskandani, a Brooklynite, switched over to the world of coaching four years ago, after finally achieving her lifelong dream of singing at the Metropolitan Opera. “I got to the pinnacle and I was totally burned out,” she said. A life coach helped her tap back into her love of singing, but she was more excited about her newfound love of the coaching process.

Now Ms. Eskandani is a full-time coach, generally working with clients over six-month spans. The sessions start at 90 minutes and scale back to 60 minutes, which is a fairly common structure in the coaching world. Slightly less conventional, however, are her favorite methods, which include the emotional freedom technique (E.F.T., better known as therapeutic tapping), guided meditations and breath work. She also sends some clients to a Reiki practitioner.

Listening to what their body can tell them about their career path is something Urszula Lipsztajn of Squamish, British Columbia, also encourages her clients to do.

“Things either contract or expand us,” she said. “I will remind them to be aware and pay attention to their bodies. They might say, ‘I was in a room with a lot of people and I felt expansive and excited.’ And then, ‘I was in a room with my boss’s lieutenant, and I contracted. Oh my gosh, now I know I need to leave my job. I don’t want to be here.’ ”

What People Want

When Caroline Webb started work as an executive coach, the work was focused largely on moving up in the corporate world: “The field was perceived to be about climbing up the ladder, and performance,” said Ms. Webb, an economist and former McKinsey executive who wrote the best-selling book “How to Have a Good Day.”

“The narrative has shifted,” she said. “One of the biggest priorities today is helping people see not just what job they might want but how they want to work differently.”

The once-dominant approach of establishing goals and goal posts, mostly around promotions and pay structures, has given way to an emphasis on self-reflection and inner truth-finding.



Dara Dubinet in Sedona, Ariz. For \$265, a lost soul can purchase access to her Complete Life Tools program and watch a bundle of personalized videos about their planetary energies and life's purpose and direction. John Burcham for The New York Times

“Covid really took the Band-Aid off the certainty that people were living with,” said David Dowd, the founder of Creativity Expansion Wrks, who poo-poo’s the word “change” (it’s “evolve”) and has been working as a Manhattan-based career coach for 50 years. “What worked isn’t working anymore,” he said.

The quest to be a super performer might also be losing some relevance. “If you think about what humans are better at than robots, it’s empathy, creativity, wisdom and inspiration,” said Ms. Webb. When she works with C-suite executives, the focus tends to be less on turbocharging a specific outcome than helping them develop compassion and leadership and stress-management skills — “this idea that you’re a human being first.”

The coaching industry sprung up in earnest the late 1970s, an outcropping of the Human Potential Movement, which emerged in Germany in the 1960s and gave rise to Werner Erhard’s EST school, known for its confrontational and often combative techniques. The apogee of results-focused coaching was illustrated by alpha-coach Tony Robbins’s appearance on the cover of Fortune Magazine in 2014.

With executives under pressure to be more compassionate and inclusive, the field is expressing a softer side and splintering out into untold specialties. “Now, there’s career coaches, there’s health and wellness coaches, there’s leadership coaches, executive coaches, life spirit coaches, spiritual coaches, dating coaches, health and wellness coaches, coaches who specialize in workers with A.D.H.D.,” said William Pullen of the Institute for Transformational Leadership at Georgetown University. “And awareness of coaching has increased — more and more people are looking to coaches for support and help.”

There’s also a new cachet factor. “Twenty years ago coaching was seen as remedial, a sign the candidate was coming up short,” said Michael Useem, a professor of management at the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School of Business. “That’s completely flipped upside down. It’s seen as a privilege.”

‘The Khaki Pants Whisperer’

Just before the pandemic, Eva Talmadge, a 40-year-old freelance book editor who'd recently moved to Washington for her husband's work, decided that she wanted to find a steady job. She was lonely, and she missed water-cooler chatter and benefits. "What I needed was the khaki pants whisperer," she said.

Ms. Talmadge ended up reaching out to Denise Fowler, a Virginia coach whose Career Happiness Coaching website flaunts professional bona fides (including an affiliation with George Washington University) and a picture of a balloon with a happy face — a combination of the old five-year-plan type practicality with the newer focus on purpose and authenticity.

Ms. Fowler helped Ms. Talmadge to rewrite her LinkedIn bio and résumé and to translate her skills for the particular needs of the D.C. nonprofit and think-tank world.

Following Ms. Fowler's advice, Ms. Talmadge rewrote her online materials to come across as chattier. ("Now my LinkedIn page reads: 'Hey,'" Ms. Talmadge said.) Ms. Fowler also diagnosed other problems: "She said that Times New Roman was the baggy khaki font of resumes, so it's now in Garamond."

But the coach's best piece of advice turned out to be the simplest and most spiritual one — to be open. Not long after dressing up her résumé, Ms. Talmadge overcame her reticence to brazenly network and told an email list of independent editors that she was actively looking for work.

A few weeks later, a member reached out about a gig editing for a Berlin-based think tank. Ms. Talmadge proofread her Garamond-font résumé one last time and sent it off to the organization. That's where she works now.