

# Career counselor Elayne Chou brings dead ends to life

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You can't make happen what you can't imagine. Enter Berkeley career counselor and therapist Dr. Elayne Chou, hired to connect hearts to minds to dollar signs. Here she advises future dropouts on transitions made mid-stream, mid-life and mid-career.

## **Q. At what stage between “just exploring” and “going postal” do people typically hire you?**

The central question clients ask is, “How do I find out what I want to do?” Most already know what they don't want, but don't know what they do want. When they get stuck at that point, they come find me. Some are struggling and in a lot of pain. Others feel empty and unfulfilled. Some need counseling. Others with stronger voices and clearer visions need coaching. Many who come have strong creative sides and artistic interests they'd like to bring out in their work.

**Q. Let's get the big one out of the way. How do you deal with money fears?**

I advise people on first getting their financial situation in order so that they feel more in control. After we work on that aspect, we can move beyond the “yes, but” of money fears to zero in on real desires, passions and interests. We can always come back to the money issue once it's being dealt with as just that – one issue among many and not a fear that shuts down exploration.

**Q. What fun things happen in the meetings?**

Like many career counselors, I start off administering the **Myers-Briggs** and **Strong Interest Inventory** assessments to establish personality type and career interests. But tests alone don't provide

answers. I spend sessions uncovering a person's authentic voice and behind-the-scenes story using different techniques. There's homework between sessions. Clients do exercises to explore decision-making styles, work and life values, skills, strengths, talents and goals. They also do informational interviews and build relationships with people in their fields of interest. We use that information to guide their search. The fun really begins when I have enough of a picture of a client to be able to start creatively devising custom-tailored exercises for them.

**Q. I'm hearing “voices.” What does voice have to do with career?**

To answer the central question, “How do I find out what I want to do?” we have to ask a more basic question, “Who am I?” Only your authentic voice can answer that. An authentic voice might say, “I need to be creative and free.” But other internalized voices of family and society might say, “Who are you to think you can do this?” These voices can drown out our authentic voice and true desires over time.

To strengthen the authentic voice, we role play. I become the authentic voice, while the client embodies the antagonistic voice, and vice versa. Speaking, listening, talking back and making your case will make your authentic voice loud and clear. You're already great at arguing against yourself, but you can use that same energy to argue *for* yourself.

**Q. How does someone handle the inevitable fear-mongering naysayers? Best fighting words?**



Career midwife Dr. Elayne Chou turns talk into action.

The best response to negativity is to reflect it back by commenting on how strongly someone seems to feel about your choices. The fact is that almost no one will look down on you for staying in the corporate world, however dissatisfied you are there. But judgment arises if you leave to pursue your dream, especially if you're the first to do it. Understand that others' fear and negativity are contagious and to be avoided.

First, make a commitment to yourself. Second, keep it to yourself. Don't poll everyone or seek general feedback early on. The question, "What would you do?" isn't a useful question because it doesn't matter what they do. Alternatively you might come up with a "board of directors" of positive supporters that you choose selectively. Be clear about what you want from them, whether it's emotional support, help with networking, recommendations on associations to join, or specific questions about their expertise. For instance, "I'm exploring your field and admire your website. What can you tell me about the e-commerce aspects?" It helps tremendously if you have a model, someone who's already made the break.

#### **Q. What if you're seriously daydreaming, but not ready to commit?**

Dabble, volunteer, act informally in your field of interest. Also, instead of focusing on one career path, consider a **"portfolio career"** which consists of more than one income stream, doesn't move in a straight line and is typically a longer process. It can be a freeing choice for individuals who have many interests and feel confined by having to choose just one path. For example, someone might have a job as a teacher, run a freelance graphic design business and also show art at fairs or galleries.

#### **Q. Wait, don't you find people their ideal "dream jobs?" What's the difference between a job and a career these days, anyway?**

Society is moving toward a "post-job" environment now. In general, a job is a short-term engagement, as in "day job". "Career" is a term that's in the process of changing. A career is yours to create. It's long term, more fluid and can include who you are beyond work. The younger generation and women taking time to raise children are viewing their careers with this big picture perspective that includes life outside the office.

The world of work is changing. Everyone, even corporate types, are going to have to develop the ability to continually adapt their skills to the environment rather than finding the one perfect "dream job" waiting for them. I help people develop skills and habits of career management that allow them to create work that is deeply satisfying – again and again.

Surprisingly, many people aren't looking for dream jobs. Most want right or "right enough" careers that satisfy their core values and allow them to maintain a sense of self. Others come thinking they need to change careers when they're actually satisfied fixing the problems in

their current job. Once you find the voice to ask for what you want and develop assertiveness techniques to deflect what you don't want, you might find that you're quite happy where you are.

People think that a career change should be easy, but it's rarely straightforward. They often come to career counselors thinking we can give them all the answers. We have to get clear on the questions first, who you were and who you are now, your individual style, and how you define success. In fact, that's a good place to start. For one person, it might be measured by money or the hierarchy of a corporate ladder. For another, it's not money, but doing what you love that makes you a success.

### **Q. Here's the real test. Is this *your* dream job?**

Yes, in the sense that I love what I do, and have the career I always dreamed of for myself. I sound like a geek saying it, but I truly never felt that earning my psychology Ph.D. was "work" since I enjoyed it so much. That was ten years ago, and I'm now at a point where I'm deepening my career identity, my program and my creative business process. I think of what I do as coaching on the art of living. I help people navigate the four central parts of life: learning, loving, leisure, and labor. Career counseling directly addresses the labor component but also reflects the other three components. To me, my career is a creation that never stops evolving.

### **Dr. Chou's resource list for freethinkers and future dropouts:**

- [The Career Guide for Creative and Unconventional People](#) by Carol Eikleberry
- [Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes](#) by William Bridges
- [The Joy of Not Working](#) by Ernie Zelinski
- [Wishcraft](#) by Barbara Sher
- [Crossing the Unknown Sea: Work as a Pilgrimage of Identity](#) by David Whyte

*Contact Elayne Chou for career counseling, coaching and consulting at (510) 435-9773.*

*Read other articles in the [Corporate Dropouts](#) series. For more health and happiness, contact Sho Sho Smith at [whimsicaltaxidermy@gmail.com](mailto:whimsicaltaxidermy@gmail.com).*



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