

How 4 Words Control Your Career Decisions

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By [J.T. O'Donnell](#)

Did you know four little words form a simple question that, in my experience, has a serious impact on your [career decisions](#)? Let me prove it to you:

Imagine you are in a room full of strangers.

In order to strike up a conversation, besides introducing yourself and asking a person their name, what's one of the first questions you'll ask?

ANSWER: *"What do you do?"*

There it is. A simple question that is so commonly used in our society, most people ask it absent-mindedly, in the same way they ask a friend, "How are you?" However, the question "What do you do?" has a much more serious implication. That's because, as soon as we hear a person's answer, we begin to size them up.

Admit it, when someone states what they do for work, we immediately start to think about the profession, our past experiences with people in the field, and then in turn, make generalizations and assumptions about the kind of person they are. In short, we start to decide how much respect we feel we should have for this person.

Now, do I think this is a fair or accurate thing to do? Of course not. How many professionally successful people lead miserable lives? Yet, it's the truth: career identity plays a huge role in how people are viewed. Which leads to this next observation...

It stands to reason, if we A) know we are going to be asked this question, and B) recognize we are going to be evaluated on our response, then it's likely that lots of us choose a career based upon its capacity to impress others.

For those of you thinking, "Sure, lots of folks probably pursue a career to gain respect, but not me," I challenge you to look deep inside yourself. Can you honestly say that your current career choice wasn't rooted in some initial desire to impress others? And, for those of you who are pondering the possibility that you've been pursuing career success to gain respect, let me prove my point with two additional questions:

1) If you had to stand up and introduce yourself to a room full of strangers, besides your name, what's one of the first things you would tell them about yourself?

ANSWER: *What you do for work.*

2) Think of the most successful person you know.

Now, ask yourself, “Did I automatically choose someone with *career* success?” In other words, did you associate the word ‘success’ with [professional accomplishments](#)?

ANSWER: *Most likely, you chose someone who has accomplished a great deal in their career. Yet, perhaps you can also point out that this success has come at a cost in some other area of their life. (i.e. relationships, health, etc.)*

My point is this: as a culture, we place a lot of emphasis on our careers as a way to define us as people. But why? Who benefits? Isn’t the goal to create our own happiness? Then, how does being obsessed with professional success as a way to determine self worth help us?

Perhaps, it’s time to stop impressing others and start impressing ourselves. For many of us, when work isn’t going well, life isn’t going well, right? Yet, here’s the thing: [career success](#) doesn’t guarantee a happy life. In fact, the way many people pursue careers in America leads to very unfulfilled lives. No wonder so many people are dissatisfied with their careers – they’re costing them too much. I say it’s time we start to take the pressure off one another and get to know each other differently – and, hopefully, better.

So, here’s what I propose:

Starting today, stop asking the question, “What do you do?” and instead, simply ask, “What do you like to do?” Now there’s a question that will give us much greater insight into who a person really is.

What do you think? How will changing what you ask people change what you learn about them? More importantly, will it change how you view them, too?

Your Next Step

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