E10: Creating a job you love with author and career coach Becca Carnahan

**Becca:** I worked in career professional development for about nine years, became a career coach, loved the work but a big inflection point for me came when my kids were born. So my son Jack was born in 2015. My daughter, Nora was shortly thereafter, 15 months later in 2016. And as a working mother, I was driving about an hour and a half into work an hour and a half back home. Peeling into daycare on two wheels to get there on time. It was a lot and I started reflecting a lot on if I wanted to be doing that commute for how much longer when my kids went to elementary school. How was that going to look in terms of getting them on and off the bus? That was definitely a big question mark for me. But I also thought about what I wanted for myself too. And seeing my kids start to learn and explore and appreciate the world in their own way. I was like, you know what? I haven't taken a pause to figure out what kind of work actually gives me the most energy. What am I most excited about in my day to day? So did a lot of self-reflection and leaned on the career coaches that I worked with to do some of this work into eventually come to the realization that for me, it was a combination of writing and coaching. I loved writing. I loved writing for my blog that I was doing on the side as a personal project. Something to tap into something that was just my own. I love the career coaching work that I was doing. And then I really started to think about how I could combine both of those into a fulfilling career.

And it all came together. When I started talking with other moms, sitting around in the playground about what they were doing for work. And oftentimes it came up that they were at inflection points, trying to figure out what they wanted to do next in their career. And I was like, you know what? This is it. I want to use my experience in career development to help his other moms were pretty much like myself to figure out their next steps. And I can do that through writing and I can do that through coaching. And that is how I ended up building my business eventually leaving my full-time role. I still coach at Harvard, which I am very grateful for that. And I, I love that community there. But for the most part, I focused on my own business coaching and writing and serving other moms who are seeking more joy and fulfillment in their work, in their lives.

So my book, 'When mommy grows up: a guide to parenting yourself to a more fulfilling career' came out in April 2020. I was working on it for a long time. I started thinking about it probably three years prior and outlining it, pulling ideas from my blog. Thinking about new ways, really to come at this idea of career development and career change in a way that wasn't so stuck. This whole idea of career development. People look at it, they don't like writing cover letters. People don't like going to interviews. It's stressful. The whole job search process is stressful.

Let alone doing the work of figuring out what it is you actually want to do. That's scary stuff. I wanted to come at that subject from a place of humor and joy and something that felt relatable. So I pulled in stories from parenthood, a lot of toddler stories. My kids were young toddlers as I was writing the book. Some stories from my own childhood, too. And then each chapter is based on a lesson that we teach our kids. So things like use your words or make new friends. How can we use those same lessons and apply them back to our own career? So I start the chapters talking about funny stories about making sure my kids are using their words or if they're sharing with their sibling.

And then flipping it around to show a related career development framework or a tool or a strategy that's related back to that same lesson that we as parents can think about and use within our own career development, as we chart a new path forward as we think about the different options that are available to us. We're not stuck doing this one thing for the next 20, 30 years of our careers. So that's what I did throughout the book. I'm glad that you enjoyed it. And it was just a labor of love, certainly to write all these stories and combined my two big loves of writing and coaching. And most especially the humor writing piece of it.

**Jacqueline:** So let me ask about job crafting, because I think that's really what you did a great job of doing while you were at Harvard. And job crafting is basically where you make the job you have into the job you want, and it's been shown to really help with job satisfaction and burnout. And there's been lots of studies of it, for example, at places like Google to show that this approach definitely leads to a more satisfied work force and better team members. So describe a little bit how you did that in your job and how you started to make that progress to saying it's okay for me to be funny at work or it's okay for me to blog at work.

**Becca:** This whole idea of job crafting. It was something that I hadn't thought about a lot before actually doing it for myself. Because I thought I applied to a job. I did the work of the job and that's what you did. That was your job. And I think a lot of people will look at their jobs that way. And that's true. We certainly need to do the things that are within our job descriptions. However, there's also oftentimes opportunity to go above and beyond or to talk with your manager about how you're able to best contribute to that organization, which might be in a different way.

So the biggest thing for me was having that conversation and it was a bit of a scary conversation to go into my manager's office. And this is someone that I was very close with and still am close with and respect so highly. I knew she would be open to having this conversation with me saying that here are the things that I love to do, and those don't exactly line up with what I'm supposed to be doing. So what I told her was that outside of work, I've been doing all this writing and I love it. I would really love to find opportunities to, to bring some of that into my work here. And I was doing some marketing, some writing and, but not a lot. And I knew that I had set responsibilities within my job. And I told her that I am more than happy, of course, to continue doing those responsibilities. But as I got more experienced and was doing the job for longer, I was able to find more efficiencies, carve out some more time as part of my day to take on some additional writing projects, to work with our marketing department here and there, to brainstorm with other groups, get pulled into different meetings.

If I hadn't raised my hand and said, I want to do more creative work and share that with my manager and share that with other people in my office, they would have never thought to pull me into those meetings or to ask my opinion on this. I had to use an example from the book, use my words and explain what I wanted and needed. The same thing with coaching. I was coaching as part of my day job, but it wasn't a big part of my day job. I was doing a lot of operations, a lot of project management types of things in that work. So I needed to take ownership of my own calendar too, and say, okay, if I want to do more coaching, I need to put more blocks on my calendar for coaching.

So when I think about job crafting for other people, I do think it starts with the self-evaluation piece understanding what kind of work gives you energy rather than draining from you? That's a big question. And then how can you relate that back to your day job? There might be something there that you haven't thought of before, about how you can contribute in a different way. And that can be a launchpad to an entirely new career, or it could just be more happiness in your current job and finding a new way to love the job that you're actually in, rather than needing to go find something different. So doing that self-evaluation finding the connection and then talking with people, having conversations within your organization to find out where your skills and your passions, your interests could be most well-connected to the goals of the organization.

So I wanted to make sure the time that I was spending away from my kids, away from other parts of my life, if I could find a way to create a job, whether that was in my old day job or in my business, that the work I was doing, like 90% of the time, somehow got me to feel like I was in flow, that I was contributing in the way that I was meant to be contributing to the world. That was the stuff. I want that for other people too. And whether that is a very technical skill or it is a soft skill, quote-unquote soft skill. Whatever that skill is that you're able to contribute that makes you feel like you're adding value in your unique way. That's just amazing to me and I feel like we just need more of that.

**Becca:** I will say along the way since having children or even before having children, there was definitely times where I was crying on the kitchen floor to be like I am overwhelmed. I wouldn't say that I was ever officially, felt that I was completely, that I was experiencing burnout. In a way that I know other people have. It's something really difficult. But there was definitely times that I was very overwhelmed and needed to just to have a good cry and be like, all right, press the reset button. And that's still gonna happen to this day. So I think allowing myself to feel the emotion of it to not try to push it down. So I've tried that before of pushing down the overwhelm and just instead, just acknowledging it, and no, I am overwhelmed, right now, what are the steps that I can do, to take to fix that?

If the first one is sitting down on this couch right now and having a good cry well, yup, okay, check that off the list. We did that. And then one thing I think that has helped on the home front of helping to keep burnout at bay is thinking about what I could outsource looking at my time, seeing how was I spending my time and where could I find extra pockets of time? So this seems like a really silly thing, but I wasn't doing grocery delivery. And a few years ago started to have groceries delivered and ended up being about the same cost, honestly, because I wasn't spending as much money walking to the grocery store and picking up random things or having my kids pick up stuff off the shelf. And it saves so much time that I was able to on the weekends, do some writing for my business or spend some more quality time with my kids so that I didn't feel badly if I had to go up and work for a little bit. So that's just one little example, of finding something that I could outsource so that I can take my time back.

Other things that I think I do now to just take care of myself are blocking off time in my calendar. I'm not blocking my calendar of meetings back to back, because I know I don't like to have meetings back to back. I want to have some space on my calendar to go take a walk or to write for an entire day if I'm feeling a little energy depleted and need to embrace my inner introvert just sitting and writing for a day. So I'll just put a block on my calendar and say no, this is a writing block. That's what I'm doing that day. So setting up those meetings with myself even if it wasn't a meeting with a person I think that has actually also really helped to give me a sense of control. Cause when I feel it, when I feel in control, I feel like I'm less likely to burn out if that makes sense.

And that was the lesson I had to learn over this past year too, that I didn't use originally when I was starting my business. I've had the business for a couple of years now, but when I took it more full time, I would go back and forth over email with people to find a good time to meet. And it took up a lot of time sending those emails back and forth, but I also found myself saying yes to being like, oh can make that work. I'll figure something out. We'll move things around. Instead of when I just put my availability out there and said, okay, no I'm available between nine and two. It's easier for me to do that on a calendar with technology than it is for me to say that out loud. And then just to put it out there, more often than not, people are able to make it work and find a time within that time range that works so that I know I have my buffer period to finish anything last stop before I go pick up the kids from school. It has worked exceptionally well for me to take control of my calendar with those tools. I do for sure have clients that if there's something going on with them at with work, their work schedule or their family, do I have evening calls here and there. Yeah, I do. But by setting it up in advance and having these time blocks advertising, this is when I'm available most people, they are able to fit within that time range. And then if I need to be a little bit flexible outside of that I don't need to be flexible outside of it all the time, which I think is helpful.

**Becca:** The few things that come to mind. One big one is confidence and you might've thought I was going to say fixing their resume or interview skills. But they'll even say this to me very flat out, is that I am feeling like my confidence took a hit over the past few years. Because of X because of Y because of something that happened at my job, because of something that happened at home. And I need to get some confidence back so that I can go after what I want to go after. So that's one big one, and we do some exercises and things around that. If that's something big for them another is accountability.

And then another one is just clarity too, of getting to this point where I have focused so much of my time and energy on my family. I've been putting my head down at work. And then I get to this feeling of feeling a little bit lost and along the way, did I go down a path that was just the path that made sense at the time, but it wasn't what I really wanted to do it. Wasn't what I was feeling excited about doing. So now I want to find some more clarity around what this next chapter of my life could be. So I focus on a lot of those things, in addition to the very tactical networking and resumes and cover letters and all of that.

And I think a lot of the women in some way or stage that I'm working with have experienced that to some degree and oftentimes the way it's comes up is that they just need to find something new. So we like, okay let's break down. Not all the things that you don't like, but what are the things that you do? What are the things that you want to spend more time doing? What are the things that make you really happy? Then what are the themes that tie those together? And then we can go back and talk about the things that people don't like to o and what they want to avoid in their next role. But I like to start from the positive side. Like, what do you want from a culture? What does a good company culture look like to you? What does a great day at work? If you could have an ideal day at work, how would you be spending your time? Who would it be spending your time with? How can we craft this ideal job description, even if it's just imaginary right now and then match that up with potential paths forward.

And then to your question about what can companies do to help that? I think part of it is having open conversations around career development is a big one. Having your managers be well-trained in talking with folks about their fulfillment and work and how can we help them tap into their best potential at work. Having managers who are well attuned to understanding that people have work and life needs, so that people can talk to managers about things that are going on, that they don't have to feel like they need to be someone different at work than they are in other parts of their lives. They can, if they need to be able to take sick time to take care of someone. They can have that conversation with their manager and then hopefully there's policies in place to take this to a bigger level. Policies in place that support people having a work-life balance. Support people being able to take care of their loved ones or take care of themselves from a physical and mental capacity. Those policies need to be in place as well as the training of managers to have those conversations and to point people to the right resources so that they can work together successfully.

I talk about empathy and creativity and problem solving. And being flexible, adaptable and there are a lot of skills that are certainly honed after becoming a parent. There are a lot of things that you're doing on a daily basis that have sharpened up some skills that you can use in the workforce. And if we're welcoming that at work and letting people bring their whole full selves, not just letting them but embracing it because it's part of who they are as a professional. And that can add value to the company. Our organizations are going to be better off. We're going to create solutions to problems that are out there in the world. And this sounds very blue sky, thinking very high level on this, but I just think if more people embrace what they're great at, more companies ask those questions and then supported those people as whole people. Then the organizations that make up our society are going to thrive and then the people will thrive as well. I think there's this big circle of people supporting each other as whole human beings that can make people happier. And if we can be happier that's that for me is a big goal in itself.