PUT YOURSELF FIRST
LESSONS FROM A FORMER HR LEADER Laurie Ruettimann

You are not human if you haven't, sometimes, hated your job.

At most companies, the culture may be messy or borderline toxic. Often, conflict isn't addressed, communication sucks or consists of an endless stream of Slack messages, and nobody ever responds to emails. Actually, sometimes they do—but only to the first question and not the other four, or they all respond at once, late in the day, right when you clock out and want to cook dinner.

Perhaps your office is ultrapolitical. The senior-level leaders all went to the same university or attend church together. Everybody on the leadership team carries the same handbag or wears the same brand of shoes. Your coworker invited your boss to his wedding, and now, in a strange coincidence, that person keeps getting all the best assignments.

Or maybe your office is okay, the people are fine, but there's a nagging voice in your head that keeps asking, "Is this as good as it gets?" Well, I am here to tell you that your career, and your life, can get a hell of a lot better—even if you are someone like me, who loves working but *hates* the workplace.

We live in an era of uncertainty, but we are lying to ourselves if we believe that systems, processes, and programs were ever designed to make workers feel secure. From the dot-com bubble to the Great Recession, work has been restructured by consultants and leadership teams so that people in power will always end up doing just fine. It's employees, and particularly those in the BIPOC community, who shoulder the disproportionate amount of risk. I know this all too well, because I have worked as a human resources leader in corporate America.

The last time someone struck up a conversation with me on an airplane, it was an executive from a midsize company who told me his life story. But then, after about half an hour, he asked about my job.

"What do you do for a living?"

Keeping it simple, I said, "I'm an HR consultant."

"Ah," he replied. "I've always wondered—why does HR suck? No offense."

Whenever someone tells you not to be offended, prepare to be offended. Especially if the comment comes from a guy in first class.

But I understand why my seatmate thought HR sucks. It often starts at the beginning of the employment process, when someone like you applies for a job and then waits forever to hear back—if at all. Companies regularly interview hundreds of candidates, only to leave the job open indefinitely because they can't find someone who is a good cultural fit (whatever that means).

Once hired, the first week will probably look like *Lord of the Flies*. A receptionist shows you where to sit on the first day, someone from IT hands you a laptop (without correct log-on information), and your new-hire paperwork is completed via an anonymous portal. If the company is ahead of the game, a real human will take you on a tour of the cafeteria and show you the closest bathroom to your desk. But that's by no means a guarantee.

If there's an employee orientation, it's not about you. The HR manager makes that very clear. If you're curious about what it really takes to succeed at this company, you're on your own. Instead of having access to an adviser or coach, you get a boring lecture or video that covers all the things you're not supposed to engage in on the job but are probably happening anyway (which is why you're sitting through mandatory training). It doesn't get much better once you're over the hump of being new. If you make it past a year, you are lucky to get a raise and feedback on your performance. But have a problem? Don't bother going to HR because, to be honest, staff there can't be trusted with confidential information at most companies.

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Sometimes, your job runs its course and the only reasonable decision is to quit. When you finally find that new job and leave, your manager explains that you're dead to him. Don't let the door hit you on the way out.

HR could fix all of this. Instead, it's a mess in most organizations. But it doesn't have to be that way.

I dream of a world where local HR departments prioritize the human beings they were meant to serve. We need human resources teams to stand firm against bullying, harassment, racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, misogyny, ableism, xenophobia, and even religious discrimination. HR could do that and much more. It should hire people based on rigorously defined criteria—not based on nepotism or cognitive biases—and then pay them a fair wage. It's on HR to ensure that workers are onboarded with care, equipped to do their jobs. And when it comes time for an employee's annual review, HR needs to step up and guarantee the process remains orderly and transparent.

I'm told some HR teams are doing this already. You may know someone who works in human resources and does a great job. I won't dispute that; however, I think it's far too rare.

But—and here's the kicker—you can't blame an institution for the reasons why work, specifically your work, is broken. In order to make a change, you must be your own HR and your own advocate at three crucial points in the evolution of your working life: when you're looking for work, when you're joining a company, and when you decide to leave.

HOW TO LOOK FOR WORK LIKE A PRO

Forgive me for stating the obvious, but looking for work is messed up. Most job descriptions are nothing more than marketing tools meant to sell you on a role that doesn't really exist. When you interview, the process is about as reliable as throwing darts at a dartboard while blindfolded. And just because you interview doesn't mean you'll hear back, either. Nobody at your future company cares if the interview process is emotionally taxing. If anything, it's okay if you're unhappy—that's part of corporate hazing.

Searching for a new job is one of the most exhausting and stressful things you can do in life, and that's because it's more than just showing up to sell someone on your skills. You are required to seem interesting and compelling while outsmarting recruiters, hiring managers, and anyone else who thinks they're one step ahead of you. You're asked to carve out time from your schedule and lie to your coworkers about where you're going at two o'clock in the afternoon. And as you're actively lying to your current employer, you must act like a professional and pretend that you'd never lie to your future employer.

The honest truth is that future employers can sense your exhaustion and stress, but they don't care. If your energy is wrong, they'll skip right past your résumé and move on to the next person who shows the appropriate amount of vitality and passion.

This may sound simple and reductive, but trust me. When on the hunt for a new job, mind-set is everything. If you're looking, go back to the single most important lesson: **Put. Yourself. First.**

Nobody is asking you to join CrossFit, but you'll need to build up your endurance in order to stay motivated and empowered when times are tough. And looking for a new job is always tough. The same good self-care rules apply: get plenty of sleep, eat foods that nourish you, and kick toxic people out of your life who don't buy into the future that you want.

Next, do a premortem by thinking about the last time you looked for work. Reflect on the experience and ask: How did you mess up? What regrets do you have? And how will you blow it this time?

There are universal acts of failure in every job search. Normally, you apply for hundreds of jobs online—even ones that don't make sense—hoping that an applicant tracking system (ATS) will find magical keywords and select your résumé for a phone screen with a recruiter. Or you'll network with other unemployed people instead of thinking about the three to five people who might actually be helpful to you in a job search. Or you talk to your fellow cynical colleagues all day long instead of finding and befriending three to five new people on LinkedIn who currently have your dream job. (By the way, all you have to do is hit that person up on LinkedIn's InMail feature and say, "I saw your profile. You have my dream job. Can I talk to you for fifteen minutes about how you found it?")

Go back to the single most important lesson: Put. Yourself. First.

The most effective way to find a job might be the least obvious. My friend Ryan Paugh wrote a fabulous book called *Superconnector: Stop Networking and Start Building Business Relationships That Matter*. He told me that the single best way to network with people is to be helpful and of service. If you are known as a sounding board for people in your community, and you have mentored someone, you are in good stead. Being service oriented enables people to think of you as helpful instead of the person who's stuck in a crappy job—or unemployed. Volunteering your time makes you more interesting and likable, and it introduces you to new people who may be helpful in surprising ways. When you help others, you gain their trust, which makes them more likely to offer favors and advice that can benefit you down the road.

Job searches don't have to be dreadful ordeals if you follow my tips. And if you'll notice, it doesn't have anything to do with HR. So stop blaming human resources when you can't find work and go grab the job you deserve.

ONBOARD YOURSELF LIKE A BOSS

The first few days of a new job are awkward and terrible for many individuals, but not for everybody—and not always. Think about the best job you've ever had (if you had one). Chances are your first ninety days were fun and challenging. You laughed a lot, got to know people, and made a bunch of friends. Your goals were clear, the company was supportive, and you spent those days taking care of business without thinking about politics, infighting, or drama.

Based on my experiences, you don't need more than three months to determine if a job is a good fit. You know the first time someone asks you to do something you aren't normally inclined to do: Can you work late? Would you mind making a few extra calls? Can we talk about things that are bothering me? If you say yes, enthusiastically, to extra emotional and professional work in the early days, the job is a fit. If you hesitate, it's an important indication that something is wrong. That's why the best HR departments will work with you right away to help you feel connected to your team and invested in the organization's goals on an emotional level. If you love the people around you and trust them, you're locked into those relationships and will gladly demonstrate discretionary effort.

Unfortunately, far too many of us don't have access to great leaders who understand the importance of interpersonal connection. It's up to you ultimately to invest in relationships during the first ninety days. So do it. Take an early and active part in your own onboarding. Hit the ground running by asking questions before you even start.

How can I get to know my colleagues before day one? What's the best way to learn about cultural norms? Can I connect with IT ahead of time, so my new laptop and phone are ready to go? Is it okay if I connect with my team before day one?

Bottom line: make important connections with people as fast as you can. Find your manager on LinkedIn and scan her first-and second-degree relationships before the first day. Try to find your new coworkers and invite them to connect. Look for ways to be helpful, opportunities for shared interests, and people you already have in common by scanning for data related to their lives outside of work. Find out where they went to college. Look online and try to figure out where they volunteer. Explore LinkedIn to discover any real-life friends you have in common.

Set up a Google alert and spy on your company, your boss, your CEO, and even the HR leader or recruiter who hired you. Keep an eye out for opportunities to talk with your new team about hot-button issues, challenges, and industry stories.

Every new job becomes an old job at some point. Relationships don't just make work easier; they make work bearable during the tough times. So cement relationships as soon as you can, and be welcomed by encouraging faces on the first day of work, even if you have to find them on your own.

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LEAVE WITH DIGNITY AND MONEY IN YOUR POCKET

My baby boomer parents drilled it into me at a young age that you don't quit your job unless you have another one lined up. This was a rule without exceptions. Is your work-place culture toxic? Has your boss shit on your dreams? Even if it's the worst job on the planet, you do not quit. My dad believed work doesn't exist to make you happy—it exists to put food on the table and pay your bills. My mom said they don't call it work because it's fun, they call it work because it's hard.

All these years later, I still carry their advice in my bones.

Walking out of a bad job without a plan rarely solves anything. You get a black stain on your record from your previous company. Employers want to know why you left your last job. And you can't ask your former colleagues to be dishonest. Besides, people don't lie very well. That's why I never tell someone it's okay to quit a job without another one lined up. It's simply not in my DNA. Instead, keep working while you conduct a speedy job search and explore your culpability in having a bad job in the first place.

If you're feeling stressed, work fewer hours. Be a slacker. Nobody will notice. It's counter-intuitive, but the more time you spend at your desk or in meetings, the less likely you are to be productive. Nobody ever felt better by reading one more email or answering one more question on a group conference call. Learn to say no, set boundaries, and schedule time for administrative work, creative work, project work, and downtime to rest your brain. Get up and go outside for lunch. There's no reason why you need to eat that turkey sandwich and side salad at your desk.

If you're feeling confrontational and aggressive, leave work early and go work out. Don't beat up on yourself or a coworker. Beat a punching bag. Let off some steam and take a break from whatever is bothering you. If you're worried about working less and getting in trouble, quit those long hours and dare them to fire you in a gracious way. Pivot away from work and embrace your emotional health. Nobody gets fired for getting more sleep and being happier; people are fired for being jerks.

You must fix what's broken about life before you try to fix work by quitting.

Even if you have cash set aside to cover a prolonged period of unemployment, hang on to your job until you find a new one. Many jobs are being automated and digitized. The job you quit today may not exist in another two years. Your skills might become obsolete during your job search, and potential employers can't trust that you are staying current and learning new things like you would ifyou were employed and immersed in training programs or management platforms.

Many people quit work and find themselves lost in the gig economy, taking on free-lance jobs or accepting contract assignments in hopes that they will go temp-to-perm. Whatever the case, most individuals don't have a business plan for their lives. They leave a job for all the right reasons, and with the best of intentions, but continue to feel just as lost and helpless as the day they quit. This is why it's so important to have the next thing lined up before you quit.

If you don't yet, here are a few other things I suggest quitting instead of your job.

Quit winging your finances. You can't tell your boss to take this job and shove it if you are broke. Build wealth so you can be choosier about your next job.

Quit doing a half-assed job search. Throw your whole ass into that search, baby. Then leave when you land a job with your dream company.

Quit feeling attached to an organization and a group of people who aren't your family and will never love you back. We spend so much of our life at work, which is problematic enough, so set up limits on your attention. Instead of obsessing about workplace gossip, obsess about yourself and your individual needs. If that sounds too touchy-feely, obsess about the people at home who miss you when you're gone.

Quit giving in to the emotional turmoil in your head and heart. You're not a prisoner, you are an employee. Use the tools I've given you to anticipate what might happen if you quit your job without another one lined up. Call your employee assistance program, talk to someone you trust, or go to therapy. Fix yourself.

Quit making excuses that keep you stuck in a job that eats your soul alive. The circumstances of life can be cruel, but you don't have to be an accomplice to brutality.

Understand why you keep making the same mistakes in your career, and resolve them.

Finally, quit complaining.

Do I think you should quit your stressful, unfulfilling, or miserable job? Of course. Eventually. But stick it out until you have another job, and work on yourself in the meanwhile. All jobs are toxic jobs if you quit without addressing what's broken in the first place.

You must fix what's broken about life before you try to fix work by quitting.

THE FUTURE OF HR IS ACTUALLY INTERESTING

I've shown you how HR sucks, but now I'm here to tell you that HR is changing like every other industry. As work changes—with automation creeping into the workforce, cost-cutting measures in place, and fewer and fewer people working as full-time employees—the duties and responsibilities of the people who remain in human resources will look different. What's the future of HR, and does it matter to you? I think it does.

First, the future of HR is automated and digitized. Technology will disrupt the department, and then hopefully improve it. There aren't robots coming for those jobs. But there are chatbots, algorithms, and outsourced service providers. The experience will be less human, requiring you to work harder when said technology fails. And the remaining HR professionals will probably fall into two camps: boots-on-the-ground project managers who do a bit of everything, from employee relations to troubleshooting with tech, and coaches who focus solely on organizational health and psychology.

The first role is entirely tactical. When your paycheck is wrong, or your benefits need to be adjusted, the future HR professional will be your level-2 support once you've tried and failed to solve your own problems via the Internet. And they'll be available to chat on video or maybe in real life if you are fighting with your boss. The second role is strategic. Companies will hire psychologists and data scientists to optimize every-thing from worker training to employee health. We already live in an era of surveillance. Companies use programs to read your email, watch your Internet usage, and even monitor your personal phone if you're plugged into corporate Wi-Fi. So don't be surprised when your employers use the data you give them to work you to the brink of death in the name of productivity.

How then do you fix work and be your own HR in an era of such rapid change? Well, whether you're a full-time employee or on a limited contract with a company, run your life like the leader you're meant to be. Ask yourself what traditional HR used to ask: What are your goals from work? Why are you here? How do the activities at work fit into your life story? If you don't have good answers, future HR teams and their corporate overlords will eat you alive.

In many ways, it's best to operate as if the future is now. Guard against intrusions into your personal time and prioritize well-being to make yourself a better and more productive worker. Invest in your education to earn more opportunities. Fix your money to be less stressed and desperate when accepting a job. If you get your life together, you will force companies to offer you better opportunities—and benefits—if they want to attract and keep you as a worker.

Finally, it doesn't matter what the current or future state of HR looks like unless you understand why you work. Once you know your purpose, it's easier to say no to emotionally volatile cultures and instead say yes to opportunities where you can learn and grow. Being your own HR leader is the best and most essential way to fix work because it takes power away from a bureaucratic department with no consistent job duties and puts the responsibility of having a good day at work—or getting over a bad week at work—squarely in your own hands.

No one can make you work at a lousy job without your consent, not even HR. Stop wondering what the hell is wrong with HR—like my seatmate in 3B—and work on claiming your employee experience as your own, as if HR doesn't matter. Because, frankly, it doesn't.

During the summer of 2019, nearly two hundred of the most respectable CEOs in America came together to change the future of work. They declared that corporations had a new mission: deliver value to customers, invest in employees, deal fairly and ethically with suppliers, and support the communities where their enterprise operates. This declaration is called the "Statement on the Purpose of a Corporation."* It's a straightforward report that affirms a new vision: companies must adapt and change—becoming good stewards of people, communities, and the planet—if they want to survive and thrive.

Why did these CEOs feel the need to redefine the purpose of a corporation? Don't let me mislead you. This isn't a feel-good story about warmhearted leaders whose hearts have grown two sizes too big. These are realists who understood that the world of work has changed. They couldn't succeed in the twenty-first century with outdated, twentieth-century business models.

For the first time, five generations of workers are all uniformly sick and tired of broken, toxic environments. Work sucks, and people use social media platforms to talk about it. There are also more women and people of color in positions of power than ever before, and they are tired of waiting for change to happen. Tight labor markets have forced businesses to accept the notion that employees are both capitalists and consumers of work—people who can shop around for jobs, spending their time and energy anywhere.

In many ways, it's best to operate as if the future is now.

In some ways, the declaration gives me hope. When the definition of a corporation changes, it alters the global discussion around work and provides room for a different conversation. For decades, there wasn't talk of raising the minimum wage, improving community relationships, reducing carbon footprints, or expanding charitable giving. There wasn't space for anything other than profits and losses. But now there is.

In other ways, a new declaration fixes nothing for people suffering at work right now. Fixing the global landscape of work is a formidable challenge. It requires corporations, government leaders, community organizations, consultants, and academics to examine centuries-old problems like racism, sexism, greed, and corruption.

But starting to fix your job demands a willingness to look at yourself in the mirror and ask, "What's on me?"

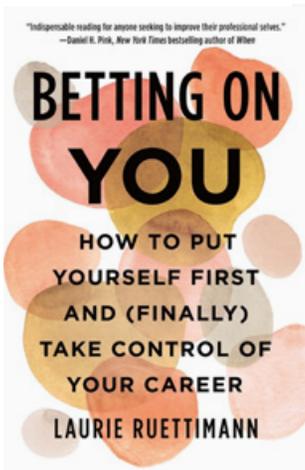**Don't wait for a group of CEOs to change your future. Change it yourself—and the sooner, the better.** ⌦

Info

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Laurie Ruettimann is a former human resources leader turned writer, entrepreneur, and speaker. CNN recognized her as one of the top five career advisors in the United States, and her work has been featured on NPR, the *New Yorker*, *USA Today*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and *Vox*. She frequently delivers keynote speeches at business and management events around the world and hosts the popular podcast *Punk Rock HR*. When she's not up in the air, she lives with her husband and cats in Raleigh, North Carolina.

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