

How often do you get lost in your work?

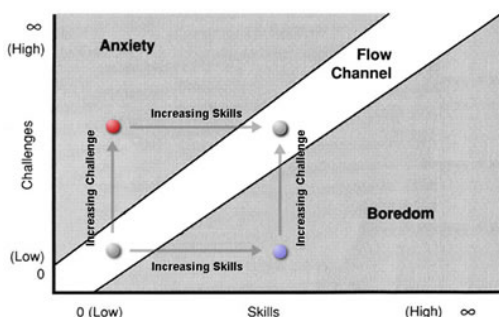
Margaret Beaton 21 January 2013

I was privileged to be in the Sydney 2000 Olympics stadium the night Cathy Freeman won the 400m Gold Medal. It was an experience of a lifetime that still makes me feel at once overawed and exhilarated.

Years later I heard Cathy speaking about her state of mind and body when she runs competitively: "I am swept along. My feet don't touching the ground. There is no noise; sound is absent. I have a deep sense of detachment and contentment. In that moment everything is turned off."

As a psychologist specialising in the careers and transitions of senior business leaders, I relate Cathy's evocative description to those clients who describe themselves as sublimely fulfilled. And I compare it with those who are striving to find a career role in which they can lose themselves, rather than feel as though they are marking time, disillusioned or doing it for the money.

Cathy Freeman's athletic performance and both these types of client are linked by the phenomenon of 'flow'. Early in his research Mihály Csikszentmihályi used the metaphor of being carried along by water to describe individuals who are so absorbed in single-mindedly performing a task that they are oblivious to the passage of time, bodily needs and even the environment around them. Being in flow is also described as being 'in the moment, 'on a roll' and—in Yiddish—'ongabrendt'.



Flow is not a permanent state; you can't be in flow all the time. But when an individual has a career role that both challenges them and plays to their competences, then the chances are they will be experiencing flow frequently and for extended periods during their work.

Look around at others in your workplace and you will recognise those who are in flow—and those who aren't.

Look more closely and you will find those in flow have clear goals, are open to and welcoming of feedback and readily strike a balance between stretching opportunities in their jobs and their capacity to cope. They seem to manage effortlessly.

What happens if someone's competence in a role isn't matched with challenges and opportunities to use their skills? Again, in your work place you'll recognise those who are competent, but don't feel challenged—they complain of boredom; and it shows. They may be apathetic and depressed. And there are those who are challenged, but not up to the tasks their job requires—they are anxious and defensive; and this also shows.

Which of these work place caricatures describes you? If you are not sometimes in flow, then you need to engage in an exploration of your aspirations, skills, energy levels and personal circumstances—you need to take stock. You can do better for yourself.

You may need to let go of your current role and move to another to minimise boredom or anxiety. This may be within your current organisation; perhaps in another; or perhaps you need to develop a portfolio career with multiple roles.

Alternatively should you be stepping up, stretching yourself in a promotion to a bigger role where the challenges and your skills are more closely matched?

Whatever your answer, if you are not getting lost in your work, if you sometimes don't wonder where the hours have gone, or if you don't feel in supreme command of yourself and the tasks you are accomplishing, then you need to search for a place where you can find flow.

This post was written by Dr Margaret Beaton, a director of [Beaton Executive Coaching](#) and [Beaton Research + Consulting](#). You can also find Margaret on [LinkedIn](#).