



# CAREER ENMESHMENT: WHEN YOUR WORK IS A BIG PART OF YOUR IDENTITY

AN OFFICIAL CLIENT UPDATE OF PT HEADHUNTER INDONESIA



One of the most common questions adults like to ask each other for the first time is: “What do you do?” The other day when I was taking a Grab Car to meet my client, the driver opened our interaction with this question. When I went to a social gathering last weekend, a few people came up to me, and the question “What do you do?” appeared as their first opening question for me.

This question of “What do you do?” can invoke a sense that we are fascinated with work. My theories behind our fascination are: First, we spend most of our time at work therefore our lives are closely tied to our work. Second, work gives us clues into a person’s values, interests, and backgrounds. When you encounter someone who works as a doctor or a corporate employee from a prestigious institution, you can start to associate that person with wealth and class. Not only does work give us a regular paycheck, but it can give us a significant marker of identity.

## Career Enmeshment

The notion of work being an identity marker can drive some people into overinvesting their time and energy into their careers. **Anne Wilson**, a professor of psychology at Wilfrid Laurier University in Ontario, believes that giving our time and energy into our career disproportionately can lead to a psychological state called ‘enmeshment’—where the boundaries between work and personal life are blurred. Someone who experiences enmeshment in his career can’t stop to think about work.

### PT HEADHUNTER INDONESIA

#### HEAD OFFICE

MENARA PALMA, 12TH FLOOR  
JL HR RASUNA SAID KAV X-2 NO.6  
JAKARTA 12950 - INDONESIA  
TEL: +62 21 2939 1284  
FAX: +62 21 2939 1222

#### SURABAYA OFFICE

PAKUWON CENTER, 23RD FLOOR  
JL EMBONG MALANG NO.1-5  
SURABAYA 60261 - INDONESIA  
TEL: +62 31 6000 3367  
FAX: +62 31 6000 3105

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He can't separate his identity from his work identity. He allows no time for other activities outside of work because his work is crucial to him. For him, investing in other activities outside of work could endanger the stability of his job, which in the end, could destroy his identity.

Identifying closely with our career isn't necessarily bad because employees who are passionate about their profession might be more **motivated and dedicated** to their work, and it can improve their **well-being**. However, we must be careful. **Janna Koretz, Psy.D.**, a psychologist specializing in entrepreneur mental health, says that when our identity ties to our job heavily, it can make us vulnerable to a painful identity crisis if we burn out, get laid off, or retire. She adds, "Individuals in these situations frequently suffer anxiety, depression, and despair."

If you are currently showing signs of enmeshment in your career and want to find practical ways to have a more balanced life, consider these three suggestions:

## A. Find Activities Outside of Your Work

If employees are thinking about their work 24/7, it's time for them to invest in outside-of-work activities. The idea of finding activities outside of our work will push us to find some healthy distractions so that our mind is not constantly thinking about work all the time. Once we find activities outside of work that appeals to us, we can start to integrate that into our life. There are a lot of activities outside of work that we can try out, to name a few, volunteering in a non-profit organization, exercising, doing side projects, and maybe picking up your old paintbrush to reignite your old painting hobby.

Engaging in activities outside of work can introduce us to a new circle of friends that, in the end, can give us a new identity. This new group of people couldn't care less if you haven't hit your monthly sales target. They don't see you as a corporate worker who always gets chased by sales targets. What they see in you is someone who shares the same passion as them, who believes there are things outside of work that can provide a sense of enjoyment and fulfillment.

Aside from getting a new circle of friends, certain activities that employees build outside of their work can expose them to new knowledge—

something that would be unavailable to them if they had spent their entire time buried by their work at the office. And we will never know if this new knowledge can be something valuable that helps our careers and, ultimately, our lives.

## B. Zoom Out From Your Current Job Title

The concept of identifying ourselves only by the work we do is limiting and fragile. It is limiting because there are multiple non-work identities that we don't know we have, for instance: the loving husband or wife, father or mother who cares for their children, the knowledge seeker, the caring neighbor, the sports or art enthusiast, and many more. These non-work identities can be as meaningful as our work identities. It's easy to lose sight of our other meaningful identities when we are too focused on our current job title.

It is also fragile because blindly accepting that we are just a vessel of corporate productivity will make our professional setbacks seem like a death threat to us. I like this anecdote from a Harvard Business Review article titled **"When Your Job Is Your Identity, Professional Failure Hurts More."** In the article, the writer, Tim O'Brien, a Lecturer in Public Policy at the Harvard Kennedy School, captures the story of Kate, a senior analyst who struggles to divorce herself from her work identity as a senior analyst. Whenever her colleagues critique her work, Kate feels angry and insecure. Kate takes their critiques personally because she overidentifies with the role so much that she forgets what their colleagues are critiquing is her work, not her as a person.

Through much reflection, Kate finally embraces that she has two identities—the personal and the work—and she respectfully draws the line between the two to avoid any conflicts. This strategy makes her happier in her work which results in her stellar performance and allows her to have a strong sense of self that doesn't get easily bruised by professional obstacles.

When we take criticism of our work from our colleagues personally, as O'Brien argues, we forget that "they only react to the role we represent in their work lives, not necessarily the interesting and thoughtful people we think we are."

## C. Leaders' Role in Protecting Employees' Personal Lives

In my firm, PT Headhunter Indonesia, during our virtual weekly meeting on Friday afternoon, our Managing Director likes to remind us to detach from work and do something enjoyable unrelated to work during the weekend.

As his employee, to be honest, I don't always try to be completely unplugged from work during the weekend, especially during the high seasons of recruitment, but I appreciate his message. It's a meaningful reminder that we are more than just corporate employees. We are also human beings with passions and interests outside of work, and pursuing those passions allows us to have more balanced lives.

According to Erin Reid, an associate professor at McMaster University's DeGroote School of Business, and Lakshmi Ramarajan, an assistant professor at Harvard Business School, leaders can implement the strategy of **minimizing time-based rewards** to create a healthier workplace culture. Minimizing time-based rewards can be practically achieved by encouraging everyone to measure results than hours invested, focusing on praising the quality of work, and setting a reasonable timeline to complete the project.

Through their research, Reid and Ramarajan also discovered that "if employees felt free to draw some lines between their professional and personal lives, organizations would benefit from greater engagement, more-open relationships, and more paths to success."

### You Are Not the Work You Do; You Are the Person You Are

In the summer of 2017, the Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison published **a short essay in the New Yorker** detailing her childhood experience working in a house of a wealthy woman in the 1940s and what that job meant for her as a little girl. Morrison was proud of that job as it allowed her to share the \$2 she earned between herself and her mother. Making her own money enabled her to squander on material things and gave her a profound sense of purpose and importance for her family.

Despite the nice things the job gave her, Morrison grew disillusioned with the job as her boss intensively increased the demand for the

chores. Feeling frustrated with the job, she unloaded her lamentation to her father, hoping to hear words of sympathy from him. She received none—not even sympathetic eyes. Instead, her father gave her some advice—more like advice for adults rather than for a child. He said, "Go to work. Get your money. And come on home."

The advice from her father registered something different in her mind. Extracting her father's advice, Morrison came to believe these pieces of wisdom:

1. Whatever the work is, do it well—not for the boss but for yourself.
2. You make the job; it doesn't make you.
3. Your real life is with us, your family.
4. You are not the work you do; you are the person you are.

I always return to this essay whenever I feel my work identity has exhausted me and when I judge my self-worth—positively or negatively—based on my job performance. The line "You are not the work you do; you are the person you are" is a perfect reminder for working people of any age, especially those who can't divorce their sense of personal identity with their work identity.

## Conclusion

Working hard is always exciting because there's nothing more rewarding than achieving your dreams by propelling yourself forward with your own will and intention. However, you need to be aware that whatever the results of your work are, even if it's a failure, don't let yourself get trapped into thinking that you are a failed person. What fails is your strategies. You are just a human being who happens to encounter a challenge. By diversifying our activities outside of work, considering our meaningful multiple non-work identities, and with the support of leaders to protect our time, we can build a balanced and healthier life.

WRITTEN BY VIDI AZIZ  
DESIGNED BY SHABRINA SEPTIANDINI



**VIDI AZIZ**  
*Senior Consultant*  
*PT Headhunter Indonesia*