

Modern Life – Episode 1 - Ashley Stahl on discovering your next career move

Transcript

Ashley Stahl: Chances are unless you're in your mid to late seventies, chances are you have years left of your career. So, I would hope that anybody listening right now that this conversation is just a permission slip for them to be who they are now and realize that sometimes backing up does not have to mean backing down.

Jamila Souffrant: Hey everyone. This is Modern Life, a brand-new podcast from Fidelity Investments here to help you live your best. I'm your host Jamila Souffrant.

Ideas around work and career have changed a ton over the last few years. And during times of career disruption and change, we start to think about what we're doing and why. To help you answer these questions. I'm excited for you to meet my guest today, Ashley Stahl. Ashley got her start working in counterterrorism, but it didn't take long for her to realize that job wasn't a good fit. So, she made the decision to reinvent herself as a career coach. Now she helps people find their dream jobs and pursue the careers they have always wanted, and is the author of the bestselling book, "U-turn get unstuck, discover your direction and design your dream career." I'll talk to Ashley about everything from getting out of a job you hate to managing your finances as you switch careers and make moves.

Ashley Stahl, welcome to Modern Life. I'm so happy today to talk to you about career.

Ashley: Thank you so much for having me.

Jamila: Now, let's take it back to the beginning. I understand that you worked in counterterrorism at the Pentagon in DC. So, I have to know, everyone wants to know, is it like the movies and TV shows and what did you do there?

Ashley: I mean, I grew up loving spy movies, so I was very captivated by the possibilities. And I had family in New York during 9/11, so I was really moved to be a part of this mission. And when I finished grad school, I came home, slept on my parents' couch in Los Angeles, applied, applied. Couldn't hear back from a job to save my life.

It was the recession. And so, for me, I ended up at an ad agency making minimum wage. And what got me into the Pentagon was I had emailed my university after a few days too many of just kind of feeling like what was the point of all of this hard work for my education. And I emailed them and said, "Do you have a list of alumni who have moved to DC, who work in DC?" and the government department replied with 2000 names and emails. So over four months in my job, every single day, I called and emailed people on that list. And then eventually, even though I fell on my face, said the wrong things, ended up getting a bunch of job offers.

And it's almost like on my way into counterterrorism, I learned that I was an amazing job seeker and there were so many moments on my way into national security that my intuition would kind of pipe in and tell me that it wasn't actually the path for me, but there was something in me that wanted to experience it.

And when I was there, I was lucky enough to get a management position. So, I went from an admin assistant making minimum wage in a way to a management role. And I was running a program that was deploying civilians to Afghanistan. It was a really challenging job. I really performed well in it. And it was one of those situations where no matter how great you are at something; you leave good on the hope that there's great.

Jamila: So, I love that you shared, while you were pursuing the Pentagon job that you had inklings of something else because I know that happens for everyone. It happened for me as I was pursuing my career. But while you were at the Pentagon, what was the moment? Maybe there were, you know, moments that compiled on one another, but what day was it that you said I can no longer do this? I have to really leave and do something else.

Ashley: Yeah. I was on a military base. I had to travel half the time. And I'll never forget sitting on this base and there's this one moment where one of the guys that was deploying had to go to the restroom and he handed me his gun and I realized I'd never held a gun in my life.

And it's just like, I could still feel it...it like gives me these, these chills and I, it was moments like that where, you know, our body is so intelligent, you know, you hear that a cat or dog has 200 million neurons in their brain, if not more. And that's how many are in our gut, which is why people call it our second brain.

There's an intelligence to when your body contracts and when you expand. And so that moment holding that gun, I just remember thinking I am way too sensitive to be here. And that's the thing that I teach job seekers and people who want to love their career is there's two dynamics in your career and people miss one or the other very often. The first dynamic is what you do.

That's about your skills. That's about how you're using your mind, your body, your heart, all day long. The other piece is the how, that's about your values, that's about who you are, what your principles are, how you see your life. And given that we know that more than 50% of people leave their job because they don't like their boss, what we know to be true is that how your job looks matters just as much as what your job is. But for me, it's about asking what is your what? What are your skills and what is your how? What are your values? And so, this was really the beginning of me digging deeper into myself.

Jamila: And so, when you did answer those questions for yourself, it led you to being a career coach.

Ashley: Yeah.

Jamila: So, talk about that transition when you knew that you could actually make a living from doing what you loved, and everything was aligned.

Ashley: So, I left the Pentagon and went home to Los Angeles when I realized how much fun I was having helping people in their career. And I ended up getting kicked out of a Starbucks in DuPont circle in DC because I invited too many people for free

career advice. And so, you know, I guess it turns out it's not the perfect event space, but I just remember being really lit up by helping people rewrite their resume. Now being an author it's like writing is just my strong suit and that's something I teach a lot about in my book too is that your core skill set usually shows up earlier in your life.

And so, with the job hunt, I was able to use my power with words, rewrite people's resume, get them job offers. And I just stuck to what I know because I thought to myself, "you know, I'm mid-twenties, I have no career to really coach off of, I just need to stick with what I know," and it was job hunting. And so, I came up with a system that turned into an online course, a podcast, my private practice, and all sorts of different things. And I haven't looked back since.

Jamila: And while you were at the Pentagon, you were actually doing this on the side?

Ashley: Yes.

Jamila: So, I actually loved that aspect and I think so many people, including myself have taken that route. Like I had my corporate career, I was doing my thing on the side, you know, I was learning personal finance and then eventually started a blog and then a podcast about it.

But it was in tandem with like my life and, you know, my real career, which really was like now my shadow career. And I think a lot of people listening, they have a full-time job, something they're doing that earns them money. But there's something else that they can do on the side to help build them up and then eventually be the launching pad to their thing.

So, what advice do you have for people who are in that stage, where they should be pursuing or if they can, they have the energy to that thing on the side to help them?

Ashley: Yeah. I love that you used the term shadow career. For those of you who don't know what that is, it's a career that is on the periphery of what you actually want to be doing.

So instead of being on camera, you're behind the camera. Instead of being the writer, you're the writer's assistant. It's tantalizingly similar to the path that deep down your heart wants, but you won't give yourself permission to do it. And that's why something feels off. I think a lot of people are stuck in a shadow career and I'm so happy that you're not. As far as my process goes with helping people kind of move into where they truly belong, I believe that it's all about your core skill set. I find it's really important to know what is that one skill that you want to grow throughout your career? Everybody has a gift, and most people have a few gifts, but one zone of genius that they truly lead with.

And it's about figuring out what that is for you and harnessing that in a business because if you stay in the workforce, it's about saying to yourself, you know, should I stay in my job? Well, the answer is, are you growing your skill set? And is it violating any core values? And if you're growing your skillset and your core values are intact, then yes, you should stay in your role.

And I think that we were sold to do work we love, and it's almost set the bar so high

that we forget that work is called work for a reason. Everything has a cost of admission. And so, I would say for the budding entrepreneurs just know that not everybody's meant to be an entrepreneur. So, figure out if you're meant to be an entrepreneur and there's no shame in either path.

And one of my core skillsets is innovation, which is the creative self-starter, the visionary. And the difference between the "intrapreneur" within a company and the entrepreneur is usually their relationship with freedom and also the relationship with financial risks. So, the intrapreneur usually needs flexibility and some level of autonomy, meaning you can give them an idea and they just want the autonomy to go run it.

The entrepreneur needs all out creative freedom. They don't want to work on other people's ideas. They want to work on their ideas and they're willing to take the financial risk to do so because the risk of not doing that causes them more pain. So, there's a lot of incredible intrapreneurs. And I would just ask yourself which one do you truly think you are? And ask the people around you because according to a lot of research, especially relationship research, our friends and family know if our relationship is headed for success or not better than we do. And I think that's the case with your careers. So, being able to ask people where have you seen me at my best in my career, what do you think my best skills are? Going on a fact-finding mission from neutral parties who have no skin in the game, other than your happiness and fulfillment will usually have incredible answers.

Jamila: And I love that you brought up intrapreneur because like you said, someone can find fulfillment in, in working for someone else. And I think in the age of social media where it looks like, oh, I'm my own boss, which is cool and does provide a level of freedom, that you can be happy working for someone else and reach financial success.

Ashley: Yeah.

Jamila: So, what would you say for someone who wants to work for someone. That's their jam, they have their lane, but they want to pivot. Maybe it's not, like you said the right role.

Ashley: Yeah.

Jamila: It's something else that they need to find. How do they know and find the right role for them?

Ashley: I've never been reached out to by so many corporations as of late to help their employees figure out what their skills are and where they belong within the company so that they can retain their employees. So, I think my first message to anybody listening is that the pandemic changed things, you know, there's some decades that happens in weeks, you know, and I think that we're living in a time where decades just took place over the course of weeks and months. And we are in a place of progress where companies care not only about your wellbeing, but of course their own benefit, having retention.

And so, if you see yourself being a better fit in a different role, be comfortable bringing

that up and know that the company wants to retain you if you're a top performer. My advice would be don't leave your job without a job in your hand and really consider this concept of job crafting. So, job crafting, there's a lot of research on it. I love it. And it's all about turning a bland job into a grand job.

Jamila: I love that.

Ashley: I just try to entertain myself with these things. It's really powerful because what you can do is you can ask yourself what is my skill that I want to harness and channel into my career path and what are some projects that would be incredibly valuable for my employer that I can take initiative to take on. And what happens is that everyone wants to work with somebody who's excellent.

And when you do that, you kind of put yourself in this world where it's like a river current, opportunities start coming your way because people notice greatness and that kind of turns the job that you're into a different job over time. So, I would say take initiative, don't be victimized by your career. Really step up and take ownership of where you want it to go. Set up a meeting. Don't have a casual conversation in the hallway, or they're going to treat your career growth just as casually. Same with asking for a raise. Make it an official meeting and sit down and say, "here's some ideas that I have for what's possible," and "I would love to take the lead on any of these projects if you let me."

Jamila: Let me, it sounds like taking initiative and advocating for yourself is the key to turning maybe a dead-end job into something, like you said, grand.

Ashley: Yeah, yeah, yeah. And if it's not working, you can always leave. There are a lot of opportunities, but again, make sure you have something in your hand before you go, because it's not a good market to just leave and hope you find something.

Jamila: I know some people are wanting their career to be their everything, and some people have found that, but I'm talking to the person right now who feels like, well, I'm supposed to love every minute of this and I'm not in love with it. Maybe I should turn this side thing that I love so much into a career or my full-time entrepreneurship role and they're having a hard time with it because of that pressure. So, what do you say to that? Because I think that keeps a lot of people really like stuck and conflicted.

Ashley: If you're unhappy from nine to five, it's hard to turn on the happy switch from five to nine. I mean, we spend 90,000 hours of our life at work. That's like two thirds of our time awake on this planet. So, it makes sense to me that people want it to count. That being said, your purpose moves. I think there's three lily pads in your career. And most people listening, I hate to admit most people are kind of on the first lily pad, which is that they don't love what they do, but they don't want to change it because it feels inconvenient. And I get it.

Changing your life, unraveling your life, it's inconvenient, makes sense. And they say that they're fine, but I truly believe when people say they're fine, they're just not in touch with their pain. You know?

And so, the second lily pad is kind of where I try to get people to swim over to that's knowing your gift. That's knowing what your talents are. That's knowing where you naturally excel. We all have a gift. And when you can find out what that little thing is

about you, and I have to say, I used to think it was cheesy when people say, oh, everybody has that special something, you know, but as a career expert, I've coached hundreds of people, one-on-one and thousands in online courses. And truly, I believe that everybody has something. And when you know your gift and you get onto that second lily pad and you start getting those opportunities your way you eventually might get a ticket to go over to the third one, which is really about your Dharma. It's really about like, when I was writing my book, it felt like something was coming through my fingers.

Jamila: You were in a flow

Ashley: Yeah. More than a flow state. It was like this magic the entire time. And now when I watch TV, I can tell who's working out of their Dharma because it's like a special place that I went to create that I've never been before. People like Kobe Bryant, you know, I remember watching him on TV and like thinking, wow, he's in his dharma.

You know, you can feel it when people are creating from what I like to call the place. And my wish is for everyone to start to figure out what is their gift so that they can at least get an opportunity to possibly make their way over to the place.

Jamila: That is beautiful. And I think what that's, what most people want in life. Right. But then they're like, okay, but I have bills and I have responsibilities. So how do I pursue that, how do I pursue this career? And not necessarily like follow the passion like you said, but you know, it would lead me if I'm walking in my purpose, it will lead me to that work that's contributing and, you know, hopefully making money.

But until then, how does one pay the bills? Because so many people right now do feel a little bit insecure with their jobs, with their finances that they don't want to leave a safe job and a safe paycheck. And so, they stay, you know, stuck in a place because of the financial security, which we can't blame them for.

So, what advice do you give for those people who are just like, well, I don't have time or energy to do that because I have kids and I have a mortgage and bills to pay.

Ashley: Yeah. The golden handcuffs are so real. My first piece of advice for anybody who feels that way is to actually take a look at your bills and calculate the numbers because what happens is often people shut down at the thought of leaving that secure job. They don't even actually crunch their numbers and say, "Is it realistic for me to get something that's a little easier on me while I go look for something else?" So, I would say, unless you're in your mid-to-late seventies, chances are you have years left of your career. And to me that means that even if you did five years of medical school or three years of law school, or you didn't go to school at all, it's never too late to become who you want to be.

So, I would hope that anybody listening right now that this conversation is just a permission slip for them to be who they are now and realize that sometimes backing up does not have to mean backing down. You know, calculate your numbers, look at different options, part-time jobs and give yourself that permission to take your time, knowing that you still have to start before you're ready because you never feel totally ready.

And, you know, we learned that doubt means don't, you know, but the truth is that...you know...this coach Dan Sullivan once told me, he said, "Fear is wetting your pants," but he said, "Courage is doing what you're supposed to do with wet pants." And so, to live a fulfilled life and to have a career that really resonates for you is a game of courage.

And if it was easy, everybody would be doing it. And so, my, my hope is that people start to create that safety within themselves to say, "I'm going to give myself permission to be who I am today."

Jamila: Do you have financial tips for people who are looking to make a pivot or to change what they're doing, how they can basically get through these changes financially and be okay?

Ashley: Yeah. Yeah. I would say my work as a career expert is usually around mindset. So, I would advise anyone to start to understand where their mindset actually is with money and to start to heal. Because the thing about money is that it's neutral, but how we hold it emotionally tends not to be. So, I mean, my mom always said, "Money doesn't grow on trees" and I'd say "Yeah it does. It's paper."

You know, it's this neutral thing. But we make it mean so much. And so, my advice for anyone is to look back into their life, look back into their upbringing and ask themselves what was the conversation in my house like about money?

What was the conversation like with my parents about success, about possibility, about owning a business, about being in the workforce? How did they relate to it and which of their beliefs did I adopt?

Jamila: Can you give an idea of maybe a client that made a pivot that was remarkable. And you were like, "Wow." And they were like, "Wow" at the result?

Ashley: Yeah. There's so many, but yeah, one of my favorites is a doctor. She was a surgeon in New York, and she came to me after years of being a surgeon, but she still, you know, she was in her mid-forties, late forties, and she knew she still had a lot of music in her left and she loved fashion.

And she was so talented at aesthetics, so good at knowing what the trends were in the future. How to put herself together, how to design a room. And we ended up determining that her being a fashion buyer was the path for her. And I remember how scared she was. And we did a lot of mindset work. A few years later, I got a random email from her inviting me to Paris fashion week because she was in charge of running it.

And I just remember that moment thinking like, "You truly can do anything you want to do." You know, I, I absolutely loved watching her change and I just love seeing people own it in that way. And, you know, I hope, I'm so honored that I get to be a part of that.

Jamila: Can you talk a little bit about the ways social media distorts the way we look at work and hustle to get to where you want?

Ashley: Yeah. You know, what's so funny for me being an online entrepreneur with the

podcast and with courses is I have a lot of friends with 6, 7, 8 figure companies and we all do it. We do the video shoot, the photo shoot, where we've got a laptop at the beach or whatever have you, but I always tell them, "Don't you get worried that sand's going to get in your laptop? Like, do you actually, nobody actually is working on the beach." I think that this hustle culture that we've been in has become this pendulum where there's a whole movement around hustle. And then there's a whole movement around self-care and self-care for me, I think has been disguised by or misunderstood by a lot of people as escapism.

People think that self-care looks like, you know, getting dessert when you go out to dinner or indulging in a bubble bath or a massage that night, when to me self-care can look like radical responsibility. It can look like getting a spreadsheet out and saying, I need to look at my debts and I need to pay these off. It can look like, you know, taking care of those doctor's appointments that you've been avoiding because you haven't made the time. I think self-care is really looking at who you want to be and honoring that vision of you. And hustle culture, I think has really skewed us and social media has even more so. Like the amount of friends that I have that are leaders and what they're doing and the amount of clients I've had, celebrities, A list films, that have confided in me that they are struggling because of this hustle culture is unbelievable. And so, I think that we compare our chapter one to somebody's chapter twelve, and we forget that there are no real shortcuts to lasting success. There's big breaks if you prepare for them, but there's no shortcuts where suddenly you wake up and you're there.

Jamila: You know, I feel like we can't have the conversation about career and finding a career that you love and/or can really provide economic stability without talking about that there are some people who don't have the foundation or equal access to opportunities. And so, we're partnering with Year Up who helps close that gap for people, the opportunity gap, so that they can have access to these careers and opportunities and to know what's possible. How do you look at that for people who need to see more examples, need to actually be in the rooms and have the opportunity so that they can get a level playing field, what they can start to do to, to get more access?

Ashley: It's so exciting to me that we're living in a time of diversity and inclusion becoming more of a conversation in the workforce. When somebody needs clarity or when somebody wants to get somewhere, to me the key ingredient is conversations. And the good news about conversations is that you can have them all the time. Anywhere. And so, I tell people you don't need to be on all the time. You just don't want to be on your phone. You want to be available. So even if I'm at the grocery store, if my life feels stuck or my career needs some stimulation, I make a point to have conversations.

And the more people you get to know the more clarity you get and the more opportunities you get. And if someone feels like there's no one around them that they feel like could really help them with a conversation, go put yourself in a free event, get on Zoom—there's virtual events—and be willing to be uncomfortable for the sake of who you can become. If you know how to talk about yourself in a way that makes sense for people, they're going to support you. One of the topics I cover in my book is the elevator pitch and how to talk about yourself. And I think it's one of the most botched interview questions, and it's one of the most missed opportunities when you're networking.

And it's really your job to be able to make sense of who you are for someone else who's listening to you. And according to research, the most memorable human experience is not love. You would think that love or kindness or happiness is the most memorable feeling, but it's actually awe. So, if you can create a sense of captivation or awe with somebody by telling your story, they will remember you and they'll want to support you.

And I think that when you do the inner work, you free your energy up. And anytime you're feeling really stuck, life is just upping your game. It's asking you to get leverage on it. If you don't like where you are, life is upping your game.

It's asking you to shake things up and it's up to you if you want to grab onto that breadcrumb.

Jamila: Okay. Ashley, thank you so much for helping us level up in our career and our mindset to make more and live lives we love.

Ashley: Thank you so much for having me.

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