



# Wander Woman

How High-Achieving Women Find Contentment and Direction

by Marcia Reynolds  
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## Take-Aways

- Women in corporate positions tend to change jobs and industries more often than men do.
- This restlessness can result in poorly thought-out decisions and endless job-hopping.
- The search for meaning, satisfaction and purpose in their work and their lives drives these “wander women.”
- Women also wander to seek new challenges and earn recognition for their achievements.
- Women no longer separate their work lives from their personal lives.
- Using “archetypes,” women can change their behavior to adapt to different situations.
- For example, “The Magician” is an entrepreneurial archetype, while “The Detective” is inquisitive and “The Pioneer” is trailblazing.
- Repeatedly envisioning new possibilities opens neural pathways in the brain that help you change the way you react to situations.
- “Relax, detach, center” and “focus” to quiet your mind and stay in the moment.
- To avoid turnover and keep experienced employees, corporations need to adjust their practices to help wandering women settle down.

## Rating (10 is best)

Overall	Applicability	Innovation	Style
8	8	8	8

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## Relevance

### What You Will Learn

In this Abstract, you will learn: 1) Why women in corporate jobs wander away to other positions, 2) How women can tap into their inner “archetypes” to envision and realize their goals, and 3) How a “wander woman” can find her sense of purpose.

### Recommendation

Surprisingly little research has examined why contemporary women leave their corporate jobs for new ones more often than men do. Organizational psychologist Marcia Reynolds interviewed 100 “high-achieving women” to discover why they often change jobs and don’t wait around to climb the career ladder. Their answers are not shocking, but they are enlightening, particularly when they underscore the differences between present-day females in the business world compared to previous generations of distaff trailblazers. Reynolds offers useful case studies, exercises and advice to help women understand their restlessness and find their heart’s desire, whether at work or at home. While her advice is not radically original – and she acknowledges her reliance upon many other sources – she has identified a new cohort of working people: meaning-driven, high-achieving women. And she writes with warmth, candor and clarity. *getAbstract* finds her book quite constructive for “wander women” seeking answers. However, its insights might also benefit men who want to understand the wander women in their professional and personal lives and who also seek purpose in their work.

## Abstract

### “High-Achieving Women”

Women who began rising to corporate leadership levels around 1985 represent a different kind of worker than those in the previous generation. Contemporary high-achieving women are more self-assured, forceful and dynamic. They are more likely to take on active, high-profile roles within their firms. They are movers and shakers, confident of their talents and not shy about demonstrating or proclaiming them to whoever needs to hear. They bring passion to their work, not solely because they covet the salaries, titles and perks of corporate managerial success, but because they have a “strong desire to contribute.” They add their sense of mission to their work out of a yearning to create “something more” in their lives. Unlike their groundbreaking predecessors, who often had to fight for basic rights, these women rarely need help to “find their voice, balance their life or strategize their way to the top”; they’re looking for a new purpose.

The drawback is that when these women hit an organizational wall, such as a recalcitrant boss or an oppressive culture, they leave. When these “wander women” can no longer add value to their work, they seek greener pastures in other departments, firms or industries. They may change careers, sometimes relinquishing secure salaries, to strike out on their own. They wander restively, moving to the next opportunity, rather than staying at a firm that no longer values their talents or contributions. Often these moves are haphazard responses answering only to the need for change. High achievers don’t always know where they’re going, only that they must go. This can result in job-hopping with no satisfying end. When a new prospect beckons a “wander woman,” she jumps ship, reveling in the fresh challenge. However, she soon becomes disenchanted and starts looking for the next ocean to cross. This “soulful agitation” keeps women asking, “What’s next?”

*“High-achieving women are wired to wander.”*

*“They often intentionally take themselves out of the running for leadership positions as they wander around looking for the elusive ‘something more’ they need to do in this lifetime.”*

*“To take the purposeful path, you have to feel what is right for you in your bones, your gut, your heart and your soul.”*

*“If you cannot articulate what makes you feel fulfilled you will have a hard time finding it in your work.”*

*“I choose my work based on what I have defined as my purpose and say ‘no’ to everything else.”*

*“If your sense of purpose is nowhere to be found, then it makes sense to question if what you are doing is right for you.”*

### “The Quiet Revolution”

Previous generations of women who worked learned to emulate men in order to achieve; they “dressed for success,” but felt like “impostors.” They either passively believed that their accomplishments spoke for themselves or they aggressively overreached to get their due. But by the 1990s, leaders at firms like Deloitte & Touche began noticing that, while they were recruiting very qualified women, few of them stayed around to climb the upper rungs on the executive ladder. Some ascribed this gap to women choosing maternity over careers, but Deloitte’s research found that women who left often felt ignored and bypassed. They were victims of a “more subtle discrimination” than traditional exclusion. Lacking mentors and challenging assignments, they quit. Deloitte took action to rectify these problems and, in 2005, promoted 116 women to its executive ranks, compared to three in 1992. So what makes wandering women wander? Five reasons for their wanderlust – and the downside risks of these motivations – are:

1. **“Extreme confidence”** – This is the metaphorical declaration “Give me a stick and I’ll build you a bridge.” Changing social views of women’s capabilities encourage young girls to grow up to become “high-energy, persistent, assertive, direct, bold and confident.” This self-assuredness can mean taking on too much and becoming addicted to work.
2. **“Constant need for new challenges”** – Women who already built that metaphorical bridge crave opportunities to do more and overcome the next hurdle. This drives them to leave their positions after two to six years, often making “impulsive job choices.”
3. **“A strong drive for recognition based on performance”** – Wandering women want applause for their accomplishments, not just for being women who can succeed in the world of work. That desire can make them strident and insensitive to others.
4. **“Work is your life’s blood”** – Dedicated women may say, “Retire? Never. I love knowing the world needs me.” But, if work defines you, it could override your personal life. As Carl Jung warned, “Where the will to power is paramount, love is lacking.”
5. **“Experience is the best teacher”** – Wandering women proclaim, “Kick me down, I’ll bounce back up. But that will never happen again.” They believe that their know-how makes them independent and self-reliant, so they have trouble asking for help.

High-achieving women no longer separate their work lives from their personal lives. Now, for women, as it has generally been for men, work is an essential part of their makeup. Four “societal shifts” triggered this change: 1) the advent of “the age of self-esteem,” when adults encouraged children to build self-confidence and made “special” kids “the new ordinary”; 2) women’s successful entry into competitive sports; 3) women’s increasing numbers among higher education graduates and 4) much more elevated expectations for women in the workforce.

### “Intentional Transformation: Claiming Your Selves”

Self-knowledge is critical to ending aimless wandering into ultimately unsatisfying jobs. Asking, who you are is different from asking what you can accomplish. The real question isn’t “What can I do?” but “Who can I be?” To that end, recognizing and exercising different behaviors in your work life can change the way you view opportunities and achieve results. One tactic is to take on several “archetypes” and use their traits in various circumstances. You could see yourself as a trailblazing “Pioneer” or a creative “Adventurer,” a patient, supportive “Coach” or an inspiring “Storyteller.” As a leader, you could take on the persona of an inclusive “Collaborator,” a controlling “Commander,” a unifying “Connector” or an edifying “Teacher.” In your firm, you might

*“Attachment to the assumption that you are always right keeps you on the defensive.”*

*“If you can’t flex your self-concept, you will either fail as a leader or you will choose to move on to another job or career where you can staunchly defend the glory of who you think you authentically are.”*

*“There is no need to ‘tough it out on your own.’ Asking for help is a sign of strength, not weakness.”*

*“Now it’s time to challenge yourself to live the examined life.”*

act as an achievement-oriented “Superstar,” a risk taking “Heroine” or a transformative, entrepreneurial “Magician.” Here are other positive archetypes:

- “The Detective” is inquisitive and detail-oriented.
- “The Queen” is decisive and powerful.
- “The Rebel” is nonconformist.
- “The Revolutionary” is visionary.
- “The Thinker” is reflective.
- “The Warrior” is strong and protective.
- “The Inspirer” is encouraging.
- “The Steward” is accommodating and self-sacrificing.
- “The Visionary” is imaginative and farsighted.

Avoiding inherent negative archetypes, such as the “Victim,” “Saboteur” and “Prostitute,” create your personal “board of directors” by identifying the archetypes you use, and the ones you may want to incorporate. Summon them, in “balance,” when your situation calls for their strength.

Most high achievers are perfectionists, but an obsession with doing things right constrains their inner satisfaction. If you’re a stickler, you may detach from your emotions and from other people. You’re a perfectionist if you assume: “There is a right answer, and it is mine,” “everything is up to me (this place is full of idiots)” and “I will always be disappointed (nothing or no one measures up).” To break out of the prison of perfectionism, use your archetypes to create visions of the outcomes you want at work or in personal relationships. Establish a “keyword” to evoke those mental pictures at regular intervals and in times of stress. Repeated visualizations create neural pathways that allow you to change the way you react to situations.

### Be Here Now

In the rush of your busy work life, you may not have time to internalize what’s going on around you. Often just taking a moment to reflect on your feelings and other people’s reactions to you can reveal valuable lessons. Profit from the “window of opportunity” after a “mind-rattling” event – good or bad – to think about, understand and, if need be, change your behavior. Assemble a group of like-minded women to share these observations in “Appreciative Dialogues.” These meetings can generate new perspectives on old problems, provoke fresh ideas and encourage support among the participants. In an Appreciative Dialogue, focus on a past “peak experience” you have had and analyze your contributions to that success. Applying that positive experience to a current dilemma can rewire how you see the problem and provide ideas for tackling it. Using a journal to recall and capture positive events also can brighten your disposition and relieve stress.

Leading a hectic life makes it harder to calm your mind and become still enough to focus on new possibilities. To steady your thoughts and stay in the moment, practice these four steps:

1. **“Relax”** – Releasing tension physically allows you to rein in your brain. Try deep breathing. Regular exercise reduces stress, even on your busiest days.
2. **“Detach”** – Clear the thoughts that muddle your mind to free up mental room for future opportunities. Let go of others’ judgments. Acting coach Gary Austin explains, “It’s none of your business what people think of you.”
3. **“Center”** – Get out of your head and back to your gut. Find your inner wisdom.
4. **“Focus”** – Use your keyword or an archetype to bring you back into the present.

*“Around the world, women are embracing their strength and hopping around jobs looking for the best place to shine.”*

*“Today’s high-achieving women care less about the boardroom than they do about their strong desire to contribute.”*

*“The sudden, new amazing solution to a problem only arises when you can look at your situation from an entirely new angle.”*

## Where Are You Headed?

Women are more likely than men to move on to new jobs and industries. Men quit their jobs for more money and status, while women “over the age of 30 are more attracted by the opportunity to be significant.” Women wander in search of a sense of purpose in their work and their lives. Owning your true intent means that you, not others, define your worth. You are not pursuing a “need for recognition,” but a need to fulfill your passion.

To find your purpose, go on a “passion quest.” First, get in touch with your emotions by thinking about your favorite foods, books or even sounds. Recall your happiest day, or a beloved prayer or what you’d like a movie of your life to reveal. Discover the meaningful drive that bubbles up in these thoughts, and relate it to a current work challenge. “Sense the meaning in the motions you are making. If you can’t, then it could be time to move on.” Change requires persistence, the ability to maintain focus despite inner distractions and external interruptions. Try to reframe your thoughts and behavior. To sustain your drive, use the four “PEAK Transformation Tools”:

1. **“Pick your emotions”** – Whether you have come to your present choices via positive or negative experiences, the intensity of your desire for change determines your ability to achieve it. Channel any resentment about your situation into finding ways to alter it.
2. **“Evaluate your evidence”** – Recognize the encouraging aspects of the shifts you’re making to create a positive feedback loop.
3. **“Accept support”** – Connect with others, and ask for their help and advice. A 2002 study showed that when women suffer stress, their systems release oxytocin, which leads them to nurture and befriend, activities that quiet their anxiety.
4. **“Know your sense of purpose”** – Your happiness depends on your belief that “you are a part of something bigger than yourself.” Focus on the greater good of your community.

Once you understand your motivations and goals, you can better steer “through, below or away” from the glass ceiling. Women need to manage up and across organizational striations to become known and valued. If you tend to dominate conversations or meetings, however, learn to “WAIT,” that is, to ask “Why Am I Talking?”

Don’t be satisfied with taking a tactical approach to your firm’s problems; companies value strategic thinkers. Uncover champions who will help you reach the next level. If you decide to quit your job, be sure you are making a “rational” choice, not an “emotional” one. Get ready for your new role by envisioning what your reconstituted work life will look like and – until the day you depart – remain committed to your current job so you continue to learn and so you preserve the ability to leave on good terms. Changing demographics and social attitudes will hasten the time when wandering women may be able to settle down. Firms must adapt more readily to the needs of their female staff members, or risk losing their best talent to that shining, meaningful opportunity just around the next bend.

## About the Author

Organizational psychologist **Marcia Reynolds** is president of Covisioning, a corporate training firm. She is a Master Certified Coach.