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LIFE'S WORK

What Do I Do? Depends on What Week It Is

By [LISA BELKIN](#)

WHEN Sean Aiken was a boy, he thought he might like to be a professional basketball player once he grew up. Now he is 25, and he is decidedly less certain.

In that way he is like so many of his millennial generation — new workers wavering on the threshold of real life, determined to get it right, they say, and fearful that they might get it wrong.

“They’ve grown up in a world where their parents always told them to explore all their options, and they are entering the work force at a time when they can explore and explore and explore,” says Mary Crane, a business consultant whose expertise is bridging the generation gap at Fortune 500 companies. “In addition to that, they see their parents as stuck in thankless jobs, and they don’t want to end up that way.”

Or, as Mr. Aiken puts it: “We have been told our whole life that anything is possible. Well, our parents did a great job, because now we actually believe it.”

In the spirit of his generation — the one that brought us extreme sports, and made a mini celebrity out of a blogger who traded a paper clip for a house, and a mega celebrity out of a socialite who went on reality TV to move from job to job in “The Simple Life” — Mr. Aiken has begun a most unusual search. He will try a different job every week for a year. Depending on your point of view, his extreme job hunt either typifies or parodies his age group.

It all began at the dinner table last year, a few months after Mr. Aiken graduated from Capilano College in North Vancouver, British Columbia, with a degree in business administration. The son was telling the father (who took a job as an accountant 30 years ago in the Aiken family’s hometown of Port Moody, British Columbia) about wanting to find work about which he was passionate. “My father looked at me,” Mr. Aiken recalled, “and said, ‘I’ve been around 60 years and I’ve yet to find something I’m passionate about except your mother.’” Sobered by that thought, Mr. Aiken hatched his plan to work at 52 jobs in a year and to chronicle the search on a Web site, [oneweekjob.com](#). He would take no salary for the work, but would encourage his “employers” to make a donation to charity. He spread the word through a mass e-mail message to friends and family and eventually through word of Web.

When offers came in that were far from home, he found a sponsor([nicejob.ca](#), a job search Web site) to pay for his travel, and he slept on the couches of “co-workers” and blog readers. As traffic to his Web site increased, he started taking along his best friend, a filmmaker, to create videos for the site.

The 20-somethings who turn to One Week Job find in Mr. Aiken “an ideal of the unstable life,” says Penelope Trunk, the author of “The Brazen Careerist” (Business Plus, 2007), who blogs and lectures on the transformation of the workplace. “He sends the message ‘job-hopping is O.K.,’ ‘moving around is O.K.’”

That is a comforting message, she says, because while Gen Y talks of seeking passion and embracing what is new, that is just brave cover for a less comfortable truth. “The reality is they might prefer one job that would last forever and end with retirement, but that kind of job doesn’t exist anymore,” Ms. Trunk says. “The alternative, the instability, terrifies them. Sean Aiken is an example of how uncertainty and constant change can be O.K.”

Mr. Aiken is on Week 36 of his journey now (he spent it at the studio of a Manhattan filmmaker). Since his first one-week-job, as a bungee-jumping instructor back in March, he has done practically everything, including teaching yoga, exterminating insects, trading stocks and baking apple pies.

He was surprised by how fond he was of some jobs. “The dairy farm was cool,” he says. “It’s all about milking cows, feeding cows, shoveling manure. I really enjoyed it.”

Others were not as fun. “Selling T-shirts at the Toronto film festival, I had three separate bosses,” he says. “I didn’t really know what was expected of me. I was always not doing the right thing for one of them.”

Mr. Aiken’s whirlwind schedule raises the question: can an understanding of real work be had in five-day snapshots? Or is this all just an example of other qualities often attributed to Gen Y — a short attention span and a tendency toward laziness?

Alex Frankel, for one, believes that the essence of a job can be learned in a week. Or three. A freelance business journalist, he is the author of “Punching In: The Unauthorized Adventures of a Front-Line Employee” (Collins, 2007). Published this month, the book tells of Mr. Frankel’s search through the workplace, one employer at a time, at places like Gap, Enterprise-Rent-a-Car and Apple.

His goal was to learn how corporations create “rah rah” employee cultures, but along the way he discovered much about himself.

“I don’t do well when I have to be part of a team all the time,” he says. “I’m better when I can be out on my own, my own boss of my part of the job.”

For that reason, he says, his work at Starbucks felt confining while his work delivering packages for UPS felt liberating. “There were passing thoughts when I was out in the truck, that I could see doing this full time,” he says. “A few weeks is certainly enough time to get a feel for whether or not a work culture is a good fit.”

Mr. Aiken started out hoping he would have a eureka moment, a cinematic swell of music heralding the epiphany that “this was what I was meant to do.”

But now that he has only 17 weeks left, he has toned down his expectations. “I was looking for the one perfect career that would make me happy,” he says. “Now I am using all the jobs together to see what I need to be happy, what works for me and what doesn’t.”

Like Mr. Frankel, he is realizing that he does not like the regimentation of an office. Also, he says, “I like changing tasks. I enjoy continual change. And it should be something interactive. With people.”

If he had to sign on for any of the positions he has held so far this year, he says, it would be the one raising funds for cancer research or the one in an advertising agency. But talking to him, and scrolling through his Web site, one

can't help but conclude that he has in fact already found his job, one not available to his parents' generation, but which his will refine and perfect.

Mr. Aiken's life work might well turn out to be the marketing of Sean Aiken.

As a French psychologist wrote on Mr. Aiken's blog: "He has in effect created a new business, he is a 'Sean — the-vocation-searcher.' It is a job that only one applicant can fit and is made up of all the skills and talents of Sean. The best way to involve all your skills in your job is to create a job made of all your skills — instead of trying to fit in an existing and traditional one. Sean is now the hero of a quest turned into an adventure."

One can already envision the book. And the reality show. And the Sean Aiken line of luggage.

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