**5 Barriers to Career Change — and How to Overcome Them**

Moving into a new career can feel impossible. A survey of more than 950 business school alumni explores why, and what can help.

by

Summary.

Why does career change feel so hard? And what can people do to make it easier? In search of answers, the authors surveyed more than 950 business school alumni. What emerged from their research were five clear barriers to and five enablers of career change.

If you’ve been thinking of making a career change, you are not alone. Consider the state of the current employment landscape: [Mass layoffs](https://mondo.com/insights/mass-layoffs-in-2022-whats-next-for-employees/) are rampant. [Venture capital deals](https://techcrunch.com/2023/01/06/vc-deal-activity-fell-in-2022-signaling-tough-times-ahead) are on hold. For managers, [burnout](https://www.forbes.com/sites/bryanrobinson/2023/02/07/new-outlook-on-burnout-for-2023-limitations-on-what-managers-can-do/) is on the rise globally. [McKinsey](https://www.mckinsey.com/mgi/our-research/generative-ai-and-the-future-of-work-in-america) predicts that advances in generative AI may lead to 12 million occupational transitions by 2030. The pandemic and subsequent economic and political volatility led many of us to [reflect on our choices](https://www.gartner.com/en/articles/employees-seek-personal-value-and-purpose-at-work-be-prepared-to-deliver) and catalyzed our desire for change.

But for many people, making the jump to a new career seems [impossible](https://hbr.org/2023/11/why-career-transition-is-so-hard), even when they yearn for something different. Why is that? And what helps?

To investigate, we surveyed more than 950 business school alumni who attended two webinars (delivered by one of us, Herminia) about how to make a career change. In the first survey, conducted in 2020, we asked open-ended questions about barriers to career change and then grouped the responses into categories. In the second survey, conducted in 2023, we asked multiple-choice questions about the categories we had identified and added questions about what enables career change. We then used ChatGPT-4 to more systematically categorize the open-ended responses about barriers from 2020. From these analyses we derived a list of what’s hard and what helps.

**What’s Hard**

When we asked the question “What barriers — if any — get in the way of you changing your career?” five answers topped the list: ***not knowing what to do next****, limiting mindsets****, inadequate networks****, financial constraints,* and ***lacking the right skills****.*

**Not knowing what to do next.**

Herminia’s research consistently finds that determining next steps is the top barrier people encounter when they consider making a career change. One person referred to it as “the eternal question of how you eat an elephant — it’s hard to know where to start, and it seems very overwhelming.” Another said, “I’m chronically unable to express a career objective that is specific enough so that anyone I network with can actually help me to find it.” Not knowing where to begin can make people feel as if they are somehow deficient for lacking clarity about what they want.

**Limiting mindsets.**

Many people find the prospect of career change so overwhelming that they become paralyzed — and end up doing nothing at all. The barrier, as one person put it, is a “lack of courage, fear I will not make enough money, fear I will not reach the top of the career ladder and feel I am a loser.” This is a serious problem, because [research](https://journals.aom.org/doi/full/10.5465/amr.2017.0196#loaded) suggests that inaction reduces self-confidence, which in turn inhibits a person’s ability to identify possible new career paths. One of our respondents understood that, saying, “I am the biggest barrier; I have to get out of my way.” A cycle of self-blame keeps them stuck. The root problem, however, is not the limiting mindset; it’s that many people simply don’t know how to search for new possibilities — or don’t yet accept that when it comes to career transition, you have to search in order to know, not the other way around.

**Inadequate networks.**

In general, people find it difficult to network for a job. It’s even harder when they feel that they don’t have a clear story, as is the case when they don’t know what they want to do next. As a result, people worry they won’t know what to say when networking or that they’ll blow a potentially useful contact that they might tap later, when they have more clarity. “I’m finding it difficult to know who to talk to [and] how to show transferable skills,” one person told us. A second reported having a hard time “identifying and selling the added value I bring, so I can reach out to people I don’t know.” The only way to overcome these barriers is to start reaching out to people and exploring options.

**Financial constraints.**

These are real, and they make certain options unrealistic, especially for people who support their families. But until a person learns more about the specifics of new occupations — and, ideally, tries them out on the side, without risking financial security — concerns about money operate as untested mental barriers. For example, one high-profile business journalist dreamed of making a living as a book author but worried about the finances and whether she’d be any good at it. When she tested it out, she learned two things: She actually *was* capable, but she didn’t enjoy writing full-time as much as she had expected to. That knowledge convinced her to reinvest herself in her existing career, happily.

**Lacking the right skills.**

Aspiring career changers know the importance of identifying their transferable skills. But lacking specific skills — in, say, digital marketing — can be a real barrier. Some respondents worried their knowledge base might be seen as obsolete. One person, for example, mentioned feeling worried about both lacking requisite skills and being perceived as overqualified for a role they were seeking. These worries are not irrational. Executives today need to demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of how new technologies are impacting the industries, organizations, and jobs they want to enter, and of the opportunities that these technologies present to transform a business.

**What Helps**

When we asked people “What actions — if any — have helped you in your career-change process?” the five top answers all concerned the barriers discussed above. They are: *networking, acquiring new knowledge and skills, trying things out, researching options,* and *self-reflection.*

**Networking.**

Networks are a primary conduit for ideas, leads, referrals, and information. They’re also a mirror of our identities. That’s why as we attempt to change, so too must our networks; sticking to the usual suspects limits our imagination about what is possible. That’s one of many reasons why so-called “weak ties” (that is, relatively distant acquaintances rather than close friends) are so important when it comes to job mobility. (Just how important was made clear by this [randomized experimental study](https://www.science.org/doi/abs/10.1126/science.abl4476), which looked at the networks of more than 20 million LinkedIn users over a five-year period, and the 2 billion new ties and 600,000 new jobs that were created.) The problem is, networking outside one’s usual circle is surprisingly hard, even for seasoned executives. The only antidote is to “just do it.” Fortunately, as Herminia and executive coach Spish Rurak [have found](https://hbr.org/2023/09/the-challenges-of-networking-as-an-executive), it gets a lot easier with practice.

**Acquiring new knowledge and skills.**

A significant number of respondents said they found that expanding or updating their skills through courses and other activities was helpful for career change. The demand for certain skills is so high, and is changing so fast, that [more and more older Americans](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4R7iLVdqomY) are heading back to school, often part-time or in the evenings. Enrollment in degree-granting postsecondary institutions of students who are 35 years or older, for example, grew by [6% between 2000 and 2017, and is expected to grow another 5% between 2017 and 2028](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/PES/section-5.asp). Skill building, however, does not necessarily involve full-time education. The online course provider [Coursera](https://www.skillademia.com/statistics/coursera-statistics), for example, closed 2022 with 23 million more students enrolled than in the previous year — when its enrollment already exceeded 100 million.

**Trying things out.**

If you have a hunch, explore it, even if provisionally. Our respondents gave many examples of how to do this — including taking part in temporary assignments, engaging in freelance advisory work, and conducting projects in areas of interest. When you don’t know where to start, just doing *anything* that is different from what you habitually do can help you get unstuck. Take a class online. Attend a conference. Do some volunteer work. These actions create “[habit discontinuity](https://hbr.org/2021/08/the-3-phases-of-making-a-major-life-change" \t "_blank)” and put you in contact with people in new circles, helping you with both mindset and networking barriers. In their best-selling book [*Designing Your Life*](https://www.amazon.com/Designing-Your-Life-Well-Lived-Joyful-ebook/dp/B01BJSRSEC), Stanford’s Bill Burnett and Dave Evans describe experimentation as the only way to discover unfamiliar possibilities, build new skills, and test out whether you’d actually like working in a given career.

**Researching options.**

Of course, even an experimental approach can require some desk research. For example, executive coach Rurak advises people to identify “20 beautiful companies.” Although this exercise doesn’t necessarily produce a next role, it can push people into action and produce useful insights. One executive who was fired and felt his networking was limited by his noncompete agreement, for example, combed through the Nasdaq list to find companies he might enjoy working at, and in the process, shifted his thinking from “all the places I can’t go” to a bigger world of possibilities. Another client of Rurak, a strategy consultant, thought he wanted to return to the corporate sector to be “part of the implementation.” But he couldn’t come up with 10 — much less 20 — companies that felt attractive to him, and eventually he realized that he actually wanted to remain a consultant. That insight led him to take a job with a rival consulting firm.

**Self-reflection.**

Respondents reported that taking time for reflection and personal development was helpful, especially when they were guided by professional coaches and career counselors. One person described it as the development of self-trust. Although introspection without experimentation rarely leads to a clear next step, it may be particularly useful for overcoming the negative emotions involved in career inaction and mustering the self-confidence needed to persist through the painful in-between period that is the hallmark of transitions.

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The accelerated pace of technological change is reshaping work and organizations in ways that call for constant career reinvention, and people clearly want greater meaning than many of their jobs provide. Yes, career change is hard. But there’s no going back to the way things were. We simply have to learn to get better at making transitions. Fortunately, as most people who have come out the other side will attest, the prize is well worth it.