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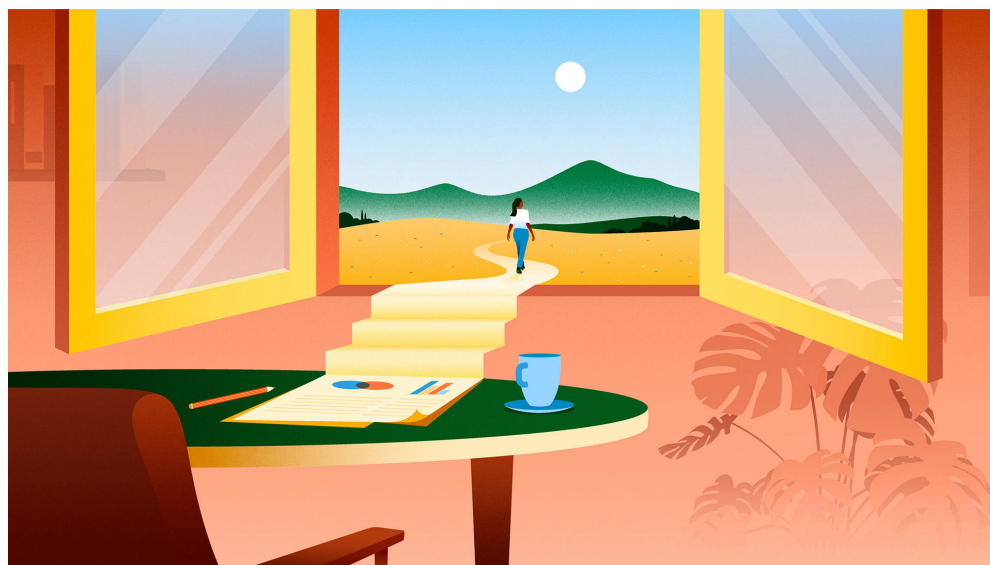
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Use Strategic Thinking to Create the Life You Want

Seven questions can clarify what really matters to you. **by Rainer Strack, Susanne Dyrchs, and Allison Bailey**

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Vanessa Branchi

In times of crisis, many of us ponder existential questions about health, security, purpose, career, family, and legacy. However, more often than not, such contemplation is short-lived. The demands of everyday life — the here and now — can overwhelm us, leaving little time to think about the long term and what we are working toward. As a result, when faced with life decisions both big and small, we are left with nothing to guide us but emotion or intuition.

The corporate equivalent, of course, is attempting to run a business without a strategy, which every HBR reader knows is a losing proposition. But as longtime consultants to organizations around the world, we wondered: Could we adapt the model for strategic thinking that we use with institutional clients to help individuals design better futures for themselves? The answer is yes, and the result is a program that we call Strategize Your Life. We've tested it with more than 500 people — including students, young professionals, middle-aged employees and managers, C-suite executives, board members, and retirees — to help them develop their individual life strategies.

You can create a life strategy at any time, but it can feel especially appropriate at certain milestones — a school graduation, the start of your first job, a promotion, becoming an empty-nester, retiring — or after a major life event, such as a health scare, a divorce, the loss of a job, a midlife crisis, or the death of a loved one. When you have a strategy, you will be better able to navigate all those transitions and difficult moments, building resilience and finding more joy and fulfillment while minimizing stress. This article will help you get started.

A Surprising Symmetry

Every corporate strategy project is different. But the hundreds that we've conducted for large organizations have had commonalities, including the use of certain methodologies and tools. We typically work through seven steps, each guided by a question:

1. How does the organization define success?
2. What is our purpose?
3. What is our vision?
4. How do we assess our business portfolio?
5. What can we learn from benchmarks?
6. What portfolio choices can we make?
7. How can we ensure a successful, sustained change?

These steps can be easily adapted to an individual:

1. How do I define a great life?
2. What is my life purpose?
3. What is my life vision?
4. How do I assess my life portfolio?
5. What can I learn from benchmarks?
6. What portfolio choices can I make?
7. How can I ensure a successful, sustained life change?

From Corporate Strategy to Life Strategy

The questions that organizations use to set a course for the future can be easily adapted to help individuals do the same.

Organizations		Individuals	Outcome
1	How does the organization define success?	How do I define a great life?	Great life
2	What is our purpose?	What is my life purpose?	Life purpose
3	What is our vision?	What is my life vision?	Life vision
4	How do we assess our business portfolio?	How do I assess my life portfolio?	Life portfolio
5	What can we learn from benchmarks?	What can I learn from benchmarks?	Life benchmark
6	What portfolio choices can we make?	What portfolio choices can I make?	Life choice
7	How can we ensure a successful, sustained change?	How can I ensure a successful, sustained life change?	Life action

Source: Analyses by Rainer Strack, Susanne Dyrchs, and Allison Bailey

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As the former head of strategy for a U.S.-based Fortune 50 company told us, “Knowing the right questions is much harder than having the answers.” Just as corporate strategy is an integrated set of choices that positions a company to win, *life strategy* is an integrated set of choices *that positions a person to live a great life*. What’s more, we can apply tools from classic organizational strategy and other realms to help you find answers to the seven questions above and make better decisions.

Critics might say that you can’t transfer concepts from business to life. In the 1960s there were similar concerns about whether strategy ideas from the military and politics could apply to the corporate world. The management guru Peter Drucker even changed the title of his 1964 book from *Business Strategy* to *Managing for Results* because everyone he and

his publisher asked told them that strategy belonged to those realms, not to business. Yet we've also seen business-world principles employed to improve people's self-management. For example, in their best-selling book *Designing Your Life*, Stanford University's Bill Burnett and Dave Evans modified the design thinking they used in software development to help individuals.

Strategize Your Life is our attempt to do the same for strategic thinking in a concrete, step-by-step way. We believe it can lead you to new insights on how you define and find your great life. Our goal is to give your emotion and intuition an analytical partner.

In surveying our workshop and coaching session participants, we found that, in the past, only 21% had outlined what a great life means to them, 9% had identified their purpose, 12% had set a vision for their life, 17% had created concrete goals and milestones, and a paltry 3% had developed what could be called a life strategy. These are critically important issues that very few of us are spending enough time on.

As Martha, a 26-year-old graduate student, explained, "Life keeps taking shape... When all the Christmas parties and weddings and trips are suddenly over, you ask yourself, 'Have I really lived or has life just happened to me?'" She was eager to be more proactive. "What better help is there than a high-level plan for life?" she asked. "Not to strictly follow it and forbid life to unfold, but to have a common thread. What should my story be? What should I have experienced so that in the end I can say to myself, 'I have lived?'"

Unlike most self-help books, we don't present one golden path to happiness or life satisfaction. Because everyone is unique, we give you the tools to find your own path in a seven-step life strategy process. In step 1 you define what a great life means for you. In step 2 you outline

your purpose; in step 3 your life vision. Step 4 is a portfolio analysis of how you spend your 168-hour week, while step 5 involves setting life satisfaction benchmarks. In step 6 you incorporate the results of the first five steps and determine your choices and potential changes in your life, and in step 7 you map out a plan for putting your choices into action. We recommend that you take notes throughout so that, by the end, you can put an initial version of your life strategy on a single page. (To help, we created a [life strategy worksheet](#), which should be filled out after you've gone through all the steps.)

This work may seem daunting, but in practice it should take you only a few hours. That said, it might not be easy. You will have to challenge yourself and go beyond the obvious. But you shouldn't give up, because the answers you'll discover are so worthwhile. After all, what's more important than your life? Commit to thinking strategically about it, look forward to the insights you will gain, and enjoy the journey.

The Seven Steps

The process begins with a simple yet profound question:

1. How do I define a great life?

The starting point of any corporate strategy process is to define fundamental metrics for success. For instance, does the organization want its strategy to focus on driving sales, shareholder value, or positive societal impact?

What are the right metrics in an individual's life? Our social norms and hierarchies might suggest we measure ourselves with money, fame, and power. But [studies have shown](#) that money leads to greater happiness only to the extent that our basic needs are met, after which its returns diminish or even plateau. Other research shows many of us are on a "hedonic treadmill": After we get a pay raise, are promoted, or purchase something that triggers a pleasurable high, we return to our original

level of happiness. And then there is social comparison — no matter what you achieve, someone will always be richer, more famous, or more powerful than you.

The ancient Greeks saw two main dimensions of a great life: *hedonia* (a focus on pleasure) and *eudaimonia* (a focus on virtues and on meaning). More recently, scholars have pointed to the importance of social connection. A [study](#) of more than 27,000 people in Asia found a strong correlation between being married and being satisfied with life, while a [study](#) that has followed 268 Harvard College men from 1938 to the present, and was expanded to include their children and wives, as well as a study that has followed 456 residents of inner-city Boston since the 1970s, also expanded to include children and wives, found that meaningful relationships were the key driver of long-term happiness. The late Harvard Business School professor Clayton Christensen agreed: In his classic HBR article “[How Will You Measure Your Life?](#)” he wrote, “I’ve concluded that the metric by which God will assess my life isn’t dollars but the individual people whose lives I’ve touched.”

A framework that includes all these factors — hedonic, eudemonic, and relational — is the PERMA model, introduced by Martin Seligman, the founder of positive psychology and a University of Pennsylvania professor, in his 2011 book, [Flourish](#). Other researchers later developed it into PERMA-V, which stands for Positive emotions (frequent feelings of pleasure and contentment), Engagement (being in the flow, losing track of time), Relationships (mutual feelings of caring, support, and love), Meaning (contributing to making the world a better place), Achievement (striving for success or mastery, reaching goals), and Vitality (being healthy and energetic).

To determine what makes a great life for you, start with each element in PERMA-V, or even add your own categories, such as autonomy or

spirituality. Then rate each one's importance to you on a scale from 0 (not important) to 10 (very important). Try to recall periods of deep satisfaction in your past and consider what triggered them.

In the first step of strategy projects, we conduct a comprehensive analysis of the status quo. So, you should also rate your current satisfaction with each dimension on a scale from 0 (not at all satisfied) to 10 (very satisfied). This quick assessment will give you a rough idea of how you define a great life and initial ideas about what you need to change.

2. What is my life purpose?

For a corporate strategy to be successful, it must be anchored to the organization's purpose, which lies at the intersection of, What are we good at? and What does the world need?, and takes into account, What are our values? and What excites us? Using these questions, we've helped companies around the world develop purpose statements. A purpose statement serves as an important guardrail for your strategy and is a North Star for your organization.

The same questions can be used to find your life purpose. Ask yourself, What am I good at? Think about situations at work or in other areas of life in which you have demonstrated critical strengths such as creativity, teamwork, or communication. Then ask, What are my core values? Think about critical decisions you've made and principles you hold dear that have provided direction, such as honesty, fairness, or integrity. There are dozens of online [lists](#) and tests to help you consider your most important values. The next question is, Which activities light me up? Perhaps your answers include mentoring, problem-solving, or engaging with different types of people. Finally, ask, What need can I help address in the world? It could be one of the 17 [Sustainable Development Goals](#) of the United Nations, such as health, education,

gender equality, or climate action, or it could be something much more general, such as love, kindness, trust, or security.

In the purpose-defining stage of strategy projects, we conduct belief audits to get input from many stakeholders. Do the same. Ask friends or family members what your strengths are, what values you live by, what things excite you, and what need you might help fill.

Draw from your own answers and theirs to draft a purpose statement, and then ask for feedback on it. Or you can engage ChatGPT in an interactive dance, using the answers to the four questions as input to help you develop your purpose statement, as Tom, a climate physicist, did in one of our recent workshops.

When Joudi, a Kurdish refugee from Syria currently living in Germany, went through this exercise, he identified his core strengths as ambition, passion, and hunger for knowledge. His core values were justice, peace, family, and charity. He said he was most excited by innovation, neurosurgery, and entrepreneurship (notably his experiences selling accessories as a street vendor in Istanbul and founding a multilingual AI-powered integration support platform for Ukrainians who had fled their country for Germany). As for the world needs he wanted to address, Joudi cited health care, freedom, and equality. In the end, he wrote this purpose statement: “Remain medically passionate, willing to learn, entrepreneurial, and strong-willed to drive medical innovation and create equitable access to health care for people.”

A chief human resources officer at a global industrial company wanted to step down from her current role but was unsure whether she should look for a similar role in another company or do something completely different. She went through the seven steps and came up with a simple purpose statement, “To help and lead others to aspire,” through which

she realized that she did want another senior HR role, just in a different company.

There are other methods for defining one's life purpose, of course. But it's important to find the time and a way to do it. We've seen some workshop participants sharpen their existing purpose ideas, while others have had a real "aha" moment, finally understanding what they were meant to do. Purpose guides your life strategy.

3. What is my life vision?

The next step in building a corporate strategy is to set out a vision for the future. We typically ask leadership teams where they want their organization to be — in terms of innovation, growth, product portfolio, market presence, etc. — in five to 10 years. Often we have them ask themselves questions like, What newspaper headline about our company would we like to read a decade from now?

Individuals should also strive to envision who they want to become in the years ahead. As the Stoic philosopher Seneca said, "If you do not know which port you are sailing to, no wind is favorable." At the same time, you want to remain open to surprises and serendipity. Seneca commented on this as well: "Luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity." Strategizing your life is the preparation.

So, ask yourself: What story would I like people to tell about me five to 10 years from now? What would I do if money wasn't an issue? What will the 80-year-old me not want to have missed in life? Your purpose and your strengths might also trigger some ideas about your vision.

For this step we have used a photo-sorting exercise similar to what our corporate clients use in branding and innovation strategy projects. Out of 180 photos, workshop participants select two to four that best

represent their personal and professional vision — what one person described as a “mood board.”

In both business and individual life strategy, a vision can give you focus. Jim, who will soon be a doctor, had a purpose statement that was rather general: “Bring people together and share passions.” His vision was more concrete and specific: “To create spaces for more social encounters, such as a medical practice with a shared coffee shop, and to get involved in homeless medicine.” Your vision should be equally descriptive.

You might end up with a short list of bullet points or a one-sentence summary of your vision. No matter how you capture it, a vision statement can be powerful in guiding your life. An example we love comes from our colleague Sebastian when he was 14. After a poor math test result, his teacher told him, “Teaching you is a waste of time” and warned he’d never get a high school diploma. For the next couple of years Sebastian took that to heart, skipped school, and started working as a bricklayer. Eventually, however, he decided to make a change, and it began with this vision statement: “I will go to university and get a PhD and then go back to my math teacher — all in the next 10 years.” He did just that, graduating summa cum laude with a PhD in economics, and in another 10 years he was a managing director and a partner at BCG.

4. How do I assess my life portfolio?

Companies typically use portfolio analysis to assess their business units on key parameters such as market growth or share and to decide where to invest capital. BCG is well-known for its 2×2 growth-share matrix.

But what is the equivalent of a business unit in life? We focus on six strategic life areas (SLAs): relationships; body, mind, and spirituality; community and society; job, learning, and finances; interests and entertainment; and personal care. We then subdivide the six SLAs into

16 strategic life units (SLUs). (For a full list of the SLUs, see the exhibit “The Key Areas of Life.”)

The Key Areas of Life

People spend their time, energy, and money in six strategic life areas, which can be subdivided into 16 strategic life units. Think about how much time you currently spend on each and rank both its importance and the satisfaction it gives you using a 0–10 scale.

Strategic life areas	Strategic life units	Descriptions
1 Relationships	Significant other	Time with partner, dates
	Family	Engaging with kids, parents, siblings
	Friendship	Time with friends
2 Body, mind, and spirituality	Physical health/sports	Exercise, physical therapy
	Mental health/mindfulness	Psychotherapy, meditation
	Spirituality/faith	Religious practice
3 Community and society	Community/citizenship	Membership in local clubs, jury duty
	Societal engagement	Volunteering, activism
4 Job, learning, and finances	Job/career	Work
	Education/learning	Classes, training
	Finances	Planning, investing
5 Interests and entertainment	Hobbies/interests	Reading, collectibles
	Online entertainment	Social media, TV, gaming
	Offline entertainment	Vacations, theater, sporting events
6 Personal care	Physiological needs	Eating, sleeping
	Activities of daily living	Commuting, housework

Source: Analyses by Rainer Strack, Susanne Dyrchs, and Allison Bailey

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And what are the equivalents of capital expenditures in life? Time, energy, and money. A week has 168 hours. How do you spend them? With your significant other, with family, at work, playing sports, at church, getting a good night’s rest?

Look back at the past year, including holidays, and assess how much time you spent on each of the 16 SLUs in an average week. When an activity crosses categories, split the time between them. For example, if you went jogging with your significant other for one hour a week, allocate half an hour to the significant other SLU and half an hour to the physical health/sports SLU. Next, rate all 16 SLUs on a scale of 0 to 10 based on how important they are to you. Then rate the satisfaction you derive from each on the same scale. (This goes one level deeper than the similar PERMA-V exercise.)

Now sketch out your own 2×2; we call it the Strategic Life Portfolio. But instead of mapping growth against share, you will put the importance of each SLU on the y-axis and the satisfaction it brings on the x-axis. Plot each SLU with a bubble, making the size of the bubble roughly proportional to the percentage of time in a week you spend on it.

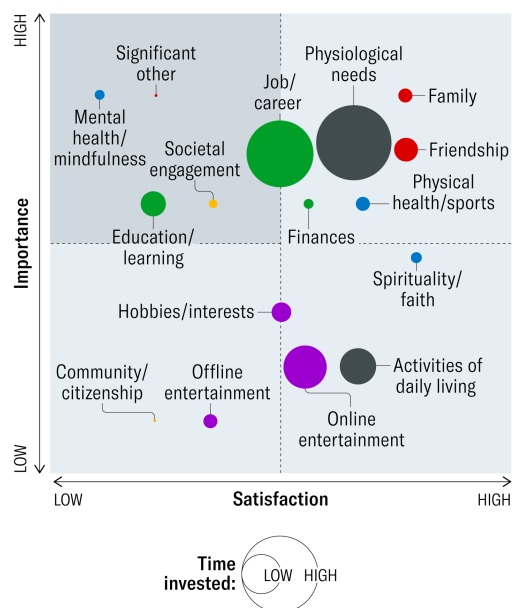
In the top-left quadrant, you will find the SLUs of high importance and low satisfaction. These are areas of high urgency, because you care about these activities deeply but aren't focusing on them enough to get the most out of them. The SLUs in the top-right quadrant also deserve some attention: You want to keep devoting significant time and energy to your most important and highest-satisfaction activities, and invest less in those that are less important (bottom left and right).

Finally, look at your entire 2×2 and ask yourself: Does my current portfolio of SLUs put me on the right track to support my purpose and achieve my vision? Does it bring me closer to how I define a great life? Where can I save and reallocate my time? Just as in corporate strategy projects, you want to set some high-level priorities — rather than a detailed plan — for investments of your time, energy, and money.

When Toni, an engineer, completed this exercise, he saw four areas for urgent improvement in the top-left quadrant: significant other (since he didn't have one), mental health/mindfulness, societal engagement, and education/learning. His job/career SLU was split between two quadrants, and he was spending too much time on online entertainment, which charted in the bottom-right quadrant. It became clear to Toni what he needed to change.

A Sample Strategic Life Portfolio

This 2x2 shows that the subject needs to spend more time and energy on his significant other, mental health/mindfulness, societal engagement, and education/learning SLUs. He should spend less time on online entertainment — an area of low importance.



Strategic life areas (SLAs) Strategic life units (SLUs)

1 Relationships	Significant other Family Friendship
2 Body, mind, and spirituality	Physical health/sports Mental health/mindfulness Spirituality/faith
3 Community and society	Community/citizenship Societal engagement
4 Job, learning, and finances	Job/career Education/learning Finances
5 Interests and entertainment	Hobbies/interests Online entertainment Offline entertainment
6 Personal care	Physiological needs Activities of daily living

Source: Analyses by Rainer Strack, Susanne Dyrchs, Allison Bailey



See more HBR charts in [Data & Visuals](#) on HBR.org.

5. What can I learn from benchmarks?

In almost every strategy project, we do a best practice and benchmarking analysis to understand what we can learn from leading companies. We can do the same for individuals by looking at role models and then, more importantly, at the research on life satisfaction.

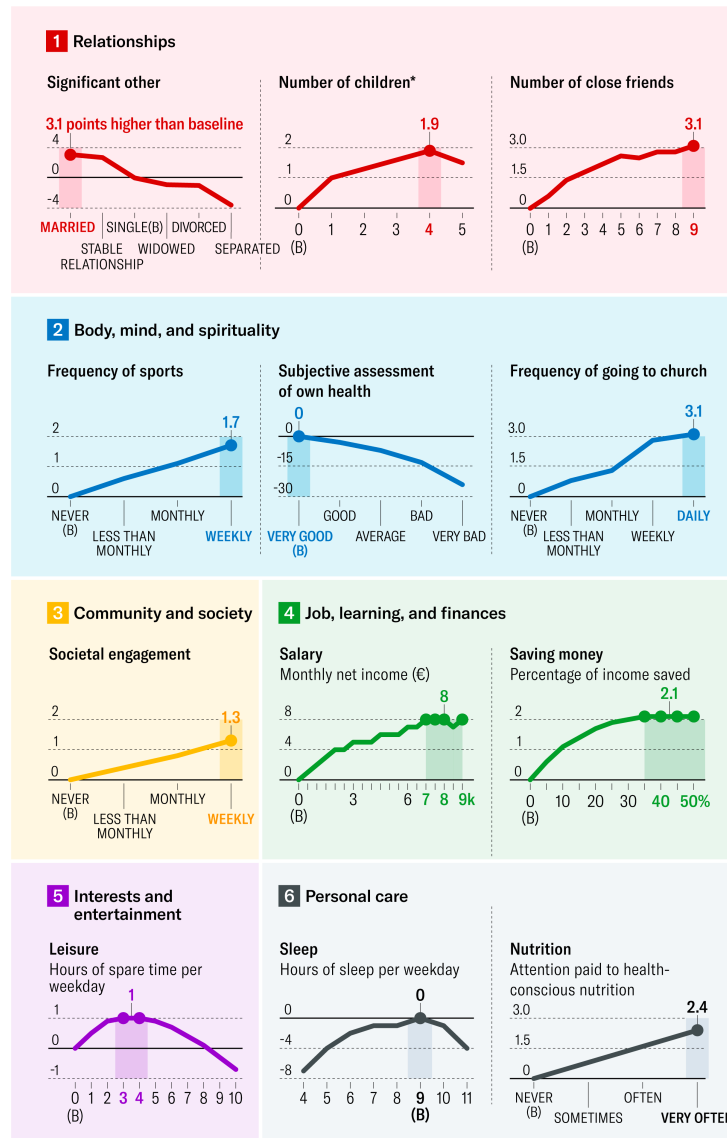
Ask yourself: Who conducts their personal and professional life in a way I admire? Maybe it is a coworker caring for his bedridden parent, the mother of three at your kids' school who also manages payroll for a Fortune 500 company, or your religious leader who lives his purpose. Ask yourself what makes them admirable, and what choices they would make if they were in your shoes.

Now consider what scientific studies tell us about life satisfaction — not anecdotally but across large populations. We already mentioned the Harvard and Asia studies. One of the largest studies worldwide on life satisfaction is the German Socio-Economic Panel [survey](#), which covered almost 100,000 people from 1984 to 2019, gathering more than 700,000 completed responses. It found that significant others, children, friends, sports, spirituality, community involvement, salaries, savings, and nutrition all contribute to life satisfaction. Not surprisingly, health problems have a very negative impact, and you can find an optimum amount of time to spend on leisure and sleep.

Benchmarking Life Satisfaction

One way to explore best practices is to understand where other people spend their time, energy, and money — and whether they report being satisfied with their lives. Longitudinal data from the German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) survey of almost 100,000 people from 1984 to 2019 is one source to reference. This chart shows one person's life satisfaction over time, with their satisfaction score reflecting changes to their baseline. Note that correlation does not equal causation.

Life satisfaction score as compared to baseline score (B), by strategic life area(s)



*If household income per person won't change

Life satisfaction on a scale from 0–100

Source: SOEP survey of 98,290 people in Germany from 1984 to 2019 (705,619 surveys filled out), from the book *Wann sind wir wirklich zufrieden? (When are we really satisfied?)*, by Martin Schröder

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Other studies have found that proven life-enhancers include practicing kindness, mindfulness, meditation, and gratefulness; cultivating more humor and laughter; dedicating time to learning; and developing a growth mindset (that is, believing your abilities and life can improve through effort and persistence).

As you do this work, it's important to understand and learn from what has worked for others, while also remembering that you can't just copy and paste someone else's approach. Your life strategy should be unique to you.

6. What portfolio choices can I make?

Corporate strategy is about making choices between options: Should we keep our current portfolio, diversify, focus, acquire a company, or enter a new market? In life, the equivalent questions are: What happens if I continue to live my life the way I am now? What if I change my priorities? Equipped with your definition of a great life, your purpose, your vision, your SLU ratings, and your benchmarks, you are ready to find out.

Go back to the great-life exercise in step 1 and think about what you can do for your areas of dissatisfaction. Review your purpose and vision from steps 2 and 3 and brainstorm how you might realize them. Think about the SLUs that step 4's portfolio exercise identified as needing more attention, and how you can improve satisfaction or reallocate time there. Then consider how the insights gleaned from step 5's benchmarks can help you with all of the above. From this long list of potential changes and actions — small and large — select several that will best move you toward a great life, and commit to them.

Now you need to be specific about what you want to change. Examples from our workshop attendees include reconnecting with three friends from school, visiting one's grandpa every week, engaging in

a weekly micro-adventure with one's significant other, changing jobs, committing to a new sleep schedule, trying a meditation app, starting a gratitude journal, spending more time with one's kids, exercising every day, supporting refugees, starting a social business, practicing religion again, dedicating 15 minutes to learning every day, switching college majors, converting a van into a camper to travel, and moving abroad. The possibilities are endless.

On the other hand, you have only 168 hours each week, which means you must reduce, outsource, or bundle existing activities, or make them more efficient through productivity strategies and tools. For example, when you work out with your boyfriend or volunteer for a good cause with your friends, you are bundling sports and significant other or societal engagement and friendship. Life strategy is about setting priorities; it is not about filling every waking minute. Remember to reserve space in your calendar for downtime as well. Researchers at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School and UCLA's Anderson School of Management found that people are happiest when they have two to five hours of free time each day.

When Judi, a workshop attendee, finished making her list of actions, she commented, "If I change all this, I will be a different person in a few weeks." Your life strategy could involve big steps like starting a business, traveling the world (as one of us did), or setting up an NGO, or it could involve a small step like meeting for coffee every week with people you care about. Even a small change can have a big impact in two key ways. First, if you do it over and over again, you take advantage of the compound growth rate. Second, you are a node in a network of people, so your change not only affects those close to you but also ripples outward. After all, sometimes big changes are triggered by small, seemingly insignificant actions — the famous butterfly effect. For example, research has shown that doing just 15

minutes of physical activity a day increases life expectancy by three years (despite amounting to only about half a year of time investment). Exercise also gives you a dopamine boost, improving your mood, which benefits those around you and makes you more productive at work, potentially leading to new outputs that greatly impact the lives of others.

If you know which strategic life unit needs work but don't know what changes to make, dig deeper and develop a substrategy for that unit — a job/career strategy, a family strategy, a mental health/mindfulness strategy, and so on — just as each business unit does with the overarching corporate strategy.

For example, to develop a job/career strategy, ask yourself the following questions: How does my current job support my purpose and vision? Does my current job give me a sense of achievement and engagement (two of the six great-life dimensions)? How does my current job align with the strengths I identified in the purpose step? Finally, look for benchmarking data, such as BCG's [Decoding Global Ways of Working study](#), where we list the top 10 criteria of great jobs according to more than 200,000 respondents. Again, rate how your job measures up to these criteria. The answers to these questions will give you an idea of how to move forward in your career.

7. How can I ensure a successful, sustained life change?

Change is not easy. Need proof? More than 40% of Americans set New Year's resolutions each January, and [reports](#) indicate that more than 90% fail to follow through on them.

Many companies, such as Google, ensure successful implementation of the strategies they've outlined by using OKRs (objectives and key results). OKRs are focused, ambitious, output-oriented, flexible, measurable, and transparent.

We recommend doing the same for each of the changes you committed to in step 6. Define the broad objective and the date by which you want to achieve it. Then break down each of those objectives into a few key results or action items, again with deadlines. Consider adding them directly to your calendar. If you are unsure about implementing a big move in your life, experiment. For example, Toni identified mental health/mindfulness as a high priority, so he might set an objective of “Download an app and try meditation techniques for 10–15 minutes a day (finish by the end of November).” He could then break it down into two key results: (1) review meditation apps and get started (first week of November), and (2) try an app for three weeks, review the experience, and make it a daily habit (last three weeks of November).

There are many ways that companies hold themselves to OKRs. Here, we focus on three of them. *Anchoring* means sharing your plan, as Google does by making its OKRs public. Who will you tell about your plan or ask to join you on your journey? Strategy projects always involve small teams, so consider not only seeking input from others but also inviting one or two people to work on their own life strategies and then workshop everyone’s results as a group. *Consequences* means setting up incentives for achievement, such as bonuses for success or penalties for failure. How will you reward yourself when you’ve successfully changed an aspect of your life, and what will the consequences be if you don’t? And *check-ins* means routinely stepping back, refining and adjusting your efforts, and celebrating your achievements, as agile project development teams do. When each week can you spend 15 minutes to review and update your life strategy?

Toni, for example, might tell a friend to hold him to his changes, promise to donate a significant amount of money to a charitable cause if he doesn’t stick to them, and schedule a weekly check-in with himself every Sunday before his study session.

Your One-Page Life Strategy

Often, the seeming enormity of an important task — like life strategy development — is what stops us from doing it. So, to make what seems impossible possible, we recommend recording your entire life strategy on a single sheet of paper or in a single location. If you have finished the exercises in this article, you can easily [do this](#). To start, write down what defines a great life for you. Next, record your strengths, your values, what lights you up, and what the world needs, and then add your purpose statement that incorporates those ideas. Third, summarize your life vision. Fourth, refer to that 2×2 you sketched and note the SLUs that are high priorities for action or that you spend too much time on. Next, write down the changes you'd like to make and commit to. Finally, for each of those changes, list an objective and two to three key results with deadlines, and then note the anchors, the consequences, and the check-in plan to make the change stick.

[Download the PDF.](#)

This page is your first minimum viable life strategy. As with corporate strategy, it needs to be reviewed, adjusted, and updated on a regular basis. Proprietary data from BCG suggests that 50% of companies review their strategy once a year, and 20% more than once a year — what we call always-on strategy development. Likewise, in addition to your weekly 15-minute check-in, we recommend scheduling a longer, one- to two-hour

review session with yourself, or with the life strategy group you started with other people, every six to 12 months. Review all seven steps, consider setbacks or shifting circumstances, and adjust accordingly.

The chief human resources officer we mentioned earlier puts her one-pager on top of all the papers on her desk. She looks at it every day to reinforce her belief in what makes a great life and to ensure she executes on her strategy for achieving it; when she has an idea for refinement, she writes it down. You can try that, too. A couple we worked with, who wanted to develop life strategies in tandem, went so far as to document their life purposes and goals with photos and notes in a picture frame. They hung it on the wall of their home, a daily reminder of where they want to go both together and as individuals.

Life is full of adventure and trauma, love and sadness, joy and stress. It can be great or terrible. There will be ups and downs. But a lot of it depends on you and the choices you make. A life strategy will not only guide you but also build your resilience so that you're better able to recover from missteps.

Sophia, a doctor who suffered from a serious chronic illness, wrote to us after attending a workshop: "I realized I want to make more decisions, do really crazy things, enjoy small and big moments, celebrate successes, go to places I've never been, meet people I've never seen before, take breaks in between, follow my flow, and make myself my most important project in life!"

Now, go and do the same. Your life is your top strategic priority.

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Rainer Strack is a senior partner emeritus and a senior adviser at BCG, where he built up and led the global People Strategy topic for 10 years. In 2014 he gave a widely watched TED talk on the [global workforce crisis](#). He formerly coheaded the Future of Work initiative for the World Economic Forum, and in 2021 he was inducted into Personalmagazin's HR Hall of Fame. He is a fellow of the BCG Henderson Institute.



Susanne Dyrchs is an executive adviser, a coach, and a people strategy expert. She is also a BCG U faculty member and a coauthor of numerous publications on organizations, leadership, and talent. She has written a personal account of her transformational journey, *Wir-Zeit [Us Time]*, which was published in 2021.



Allison Bailey is a senior partner and a managing director at BCG. She leads the firm's People & Organization practice globally and is a coauthor of several publications on the future of work, the bionic company, digital learning, and upskilling. She is also a fellow of the BCG Henderson Institute.



Worksheet

My Life Strategy

Use this document to help you summarize your ambitions and plans. Refer to the article “Use Strategic Thinking to Create the Life You Want,” by Rainer Strack, Susanne Dyrchs, and Allison Bailey, as a guide.

If you're filling this out digitally, use Adobe Acrobat for an optimal experience.

How do I define a great life? (list your priorities, e.g., relationships, achievement, etc.)

1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____ 4 _____ 5 _____

What is my life purpose? (list your strengths, values, what lights you up, worldly needs that you can address, and your purpose)

Strengths (e.g., communication): _____

Values (e.g., honesty): _____

What lights me up (e.g., travel): _____

Worldly needs (e.g., education): _____

Purpose (e.g., to bridge cultural divides):

What is my life vision? (write a phrase or bullet points, e.g., travel the world as a multilingual translator)

How do I assess my life portfolio? (list your high-priority strategic life units [SLUs], e.g., learning; or SLUs with too much time invested, e.g., career)

1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____

4 _____ 5 _____ 6 _____

What portfolio choices can I make? (list the changes in your life you're committing to, e.g., study French)

1	2	3	4	5
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How can I ensure a successful, sustained life change?

Objectives for making the changes from the previous step, with dates (e.g., obtain French A2 qualification by Nov. 30):

1	2	3	4	5
---	---	---	---	---

Two to three key results, with dates, for each of the objectives (e.g., set up meeting with teacher by May 10):

1a	2a	3a	4a	5a
1b	2b	3b	4b	5b
1c	2c	3c	4c	5c

People I'm accountable to (e.g., good friend):

Rewards or consequences (e.g., take/don't take trip to Paris):

Weekly self-check-in (e.g., Friday 8–8:15 AM):

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 Herminia Ibarra, Kendall Smith, and Neil Courtis

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Vanessa Branchi

If you've been thinking of making a career change, you are not alone. Consider the state of the current employment landscape: [Mass layoffs](#) are rampant. [Venture capital deals](#) are on hold. For managers, [burnout](#) is on the rise globally. [McKinsey](#) 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 and catalyzed our desire for change.

But for many people, making the jump to a new career seems impossible, 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 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](#), 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](#), 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](#) 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](#). Skill building, however, does not necessarily involve full-time education. The online course provider [Coursera](#), 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](#)” 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*, 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.

...

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.

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Herminia Ibarra is the Charles Handy Professor of Organisational Behaviour at London Business School and the author of *Act Like a Leader, Think Like a Leader*, revised edition (Harvard Business Review Press, 2023), and *Working Identity*, revised edition (Harvard Business Review Press, 2023).

 @HerminiaIbarra



Kendall Smith is a PhD student at London Business School.



Neil Courtis is the managing director of *Sensible Media*, an online provider of career-skills courses.

Our Favorite Advice on Work, Change, and Life

When you're facing a pivotal moment, these HBR articles and podcasts, selected by our editors, can help. **by Gretchen Gavett**

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Vanessa Branchi

Questions about work, life, and meaning are nothing new. How do we define our purpose? What can help us make or process a big change that affects who we are and what we do? How should we navigate challenges, big and small, as workers and as humans?

The [feature article](#) in this Big Idea series recommends that you identify your values and goals by applying a strategic framework to your own life, which will help guide you through pivotal moments — both planned and unplanned — and tough times. This article adds to our

ongoing coverage of how work and meaning intersect — and why it’s worth stepping back to ask yourself the deep questions about what really matters to you.

We are sharing ideas from the HBR archive to help you dig into some of these questions. Each article and podcast episode was chosen by an HBR contributor or editor and includes a personal story recounting why it was meaningful to them. We hope you find something that can help guide you when you need it most.

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How Will You Measure Your Life?

by Clayton M. Christensen

It’s hard to overestimate the impact “[How Will You Measure Your Life?](#)” has had on people. The late Harvard Business School professor Clay Christensen had been discussing the ideas in the article with students for years before one of us, Karen, then-editor of *Harvard Business Review*, asked Clay if we could turn his celebrated “last class” into something for the magazine. At its core, the concept is simple: Understanding business theories can help predict the consequences of the choices you are making in your life. For example, if you understand the theory of resource allocation then you’ll understand that consistently spending extra time at work, instead of spending time with your family, may lead to professional success but it’ll most likely result in strained family relationships.

Once HBR published the article, feedback flooded in. Clay was inundated with calls and notes of gratitude from all over the world. We both personally know people who have changed careers, started their own businesses, or refocused their lives around their families after learning these ideas. Just the other day — more than 13 years since

the article first appeared in HBR — someone shared with Efosa the gratitude he felt that Clay’s article had “provided a life roadmap for [him].”

So, how *will* you measure your life? It’s a question neither of us had contemplated until we met Clay. He always said that good theory allows you to put a new set of lenses on, to see things differently. That happened to us. As a result, we, too, used these ideas to recalibrate how we defined success and changed our own career trajectories, which eventually included the honor of working together on what would be Clay’s last book, *The Prosperity Paradox*. We consider it a gift that we were introduced to Clay and his theories. We hope you will, too.

— **Karen Dillon and Efosa Ojomo**, coauthors of *The Prosperity Paradox* and HBR contributors. Dillon is also a coauthor of the book *How Will You Measure Your Life?*, which followed the original HBR article.

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Values, Passion, or Purpose — Which Should Guide Your Career?

by Irina Cozma

When it was time to decide on a career path in college, I chose to follow my passion for writing. I knew studying journalism wouldn’t land me the highest-paying jobs, and that I might feel more fulfilled pursuing a different path. But I truly loved telling stories that make an impact. I sometimes wonder if I made the right choice — would I be happier if I’d prioritized my values or purpose instead of my passion for writing? You’ve probably asked yourself a variation of this question, too. This article reminds us that there’s no “right” or “wrong” answer. It’s about finding balance between the things you love, the things that drive you, and the things you can’t live without.

— **Kelsey Alpaio**, *HBR senior associate editor*

• • •

Be a Better Leader, Have a Richer Life

by Stewart D. Friedman

I read [this article](#) (and [book](#)) early in my career. Because I was ambitious, I had felt guilty about pursuing anything outside of work — despite my strong interest in several volunteer causes and excitement about a new romantic relationship. Friedman’s work made me realize that all of these parts of my life were both individually important and mutually reinforcing. That gave me the freedom to step back a little from work and to practice leadership on a nonprofit board, enjoy spending time with another human, and just take a deep breath (even before “self-care” became a cultural watchword).

— **Ania Wieckowski**, *HBR executive editor*

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To Make a Change at Work, Tell Yourself a Different Story

by Monique Valcour and John McNulty

There is power in the stories we tell ourselves and others about our lives. Stories can shape our thinking and inform our behavior. But what if the stories we’re telling ourselves hinder us from pursuing new goals or doing things differently? What if they make us second-guess our abilities or not take chances? That almost happened to me when I told myself, “I could never be a good editor. I’m a hotel management graduate; I haven’t studied literature or journalism.”

Thankfully, someone told me a different story about myself. So [this article](#) really resonated with me. It showed me how stories can be constraining instead of liberating and how we can reimagine our stories to help us move in the direction we want to go. For me, the first step was to change my narrative. Instead of telling people, “I’m trying to be an editor,” I said, “I am an editor.” Editing out just three words made all the difference.

— **Vasundhara Sawhney**, *HBR senior editor*

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[To Reduce the Strain of Overwork, Learn to Listen to Your Body](#)

by Stephanie J. Creary and Karen Locke

I often live in my head, spending hours ruminating about work and wondering whether I’ve put in enough time and effort to please my boss, my colleagues, and myself. [This article](#), which looks at the impact yoga training had on people experiencing signs of overwork, was my wake-up call. I recognized how much stress and tension my body frequently held as my mind spun, and how I had been neglecting to heed these signals — to the detriment of my work and my life in general. It also showed me that it’s possible, as the authors write, to “catch [myself], pause, and pull back from overwork.” I could create an identity outside of my job, find “third places” to share my love of physical movement with others, and listen to my body as well as my brain.

— **Gretchen Gavett**, *HBR senior editor*

• • •

New Chapters

Dear HBR podcast

Neither of us had ever hosted a podcast when we launched the workplace advice show *Dear HBR* in 2018, but we loved the time we spent together (nearly three years and 80 episodes) in front of microphones. When the show was ending in late 2020, producer Curt Nickisch suggested we tape a farewell episode. The topic, appropriately enough, was “New Chapters.”

Curt arranged for author and speaker Bruce Feiler to join us. Bruce, who’s written books about unexpected life transitions, calls these events “lifequakes.” “These are important times when we [not only] look at the next job, but [also] use them as an opportunity to kind of rethink and reimagine and revise the stories that we tell about our lives,” Bruce told us as we read and discussed letters from listeners experiencing their own transitions.

For *Dear HBR* listeners, and for us as the hosts, the episode provided a satisfying coda to the podcast, which was itself an unexpected chapter in our careers. After *Dear HBR*’s finale, Dan went back to magazine editing, but Alison continued on as a podcaster, cohosting HBR’s *IdeaCast*. Looking back on the more than 200 listener letters we discussed during the series’ run, one recurring theme stands out: Unexpected twists are a feature of just about every modern career.

— ***Alison Beard and Dan McGinn***, *HBR executive editors*

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Gretchen Gavett is a senior editor at Harvard Business Review.