

# 4 Questions to Ask Yourself Before Changing Careers

**INTRO** You're listening to Harvard Business Review, where on 23rd February 2024, Dorie Clark, a marketing strategist and keynote speaker who teaches at Duke University's Fuqua School, writes/write "4 Questions to Ask Yourself Before Changing Careers".

Though the **unprecedented** job-change **frenzy** of the Great **Resignation** has **subsided**, plenty of professionals are still considering the possibility of shifting careers. Indeed, as of last summer, a full 58% were **contemplating** a change. Of course, any professional planning a career move needs to look at how to uplevel their skills and build a new network in their desired field. But as I discuss in my book **Reinventing You**, here are four critical, less-obvious questions to ask yourself before you transition into a new field.

**First**, what's motivating the change? Sometimes, the answer is obvious: You've always loved photography, you've **honed** your skills to the point of **excellence**, and now it's time to turn your **avocation** into your **vocation**. But other times, a desire to change careers might arise less from dissatisfaction with your current path, and more from particular circumstances like a bad boss or a corporate culture you dislike. Because professional reinvention can be time-consuming and **disruptive**, it's important to be clear about whether you truly want to move into a new field, or just escape your current situation (**in which case**, an internal reassignment or a new company might work just as well as a full-on career shift).

**Second**, what's the smallest way to test my **hypotheses**? We often assume we know what will solve our career **qualms** — say, going back for an advanced degree, or breaking into tech. But while your **instincts** may be **broadly** correct, there are a lot of particulars you won't know until you test them. As I've written about before, a career coach told me about one client who was convinced she wanted to switch careers and become a flower arranger. Despite her client's desire to jump directly into the job-search process, the coach urged her to first shadow an arranger for a day — a prescient call, because the client almost immediately realized that the cold workplace conditions (necessary to keep the flowers fresh) were a non-starter for her. Think about small ways you can test the hidden hypotheses you've been holding about your desired career path. This could include a mix of informational interviews, job shadowing, reading books and memoirs in the field, and asking those in the field pointed questions about the worst elements of their jobs, to draw out disconfirming evidence.

**The third** question to ask is, what's my runway? Shifting careers — because you're moving into a field where you likely have less experience — often entails taking a pay cut or demotion, at least on a temporary basis. This can work splendidly in the long run. One woman I profiled in *Reinventing You*, after a long Wall Street career, took a

two-year nonprofit fellowship. It wasn't easy: The pay cut was substantial, and she struggled to connect with her new colleagues. But she developed the skills and connections necessary to land a prestigious job leading a public-private partnership after her fellowship ended. It's a successful template, but it's important to recognize that what made it possible was the financial reserves she'd previously stocked away. If you have substantial savings or a partner who's willing to support you, you can afford to take bigger career leaps, because short-term pay cuts matter much less. If, on the other hand, your runway is smaller, you may need to content yourself with a series of sequential, less-dramatic changes that enable you to stay closer to your existing network and skill set — which you can monetize at, or near, your current rates. For instance, you may be an intellectual property attorney who dreams of becoming a film director, but instead of jumping directly into a field where almost no one will initially be willing to match your previous salary, you might start by shifting into entertainment law in order to solidify your Hollywood connections and prepare for a second, subsequent move into directing. The final question - what's my fallback plan? Career change inevitably entails some risk. (It's worth noting that staying on your current path does as well — so it's worth taking mitigation steps either way.) You might love your new field but dislike the company where you first land, or you might have underestimated how long it will take for your startup to become profitable. Conduct a “pre-mortem” to think through potential pitfalls and identify strategies to overcome them. For example, you could prioritize networking during your first year so you can easily slip into a “plan B” job if you don't like your first one, or you could talk to your partner about taking out a second mortgage if your startup doesn't hit a certain sales threshold in its first year. We often hesitate to map out fallback plans because we don't want to “jinx” the new endeavor, or appear like we're not all in. Indeed, because you often have to overcome the skepticism of family members and close friends as you're making a career change (“Why would you give up the career you've worked so hard to build? What are we going to live on?”), there's a natural tendency to overindex on optimism. But keeping a realistic view of potential obstacles is essential to your future success and your ability to adapt if conditions on the ground aren't what you anticipated.

Changing careers can be an exhilarating way to keep yourself intellectually engaged and share more of your talents with the world. Asking yourself these four questions can help address some of the inherent risks and make your transition smoother along the way.

**OUTRO** You were listening to Harvard Business Review, where Dorie Clark writes/write "4 Questions to Ask Yourself Before Changing Careers". This article was published on the 23rd February 2024, and was read by Adrienne Walker, for Noa.