



Book Strategies for Successful Career Change

Finding Your Very Best Next Work Life

Martha E. Mangelsdorf
Ten Speed Press, 2009

Recommendation

Some people decide to switch careers to pursue more gratifying work. Others have career change thrust upon them by company closings, downsizing or technological advancements. Whatever the reason, changing careers can be stressful and bewildering. Business writer Martha E. Mangelsdorf's common sense manual, while a bit simplistic, does a good job of breaking the process into manageable steps. The first is identifying what you want. That is never easy, but once you manage it, the rest of your transition will fall into place so you can focus on practicalities. Can you find opportunities in a related field or even within your current company? What are your strengths, weaknesses and "transferable skills"? Can you switch careers without additional training and education? Could you overlap careers or work two jobs to maintain your financial security? Mangelsdorf answers all these questions and more, using successful career change stories to punctuate her points. If you are at a career crossroads, *BooksInShort* recommends this guide to help you navigate through the tumult.

Take-Aways

- Changes in economics, technology and culture have made switching careers commonplace and socially acceptable.
- Take some time to assess what career you want so you can set goals and make plans.
- Talk to someone who works in your desired field to figure out where to start. Break your objectives down into small, manageable steps.
- Plan for a possible wage reduction when you change careers.
- Although following your passion sounds inspiring, it isn't always economically feasible.
- Consider working in a related field, where you can use some of your existing expertise, or in a growing industry, where employment opportunities are high.
- Take an inventory of your strengths, weaknesses and "transferable skills."
- Understand your personal limitations. Focus on realistic, workable choices.
- Explore your career options by attending seminars, taking classes or doing an internship.
- Rather than giving up your current career, try combining your present job and a new one while you decide what you'd like to do.

Summary

Why Start Anew?

The set path of joining a firm upon college graduation, working up the corporate ladder and retiring at 65 is becoming a thing of the past. Major developments in economics, technology and society have made career change more common. You may seek a new career for several reasons:

- Change in your industry has undermined your career.
- You don't earn enough for the lifestyle you desire.
- You'd rather work at something that stirs your passions.
- You could go further if you had more training or education.
- Your current job is no longer fulfilling.
- You're older and you want to dedicate yourself to a more satisfying occupation.

“People in all kinds of different circumstances successfully change careers; there is no right or wrong time.”

If you’re about to embark on a career change, first think it through. Ask yourself the big question: “What do you want to accomplish before you die?” Once you know what you really want, setting goals and determining how to achieve them will become easier.

Getting Started

The first step in making a career change is acknowledging that you are dissatisfied. However, instead of doing something drastic, take a small step in a new direction. Lee Finkle Estridge was a successful sales rep for a photography supply company. She enjoyed her career and earned enough money to put her daughter through college without loans. However, Finkle Estridge began to realize that she was no longer satisfied with her job and the long hours it required. While on vacation in Hawaii, she discovered that she had an aptitude for life coaching. She came home and made a career change. She now enjoys a new, balanced lifestyle coaching others who are making important choices.

“Starting your own business is one of the most common types of career change in America today.”

If you are interested in moving into a new field, the first step may be as simple as discussing it with someone who already works in that field. If you’re not sure how to start, explore areas related to your current occupation. Does your current employer offer opportunities for new directions? For example, Gail Snowden spent most of her professional life in bank management. Leading an inner-city initiative for the bank and then, later, leading the bank’s foundation helped prepare her for an eventual transition into the nonprofit sector.

“Many of us do surprisingly little planning of our biggest projects: our lives.”

Sometimes people go through natural transitions, such as taking maternity or paternity leave, recovering from an illness, or receiving a buyout or severance offer. Take advantage of such pauses to contemplate your future. Seek advice from a career counselor, try consulting or take a part-time job in your field of interest.

Seeking Support

If you are in a committed relationship, your partner’s attitude will influence your career change. Transitions are stressful, and he or she may worry about financial uncertainty, time demands, an undefined future or a sense of being left out. If you’re single, you won’t have to review your plans with a partner, but you may have a harder time financially. In addition to family and friends, you can turn to outside sources for support during this transition, including others who are making the same shift, acquaintances who work in the field you’d like to join, and professional career advisors or mentors. Increase your contacts and options through “outplacement seminars, classes or counseling,” which your previous workplace may offer as a service.

“Changing the direction of your career is a little like turning a big ship in a quite different direction: You can’t do it instantly.”

Career transitions often affect your income. Although you may make more money in the long term, you might have to take a pay cut initially. Additional training or education costs money. If you are starting a business, you may face a time gap before it becomes profitable. Plan for a drop in finances by saving ahead of time. You may be able to lean on your partner or parents, or amass some funding by way of a “buyout” or severance package. Perhaps you can spend less during the transition or work a second job. Consider letting your jobs overlap, such as doing consulting work in your original field while working part time in your new endeavor.

“Setting a goal is making an announcement to yourself that you want to do something different.”

When contemplating a career change, think about skills you have but don’t necessarily use – or use only sparingly – in your current job. Judy Goldberger is fluent in Spanish, but her job as a nonprofit fundraiser didn’t call upon her language skills. When she became a nurse, she found that she enjoyed working with Hispanic women and children. Your underutilized skills may come from a hobby, such as a passion for gardening. When Nick Pappas opened an ice-cream parlor after he left the corporate world, he drew on his childhood experience working in his parents’ restaurant.

Practical Passion

Although following your passion sounds inspiring, it isn’t always economically viable. The truth is that you may not be able to make a good living doing only what you love to do, that is, unless you love to do something that pays well or is in great demand. However, you can find ways to follow your career dreams and still make money. Patrick Marshall had worked in recruiting for the telecommunications industry. But after doctors diagnosed his baby daughter with cystic fibrosis, Marshall became interested in biotechnology companies researching cystic fibrosis treatments. He then applied his skills to a new field, biotechnology, and launched a recruiting firm for the biotechnology industry. He married his existing skills with his passion for supporting cystic fibrosis research.

“We are given a small step to take – one that may feel hard and scary, but is doable – and if we take that step, the next one becomes apparent.”

If you can make money doing what interests you, that’s an ideal outcome, though some efforts work better than others. Holly Gandolfo left customer service and returned to school in her 30s to pursue her dream of becoming a nurse, a job that’s in demand. Robin Flint loved playing the piano when she was growing up; later in life, she found a practical way to do work related to her love of music and piano – by became a piano tuner.

“Just as if you were approaching a tree full of beautiful ripe fruit, you have plenty of options to explore – and many resources to draw on.”

Consider a new career in growth fields or with growing organizations. Booming industries and companies require more workers, creating opportunities for new people to join, while the demand for employees shrinks in markets or industries that are sluggish or dwindling. Research the field you are thinking about entering to determine if it is growing in the short- and long-terms. Even if an industry is stagnant, it may have segments or niches that are expanding. Look at the big picture, and analyze trends that might affect your industry of choice.

“A career view that advocates following your passions and doing what you love to do...may not take enough account of the laws of supply and demand.”

In addition to analyzing the market that intrigues you, take an inventory of your strengths and weaknesses. First, look at your “transferable skills,” abilities you currently use that you can bring to your new endeavor. You may be able to find a similar position in a more intriguing field. Alternatively, identify skills you may be able to use in a different context. For instance, Lisa MacLean, a computer programmer and network administrator, found a rewarding new job teaching computer science at a local college. Soft skills, such as sales, leadership or marketing, transfer nicely from one field to another. Notable artistic talent and great math skills, for example, are assets in many occupations. In addition to your strengths, be candid about your limitations. For instance, if you have small children, you may not want a job that requires a lot of travel. You can work around many such constraints. Clearly understanding your requirements allows you to focus on workable choices.

Small Steps

A career change may feel daunting, so break the process down into manageable steps. First, research interesting fields by browsing books at your local library or researching on the Internet. Industry and professional associations are terrific sources of relevant information. Check industry publications and attend industry events, such as trade shows or association meetings. Talk to people who work in the field. Your network is probably more extensive than you realize. Let people know that you are looking for contacts and you’ll be surprised at the help you’ll receive. Spread the word among friends, family, co-workers, classmates, neighbors, people with whom you do business, members of your congregation and even people on your softball team.

“As you think about career change, think of yourself as looking for an intersection between what you want to do and what people will pay [for] adequately.”

To explore your career options without risk, take a class, workshop or seminar. Ellin Hanlon took classes in landscape design after working in office administration. She eventually opened her own landscape design firm. Another possibility is to take a part-time job to explore a new field. Diane Shapiro took an entry-level, half-time job at a health club and eventually became a fitness trainer. Some companies offer internships, a great vehicle for learning a new business.

Two Careers

Rather than give up your current career to pursue an alternative, you may want to try a combination of the two. For example, David Kravitz studied voice and opera at the New England Conservatory of Music and then attended law school. After graduation, he worked full time as a lawyer and sang in his spare time. Then he began to receive offers to sing solos and decided to devote more time to singing. He found work writing legal briefs, which left him more time to pursue singing. The two careers seem unrelated, but he balanced both. If you’re considering pursuing two careers, either as a stopgap measure or as a long-term arrangement, ask yourself:

- Will you be able to schedule both kinds of work without too many conflicts?
- Will your current boss give you a flexible or reduced schedule so you can pursue other interests?
- Do you have the energy, self-discipline and organizational skills to juggle two careers?
- If you reduce your work hours in your present career, will you still receive benefits?

“Treat career transition as an experiment – one in which you take steps to gather input and information, then incorporate what you learn into your evolving plans.”

Going back to school or investing a lot of money in additional training is not always necessary. Consider a new job that requires less schooling. For example, you may not be able to invest the time and money to become a doctor, but you might like working as a nurse or physician’s assistant. Seek ways to obtain inexpensive training, like an internship or apprenticeship. Check short-term classes, seminars, intensive courses or training programs at your workplace. Consider online courses, which are gaining popularity. See if you can work “distance learning” into your existing schedule.

“Job markets – much like oceans and rivers – have currents.”

If you have always dreamed of being self-employed, join the 11% of Americans who work for themselves. One trend that can represent an opportunity for self-employed people: Many firms are outsourcing more work to freelancers and independent contractors.

Pitfalls

The idea of starting over in a new career is intimidating, especially if you’ve heard horror stories from those who’ve failed. But patience, awareness, planning and research can help you sidestep the more obvious difficulties. Check these eight factors to avoid potential career-change pitfalls:

1. Do the math. Ascertain that you can generate enough income.
2. Make sure you will like the new tasks you’ll be doing.
3. Check that training will be helpful and that the new job justifies the costs.
4. Do your research before you jump. Don’t switch careers too quickly.
5. Keep an eye on your big objectives, even if you are “stuck earning a living.”
6. Set up your new small business with success in sight; many new firms don’t make it.
7. Know enough about change in your former field to be sure you can re-enter if need be.
8. Be smart about your fears and doubts, but don’t let them paralyze you.

“Think of it as career trailblazing – creating a personal path in a wilderness where there was no path before.”

In sum, manage your career transition by identifying fields that fascinate you, conducting a self-analysis to identify your long-term goals and listing the skills you can transfer to a new undertaking. Then, research possible occupations, appeal to your social network and test your new career in safe ways such as part-time work, classes or internships. Think outside the box: Consider working at two careers at once or seeing if you can shift into self-employment.

About the Author

Martha E. Mangelsdorf worked at *Inc.* magazine and wrote a column on career transition for the *Boston Globe*. She is currently an editor at the *MIT Sloan Management Review*.
