



ARTICLE

Looking for your
new career in all the
wrong places?

How to Stay Stuck in the Wrong Career

by Herminia Ibarra

*New sections to
guide you through
the article:*

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THE IDEA

IN BRIEF

ARE you one of the growing number of people struggling to make mid-career changes? Searching for ten easy steps to professional reinvention? Or awaiting flashes of insight—while opportunities pass you by?

Would you be willing to jettison all you've heard about career transition and follow a crooked path—rather than the straight and narrow one that's gotten you nowhere?

If so, consider the counterintuitive approach described in this article. It'll have you *doing* instead of infinitely planning. Taking *action* instead of endless self-assessment tests. You'll reinvent your **working identity**—your sense of who you are as a professional—by experimenting with who you *could* be.

THE IDEA

AT WORK

Sounds reasonable, but . . .

Consider the traditional “plan and implement” approach to career change: Assess your interests, skills, and experience; identify appropriate jobs; consult friends, colleagues, career counselors; take the plunge.

This all *sounds* reasonable—but it actually fosters stagnation. You get mired in introspection while searching for your “one true self”—a futile quest, since individuals have many possible selves. Your ideal won't necessarily find a match in the real world. Worse, this method encourages making a big change all at once—which can land you in the wrong job.

Sounds crazy, but . . .

Now consider the “test and learn” method: You put *several* working identities into practice, refining them until they're sufficiently grounded in experience to inspire more decisive steps. You make your possible *future* working identities vivid, tangible, and compelling—countering the tendency to grab familiar work when the unknown becomes too scary.

Reinventing your working identity takes several years—and may land you in surprising places. But that doesn't mean the process must be random. These tactics provide a method to the seeming madness:

- **Craft experiments.** Play with new professional roles on a limited but tangible scale, without compromising your current job. Try freelance assignments or pro bono work.

Moonlight. Use sabbaticals or extended vacations to explore new directions.

EXAMPLE:

A former investment banker dabbled in wine tours and scuba diving businesses before determining that such work wouldn't hold his interest long-term. Realizing a “more normal” career path would better serve his emotional and financial needs, he is now an internal venture capitalist for a media company.

- **Shift connections.** Strangers can best help you see who you're becoming, providing fresh ideas uncolored by your previous identity. Make new connections by working for people you've long admired and can learn from. Find people—perhaps through alumni and company networks—who can help you grow into your possible new selves.
- **Make sense.** Infuse events with special meaning. Weave them into a story about who you're becoming. Relate that story publicly. You'll clarify your intentions, stay motivated, and inspire others' support.

EXAMPLE:

An investment banker considering fiction writing visited an astrologer, who noted that forces pulling him in opposing directions (stability versus creative expression) were irreconcilable. He told everyone this story and wrote about it in his local newspaper. The more he communicated it, the more the incident made sense—and the more friends and family supported his writing ambitions.

How to Stay Stuck in the Wrong Career

by Herminia Ibarra

You're ready to chuck it all and start afresh. Just make sure you don't listen to the usual advice about changing careers.

EVERYONE KNOWS A STORY about a smart and talented businessperson who has lost his or her passion for work, who no longer looks forward to going to the office yet remains stuck without a visible way out. Most everyone knows a story, too, about a person who ditched a 20-year career to pursue something completely different – the lawyer who gave it all up to become a writer or the auditor who quit her accounting firm to start her own toy company – and is the happier for it.

“Am I doing what is right for me, or should I change direction?” is one of the most pressing questions in the mid-career professional’s mind today. The numbers of people making major career changes, not to mention those just thinking about it, have risen signifi-

cantly over the last decade and continue to grow. But the difference between the person who yearns for change yet stays put and the person who takes the leap to find renewed fulfillment at midcareer is not what you might expect. Consider the following examples:

Susan Fontaine made a clean break with her unfulfilling past as partner and head of the strategy practice at a top consulting firm. But the former management consultant – her name, like the names of the other people I studied, has been changed for this article – had not yet had the time to figure out a future direction. When a close client offered her the top strategy job at a *Financial Times* 100 firm, she took it. She was ready for change, and the opportunity was too good to pass up. To her dismay,

this position – though perfect according to what she calls “the relentless logic of a post-MBA CV” – was no different from her old job in all the aspects she had been seeking to change. Two weeks into the new role, she realized she had made a terrible mistake.

After a four-week executive education program at a top business school, Harris Roberts, a regulatory affairs director at a major health care firm, was ready for change. He wanted bottom-line responsibility, and he itched to put into practice some of the cutting-edge ideas he had learned in the program. His long-time mentor, the company’s CEO, had promised, “When you come back, we’ll give you a business unit.” But upon Harris’s return, a complicated new product introduction delayed the long-awaited transition. He was needed in his old role, so he was asked to postpone his dream. As always, Harris put the company first. But he was disappointed; there was no challenge anymore. Resigned to waiting it out, he created for himself a “network of mentors,” senior members of the firm whom he enlisted to guide his development and help him try to land the coveted general management role. Eighteen months later, he was still doing essentially the same job.

A milestone birthday, upheaval in his personal life, and a negative performance evaluation – the first of his career – combined to make a “snapping point” for Gary McCarthy. After business school, the former investment banker and consultant had taken a job at a blue-chip firm by default, biding his time until he found his “true passion.” Now, he decided, it was time to make a proactive career choice. Determined to get it right, Gary did all the correct things. He started with a career psychologist who gave him a battery of

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tests to help him figure out his work interests and values. He talked to headhunters, friends, and family and read best-selling books on career change. By his own account, none of the advice was very useful. He researched possible industries and companies. He made two lists: completely different professions involving things he was passionate about and variations on what he was already doing. A year later, a viable alternative had yet to materialize.

When I consider the experiences of these people and dozens of others I have studied over the past few years, there can be no doubt: Despite the rhetoric, a true change of direction is very hard to swing. This isn’t because managers or professionals are typically unwilling to change; on the contrary, many make serious attempts to reinvent themselves, devoting large amounts of time and energy to the process at great professional and personal risk. But despite heroic efforts, they remain stuck in the wrong careers, not living up to their potential and sacrificing professional fulfillment.

Many academics and career counselors observe this inertia and conclude that the problem lies in basic human motives: We fear change, lack readiness, are unwilling to make sacrifices, sabotage ourselves. My in-depth research (see the sidebar “Studying Career Change” for an explanation of my methods) leads me to a different conclusion: People most often fail because they go about it all wrong. Indeed, the conventional wisdom on how to change careers is in fact a prescription for how to stay put. The problem lies in our methods, not our motives.

In my study, I saw many people try a conventional approach and then languish for months, if not years. But by taking a different tack, one I came to call the practice of *working identity*, they eventually found their way to brand-new careers. The phrase “working identity,” of course, carries two meanings. It is, first, our sense of self in our professional roles, what we convey about ourselves to others and, ultimately, how we live our working lives. But it can also denote action – a process of applying

effort to reshape that identity. Working our identity, I found, is a matter of skill, not personality, and therefore can be learned by almost anyone seeking professional renewal. But first we have to be willing to abandon everything we have ever been taught about making sound career decisions.

A Three-Point Plan

We like to think that the key to a successful career change is knowing what we want to do next, then using that knowledge to guide our actions. But studying people in the throes of the career change process (as opposed to afterward, when hindsight is always 20/20) led me to a startling conclusion: Change actually happens the other way around. Doing comes first, knowing second.

Why? Because changing careers means redefining our working identity. Career change follows a first-act-and-then-think sequence because who we are and what we do are tightly connected, the result of years of action; to change that connection, we must also resort to action – exactly what the conventional wisdom cautions us against.

Conventional career change methods – Susan’s “logical” CV progression, Harris’s networking, and Gary’s planning – are all part of what I call the “plan and implement” model of change. It goes like this: First, determine with as much clarity and certainty as possible what you really want to do. Next, use that knowledge to identify jobs or fields in which your passions can be coupled with your skills and experience. Seek advice from the people who know you best and from professionals in tune with the market. Then simply implement the resulting action steps. Change is seen as a one-shot deal: The plan-and-implement approach cautions us against making a move before we know exactly where we are going.

It all sounds reasonable, and it is a reassuring way to proceed. Yet my research suggests that proceeding this way will lead to the most disastrous of results, which is to say no result. So if your deepest desire is to remain indefinitely in a career that grates on your nerves

or stifles your self-expression, simply adhere to that conventional wisdom, presented below as a foolproof, three-point plan.

Know Thyself

Like Gary McCarthy, most of us are taught to begin a career change with a quest for self-knowledge. Knowing, in theory, comes from self-reflection, in solitary introspection or with the help of standardized questionnaires and certified professionals. Learning whether we are introverted or extroverted, whether we prefer to work in a structured and methodical environment or in chaos, whether we place greater value on impact or income helps us avoid jobs that will again prove unsatisfying. Having reached an understanding of his or her temperament, needs, competencies, core values, and priorities, a person can go out and find a job or organization that matches.

Gary did all these things. Armed with his test results, he researched promising companies and industries and networked with a lot of people to get leads

was not worth the economic sacrifice). So he went back to the headhunters and traditional companies, only to reconfirm that he did not want what they had to offer. Next, he identified entrepreneurs he admired and looked for ways to get his foot in their doors. He explored freelancing, trying to get short-term projects in exciting young companies. But a precise match did not materialize.

Certainly the common practice of looking back over our careers and identifying what we liked and disliked, what we found satisfying and not satisfying, can be a useful tool. But too often this practice is rooted in the profound misconception that it is possible to discover one's "true self," when the reality is that none of us has such an essence. (See the sidebar "Our Many Possible Selves" for a discussion of why one's true self is so elusive.) Intense introspection also poses the danger that a potential career changer will get stuck in the realm of daydreams. Either the fantasy never finds a match in a real-world, paycheck-producing job or, unlike Gary,

objective scrutiny of the available choices, who should you turn to for guidance? Conventional wisdom has it that you should look to those who know you best and those who know the market. Friends and family – with whom you share a long history – can offer insight into your true nature, and they have your best interests at heart; professionals add a dose of pragmatism, keeping you grounded in the realities of the marketplace.

In times of change and uncertainty, we naturally take comfort in our enduring connections with friends and family. But when it comes to reinventing ourselves, the people who know us best are the ones most likely to hinder rather than help us. They may wish to be supportive, but they tend to reinforce – or even desperately try to preserve – the old identities we are trying to shed. Early in his career, Gary discovered that his close circle would not be much help. "I wanted to do something different but was shocked to realize that people were already pigeonholing me," he says. "I tried to brainstorm with friends and family about what other things I might do. All the ideas that came back were a version of 'Well, you could get a middle management job in a finance department of a company.' Or 'You could become a trainee in a management program.'" John Alexander, an investment banker hoping to make a go of fiction writing, reports that he had often discussed his career predicament with his friends and family. "They would tend to say, 'I can see why writing might be interesting, but you've got a very good job, and do you really want to jeopardize that?'"

Mentors and close coworkers, though well meaning, can also unwittingly hold us back. Take Harris Roberts, the health care company director who wanted to assume a general management role. The people around him, who were invested in his staying put, only mirrored his normal doubts about moving outside his comfort zone. His mentors cared about him and held the power to make his desired change a reality. But they made a fence, not a gateway, blocking the

My research suggests that conventional, reasonable-sounding career change methods will lead to the most disastrous of results, which is to say no result.

and referrals. He made two lists of possibilities: "conformist" and "nonconformist." But what happened from there, and what consumed 90% of the year he spent looking for a new career, is what the conventional models leave out – a lot of trial and error.

Gary started with several rounds of talking with traditional companies and headhunters. Next, he tried to turn a passion or a hobby into a career: He and his wife wrote a business plan for a wine-tour business. The financials were not great, so they dropped it. Next, he pursued his true fantasy career: Gary got certified as a scuba instructor and looked into the purchase of a dive operation. He soon learned, though, that his dream job was unlikely to hold his interest over the long term (and thus

we remain emotionally attached to a fantasy career that we do not realize we have outgrown.

We learn who we have become – in practice, not in theory – by testing fantasy and reality, not by "looking inside." Knowing oneself is crucial, but it is usually the outcome of – and not a first input to – the reinvention process. Worse, starting out by trying to identify one's true self often causes paralysis. While we wait for the flash of blinding insight, opportunities pass us by. To launch ourselves anew, we need to get out of our heads. We need to *act*.

Consult Trusted Advisers

If you accept the conventional wisdom that career change begins with self-knowledge and proceeds through an

moves that would lead to career change. By talking only to people who inhabited his immediate professional world, people whose ideas for him didn't go beyond the four walls, Harris seriously limited himself. Not only did he lack outside market information, but these coworkers could no more let go of their outdated image of a junior Harris than he himself could.

Headhunters and outplacers, today's career change professionals, can keep us tethered to the past just as effectively. We assume, rightly, that they have the

market perspective we lack—but we forget that they are in the business of facilitating incremental moves along an established trajectory. At midcareer, however, many people are no longer looking to “leverage past experience in a different setting.” They want to invent their own jobs and escape the shackles of corporate convention, in some cases to do something completely different. What Susan Fontaine, the management consultant, experienced is typical: “I found headhunters unhelpful, basically. I would say, ‘Here are my skills; what

else might I do?’ And they kept saying, ‘Why don't you move to Andersen?’ or, ‘Why don't you try Bain?’ All they could suggest was exactly the same thing. I kept saying, ‘I'm quite clear I don't want to do that, and if I did want to do that, I would not come to you. I can do that on my own.’”

So if self-assessment, the advice of close ones, and the counsel of change professionals won't do it, then where can we find support for our reinvention? To make a true break with the past, we need to see ourselves in a new

Our Many Possible Selves

What is identity? Most traditional definitions—the ones that form the foundation for most career advice—are based on the notion of an “inner core” or a “true self.” By early adulthood, these theories suggest, a person has formed a relatively stable personality structure, defined by his or her aptitudes, preferences, and values. Excavating this true self—often forgotten in a dead-end pursuit of fame, fortune, or social approval—should be the starting point of any career reorientation, according to conventional wisdom. With the appropriate self-knowledge, obtained via introspection and psychological testing, a person can more easily search for the right “match” and avoid the mistakes of the past. This true-self definition corresponds perfectly to the plan-and-implement method—once we find the self, all that remains is execution.

The work of Stanford cognitive psychologist Hazel Markus and other behavioral scientists, however, offers a different definition of identity, one that is more consistent with what I have discovered: We are many selves. And while these selves are defined partly by our histories, they are defined just as powerfully by our present circumstances and our hopes and fears for the future.

Our possible selves—the images and fantasies we all have about who we hope to become, think we should become, or even fear becoming—are at the heart of the career change process. Although conventional wisdom says pain—a self we fear becoming—is the only driver for change, in reality pain can create paralysis. We change only when we have enticing alternatives that we can feel, touch, and taste. That is why working identity, as a prac-

tice, is necessarily a process of experimenting, testing, and learning about our possible selves.

Take Gary McCarthy, the former investment banker and consultant profiled in the main article. The set of possible selves he considered is typical in its number and range. It included a “ditch it all and open a tour-guide business in the south of France with my wife” self; a socially respectable “junior partner” self that his parents would have endorsed; a youthful, outdoorsy, “follow your passion” self who renounced convention and wanted to open a scuba business; a “responsible spouse and future parent” self who wanted to make good dual-career decisions; a “corporate drone at age 50, full of regrets” self; an “apprentice” self who learned at the elbow of an admired entrepreneur; and a practical, reasonable, “go to a traditional company where I can combine my backgrounds in banking and consulting” self.

Conventional wisdom would say that the scope of his list of possibilities was evidence that he lacked focus and wasn't ready for change. But within the working identity framework, it was precisely this variety that allowed him to find a truly good fit. Certain possible selves are concrete and tangible, defined by the things we do and the company we keep today; others remain vague and fuzzy, existing only in the realm of private dreams, hypothetical possibilities, and abstract ideas. By bringing the possibilities—both desired and feared, present and future—more sharply into focus, we give ourselves a concrete base of experience from which to choose among them.

light. We need guides who have been there and can understand where we are going. Reaching outside our normal circles to new people, networks, and professional communities is the best way to both break frame and get psychological sustenance.

Think Big

We like to think that we can leap directly from a desire for change to a single decision that will complete our reinvention – the conventional wisdom would say you shouldn’t fool yourself with small, superficial adjustments. But trying to tackle the big changes too quickly can be counterproductive. Just as starting the transition by looking for one’s true self can cause paralysis rather than progress, trying to make one big move once and for all can prevent real change.

When Susan Fontaine decided to leave her consulting career, it was with good reason. A single mother of two, she was finding the travel and other demands on her personal life increasingly intolerable. She quit her job and resolved to spend some time exploring her options. That resolve vanished, however, when financial pressure coincided with a flattering offer to join the management team of a former client. She accepted the new position only to discover that its demands would be very similar to those of the position she had left. “I thought, ‘What have I done?’” she later told me. “I had had the opportunity to leave all that!” By hoping to solve all her problems in one fell swoop, Susan made a change that amounted to no change at all. Two weeks into the new job, she resigned.

As much as we might want to avoid endless procrastination, premature closure is not the answer. It takes time to discover what we truly want to change and to identify the deeply grooved habits and assumptions that are holding us back. The lesson of Susan’s story is that trying to make a single bold move can bring us back to square one all too quickly. A longer, less linear transition process may leave us feeling that we are wasting time. But as we will see below,

taking smaller steps can allow a richer, more grounded redefinition of our working identity to emerge.

Three Success Stories

Although they floundered, victims of conventional wisdom, Gary McCarthy, Harris Roberts, and Susan Fontaine eventually moved on to a different – and more successful – approach. Gary is now at a media company he admires, working as an internal venture capitalist, a role that allows him to use his skill set in consulting and finance but grants him great creative latitude and total ownership of his results. Harris is president and COO of a growing medical device company and very much involved in setting the strategic direction of his new firm. Susan is working with nonprofits, bringing her strategy expertise to this sector and loving her work.

None of them followed a straight and narrow route. Gary dabbled in wine tours and flirted with buying a scuba diving operation before settling on what

his wife called a more normal path. Harris had his prized general management role snatched from under him a second time as the result of a corporate restructuring. He considered leaving for a biotech start-up but realized that he simply did not have the appetite for such a risky move. Susan set up temporarily as a freelance consultant, landing traditional consulting projects to pay the bills and using her discretionary time to explore a more varied portfolio of assignments.

Their experience is typical. Nearly everyone who tries to figure out a next career takes a long time to find the one that is truly right. Most career transitions take about three years. It is rarely a linear path: We take two steps forward and one step back, and where we end up often surprises us.

Working Identity

Once we start questioning not just whether we are in the right job or organization today but also what we thought

Test and Learn

Your working identity is an amalgam of the kind of work you do, the relationships and organizations that form part of your work life, and the story you tell about why you do what you do and how you arrived at that point. Reshaping that identity, therefore, is a matter of making adjustments to all three of those aspects over time. The adjustments happen tentatively and incrementally, so the process can seem disorderly. In fact, it is a logical process of testing, discovering, and adapting that can be learned by almost anyone seeking professional renewal.

Crafting Experiments

Working identity is defined by what we do, the professional activities that engage us. ▶	Try out new activities and professional roles on a small scale before making a major commitment to a different path.
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Shifting Connections

Working identity is also defined by the company we keep, our working relationships, and the professional groups to which we belong. ▶	Develop contacts that can open doors to new worlds, and look for role models and new reference groups to guide and benchmark your progress.
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Making Sense

Working identity is also defined by the formative events in our lives and the stories that link who we were and who we will become. ▶	Find or create catalysts and triggers for change, and use them as occasions to rework your life story.
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we wanted for the future, the job search methods we have all been taught fail us. But that doesn't mean we must resign ourselves to a random process governed by factors outside our control – a life crisis that forces us to reprioritize, an unexpected job offer. There is an alternative method that works according to a different logic than the plan-and-implement approach. Gary, Harris, and Susan, as well as many other successful career changers I have observed, shared this method, which I call the “test and learn” model of change. During times of transition – when our possible selves are shifting wildly – the only way to create change is by putting our possible identities into practice, working and crafting them until they are sufficiently grounded in experience to guide more decisive steps. (See the exhibit “Test and Learn.”)

The test-and-learn approach recognizes that the only way to counter uncertainty and resist the pull of the familiar is to make alternative futures more vivid, more tangible, and more doable. We acquired our old identities in practice. Likewise, we redefine them, in practice, by crafting experiments, shifting connections, and making sense of the changes we are going through. These three common practices lie at the heart of the most disparate of career changes, lending logic to what can look like chance occurrences and disorderly behavior.

Crafting Experiments. By far the biggest mistake people make when trying to change careers is delaying the first step until they have settled on a destination. This error is undermining because the only way we figure out what we really want to do is by giving it a try. Understandably, most people are reluctant to leap into the unknown. We must test our fantasies – otherwise, they remain just that. I discovered that most people create new working identities on the side at first, by getting involved in extracurricular ventures and weekend projects.

Crafting experiments refers to the practice of creating these side projects. Their great advantage is that we can try

out new professional roles on a limited scale without compromising our current jobs or having to leap into new positions too quickly. In almost every instance of successful change that I have observed, the person had already been deeply engaged in the new career for quite some time.

There are many ways to set up experiments that work. Newly resolved to explore a range of possibilities, Susan took freelancing assignments in her old line of work and did pro bono work for charities as her lifeline to get her through this difficult period. Through that work, she began to develop contacts that led to paid charity consulting. Gradually, she became immersed in nonprofits, a sector she had never expected to find a career in. And she found herself enjoying freelancing. Today, she is working with the largest UK consulting firm that specializes in charities, and she has this to say: “All I hope is that I never again make the mistake of jumping before giving myself the chance to explore what I really want to do.”

Other people use temporary assignments, outside contracts, advisory work, and moonlighting to get experience or build skills in new industries. Thanks to a temporary stint at the helm of his division, Harris got over his fear, which had silently plagued him for years, that he lacked the finance and cross-functional background necessary to be a good general manager. This concrete experience, more than any amount of self-reflection, helped him envision himself as a general manager. Taking courses or picking up training and credentials in a new area is still another way of experimenting. For many of the people in my study, an executive program, sabbatical, or extended vacation improved their capacity to move in a new direction. These breaks are powerful because they force us to step back from the daily routine while engaging us with new people and activities.

Shifting Connections. Consider how common it is for employees to say of their companies, “There is no one here I want to be like.” At midcareer, our desire for change is rarely about only

the work we do; it is perhaps more importantly about changing our working relationships so they are more satisfying and inspiring. Shifting connections refers to the practice of finding people who can help us see and grow into our new selves. For most successful career changers I have observed, a guiding figure or new professional community helped to light the way and cushion the eventual leap.

Finding a new job always requires networking outside our usual circles. We get ideas and job leads by branching out. Gary, for example, used his alumni and company networks quite successfully. It was an ex-employee of his company – someone he didn't know personally – who got him the temporary project at his current company. But what clinched his decision, what made this job different from all the other conformist roles he had considered, was the opportunity to work for a role model he had long admired and from whom he could learn the ropes.

Seeking refuge in close working relationships is natural in times of change and uncertainty. But Harris made a classic mistake in turning to an old mentor, Alfred, who was too invested in Harris remaining the unsure protégé to give him room to grow. Harris's way out of this “codependent” relationship came via a person he had met casually at a professional conference. Gerry, the company founder who later hired Harris as his COO, initially approached Harris for regulatory advice. Eventually, they developed an informal consulting relationship. In Gerry, Harris found a person who believed in his potential as a general manager and offered a different kind of close, interdependent working relationship: “It was such a contrast to my relationship with Alfred,” Harris says. “It's not as paternal. Gerry knows things I need to learn – things that relate to creative financing, ways to raise money – but he also needs to learn from me. He doesn't know how to run a company, and I do. He's looking to me to teach him what's necessary to develop an organization, to build a foundation. I think I can learn a lot from Gerry,

but it's a more mature and more professional relationship than I had with Alfred."

To make a break with the past, we must venture into unknown networks – and not just for job leads. Often it is strangers who are best equipped to help us see who we are becoming.

Making Sense. In the middle of the confusion about which way to go, many of us hope for one event that will clarify everything, that will transform our stumbling moves into a coherent trajectory. Julio Gonzales, a doctor trying to leave the practice of medicine, put it like this: "I was waiting for an epiphany – I wake up in the middle of the night and the Angel of Mercy tells me *this* is what I should do." The third working identity practice, making sense, refers to creating our own triggers for change: infusing events – the momentous and the mundane – with special meaning and weaving them into a story about who we are becoming.

Every person who has changed careers has a story about the moment of truth. For John Alexander, the would-be author I've mentioned, the moment of truth came when, on a whim, he visited an astrologer. To his surprise, the first thing she said to him was, "I'm glad I haven't been *you* for the last two or three years. You have been undergoing a painful internal tug-of-war between two opposing factions. One side wants stability, economic well-being, and social status, and the other craves artistic expression, maybe as a writer or an impresario. You may wish to believe that there can be reconciliation between these two. I tell you, there cannot be." Another career changer, a woman who had grown increasingly frustrated as an executive in a high-tech start-up, said, "One day my husband just asked me, 'Are you happy? If you are, that's great. But you don't *look* happy.' His question prompted me to reconsider what I was doing."

It would be easy to believe from such accounts that career changes have their geneses in such moments. But the moment of insight is an effect, not a cause, of change. Across my many interviews,

a striking discovery was that such moments tended to occur late in the transition process, only after much trial and tribulation. Rather than catalyzing change, defining moments helped people make sense of changes that had long been unfolding.

Trigger events don't just jolt us out of our habitual routines, they are the necessary pegs on which to hang our reinvention stories. Arranging life events into a coherent story is one of the subtlest, yet most demanding, challenges of career reinvention. To reinvent oneself

Studying Career Change

Certain career transitions have been thoroughly studied and are well understood: a move into a position of greater managerial responsibility and organizational status, a transfer to a similar job in a new company or industry, a lateral move into a different work function within a familiar field. But few researchers have investigated how managers and professionals go about making a true change of direction.

My research is an in-depth study of 39 people who changed, or were in the process of trying to change, careers. Determining the magnitude of any work transition is highly subjective. Who, apart from the person who has lived through it, can say whether a shift is radical or incremental? After interviewing dozens of people who were making very different kinds of career moves, I settled on a three-part definition of career change.

Some of the people in my study made significant changes in the context in which they worked, most typically jumping from large, established companies to small, entrepreneurial organizations or to self-employment or between the for-profit and nonprofit sectors. Others made major changes in the content of the work, sometimes leaving occupations, such as medicine, law or academia, that they had trained for extensively. The majority made significant changes in both what they did and where they did it, but most important, all experienced a feeling of having reached a crossroad, one that would require psychological change.

My sample ranged in age from 32 to 51, with an average of 41. I chose this range not to coincide with the infamous midlife crisis but to study a group of people with enough experience in one career to make a shift to another high-stakes endeavor. Sixty-five percent of the participants were men. Almost half of the subjects lived and worked outside the United States, mostly in France and the UK. It was a highly credentialed sample: All had college degrees, and about three-fourths held graduate or professional degrees (business, science, law, and so on). They represented all walks of managerial and professional life, including business management, law, finance, academia, medicine, science, and technology.

Some of the interviews were retrospective, with people who had already completed their changes. With people at earlier stages of the transition, I conducted an average of three interviews over two to three years. The interviews were open-ended, typically beginning with: "Tell me about your career to date." Between the interviews, I had e-mail exchanges and telephone conversations with participants to keep track of their progress. I supplemented this core study with many shorter interviews involving a range of career change professionals, including headhunters, venture capitalists, career counselors, and outplacement specialists.

is to rework one's story. At the start of a career transition, when all we have is a laundry list of diffuse ideas, it unsettles us that we have no story. It disturbs us to find so many different options appealing, and we worry that the same self who once chose what we no longer want to do might again make a bad choice. Without a story that explains why we must change, the external audience to whom we are selling our reinvention remains dubious, and we, too, feel unsettled and uncertain.


Good stories develop in the telling and retelling, by being put into the public sphere even before they are fully formed. Instead of being embarrassed about having visited an astrologer, for example, John told everyone his story and even wrote about it in a newspaper column. The closer he got to finding his

creative outlet, the more the episode made sense and the less often his story elicited the "Why would you want to do that?" reaction. By making public declarations about what we seek and about the common thread that binds our old and new selves, we clarify our intentions and improve our ability to enlist others' support.

The Road Now Taken

Most of us know what we are trying to escape: the lockstep of a narrowly defined career, inauthentic or unstimulating work, numbing corporate politics, a lack of time for life outside of work. Finding an alternative that truly fits, like finding one's mission in life, cannot be accomplished overnight. It takes time, perseverance, and hard work. But effort isn't enough; a sound method and

the skill to put it into practice are also required.

The idea of working one's identity flies in the face of everything we have always been told about choosing careers. It asks us to devote the greater part of our time and energy to action rather than reflection, to doing instead of planning. It tells us to give up the search for a ten-point plan and to accept instead a crooked path. But what appears to be a mysterious, road-to-Damascus process is actually a learning-by-doing practice that any of us can adopt. We start by taking action. 

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ARTICLES

"A Second Career: The Possible Dream" by Harry Levinson (*Harvard Business Review*, May–June 1983, Product no. 83307)

Levinson describes an approach to midlife career change that blends elements of "testing and learning" with "planning and implementing." He begins by considering a version of working identity he calls **ego ideal**: your idealized image of your future self, including goals you'd like to achieve. He then explains how to clarify your ego ideal by asking a series of probing questions, such as, "What lifetime experiences have I found most gratifying?" and "What kinds of achievements do I admire?"

Next Levinson suggests ways to identify the activities and work environments appropriate for your ego ideal. Finally, he considers the unique concerns facing midlife career changers, such as family responsibilities, potential loss of status, and the feelings of loss that accompany major job changes.

"Reawakening Your Passion for Work" by Richard Boyatzis, Annie McKee, and Daniel Goleman (*Harvard Business Review*, April 2002, Product no. 9659)

These authors shift gears to executives who are at the apex of their careers and begin to feel that something is missing from their work lives. Addressing this feeling is essential for renewing their energy, creativity, and commitment—and their ability to inspire others.

The article emphasizes the importance of **knowing when it's time for a change**. Signals

include: 1) "*I feel trapped.*" Once-meaningful work seems less meaningful. You're restless but can't change or articulate what's wrong. 2) "*I feel bored.*" Life seems to lack satisfying work, intellectual stimulation, and fun. You're just "going through the motions." 3) "*I can't ignore the call.*" You're strongly drawn to a new mission, such as becoming a teacher.

BOOK

***Working Identity: Unconventional Strategies for Reinventing Your Career* by Herminia Ibarra (*Harvard Business School Press*, November 2002, Product no. 7788)**

This book expands on the ideas in "How to Stay Stuck in the Wrong Career." The author acknowledges the powerful pull of the familiar and the difficulty in moving away from a current profession in which we've invested long years and intense effort. Based on her research on professionals and managers in transition, Ibarra outlines the "test and learn" process of career reinvention and provides examples of people who have successfully used the three tactics described in her HBR article.

She shares additional suggestions for deciding when to abandon your current path and follow a new one, crafting and executing "identity experiments," creating "small wins" that keep your momentum going, connecting with new role models and mentors who can ease the transition, and surviving the rocky period between career identities.

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