

CAREER TRANSITIONS FOR THE UPSTART

by Judy Estrin

*If you don't know where you are going, any road will take you there.
- Lewis Carroll in Alice's Adventure in Wonderland (1865). //*

William Bridges was correct when he said, “there are no jobs.” I believe that to have a truly successful transition, it is wiser to look for work rather than a job. And if you are contemplating starting your own business or consulting practice, you may be wondering where to start looking. First, you have to be absolutely clear about who you are, what your skills or competencies are, and where you want to go, and develop a transition timeline, with milestones to help you actualize your vision.

Start at the beginning

Consider what makes you want to go into business for yourself. Are you bored with what you are currently doing? Do you feel that there are no longer advancement opportunities within your present organization? Are you ready to tackle a new industry? Do you want to expand your skill base? Are you looking to be your own boss? Do you want to be a “bigger fish in a smaller pond”? Are you trying to get a better handle on work-life balance, or contemplating relocation? These are the types of questions to ask yourself before you dive into a transition.

Of course, if your industry or organization is in a downsizing mode, you may believe that you have no control. This is not true. If you have kept track of your accomplishments, regularly updated your résumé, politely talked to every headhunter who phoned, and kept up your professional network, you are more ready than you think.

Take inventory of your values and expectations from your next position. Ask yourself where you want to be in 5 years. Are you closer to retirement than to the beginning of your career? What skills do you want to master in your new position?

Journalists use a formula for writing that can serve as a model for developing and managing entrepreneurship decisions. Consider the following six:

Who. Define your ideal clients and ideal organizations. Do you want to affiliate yourself with green organizations?

What. Determine what type of work you want to focus on or do most of—project management, coaching, facilitation, instructional design? While you don't have to do just one thing, you may want to concentrate on the areas where you excel. Are you someone who can sell, do needs analysis, and assemble the best team to perform the tasks sold?

Where. Will you build a home office and have a space for clients to meet with you?

When. This may sound like a frivolous question, but do you want to work full-time or part-time? My personal example for managing a consulting business while maintaining work-life balance has always been Geoff Bellman from Seattle, Washington. He taught me to first schedule the time that I wanted for things other than work, including vacation time.

Why. Why are you making a change? Why do you want to go in a specific direction? Do you want to make a different kind or level of contribution to the profession, society, or your community? Are you looking to have more fun in your life and more control?

How. In what way are you going to accomplish your personal and financial goals? Perhaps you will do so through speaking engagements, through your own labor, or by finding ways to have passive income? Are you going to sell a product you develop or distribute someone else's? Are you aiming at multiple income streams? How much money do you need to earn or generate to do what you want? How many days each year do you want to have to play versus work?

Have a plan

Whether you are a relative newbie to the field or a seasoned professional, it all starts with a plan. Be clear on your goals and objectives. Know when you want to be at your goal. Identify not only what you want to do next, but where you want to do it. Be reasonable, allowing enough cushioning time; don't expect magic to happen within 24 hours of your decision.

If you are contemplating hanging out your shingle, have a financial cushion. Most advisors recommend having a minimum of six months' living expenses available. Even if you have a great contract right out of the box, ensure that while you are busy working you are not necessarily busy marketing.

Network

Networking doesn't stop if you are internal. It isn't necessarily what you know that gets you where you want to be, but who you know. Many a training or organization development department has fallen on hard times when internals fail to market their skills. Remember, as an internal, your boss rarely, if ever, sees or directly benefits from your work. If you are networking and marketing within your organization, others outside of your work team are the recipients of your skills.

Remembering that we are always in transition, it is critical not to get lulled into the "this is forever" syndrome. Speak at conferences. Volunteer at

association or community activities to keep your name out there. Even if you are very happy where you are, develop a one-minute commercial that describes who you are and what you do. Keep your résumé up to date and maintain a copy of your Rolodex on your home system, just in case you need those numbers and you've been cordially escorted out the door!

Many is the time I've heard someone say, "I don't know anyone outside of the organization. *They* never sent me to conferences or meetings." Forget the "they." If you want to keep working versus not-working, you must always network.

Work your plan

Having a marketing plan is essential. Executing a marketing plan is critical. I've seen plenty of great plans that got no further than the paper on which they were written. Nothing works if the implementation falls short.

Having specific checkpoints and targets gives you something by which to measure yourself. Check early and often. You may well have to adjust or shift your course of action based on what you discover once you begin implementation.

Mentors matter

Whether you are internal or external, it is valuable to have a mentor to guide you during the process. Find someone you trust who will be brutally honest with you in providing the feedback and advice you need to meet your goal. Often, multiple mentors come into your life who fill different roles.

Be prepared

Be aware and ready for opportunities. In 30 seconds or less can you give a concise "pitch" about your abilities? Do you have a supply of business cards on you at all times? Do you look like you are ready to work? If you are conducting a search, being interview-ready means more than keeping up

appearances—it includes keeping a positive, confident demeanor.

Enjoy the process

If you are in transition by your own choice or one imposed on you by an organization, accept the situation for what it is. Look for the joy in what you are doing, where you are going, and how you are moving along the path.

Don't let media sway you into thinking that we are on the verge of doom and gloom. There are and will always be economic swings. Maintain a mode where you keep your eyes on the prize of fulfilling your own vision.

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