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Eight Tips for Career Transitions

After reinventing myself more than once in the last ten years, and coaching clients on creating the next chapter of work in their careers, I've learned a few things about career transitions. Here are my eight top tips:

1. **Get your financial house in order.** Career transitions take place over time — months and years, not days and weeks. It's likely you'll take a pay cut — whether it's going to a start-up, becoming self-employed, or venturing into a new occupation. If you're loaded down with debt and relying on a healthy paycheck to make ends meet each month, you've limited your options on what's next for you. Pay off your loans. Put yourself on a spending diet so that you can sock away a few dollars. This will give you peace of mind when you are ready to leave your current gig.
2. **Take field trips.** Some people know what their next work will be. Others are still searching. In either case, it's a good idea to explore different work with small excursions. This might be having lunch with someone who's been self-employed for a decade or going to a chapter meeting of an industry group or visiting a friend that works for a start-up. By thinking of these activities as field trips, it takes the pressure off of finding the right fit quickly. If you find that a new area is not what you thought it would be, no big deal. Just plan your next field trip. Over time, you'll gather enough information to uncover what it is you really want to do.
3. **Listen to your gut, feel the energy (or lack of it).** Work that is right for you will feel easy, even if you are new at it. It's like a boost of energy in the middle of the day. On the flip side, don't fall into the trap of considering a new area just because it makes logical sense. For example, an area that builds on experience in your current work. It might not be the right thing if you can't seem to gain momentum. If that phone call you've been meaning to make never rises to the top of the to-do list, it's time to re-examine what it is you really want.
4. **Build a new network.** In the book, "Working Identity" by Herminia Ibarra, the author talks about the need to create new networks when you change careers. Your old network will be of little use. I found this to be true when I transitioned from being an engineer to an organization development consultant while still working for the same company. I began to hang out with people at the company who did HR-type work — recruiting, leadership development, team effectiveness. Later, after I founded my own firm, I joined organizations that attracted other organization development consultants. By the time I started my ezine, I had a list of 75 consultants on my mailing list. A similar thing happened after I went through training to be a coach and subsequently changed the focus of my company to be about coaching, not consulting. Before I knew it, I had created a network of new and experienced coaches where I could ask questions and get support. By the way, taking field trips helps to build the new network.

5. **Find a mentor.** If you are clear what you want the next chapter to look like (e.g., I want to work as an advisor to elderly people on navigating the health care system or I want to be a professional blogger on Web 2.0), the next step is to find a mentor. This should be a person who is far enough along on the learning curve that they can help you avoid some of the bumps in the road. How do you find mentors? Read professional journals and contact the author of a great article. Explore blogs that focus on your area of interest. Attend professional conferences or seminars and notice who you are attracted to. When you find someone who fits the bill, the most obvious, but sometimes hardest thing to do is ask. Chances are that if you've found the right person, he or she will be honored that you asked.
6. **Get involved in small ways.** Before I moved full-time into organization development consulting, I volunteered to work with my technical colleagues on teamwork issues. I helped develop a process for making team decisions, when the team consisted of 25 people. I facilitated group meetings and tried out methodologies that I was learning about from reading organization development journals. Similarly, when I was considering training to be a coach, one of my technical colleagues asked me to coach him on a monthly basis. After I started coaching training, I asked for volunteer clients from my old network, people willing to be guinea pigs for my latest venture. If you are contemplating working for yourself, try out an arrangement of working at home one day a week or selling a product on the side. Small steps will build your confidence that you can do the work on a bigger scale.
7. **Develop your skills through formal training.** But don't overwhelm yourself by thinking you have to get another degree. I've been through my share of training for both organization development work and for coaching. I'm grateful for that training, but I never felt the need to get another degree for the sake of credibility. Training served to expand my toolbox, to give me new perspectives, and to satisfy my curiosity to know more. After working as a coach for several years, I still attend one or two new training classes each year, to keep learning and to renew my commitment to my craft.
8. **Don't underestimate the power of passion.** Clients have said to me, "Who am I to be doing this new work? I'm just a <fill in the blank with current occupation>." I am reminded of the line from the poem by Marianne Williamson, that was read by Nelson Mandela at his presidential inauguration: *"We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be?"* Passion counts for a lot. So does hard work and learning. Both come naturally with passion. Where does passion come from? It comes from our wounds that have healed enough to be brought into the world. It comes from our experiences that tell us things could be better, if only someone cared enough. It comes from our desire to help others avoid the mistakes we made.

If this all sounds like a lot of work, it's because it is. Career transitions are a journey into our new selves, the emerging faces of who we are. There are no short cuts to re-inventing yourself.

With each re-invention, you'll get closer to your natural sweet spot, the place where work becomes play, where what you do for a living is completely in line with your values, where

you suddenly find that you're not an average worker, but a brilliant performer. Enjoy the ride.

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