

Reinventing Yourself

Changing direction and changing careers

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For some people, asking them to decide at age 18 what kind of work they want to do for the next couple decades is like asking them to speak French when they've been learning Spanish. Little wonder that a growing number of women are changing careers in their 40s, 50s and 60s. Three women who pursued new paths and reinvented themselves share their tales of metamorphosis.

Goodbye corporate world

After more than 35 years as an accountant, Norma J. Swenson bid farewell to the corporate world. But five years into retirement, Swenson says, she felt bored and wondered what to do next. One thing she knew for certain was that she was not interested in working in an office environment again.

After a friend of hers who worked in home health care encouraged her to consider the field, Swenson became a caregiver with Home Health United . "I am having a ball," she says. "I think maybe this was my calling all along." She enjoys the change of pace, she says, and not being under end-of-the-month time restraints and corporate structure.

Swenson admits that changing directions was a little frightening at first. "My greatest fear was that I would do it wrong, that I wouldn't be able to handle a situation," she says. "I've found that all I have to do is ask, and they [clients] are more than willing to tell me what they want and how they want it."

The switch also required a change in thinking on her part. "I never thought that I was outgoing, where I could carry on conversations with people," Swenson says. She learned that she loves interacting with people, especially in their homes; the job responsibilities fit quite well with her homemaker interests and skills. "It makes me feel good, too, that I can put a little happiness in their life," she adds.

Always learning

Nancy Endres , who worked in city and state government for numerous years, often felt "it was just a job." She explains: "I think when you don't feel it's giving back, it can be a mundane, 40-hours-a-week type thing." Now 57, Endres has changed gears several times during the last three decades. She went from working in the Legislature to directing a nonprofit organization. At 45, she started a new career as a Mary Kay consultant (independent contractor), which she still enjoys today.

Endres says being able to diversify as you learn within each career leads to more options in the future. "I kept diversifying my skills; I kept learning new things," she says. "I knew politics, I knew sales, and I knew secretarial, and I could parlay that into a management position." Endres, who attributes her ability to "move past the glass ceiling" to having attained multiple skills to market, encourages young women to do the same.

Endres believes that beginning around age 40, women start to know their strengths and weaknesses. "What I knew is I didn't want to work [full time] until I'm 62 or 65, but I want to stay connected," she says. "I wanted to create a back-up plan for when I'm over 60..." Having worked in the field of aging, she was keenly aware she did not want to look back and regret the choices she made and the opportunities she missed. Endres defined what was most important to her in a career: to be able to use her skills in a meaningful way and to have freedom and flexibility to pursue passions like travel, painting and reading.

Focus on your passions

Clara Hurd Nydam , president of Career Momentum, Inc ., knows firsthand the importance of focusing on your strengths and what you enjoy doing, not just what you have great skill at. "There's a difference

between skill and talent and what really drives a person,” says Nydam. “For instance, I was a great typist; I could type really fast, but that wasn't enough...” She found she needed ways to express her creativity, “the things I couldn't get behind a secretary's desk or a receptionist's desk where I was doing someone else's stuff.” She became a career counselor first; then a couple years later, started her own business when working for someone else didn't give her “the ability to expand my horizons beyond just routine performance.”

Nydam discusses the ins and outs of networking in the career change process. Networking is really scary for a lot of people, she says, but it's a vital tool when changing directions. Approach networking as a means of discovery and research, rather than as a source of job leads. “If you focus on what's going on in the other person's world,” Nydam says, “you'll discover points of mutual interest. Think strategically about your networking,” asking yourself what it is that you're hoping to learn from this person.

Time for a career change?

For many, midlife proves to be an intense period of self-examination. “Many of us find we picked careers to please someone else,” says [Karen S. Ostrov, Ph.D., Konect Consulting, LLC](#). Some enter an unsettling stage; they have a decent job with good benefits and it pays well, but they're watching the clock every day and feeling unmotivated and unhappy.

If you're spending too much of your workday doing things you don't enjoy, it may be time to explore other options. “Let's not be fooled, there's no perfect career,” she says. It's a numbers game of sorts, percentages, to be more precise. People feel most satisfied when at least a significant part of their work involves using their signature strengths, Ostrov says.

It's helpful to think of changing directions as a slow, deliberate process. “There's no better time to get a new job or a new career going than when you're already employed,” she says. Trying to look for your next career is easier on your self-esteem if you're still bringing in a paycheck, she points out. Ostrov suggests carving out a few hours a week for the exploration process and to gather information about new fields.

It's a mindset

Many people have a hard time imagining that a career change is possible, says Judy Collins, JD, of Collins Coaching, LLC. They anticipate that it's much harder than it really is, says Collins, a business and life coach and P.P.C. (Professional Certified Coach).

Collins believes that “the more women focus on their needs and wants, the more likely they will end up in a situation that will be fulfilling to them.” Two other key concepts in career change are planning and fear. By researching options, you can lay out what steps the change will require. “Creating a plan about what steps you actually have to go through can make it seem much more possible,” she says.

One of the biggest obstacles to changing careers is fear. “Most of the time fear is coming up, it's imagined,” Collins states. “Get in touch with the underlying threat you feel you're facing and then address it straight on.” Fear can help motivate you to develop more reserves on your current job (before changing careers) or to more fully explore the options.

“Always try as hard as you can to be in alignment with the principle of trusting yourself,” Collins asserts. “You are 100 percent in control of the truth about what is right for you.” You can ask for and listen to others' advice, she says, but trust your own feelings and perspectives.

Questions to ask when thinking about changing careers:

- Am I running from something or is there something I want to run toward?
- What part of my desire to change is motivated by something I don't like, that I want to get away from?
- What do I want to have less of in my life? What do I want more of in my life? What is it about my current situation that's preventing me from getting what I want?

- What are my strengths? What am I most passionate about?

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