



Changing Careers in Midstream

by Genita Kovacevich-Costello

At the age of 28, I am madly in love with my third career. This time, however, I walked into the affair with my eyes open. I'm no longer naive enough to think that the honeymoon will last forever. The national average, in fact, assures me that the "itch to switch" will strike me again, and again - and maybe even again. Caught in the midst of today's economic and social upheavals, I am like many American workers: we have been given the choice, as well as the mandate, to change careers.

A Matter of Choice?

Work satisfaction has become a matter of life and death. Evidence from recent studies suggests that the strongest factor to a long and healthy life is how you feel about your job. With a working population which is younger, better educated and more mobile than ever before, careers are expected to provide much more

than a decent living and job security. Ask anyone who is happy with their work what they like about it and chances are that "the money I rake in" will take a back seat to answers like "the challenge," "the people I work with" or "the chance to be creative."

John C. Crystal, pioneer in life/work planning and Director of the John C. Crystal Center in New York, estimates that 80 percent of all workers are in jobs which do not provide deep satisfaction. "How many people do you know who hate their work?" queries Crystal. "Their working lives are in opposition to the kinds of people they really are and they find themselves waiting until 5:00 so they can begin living again."

Deborah Reinow, Corporate and Convention Sales Manager for the San Franciscan Hotel, included herself on the career casualties list until nearly two years ago. After three years in a job training program in Sonoma County, Reinow

realized that she was being drained by counseling and helping people. "The kind of work I was doing," she says today, "was short-term and provided no tangible results. I learned that was what I needed."

One day, shortly after returning from a vacation, Reinow remembers "walking into the teacher's lunch room and finding I couldn't breathe. My own mental health was at stake." It struck her as a sudden revelation: her career didn't fit her.

Not everyone becomes as worn out as Deborah Reinow before changing careers. Many simply become bored. Some come to terms suddenly with the constriction of the narrow options which they gave themselves when major life choices were first demanded of them. Mildred McCloskey, Director of Crossroads Institute for Career Development in Berkeley, California, describes many of her clients as people who "prematurely foreclosed on a career because of parental urging" or other social pressures. The preoccupation with what they should do prevented from considering what they really wanted to do.

At the age of 46, Leroy Kearney decided that he had waited long enough for "someday" to arrive so that he could do what he knew would bring him satisfaction. After 20 years in the education field, he enrolled himself as a student in medical school. Now in private practice in Philadelphia, Dr. Kearney remembers how his old dream never died.

"I kept wondering, 'What if I had gone to med school?'" he recalls. "As I looked over my life, I realized I did not regret the things I had tried and failed at, but the things I had wanted to do and didn't have the guts or heart to try."

When internal signs indicate that something is amiss in your career, you must determine what is causing the dissatisfaction before you can take corrective measures. "Too often," cautions Charles Prugh, San Francisco Career Consultant, "people quickly seek an answer for a problem they have not properly defined." You must decide whether it is the job itself or circumstances surrounding the job which are making you unhappy. "Frequently," Prugh explains, "people lump this all together, dismissing both the company and the work, when perhaps they could resurrect part of the job and take it elsewhere."

By making this distinction, you sometimes discover that the solution lies in

your own backyard, buried perhaps under something you've been meaning to clean up for years. Consider, for example, the case of a quality control manager at Raychem Corporation. This man wanted to try something different and was able to switch into Human Resources without switching employers. This internal transfer enabled him to retain the same salary level and benefits while the company was able to retain a valuable employee.

Companies such as Raychem and Lawrence Livermore Laboratories have realized the economic benefits of "growing their own people" and have established career development programs for this purpose. Career counselors are available to employees to provide self-assessment workshops, individual counseling and outplacement seminars. According to Raychem's Career Development Manager Marueen Sheills, this company began years ago to add up the expense involved in recruiting, relocating and retraining new employees. "We decided," Sheills says, "that it's best to do the most we can with the people we have."

For many career changers, of course, the luxury of asking themselves what they want to do becomes more a matter of necessity. Current economic conditions and technological changes appear to dictate nearly everyone's employment choices. In education, for instance, this has certainly been the case. A recent article in *Money* magazine estimated that more than 100,000 teachers dropped out of the classroom last year. For some, there was no job to resume because they had been laid off. For others, the ensuing pressure to do more work with less support became overwhelming and debilitating.

Regardless of whether you are by choice seeking a career change or are propelled into it by outside forces, you must hone some psychological as well as vocational tools before taking the plunge. To say, "I quit!" might be momentarily liberating, but if you're not prepared for the consequences you'll be courting disaster.

Psychological Tools

As with any situation involving risk, there are certain trade-offs to be made when changing careers. There are many things (Charles Prugh calls them

continued on next page

"Old self-images and value systems must be reckoned with before career changers can begin to see themselves in a new environment."

continued from previous page

"golden handcuffs") which can keep you in the wrong place for years. These include pension plans, accrued vacation benefits, seniority and the confidence which usually accompanies the boredom of being in one job for too long. Crossroads Institute helps their clients to become more comfortable with the risks inherent in changing careers. Using Dr. Ellen Siegelman's concept of risk-taking, McCloskey and her staff encourage program participants to discover that "when we do take a risk, if we also take the appropriate safeguards, we always feel strengthened by it."

Old self-images and value systems must also be reckoned with before career changers can begin to see themselves in a new environment. Unfortunately, the time and money you spend earning extra education degrees can often trap you in outdated roles which might be comfortable but certainly are not practical. "It took me six to eight months," remembers Deborah Reinow, "to deal with the idea that I could do something outside of social services. I had been trained in it and felt I should use it. Besides, I didn't know what else to do - and that was scary."

Old role prescriptions are much easier to discard when there are new ones to assume their place. By taking stock of your personal qualifications (those which are outside the parameters of your current job), you can begin to establish and develop a new occupational image. A wide selection of resources are available to assist you in this process, including Bolles's and Zenoff's *Job Hunting Map*, John Crystal's autobiographical approach, local workshops and career consultants. Each system is essentially designed to help participants review past experience in order to identify those skills, interests and values which contribute to a feeling of competence and satisfaction. "Without this step," warns Prugh, "people don't know what they're for or against." It is likely that they will once again fall into non-rewarding jobs, grabbing anxiously at the first thing available instead of the offer which is best suited to their needs.

Only once your self-inventory is completed will you be able to translate skills and interests into occupational objectives. These working requirements become the criteria to help you decide whether or not a new career is suited to

your real tastes and abilities. Only then can you turn your attention to discovering what absolute options await you.

Vocational Tools

Devote the same quality of care to exploring potential career fields as you devoted to exploring the real you. Mildred McCloskey has found that many of her clients, especially those moving from the public to the private sector, are disadvantaged by a sketchy view of other fields and ignorance of the broad job market.

Like many career changers, Sue McCready believed that her desire to "work with people" relegated her to a career in education or social services. With the onslaught of Proposition 13 in California, where she lived and worked, McCready reluctantly began exploring the world of business. "I began to realize that my notions about business weren't accurate," she explains. "I realized I wasn't limited to working with kids. I was limiting myself. There were opportunities for me to express myself in the business world as well."

With a hidden (non-advertised) job market estimated at 80 percent, the career changer can be at a severe disadvantage. Undoubtedly you've already experienced the power of networking. It is an important practical tool and can be enhanced by joining professional associations and engaging in informational interviews. Deborah Reinow spent four months meeting with people in the hotel industry to determine what they were like, what she could expect to find in the field and whether or not she could find a satisfying niche in it. "You have to be willing to go through the process," she advises. "No one is going to give you a job. You have to do that for yourself."

In some instances, additional education can be an important transitional step. And in some cases, as with Leroy Kearney, complete retraining is a necessary credential for entering a new field. For most new careers, however, coursework is most beneficial for the exposure it gives you to professionals already working in the field.

Even the most carefully planned career exploration can be undermined if you try to market your new self with your old résumé. The trained educator, for example, with a four-page vitae laced with terms like "teaching" instead of "training" will have a difficult time con-

vincing the business world that she or he will fit in snugly. Identifying transferable skills during the personal inventory should enable you to write a résumé and conduct an interview in the language of the trade you're pursuing. Transitional experiences such as volunteer work, freelancing or internships can also help to update your work experience while increasing your professional confidence.

The Agony and the Ecstasy

Admittedly, changing careers can be more work than a job itself. If you truly want to make a successful change, be realistic and approach the project prepared and forewarned of three facts.

First, there will be trade-offs. To gain greater independence, you may have to live with less job security. Accurate self-assessment will help you decide if the trade-off is one with which you can comfortably live.

Second, it will take time. "You have to have realistic time expectations," says Deborah Reinow, who spent a year making her own transition. "You have to be sure you're not just settling for something because you're tired." Changing careers is a process, not merely a step. Yielding to the temptation to "jump the gun" will only cure the symptoms, not the underlying cause. And if you're overly rash, you may end up thrusting yourself into a whirlwind of confusion.

Third, starting a new career can be as painful as leaving the old one behind. Leroy Kearney's experience taught him that "you need a certain amount of security within yourself. You have to be willing to be born again - to be able to walk as a child again."

Accept from point go that change implies growth and growth begets pain. Always. As Mildred McCloskey sees it, this is the agony of changing careers. As your work changes, other alterations in your life will become necessary. Even when you know that all these changes are for the better, you still have the right to feel the hurt. Just know that for those who bear the agony, there is a definite ecstasy as well. You have decided not to wait until "someday" to do what you really want. You are doing it today. ■

Genita Kovacevich-Costello is a writer and career counselor based in Redwood City, California. Her previous career incarnations include those of marriage and family counselor and teacher.