

Making a successful career switch

Many individuals face the prospect of a career switch at some point in their professional lives. There are various reasons and motivations behind a switch in careers. According to Mr David Wee, Managing Director of Lee Hecht Harrison, a career consulting and leadership management firm, there are many circumstances that prompt individuals to make a career switch.

Some people feel the need to switch careers as part of their personality and value system. Such individuals often strive to accomplish a variety of things over a period of time and are driven by change. There are individuals who find themselves in the wrong career and simply had to switch to another in order to find fulfillment. Another common reason for switching careers is redundancy. Some people found themselves to be out of a job suddenly and therefore, need to find a new position fairly quickly. It is important to know where new jobs are coming from. For some, a career switch may be necessary to remain employed.

No matter what the reason or motivation, making a career switch requires careful consideration and planning.

Are you ready to switch?

Do you remember the saying “Time flies when you are having fun?” Conversely, when you are feeling miserable at work, time crawls to the point of being torturous. One clear sign that you are ready for a career switch is when you start to watch the clock more frequently. If you find yourself leaving the office ‘on the dot’ or worse, even before the official knock-off time, that could be a sign that it’s time to move on.

Other possible indicators:

- Dreading to go to work
- Frequently coming late for work
- Experiencing a drop in performance
- Having difficulty to concentrate and focus
- Participating less in meetings and discussions
- Finding faults and complaining all the time
- Actively looking for jobs

Planning your move

Switching careers may not be a tedious or painful step. With proper planning and a sound strategy, a meaningful and successful career switch can result. Mr Wee advises as follows:

- Firstly, you need to know yourself and understand what gives you for job satisfaction. For example, do you know which of your skill set do you still enjoy using? What interests you most at this point in your career? What are your most important values? Are your career demands aligned to these values?
- Another important factor is knowledge of the market place and trends. What careers are in demand in the marketplace right now? Research and understand industry trends, the requirements of organisations within these industries or even another department within your current company. Can you fill that demand? What transferable skills can you bring to these new opportunities?

- Research and networking are important. Talk to people and learn as much as possible about the new career that you are considering.
- Once you know the career you would like to switch to and verified the demand, the next thing is to test its feasibility and consider other factors. Determine how much of your skills can be transferable. Are you switching jobs within a similar industry and job role? The further you move away from your experience, the longer the switch will take.
- While you might like to try something new, consider the risks involved. How versatile are you to face these challenges? How fast can you learn? How long can you wait? How long can the company wait before you are productive? How does your family feel about the switch? How can you position yourself correctly to the prospective employer?

Your Next Steps

Once you have done your research and gone through the thought process described, you are ready to move to the next step.

For a start, discuss your potential career switch with your family. Explain the reasons and benefits for the switch. Family support is important and can be very helpful in times of uncertainty. Determine that you are ready financially should the career switch not work out.

Next, you need to revise your resume, taking into consideration your transferable skills and the industry that you are aiming to enter. In making a career switch, prepare a functional resume instead of a chronological one. This highlights the transferable skills and focuses on your achievements based on these functional skills.

Mr Wee advises, "At Lee Hecht Harrison, we help our clients to first identify a list of skills they have acquired from their past jobs. We then help them to understand what is needed in their targeted jobs and compare the two lists. They are usually pleasantly surprised that they do have more transferable skills than they thought they had. Using the same thought process, start to think about your own transferable skills and match them with what is required in the marketplace."

It may be useful to take half a step each time, says Mr Wee. Focus on similarity. Move within a similar industry or into a similar role.

Avoiding the pitfalls

One common mistake in switching careers is the failure to plan. When individuals switch careers due to superficial reasons such as boredom or motivated by higher salaries offered in other industries, they are likely to act in haste without any proper planning. Such career switches are likely to fail, as the individuals concerned would not have conducted thorough research on the industries of interest and they would not know how to go about 'selling' their skills to prospective employers. If they do secure a new job, they would soon discover that it is not the right fit and that they are just as unfulfilled and unmotivated as they were in their previous jobs.

Another common mistake is not seeking proper guidance. In ensuring a successful career switch, individuals need to seek out their contacts and identify the people whom they can turn to for industry information and advice. It is highly advisable for individuals to speak to an experienced career coach. According to Mr Wee, a career coach will help ensure that your plan is sound and objective. He or she will also help you ease the pressures of a job search, making sure that you do not jump onto the first opportunity that comes along.

Advice to mid-career professionals

For mid-career professionals looking to move, Mr Wee advises as follows:

- Capitalise on your experience from past jobs to help you determine your strengths, likes and dislikes.
- Think of the jobs that you enjoyed most and recognise those you like the least, and why.
- Think about the job scope, the responsibilities, your bosses' management styles, the environment, the company and things specific to the industry and profession. What do you like and dislike about them and why.
- Think of what functional skills you have acquired and identify the ones that might be transferable.
- Market yourself appropriately through your network of contacts and make people see the value that you can bring.

Advice for young working adults

You may be a young working adult who, after 2 or 3 years of work experience, discover that you are in the wrong job. Mr Wee advises that you look back at your school days for clues and indications.

- What were your achievements in school? Which subjects did you enjoy most and excel in? Which subjects did you dislike? Why?
- What types of activities did you enjoy most in school? What role did you usually play in a team project? Did you work best alone or in a team?
- Did you enjoy a changing environment or prefer a structured one?
- Do you work best with numbers, words or pictures?

The above will give you valuable clues to finding the right field to move into.

Conclusion

A career switch can energise one's career and bring a higher level of job fulfillment and motivation to the individual. However, one must be prepared to work hard and make sacrifices to ensure a smooth career switch. Careful consideration, proper planning and sound advice will help towards making your career switch as a successful one.