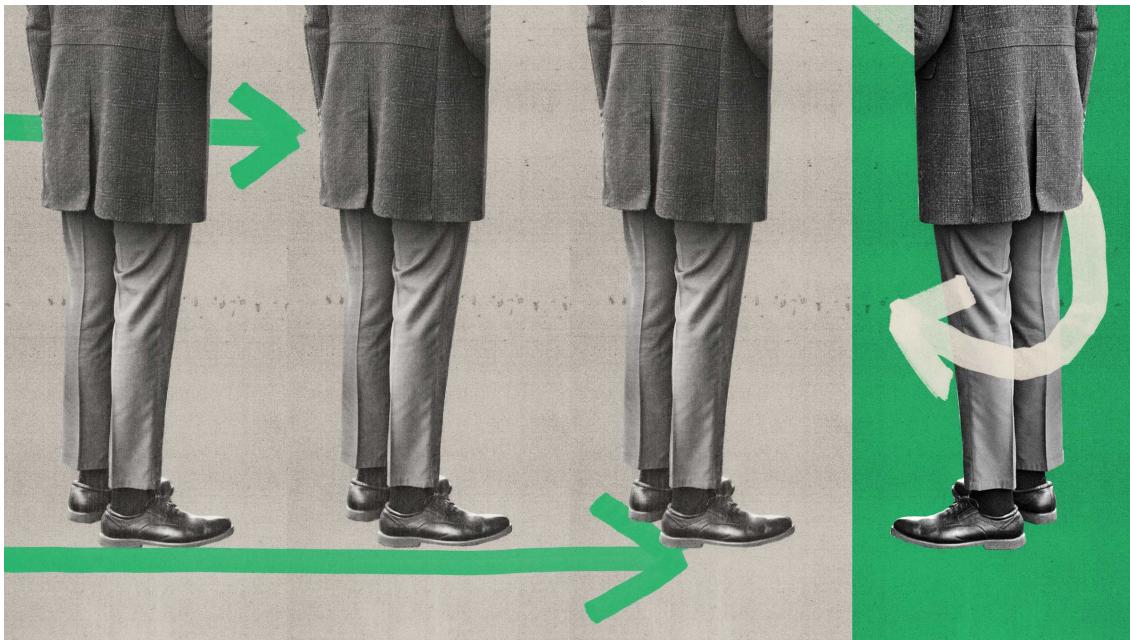


Career Transitions

What to Ask Yourself Before a Career Pivot

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HBR Staff/Pexels

Summary. Gone are the days of picking a job or career path and sticking to it forever. Career pivots are far more common today than they ever were. For example, consider Oprah Winfrey's transitions from TV anchor to superstar talk show host to film actress, producer, and... [more](#)

When the Vatican commissioned the Sistine Chapel, Michelangelo was a highly regarded sculptor who had not yet produced any paintings. Luckily for the Vatican — and for

Michelangelo — the gamble paid off: his first commissioned painting turned out one of the most majestic art works in history, visited by 6 million people each year.

As with Michelangelo, so with many others. Indeed, history is replete with famous career pivots turned into extraordinary stories of individual success. For example, consider Oprah Winfrey's transitions from TV anchor to superstar talk show host, to film actress, to producer, to media mogul. Or Vera Wang's pirouette from competitive figure skater to renowned designer. Or Andrea Bocelli's transition from the courtroom to the concert hall.

In fact, career pivots are far more common today than they ever were. Gone are the years of picking what to study on the basis of a clear job choice or career trajectory. The best plan, it seems, is no plan at all — or simply keeping your options open.

Academic research has been examining career pivots for decades, with the goal of understanding not just their pros and cons, but also the best strategies and circumstances that enable their success. Contrary to what people think, career pivots are far less dependent on age than on other, organizational, psychological, and contextual factors. In other words, there is no such thing as the “ideal age” for a change; instead, other factors should be considered.

Key Drivers of a Career Change

My colleague Herminia Ibarra at London Business School, one of the leading thinkers in this space, summarized the key drivers of career change:

- **Situational (external) drivers:** external market forces, such as the economy or the talent landscape; organizational changes,

such as restructuring; and emerging opportunities, usually seen as “pull” factors.

- **Personal (internal) drivers:** internal factors include the “skills, talents, preferences, past experiences, developmental stage and self-conceptions that individuals bring to their work role and career,” personal networks and “triggers,” and opportunities that mobilize people towards the pursuit of new pathways.

How We Define and Align Our Professional and Personal Identities

Of particular importance here is the concept of “professional identity”, especially as it pertains to an individual’s self-concept. In essence, our identity is influenced not just by our past work experiences, but also by our projected ones. When we feel that we are headed in a direction that is not congruent with our self-concept, such that our perceived “actual self” is out of sync with our “ideal self,” we are motivated to take action and change.

Psychologically speaking, career pivots are attempts to align our occupational choices with our self-concept and identity. This view is also consistent with the original conceptualization of employee engagement, proposed by William Kahn in 1990. As he noted, a critical factor determining the different levels of motivation, enthusiasm, and energy between employees — particularly those who are part of the same team or organization — is the degree to which they identify with their work persona. Those who see it as emblematic of their self or identity will tend to be engaged, whereas those who don’t, will just clock in-and-out, feel alienated, and at best hope to find meaning in other activities.

But what defines our self-concept and identity? Networks play a big role. As I illustrate in my latest book, *I, Human: AI, Automation, and the Quest to Reclaim What Makes Us Unique*, humans are meaning-craving machines, and the primary source

of meaning is other people. We wouldn't be able to make sense of the world or anything at all, if it weren't for the fact that we are able to receive, understand, and utilize the pre-digested systems of meaning from others (e.g., parents, teachers, friends, colleagues, and spouses, not to mention podcasts). The more extensive, dense, and rich your social networks are, the more likely you will be to develop a complex self-concept that aligns with both your reputation and the market's regard for your skills and potential.

Fifty years ago, we may have simply relied on our neighbor's or aunt's advice to devote our future professional lives to one specific career, without ever ruminating much over our choices. Today, we are bombarded with an infinite number of suggestions (including from yours truly), and have access to a vast catalogue of information, opportunities, and industry predictions. This creates too much complexity and what behavioral economists refer to as "choice paradox": the more choices we have the harder it is to be satisfied with our choices, or to feel confident in them (as Scott Galloway noted). In that sense, harnessing the right networks and listening to selected mentors, champions, colleagues who are capable of understanding our potential, and identifying a better home for it, should help us define our action plan.

There are also some universals underpinning the success of career pivots, which provide a useful checklist for a self-assessment, if you are interested in evaluating your potential for pivoting. Most models emphasize individual-level factors, such as the "5C" model of control, curiosity, commitment, confidence and concern. As the labels suggest, this model posits that individuals will be more likely to succeed in their pivots when they have more control over their jobs and careers, when they're more curious to explore outside options (including unusual paths), when they commit to their changes, and when they display a healthy mix

between confidence in their abilities and concern that improvement is needed. It follows that if any of these ingredients is missing, there will be extra challenges in pivoting.

In addition, you may wish to consider these simple questions for an initial self-assessment that may help to orient you in the process of evaluating your needs.

Questions to Ask Yourself as You Consider a Career Pivot:

- What things do I like most about my current/past job(s)?
- What are the jobs or careers of people I find fascinating, interesting, or successful?
- What distinctive skills do people see in me, and what specific indicator(s) makes people see them (credentials, behaviors, experience, etc.)?
- What are the most impressive elements of my resume? (Focus on unique and difficult accomplishments.)
- What skills would I love to have acquired in three to five years' time?
- What things do I dislike most about my current/past job(s)?
- What are the jobs or careers of people I find boring and uninteresting?
- What new jobs or careers exist that require my skills and interests?
- What organizational cultures resonate with me, because they fit with my own values, style, and preferences?
- If I could have three different careers between now and retirement, which ones would I pick (if there were no obstacles or limits, and if I were a great fit)?

Keep these questions in mind when you consider different options. Share your answers with trusted friends, experts, and colleagues. Use generative AI to cross-check, research, and

discover. Even better, ask people who know you really well to answer these questions for you, from their perspective. It is often the case that others have a better understanding of who we are than we have ourselves.

Needless to say, career pivots are a bet, and as with any bet, the outcome will be determined in the future. The best thing you can do is to make an informed decision: be clear about the motives you are trying to fulfill — especially changes to your professional self or identity — and scrutinize the pros and cons of available options vis-à-vis your skills, interests, and personality. Finding the balance between an open-minded desire to experiment and a strategic focus, and being honest with yourself when you evaluate the outcome of your choices, will enable you to keep advancing and developing your potential. Make sure that your errors are smart failures, in the sense of boosting your future employability and career success. After all, progress is not a straight line.

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