

Reinventing Your Career in the Time of Coronavirus

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Unexpected events or shocks disrupt our habitual routines, jolt us out of our comfort zones, and lead us to ask big questions about what matters and what is worth doing. It's no wonder, then, that during the current pandemic, many people are rethinking their careers.

But is this really the right time? Even for those of us lucky enough not to be sick, caring for others who are sick, or scrambling to make ends meet, the pandemic has increased uncertainty and caught us unprepared — psychologically, financially, and infrastructurally. The situation feels threatening. And, as psychologists have shown, threatening situations prompt us to behave conservatively — the opposite of what is required when we're considering a career change. It's hard to dive wholeheartedly into reinventing your career if you're feeling risk-averse or are worried about your prospects.

So how do we balance the pressing need to ensure basic survival — of our families and firms — with what may well be a growing urge to do something new after this crisis has subsided?

I've been studying career change for the past two decades, a period that has spanned the dot-com boom and bust, the 2008 financial crisis, the subsequent extended bull-market run, and now the pandemic that has brought that run to an end. That experience has taught me that a few simple principles can help those living through hard times continue to focus on reinventing their careers.

Develop many possible selves

When you don't know what the future will bring, or when the path you thought you were on takes an unexpected turn, it makes sense to pursue a diverse portfolio of options rather than just sticking single-mindedly to one. Even in happier times, career change is never a perfectly linear process. It's a necessarily messy journey of exploration — and to do it right, you have to experiment with, test, and learn about a range of possible selves.

Possible selves are the ideas we all have about who we might want to become. Some are concrete and well-informed by experience; others are vague and fuzzy, nascent and untested. Some are realistic; others are pure fantasy. And, naturally, some appeal more to us than others.

Today, more than ever, the path to your next career will be circuitous. To cover all of the ground you'll need to cover, it's vital to let yourself imagine a divergent set of possible selves and futures. Embrace that process and explore as many of them as you can.

Embrace the “liminal” period

The hallmark of the career-change process is the emotional experience of “liminality” — that is, of existing betwixt and between a past that is clearly gone and a future that is still uncertain. Liminality can be an unpleasant state to inhabit emotionally. People going through it feel unmoored, lose their bearings, and oscillate between “holding on” and “letting go.” But this fraught stage is a necessary part of the journey, because it allows you to process a lot of complex emotions and conflicting desires, and ultimately prevents you from shutting down prematurely and missing better options that still lie ahead.

The current crisis is likely to prolong this in-between state for many of us. While frustrating at times, the state has its benefits. As Bill Bridges has written in *Transitions*, “We need not feel defensive about this apparently unproductive time-out at turning points in our lives ... In the apparently aimless activity of our time alone, we are doing important inner business.”

Neurological studies suggest that taking advantage of liminal time to do that “inner business” may be more beneficial than engaging in a flurry of busy-making self-improvement efforts. Downtime is crucial not only for replenishing the brain’s stores of attention and motivation but also for sustaining the cognitive processes that allow us to fully develop our humanity. It’s how we consolidate memories, integrate what we have learned, plan for the future, maintain our moral compass, and construct our sense of ourselves.

Get going on projects

The most common path to a career reinvention involves doing something on the side — cultivating knowledge, skills, resources, and relationships until you’ve got strong new legs to walk on in exploring a new career. On nights and weekends, people take part-time courses, do pro-bono or advisory work, and develop start-up ideas. In the research I did for my book *Working Identity*, which is devoted to the subject of career reinvention, I found that most people work on several possibilities at once, comparing and contrasting the pros and cons of each. This activity is crucial. It helps you work through not only the practical questions but also the existential ones that drive career change: Who am I? Who do I want to become? Where can I best contribute? We learn who we want to become by testing fantasy and reality, and, of course, by *doing*.

Our current conditions of quarantine and lockdown limit the possibilities, of course. People have long used contract or advisory work to explore new options or to finance new ventures, for example, but non-essential budgets are now drying up, and as a result many people are finding these avenues obstructed.

Nevertheless, under the present circumstances many people are finding it easier than before to reallocate time and resources to back-burner projects. Many people are already taking advantage of the moment. As part of a webinar I teach on career reinvention, I recently conducted an online poll asking participants to describe how they’re responding to the coronavirus crisis, and 50% of the 2000 people who responded reported that it has given them “opportunities to try new things or learn new skills.” In some cases, these new skills are

directly related to working remotely. That's certainly been the case for me: Like most of my faculty colleagues, I've had to quickly learn to teach online.

You don't need to limit our projects to the domain of your desired career change. Many people today are doing rewarding work and making surprising discoveries by engaging in crisis initiatives at their organizations or in community volunteer efforts. The point is to do new and different work with new and different people, because that process represents an opportunity to learn about yourself, your preferences and dislikes, and the kinds of contexts and people that bring out the best in you.

Work your "dormant" ties

Networking is a contact sport, which makes it hard to play in a lockdown. Many people today are wondering how in the current environment they can initiate and build the relationships they need to reinvent themselves — relationships with people who may be struggling to adapt to difficult circumstances themselves.

The golden rule of networking for career change has always been to mobilize your weak ties — that is, the relationships you have with people you don't know so well or don't see very often, in order to maximize your chances of learning things you don't know already. The problem with friends, family, and close coworkers — your strong ties — is that they know the same things you know. They'll want to help you, of course, but they're unlikely to be able to help you think creatively about your future. It's more likely that they'll pigeonhole you.

But there's a catch when it comes to your weak ties. Although these people are more likely to be a source of useful new information and resources, they're also likely to be less motivated to help you, especially when they're stretched themselves. For this reason, in times of uncertainty people rely more on their strong ties, which are based on commitment, trust, and obligation.

So we have a weak tie/strong tie conundrum. One way around it is to make use of your "dormant ties" — the relationships with people who you were once close to but now haven't been in contact with for roughly three years or more. In one study, more than 200 executives were asked to reconnect with such people and to use their interactions to get information or advice that might help them on an important work project. The executives reported that the advice they received from these dormant sources was on average more valuable and novel than what they obtained from their more-active relationships.

Talk it out

In the middle of the confusion that career change can bring, many of us hope that introspection will eventually produce a flash of blinding insight. But as I learned in my *Working Identity* research, solitary introspection, when not coupled with active experimentation, is dangerous, because it can lead us to get stuck in the realm of daydreams — which, of course, provide neither gainful employment nor career fulfillment.

Self-reflection, paradoxically, is a practice best nourished by talking out loud in social exchanges with kindred spirits who respond, sympathize, commiserate, question, read your body language, and share their own experiences. One of the reasons potential career changers benefit so much from attending courses is that their fellow students represent a ready-made community of kindred spirits to talk to. Just the simple act of creating and telling a story about what you want to do, or why you want a change, can clarify your thinking and propel you forward, by committing you publicly to making a change. Any veteran storyteller will tell you that there's no substitute for practicing in front of a live audience.

But even that is hard in the current context of self-isolation and social distancing. Still, with a bit of initiative and creativity, you can find ways to explain yourself out loud — by scheduling walks that respect social distance, by working with a career coach online, by creating a Zoom group that meets regularly to share plans.

In the end, when it comes to reinventing your career in this time of crisis, remember this important point: The time to get going is now — but don't go it alone.

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