

Interview Study – Successful Career Change Strategies

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How do seasoned executives successfully master career change?

Ernst Bechinie, Executive Coach, has interviewed company owners, executives and professionals about their experiences. The interviews were done in the time from May 2009 till February 2010.

The following table gives an overview of the participants:

- Number of participants in total	44
- Male	34 (77%)
- Female	10 (23%)
- Present average age of participants (2009)	52 years
- Average age at time of most important change	42 years
- Participants by functions	
- Member of Board, CEO	8
- Company Owners	11
- Executives (usually 1. level below top management)	12
- Professionals	13

The interviews were focusing on the most relevant career change of each individual participant. The following points are – amongst a large amount of data – a summary of the often-found strategies, as a kind of common denominator.

The following points are a summary of the key strategies used. They should act as common denominators and can be tied in and supported by substantial documented research data.

1) Being aware and Listen to inner signals for change

The majority of the participants decided themselves, to look to change something in their career. The trigger points for starting to analyze change usually came from a combination of three sources: the desire to find new professional challenges, being unsatisfied with their present situation, and the search for a new meaning of life. Important for them was to realize these signals and learn to follow them.

A lady teacher said: “I just could not see myself remaining at the gymnasium for the next 20 years. I desired and needed new horizons and I was afraid of standing still. However, I had no concrete idea what I was aiming for. Despite my interest of teaching in school, I realized this was no more the core thread of my professional life”.

2) Success came from acting in the market

Successful professional changes were happening in a process of trial and error in the market. They were not the result of introspection isolated from the market. Most importantly, successful career changes were not obtained by following a career handbook.

An owner of a middle-sized training company noted: “I have never had a career plan – despite my MBA. My transformation from employee to entrepreneur was a result of intuition, trying out new routes to market, overcoming failures, taking chances in the right moment. At the beginning of the process I did not know where it would end”.

3) Having confidence in their own resources and former success

The path of change for most participants was often clouded with doubts, unanswered questions and racked by insecurities. Important however, was the ability to draw on ones’ own resources and capabilities that were already there. Having a fundamental trust in what had worked before and doing more of it.

A lady banker who is now operating a training company stated: “It was very much a question of having self belief, deep down inside of me is a place that knows that whatever happens is for the

better. This helped me to stay positive and open for whatever might come. This gave me the confidence to rely on my professional experiences and my knowledge of life”.

4) Discovering and following our passion

All participants had been working on their professional competencies and had compared them with their relevant markets. This was a standard procedure for everybody. However it was found important by many, to examine carefully their emotional connections concerning a future occupation. To understand where their passion lay and what it could mean for their professional search.

A headhunter with side activity in an art business had experienced this: “After two years of moving between my lucrative profession and my amateur cultural activity in the art world, I discovered that my heart lay in art. I became confident that I could transform this passion into a successful business”.

5) Learning from role models

For many participants it was very helpful to talk to people who were already established and successful in an area they were interested in; people who could help them open their eyes. However these contacts were not always found in the participants’ normal environment. They had to leave known paths and venture into new territories.

An employee on his way to become an independent professional said: “I received important support and encouragement from a friend operating in a total different area of activity to mine. He demonstrated to me that there could be an interesting and successful life as an independent rather than working for a company as an employee”.

6) Listening and talking

Today everybody is talking about networking and also participating in the corresponding events. However many participants found it difficult at the beginning to find and create the right environment where they could benefit and talk freely about themselves. The challenge was to broaden their search to meet people outside their former area of activity and comfort zone and get to know different business worlds. All participants stressed the need and importance of building up a circle of contacts they could trust implicitly with very personal questions.

An executive said: “I found both new insights and personal encouragement in talking with my wife and two close friends, both of whom were working in completely different professions”.

7) Allow enough time for the change

The transition phase of the participants took in average a little over one year. There was a minimum of about 6 months and some transitions took up to three years. The basis of this calculation was from the first intentions for a change until the moment of a new professional start. For most of the participants this was a time of confrontation, both with the market and with themselves. All felt in hindsight that it was an intensive time of learning with lasting positive effects. A manager of an international corporation, who became a member of the board of a start-up company, summarized his transition phase: “Deep changes occur when we are willing to question everything that has gone before. In my case this involved my former job, the city I lived in, the language I spoke and my personal relationships. I needed time for this process to build space and distance from my former times. During this transitional period I found and nurtured the energy to successfully complete my change”.

8) Professional changes and consequences in personal life

The professional reorientation was for a number of people also the catalyst for questioning existing life patterns. Personal relationships had been influenced – in different ways.

On one side, some participants reported that they had ceased a relationship with their life partner during the period of their professional change. A consultant lady remarked: “The successful change of my career had increased my self esteem. This gave me the strength to end an unhappy marriage”.

On the other side the job shift of an executive – as an example for others - brought a more intensive relationship with his wife and his family: “In the process of my job search I had become a more extrovert person. I made the experience that open communications was helpful in meeting new people. This experience has also deepened the relationship with my wife”.

The answer of an executive to the question: Would you do it again?

“Yes, it was worthwhile taking the risks and living through all this uncertainty and suffering. As a result I have developed professionally, met new people, entered into new worlds. Being able to use my competencies in a new environment renewed my motivation. I have learned during this process. I have also clearly recognized my limitations and am more conscious of some of my negative traits hindering my development.

Author’s Note: Special thanks go to the participants of the study. Without their openness, trust and time, this work could not have been done.