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How to Stay Stuck in the Wrong Career

Key ideas from the [Harvard Business Review](#) article By Herminia Ibarra

The Idea in Brief

Are you one of the growing number of people struggling to make mid-career changes? Searching for ten easy steps to professional reinvention? Or awaiting flashes of insight--while opportunities pass you by?

Would you be willing to jettison all you've heard about career transition and follow a crooked path--rather than the straight and narrow one that's gotten you nowhere?

If so, consider the counterintuitive approach described in this article. It'll have you *doing* instead of infinitely planning. Taking *action* instead of endless self-assessment tests. You'll reinvent your **working identity**--your sense of who you are as a professional--by experimenting with who you *could* be.

The Idea in Practice

Sounds Reasonable, but...

Consider the traditional "plan and implement" approach to career change: Assess your interests, skills, and experience; identify appropriate jobs; consult friends, colleagues, career counselors; take the plunge.

This all *sounds* reasonable--but it actually fosters stagnation. You get mired in introspection while searching for your "one true self "a futile quest, since individuals have many possible selves. Your ideal won't necessarily find a match in the real world. Worse, this method encourages making a big change all at once--which can land you in the wrong job.

Sounds Crazy, but...

Now consider the "test and learn" method: You put *several* working identities into practice, refining them until they're sufficiently grounded in experience to inspire more decisive steps. You make your possible *future* working identities vivid, tangible, and compelling--countering the tendency to grab familiar work when the unknown becomes too scary.

Reinventing your working identity takes several years--and may land you in surprising places. But that doesn't mean the process must be random. These tactics provide a method to the seeming madness:

- **Craft experiments.** Play with new professional roles on a limited but tangible scale, without compromising your current job. Try freelance assignments or pro bono work. Moonlight. Use sabbaticals or extended vacations to explore new directions.

A former investment banker dabbled in wine tours and scuba diving businesses before determining that such work wouldn't hold his interest long-term. Realizing a "more normal" career path would better serve his emotional and financial needs, he is now an internal venture capitalist for a media company.

- **Shift connections.** Strangers can best help you see who you're becoming, providing fresh ideas uncolored by your previous identity. Make new connections by working for people you've long admired and can learn from. Find people--perhaps through alumni and company networks--who can help you grow into your possible new selves.
- **Make sense.** Infuse events with special meaning. Weave them into a story about who you're becoming. Relate that story publicly. You'll clarify your intentions, stay motivated, and inspire others' support.

An investment banker considering fiction writing visited an astrologer, who noted that forces pulling him in opposing directions (stability versus creative expression) were irreconcilable. He told everyone this story and wrote about it in his local newspaper. The more he communicated it, the more the incident made sense--and the more friends and family supported his writing ambitions.

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Further Reading

Articles

A Second Career: The Possible Dream

Harvard Business Review

May-June 1983

by Harry Levinson

Levinson describes an approach to midlife career change that blends elements of "testing and learning" with "planning and implementing." He begins by considering a version of working identity he calls **ego ideal**: your idealized image of your future self, including goals you'd like to achieve. He then explains how to clarify your ego ideal by asking a series of probing questions, such as, "What lifetime experiences have I found most gratifying?" and "What kinds of achievements do I admire?"

Next Levinson suggests ways to identify the activities and work environments appropriate for your ego ideal. Finally, he considers the unique concerns facing midlife career changers, such as family responsibilities, potential loss of status, and the feelings of loss that accompany major job changes.

Reawakening Your Passion for Work

Harvard Business Review

April 2002

by Richard Boyatzis, Annie McKee, and Daniel Goleman

These authors shift gears to executives who are at the apex of their careers and begin to feel that something is missing from their work lives. Addressing this feeling is essential for renewing their energy, creativity, and commitment--and their ability to inspire others.

The article emphasizes the importance of **knowing when it's time for a change**. Signals include: 1) *"I feel trapped."* Once-meaningful work seems less meaningful. You're restless but can't change or articulate what's wrong. 2) *"I feel bored."* Life seems to lack satisfying work, intellectual stimulation, and fun. You're just "going through the motions." 3) *"I can't ignore the call."* You're strongly drawn to a new mission, such as becoming a teacher.

Book

Working Identity: Unconventional Strategies for Reinventing Your Career

Harvard Business School Press

November 2002

by Herminia Ibarra

This book expands on the ideas in "How to Stay Stuck in the Wrong Career." The author acknowledges the powerful pull of the familiar and the difficulty in moving away from a current profession in which we've invested long years and intense effort. Based on her research on professionals and managers in transition, Ibarra outlines the "test and learn" process of career reinvention and provides examples of people who have successfully used the three tactics described in her HBR article.

She shares additional suggestions for deciding when to abandon your current path and follow a new one, crafting and executing "identity experiments," creating "small wins" that keep your momentum going, connecting with new role models and mentors who can ease the transition, and surviving the rocky period between career identities.

About the Author

Herminia Ibarra is a professor of organizational behavior at Insead in Fontainebleau, France. Her forthcoming book, *Working Identity: Unconventional Strategies for Reinventing Your Career* (Harvard Business School Press), identifies conditions that enable people to make major career changes.

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