8 reflections on career transitions
This e-book is intended for individuals experiencing career transition. Each chapter is based on a series of previously published one page papers – and should be a quick, easy read. Each is written to help add some fresh ideas to shape the readers’ thinking about their own situation.

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Career transitions are sometimes hard to navigate. In our experience, many talented professionals can use a little help in managing career transitions successfully.

We have built a range of perspectives and insights about careers and career change in the course of our work with many hundreds of absorbing and gifted individuals.

From the outset, a framework for understanding career transition and putting it into the context of one’s unfolding career is needed. We recommend that individuals incorporate the following perspectives in building this framework.

- A career belongs to a person, not an organisation. Much of our work entails helping people take back control and provide their own direction in what will unfold for them in the future. Great organisations create opportunities but ultimately the accountability for careers rests with each individual. This accountability is usually tested and sometimes re-discovered in times of change.

- There is some risk that in the evolving world of work many of us are losing some humanity: an ability to understand and engage with others at a real and sensitive level. Nowhere does this become more apparent than in times when individuals have to leave an organisation: this is a time for working out what you really value and need – and for laying down some rules for the future about how you will manage yourself. In our work with individuals we try to do what we can to create a little more space for engagement with emotions and feelings.
People change and grow continuously. At different stages of our lives we need different things. There is no set trajectory; growth can be “outwards”, it does not have to be “upwards” (in an organisational hierarchy). Most of us move through several careers in our lifetimes – and we need to learn how to take changes in our stride and how to develop essential career transition skills.

You need to use the time in career transition productively by taking apart and reflecting on what might be seen as your conditioned responses to work. Whether your situation is through retrenchment or voluntary redundancy, take the time to slow down and step back, decompress, recapture some lost time with family, become better at listening to your inner voice and give space to some repressed aspirations.

New and resilient careers need three things:

1. A grasp of your capabilities and signature strengths,
2. clear “markets” – places and situations where your capabilities are needed (Sometimes you need to reinvent yourself if old “markets” are drying up)
3. skills and methodologies for exploring markets, for representing yourself and engaging in markets of interest.

You need to connect your career with your personal interests. One of the best prizes in life is the chance to work at something we like: work that allows us to feel that we are making a contribution, that absorbs us, that demands concentration. At Macfarlan Lane we encourage people to go out on a limb to find this kind of work. After all, the reason we go out on a limb is to harvest the fruits that are there.
Many successful professionals invest a huge amount of themselves in their work. It is all consuming, filling 12 hour days, and is never far from their minds, even at weekends. Work is high pressured, fast paced and demanding of time and relationships. For senior people, it has been like this for years. For these people, work is central to their image of themselves and to their lifestyle: long hours, high contribution and high income meet a range of personal and family aspirations.

Today’s overachieving professionals labour longer, take on more responsibility, and earn more than the workaholics of the past. They hold what Hewlett and Luce call "extreme jobs," which entail workweeks of 60 or more hours\(^1\).

The costs they wear are high as well. These can include significant impacts on health and on personality. Families are raised under pressure – with expensive child support arrangements sometimes mitigating impossible time conflicts. Sometimes families break apart in the modern environment of work. For many professionals the package of trade-offs and outcomes is a fine balancing act, but one worth the game. For some it is a case of “hang on” and “hold it together” until “we have enough to retire....”

What brings this about? The answer is a combination of elements: peer pressure, a culture or ethos amongst ambitious professionals, perhaps competitive pressure within a firm, and between it and other firms.

The complexity and pressure of modern professional life is not easy to diagnose or unravel.

Imagine then, the impact on one of those individuals when someone walks into their office one day and says: “Lee, I am afraid there have to be some changes, and we have to let you go...”

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1 Harvard Business Review December 2006
The decision may be the right one – maybe driven by strategy change, or a need for regeneration. But for the individual, all of a sudden the sacrifices of the past and the carefully built picture of success seem an illusion. The large mortgages and the fixed lifestyle costs and school fees seem a threat. On the surface, most individuals “cope” – but inside there are often huge and conflicting emotions.

Work provides structure to most days. It is associated with wide rather than narrow circles of relationships. Usually it is associated with doing something constructive and providing meaning or validation at some level. Work exercises both intellectual and social skills. For many people work is a form of self-expression. Work often stretches them and helps them grow capabilities and insights. Of course full time work usually delivers income as well – and “how much money I make” is itself a factor in self-definition for many people.

If all these validating and stretching things associated with work are ripped away, the impact can be fairly catastrophic for a time, unless great care is taken around issues of self-definition.

Stepping out of one form of work and doing something else – whether by choice, or not – is a much bigger transition than many acknowledge.

Senior people have often invested a huge amount of their time and energy in building a field of expertise, in building client relationships and in earning the right to lead an area in their firm. They often define themselves quite fundamentally around their roles in the firm. For some people in roles like these, transition to something else, when that time comes, is really quite a challenge.
In our initial work with senior people, we try to support them in generating options, in looking back at past achievements and what they tell us, and in looking forwards to reflect on alternative activities and vehicles of employment. This early work is fundamental to a career transition journey. And because the past career has been so self-defining, capturing a new one, especially if there is significant change involved, is a stretching process for the individual. It is tantamount to redefinition. And this requires focus and time. Effectiveness means embracing the significance of the issues at a very personal, self-defining level.
All of us talk to ourselves. In our heads there are constant thoughts and reactions, aspirations and intuitions flitting about. These inner conversations are what propel us forward.

But in the busy, cut and thrust world of work, the conversations we have with ourselves are all too often rushed and incomplete. We don’t get to finish the sentences or reach effective conclusions. We don’t explore and reach conclusions from the half formed thoughts which were circulating in our minds a few days earlier. In fact, sometimes we barely have time to think even about our reactions to events around us. This condition is called the “hurry sickness”.

Inner conversations about career direction and reaching fulfilment are important and sometimes a little help is needed to make them fruitful. Focus on the inner conversations can be provided by external advisers. At Macfarlan Lane we like to see people finish their inner dialogue. The conversations we like to see completed in their minds are all about “working out, and then building on what I am good at”, “working to achieve a more rewarding career”, “working out how to influence and win opportunities”, and sometimes, “working out how to set up my own business”.

The Inner Conversations we Neglect
You simply cannot reach good conclusions about yourself in your mind, and develop the competencies of career resilience in the midst of all the normal pressures of work. So what we do with people is suggest they create compartments – one of which is the “career compartment”. We also assemble a structured process, working through talents, values, achievements, marketing and research, learning how to listen, and to interview and other skills.

The aim is to enable people to take a step backwards from immediate pressures; then to move forward again with greater understanding of themselves, their real skills and the situations they face. The key is to create a structured process so that important conclusions can be reached, and significant competencies in career building are achieved.

Although many authors have made statements about the value of reflection, Sherry Swain sums up the generally accepted benefits of reflection: “reflection enables us to evaluate experience, learn from mistakes, repeat successes, revise, and plan.”

Career resilience means independently leading your own career, taking up opportunities—and sometimes creating them—coping effectively with unplanned changes and working to a broad plan which best suits your evolving interests. Career resilience sometimes means moving into periods of self-employment, and perhaps building portfolios of activities.

There are several pragmatic reasons for being interested in career resilience:

- Even in the best organisations, top-down succession planning cannot realistically address the interests of all individuals: you gain most from your time in an organisation by taking initiatives in discussions about your future.
- More generally, employer loyalty for the long haul is largely gone. As people change within organisations, and as situations change, employment contracts are now more frequently terminated by employers.
- People today face up to four or five “careers” in their lifetimes—and building career resilience is critical in navigating upcoming changes in work and in employment arrangements.

One way to foster some good quality thinking about how to build career alternatives—so becoming more resilient—is to conceive of a career plan as the business plan of your “business of one”.

If you see yourself as a “business”, operating in one or more “markets” then the career plan and thinking which will emerge will be much harder edged.
The headings for this type of career plan can be framed as questions; the questions an entrepreneur typically considers in the start up phase of a regular business. Here are some of the questions we ask in helping people work up this type of career plan.

- What am I capable of delivering?
- What do I want to be doing in a few years from now?
- What are the capabilities I need to work on?
- What are the activities or “work” I should probably always avoid?
- What are the “markets” which are attractive to me?
- How will I explore and research these markets?
- Where are the opportunities opening up?
- How will I reach these markets – who might I talk with?
- How can I create a capability to deliver above expectations in my chosen market?
- What gaps do I need to address?

A career plan under these headings can be challenging to capture. But it will force you to examine some important issues. In the course of developing this kind of plan you will talk with others, perhaps beginning a valuable network in the process. You will begin to build some of the underpinnings of career resilience.
Navigating Career Transitions Successfully: Find a Coach

Strong differences in career transition work emerge in the extent to which coaching is deployed, and where mentoring is also provided by people who bring senior commercial experience to the table. We attribute most of the success we achieve in all our assignments to the initially built (and then sustained) coaching relationship.

Coaching, as distinct from simple advice, is clearly needed when the individual may want to rush into action, without pausing for reflection and formulating realistic and fulfilling goals. It is also valuable when the opposite tendency is observed: one of sinking into something of a decline – or the taking of a “break” which can sometimes lead to a serious loss of energy and confidence.

Often there are set-backs in the course of the journey: the search firm which won’t return calls in the context of a courtship, the news that a job applied for has gone to someone else, or the testing and (sometimes wise) abandonment of a new business idea.

Issues of pacing arise, and difficulty is often experienced in balancing the “work” required in this new period of living with the need to take proper breaks and the reinstatement of an exercise program. The structure provided by a job needs to be replaced with another self-directed structure around the work needed in capturing a new career – and this usually only happens with thoughtful coaching.
New skills, especially in research and networking, need to be built through action learning in the individual. New ways to deliver value need exploration and experimentation, new solutions need to be developed for emerging business challenges, new professions need to be considered.

Throughout these challenges individuals need a sounding board: a place to expose their thinking, to be prompted through questions to explore wider issues, to be encouraged and often lifted up a little. The most effective way to achieve this is through a coaching program that is not time-limited and that offers much more than guidance through structured materials.

"Coaching entails the effective engagement of individual energy in the achievement of desired personal goals. Good coaches are well trained, mature, and highly intelligent. Effective coaching in this context also requires extensive commercial experience and a creative approach in guiding individuals to sources of information and in working up new ways to add value."

Coaching support is especially needed in the current economic context. Coaching is critical when opportunities in some professions (such as investment banking) suddenly contract, and when new vehicles of employment (such as being an interim, or contract executive, or through starting a new business venture) need active exploration and testing.

This is a time in which most of the people we work with need to define new ways to deliver value in the organisational and wider community settings of the future. We recognise that without the assistance of an experienced mentor/coach, this is a daunting task.
Your career – it’s not your life, but it’s a big part of it. Careers ideally feed and complement all the other things most people aim to achieve: including good relationships, growing as an individual, putting something back into the community, and exploring – whether the world, literature, or any other passion.

Careers should not be the outcome of a series of accidents and happenstance, or something an individual hands over to others to look after. Nor is it right to be passive and just put up with an imposed view of work and how working life should evolve.

Sometimes the need to undertake a career stocktake is thrust upon an individual – through a reorganisation, a change of boss perhaps, or even retrenchment. Sometimes individuals just add up the sum of things in their lives, and decide a stocktake is needed.

So, how do you do a stocktake? You need to pull together experiences, assess possibilities, analyse abilities, look at the past, present and future. The following are useful questions to ask yourself, and perhaps an adviser, on the way:

- How well advanced are your knowledge and skills, in terms of growth in your professional platform?
- What is the nature of your inner conversations? How much self esteem is present, how much self insight? Are you working against self-limiting beliefs?
- What networks, relationships, alliances and associations exist, and where might these be expanded?
- The future: how might this look to you, in terms of personal aspirations? Have some aspirations been “held back”, but should now be revisited? Are there alternative paths to the more conventional ones of the past?
How well developed are your skills in self representation, and in research and exploration?

Where do you sit in terms of the broader competencies which underpin career resilience? Can coaching and insights help to create a stronger independent capability in personal career management?

What have you done in the context of career development: how is your time invested?

What are the “markets” in front of you, and how is work changing in your fields of interest? Are career aspirations being properly informed by a good understanding of possible markets?

Careers can’t be guided and planned with absolute certainty: life and the level of change around us make sure of that. However, with the benefit of some reflection, coaching and action learning, a better or fresh career may be waiting to be liberated.
Widespread retrenchments and downsizing inevitably lead to more applicants for a diminishing supply of jobs. Some occupations are thinning out. So what do displaced professionals and senior managers need to do?

Some of the answer lies in learning to find new ways to access jobs, in not relying on advertised positions and on recruiters. In our work with senior people, we encourage networking, research and direct approaches to organisations. We suggest people look for opportunities not yet taken to the market.

Another part of the answer lies in developing different models, or frameworks, in creating work. Different models include interim executive roles and project work - the engagement is for the project, not initially about enduring employment. Being ready for these models tends to open up opportunities where organisations face issues, but at the same time might be reluctant to take on permanent employees.

Different frameworks include starting focused service businesses and consultancies.

Whichever pathway you choose, the critical initial element is to explore the market. Ensure that you are selling needed solutions, as well as doing things you enjoy.

If commencing some form of self-employment is of interest, early questions are: What is the market? What needs am I meeting? How do I reach this market? Can I provide this service at a price which gives me a fair return for my time and the totality of my costs?
If the answers are positive, then the next steps entail thorough concept testing and building an initial business plan. Expose the plan to people whose wisdom and experience exceeds yours. Include prospective customers in testing your ideas. Prove the model first. Leave until last any direct expense in software, business structures, and fixed costs. Some level of guidance through these steps is useful.

Reinvention implies moving to a real exploration of emerging markets and needed solutions. Go behind and beyond existing companies and markets. Look to unmet needs and emerging areas of opportunity. Test which vehicles will work best and the realities involved.

Right now investment bankers are reinventing themselves by advising on debt-based funding versus equity-based funding; providing strategy and restructuring advice to small to medium enterprises; becoming active investors (angels) in emerging businesses; and buying or buying into businesses to give rein to long suppressed entrepreneurial instincts. Chief Financial Officers are looking into business coaching opportunities, and interim roles turning around, or divesting troubled operations. CIOs and IT experts are moving from banking and finance into health and other government services sometimes with boutique consultancies and sometimes in defined project roles.
Emerging markets include turning troubled businesses around; working with voluntary administrators and liquidators; moving into sectors being vacated by large businesses, which may suit lower cost operations; and looking at major areas of need – such as e-health platforms – where there remains a great deal of work to be done and a continuing appetite to fund the need.

Reinvention is challenging to implement. It means learning new research and exploration skills and how to network effectively. Reinvention requires some carefully supported analysis of your own skills and capabilities, and perhaps some testing of long held assumptions. It is best supported with some quality coaching and mentoring.
Career Change in your Hands

You are in control of a significant area of business, on top of your profession, well regarded by your peers, well paid, and more or less in control of what each day will bring and what you expect to achieve. And your team is traveling well also.

But what if all of this were to change? An offer is made for the business; your CEO and primary sponsor moves on, your group is merged with another, a new gung-ho CEO is appointed.... If any of these things happen, then all of a sudden you may not be in control of as much of your career as you thought, or you may have to cut short the careers of your staff.

Here is some quick advice for you, and for you to give your staff, about preparing for such a possibility.

1. **Don’t ignore the possibility!** In most careers now there will be several changes in direction, and at least one will be involuntary. Continuing to grow your knowledge, improve your skills and build your career resilience is your responsibility.

2. **Build a network of people** whose advice you value – going well beyond work colleagues. And as you build this list turn it into an active network: a group of individuals you may seek to help in various ways, whose advice may in turn be valuable for you sometime. Teach your staff the power of networking. In our experience, 80% of new appointments occur through networking – not via job advertisements or headhunters.

3. **Keep a record of your major career achievements** and the circumstances around them. It is amazing how much we forget as we move through our careers, yet these achievements and the stories around them will be guiding posts for you and others in the future.

4. **Invest some time in exploring the world of other people and other situations** – including the world of people who run their own businesses, or perhaps have a portfolio of activities. Always keep open the possibility of new career directions.
Remember that Life’s a Fine Balancing Act

Many people aspire to have better balance in their lives: to be less pressured, more creative, more relaxed and at peace with themselves. But somehow or other, pressures at work and outside it conspire to make this difficult.

With today’s demanding organisations, we have to be firm in setting boundaries to preserve those aspects of life we truly value. Our efforts in balancing life are an investment in the future. Balance is to some degree an individual thing: it is in part an inner state of mind, how we perceive things, how we succeed (or fail) in compartmentalising different aspects of our lives – or manage the total. Generally, achieving balance means most of the following:

- Not allowing work to completely occupy all your waking hours.
- Creating time for rich lives outside work.
- Spending time with loved ones and building relationships with friends.
- Having external interests, learning, travel.
- Building and maintaining fitness and good health.
- Being calm, in your inner world and externally.
- Having some sort of career or broader life plan, towards which you move under your control, rather than allowing yourself to be swept along by events.
Remember that Life’s a Fine Balancing Act

Identifying what “balance” means for you in clearly articulated aspirations like these goes a long way to addressing the problem.

The first step in restoring balance in the way you live is to make some time available for reflection and taking stock. For most people, this means taking time out: going away, taking some long walks, talking things through with others. Use this time to define what balance should mean for you, what is unacceptable going forward, and then work out how to negotiate, position yourself, redefine expectations at work and get the “work” bit of your life back in control.

This is the most important bit: do something firmly and with resolve. Change the expectations you and others place on yourself.

The second step is to understand that a large part of achieving balance is in how you manage yourself. Balanced, calm individuals respect themselves: they are not easily distracted or upended by the emotions and actions of others. When stress or unpleasantness is taken to them, they seem to be able to draw on an inner well of self-knowledge and respect, and to be able to muster thoughtful, affirming responses in others.

The most important thing is to understand that your actions and practices – especially in your relations with others – are what will create the calm and effective person you would like to be. You cannot simply think your way to inner peace.

“Change the expectations you and others place on yourself.”
Remember that Life’s a Fine Balancing Act

Take a look at your actions and behaviour. Begin acting in a way you would like others to see you. If you want to improve your level of calmness and inner peace, act like a person who is calm: manage your actions and practices quite deliberately, and then observe this person emerge in yourself and in the eyes of those around you.

Those actions and practices might well include taking the time to learn how to meditate, or learning yoga or some other form of mind and body control. Daily practice of one of these disciplines has an immensely beneficial impact on stress levels and in turn on behaviours.

The third step is to have a plan, a broad road-map for the way you would like your life to unfold. Of course unexpected events are going to occur along the way. You may have to change your broad life plan several times. Balanced people have some goals, and have a measure of persistence in the way they invest their time and energy towards achieving those goals.

Work up a broad set of goals about what you want to achieve, how you want to live and what you might do for others. Begin to define what you should do now, or over the next few years, if you want to be able to look back on a full life.

With today’s demanding organizations, we have to be firm in setting boundaries to preserve those aspects of life we truly value. Our efforts in balancing life are an investment in the future. We increase the possibility of finding happiness when we learn to combine work and play.
Conclusion

Great careers are a mixture of ups and downs. At some period – however much you may have strived for excellence – the floor is going to open up and you may find yourself in free fall. Or you may find yourself walking out the door not knowing where you are going but compelled to walk, to go, to leave, to run, to wander.

At such times it helps to take a good hard look at yourself and ponder. These are the questions which are worth some time:

- What are the experiences you have had thus far in life and in which did you feel you did well?
- What are the skills that you most enjoyed using in those experiences?
- If you could not do your present job any more, and never had to work again, what would you spend your time doing?
- Where are your capabilities and strengths needed most? Where are your markets?
- How could you plan to have more time for what is important, more time with your loved ones and friends, now, in this present time, without waiting for retirement?

In an ideal life one’s career gives meaning and purpose to a significant period of each day; and the work undertaken gives reward to others as well. It can take a little while to navigate career changes and bring these elements together, but the journey is really worth undertaking with energy and enthusiasm.
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