

TRANSITIONS

Are you ready for a career change? Here's how to plan your leap.

BY ELA SCHWARTZ

When Tricia Wygal, now a senior production editor at the Crown Publishing Group in New York, is asked how she got to her present position from her first career as a dancer with the Milwaukee Ballet, she says that while dressed in toe shoes and tulle amidst the bright lights and applause, she'd think, "This is all great... but what I really want to do is work in publishing!"



TRICIA WYGAL • BALLET DANCER TO EDITOR



THE DECISION TO leave one career for another is rarely simple, and making it a reality doesn't happen overnight. After all, making a successful career switch will mean defining what you want to do, devising a plan to make it happen, and confronting your fear of change as you leave your old identity—and paycheck—behind. But Gail Blanke, New York-based founder and CEO of **Lifedesigns LLC**, motivational speaker, and bestselling author of two books, as well as the upcoming *Throw Out Fifty Things: Clear the Clutter, Find Your Life*, stresses that with job security a thing of the past, career change can be a wise move. “Security is highly overrated,” she says. “It’s about constantly moving forward. You can’t grow if you can’t change, and you can’t change if you’re not willing to take a risk.”



DEFINE YOUR DREAM

Many of us spend years longing to pursue a particular career. Others know they're unhappy in their current endeavors but don't have a clear picture of which career would work for them—or how to get there. Some are prompted by a pivotal event. Wygal, for example, dumped her dance career after experiencing several painful injuries at a time when she had no medical insurance. She segued into playing in a rock band and started supplementing her income by picking up freelance proofreading jobs.

“You could take work on tour, so it was ideal,” she says. From there, she went back to school for an English degree and began freelancing in-house. “Those years of freelancing started adding up, and before I knew it, I'd acquired a new skill,” says Wygal, who went on to land a full-time editing job.

Whatever is spurring your transition, Blanke suggests starting by creating a vision. “Ask yourself what ‘good’ would look like,” she says. “What is it you could be doing that you'd love so much you couldn't wait to do it? If you have a vision of yourself being really happy, you'll find the courage to take the risk.”

She notes that you may not even have to leave your present company. Before setting off on her own, Blanke worked at Avon Products, Inc., as a senior vice president handling global public affairs. When she told her father she wanted to do something more meaningful to her, “he told me if you can't find something, create it.” Blanke launched the Avon Breast Cancer Awareness Crusade, “and the end result was saving people's lives,” she says.

LOOK WITHIN YOUR INDUSTRY

If an opportunity doesn't exist within your company, try looking within your field. Monica Merel, CEO and founder of MGM Properties Electrical, a full-service provider of residential and commercial electrical services based in South Orange, New Jersey, has changed careers several times. She says the common thread has been “always working in something that had to do with building.”

Merel started out as a sales rep for a company that made electrical equipment but decided she was more interested in installing the products she was selling. She got her MBA as well as her electrician's license and shifted into working as an electrical contractor. The next change was founding MGM Properties. As the company grew, she brought in a partner to handle finance so she could focus on her

LEFT: ISTOCKPHOTO



newest passion—handling sales and managing crews who install solar energy systems. “It’s meaningful to me and aligns my beliefs in renewable energy with my knowledge,” she explains. “If you like the industry but not the tasks you’re doing, you don’t have to jump ship entirely; you can find different kinds of jobs within your industry.”

PUT YOUR EXPERTISE TO WORK IN ANOTHER FIELD

For 18 years Cory Chacon handled international marketing for several major record labels. When the music industry changed with the advent of digital technology, she was downsized and found her job description had gone the way of the local record store. Chacon realized one of the aspects of her old job that she’d loved was traveling and staying in hotels, so she decided to pursue a career in hospitality. Her ability to relate to hotel guests turned into an asset in her new field. “If you’re not ready for a drastic change, look at your skill sets and see what’s applicable to another industry,” she advises.

GAIL BLANKE • SENIOR VP TO MOTIVATIONAL SPEAKER



TRY IT OUT

Chacon got a degree in hotel administration, but she also decided to give her career a test drive through **VocationVacations**, a company based in Portland, Oregon, that pairs would-be job seekers with mentors in their fields of choice. Chacon was teamed with the general manager of the Hotel Monaco in Chicago, part of Kimpton Hotels, “and got a two-day immersion in what it was like to be a successful hotelier,” she says. Her mentor got her an interview at another Kimpton property, The Muse Hotel in Manhattan, which led to a job offer: today Chacon is concierge at The Muse.

Brian Kurth, founder of VocationVacations and author of *Test-Drive Your Dream Job: A Step-by-Step Guide to Finding and Creating the Work You Love* says his clients include everyone from corporate litigators to health care workers and teachers who aspire to become bakers, dog trainers, private investigators or even truckers.

Kurth says that while many of his clients find their VocationVacation to be everything they dreamed it would be, for others the experience is a wake-up call. He describes how running a bed-and-breakfast may include being woken up at 2 o’clock in the morning

CORY CHACON • MUSIC MARKETER TO CONCIERGE



LEFT: JEFFREY POZZUTO

by inebriated guests, and a stint as a doggy day care owner might involve picking up lots of... well, you get the idea. "But even our Vocationers who decide the job isn't for them are still happy they tried it out. It's all due diligence," he says.

DO YOUR HOMEWORK

Entrepreneurism is an ever-increasingly attractive option for more and more people. Keep in mind that while you'll be your own boss, entrepreneurs work just as long, if not longer hours, than many employees. "You do need to go into it with your eyes open," says Pamela Skillings, founder and CEO of New York-based marketing communications firm Skillful Communications, career coach and author of *Escape from Corporate America: A Practical Guide to Creating the Career of Your Dreams*. "Do your homework, pull together a business plan, line up capital if you need to, and network."

BE PRACTICAL

More than anything else, experts say it's the fear of financial ruin that gives potential job changers

the willies. Skillings advises putting together what she calls a "financial escape plan. Sit down with a financial adviser and get a realistic picture of your current financial health—your assets, your liabilities and your cash flow," she says. "Think about what trade-offs you would be willing to make in order to finance your dream, and get busy socking away whatever you can. With your financial picture clear, you can start evaluating your options and planning your escape timetable."

Before leaving your job, Skillings recommends getting a loan or line of credit or lining up a new lease or mortgage. Take care of any medical or dental appointments while you still have company benefits, and take advantage of any perks you will lose access to after you leave.

JUST DO IT!

At a certain point you've got to move beyond what Kurth calls "analysis paralysis" and make your move. "It's a series of baby steps that add up to one giant leap," he says.

Blanke sums it up by quoting Mary Ann Evans, who herself embraced change when she bucked the social norms of Victorian England to write under the pen name George Eliot: "It is never too late to become what you might have been." •

